

**THE ASSAULT ON FORT WAGNER,
JULY 18, 1863. THE MEMORABLE
CHARGE OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH
REGIMENT OF MASSACHUSETTS
VOLUNTEERS**

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The Assault on Fort Wagner, July 18, 1863. The Memorable Charge of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers by Luis F. Emilio

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LUIS F. EMILIO

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THE
ASSAULT ON FORT WAGNER,

July 18, 1863.

THE MEMORABLE CHARGE

OF THE

Fifty-fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers.

WRITTEN FOR "THE SPRINGFIELD REPUBLICAN,"

BY

CAPTAIN LUIS F. EMILIO

OF THE REGIMENT.

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THE ASSAULT ON FORT WAGNER,

JULY 18, 1863.

MORRIS ISLAND, bordering the Atlantic Ocean, along which lay the main ship-channel leading into Charleston Harbor, on the 18th of July, 1863, presented a rare spectacle of modern warfare. Off its shores lay the iron-clads, gun-boats, mortar-boats, and supply-vessels of Admiral Dahlgren's squadron; the broad expanse of beach extending along its eastern face was filled with a gathering host; while here and there, nestling in the sand-hills, were the camps of the troops, now almost deserted. Lighthouse Inlet, separating Morris Island from Folly Island, bore on its waters, and along its banks, busy transports, conveying troops or unloading stores. On the higher hills of Morris Island were groups of officers, soldiers, newspaper correspondents, and civilians, watching the events that were transpiring. Charleston, the "Culprit City," with its spires piercing the distant horizon, was plainly in view. Across the waters of the beautiful harbor, on Sullivan's Island was Fort Moultrie; on Shute's Folly, Castle Pinckney; surmounting the middle ground, Fort Ripley; across the marshes, Fort Johnson and the James Island batteries; and amid the waters, flying the Southern cross of the whilom Confederacy, loomed the high walls of Fort Sumter.

Where the higher sand-hills gave place to lower stretches of white dunes, from the sea to the marshes, extended our batteries, arranged in a semicircle; and in them were mounted forty-two guns and mortars. Beyond that point, northward, the island was but a narrow strip of sand between the sea and Vincent's Creek, and which, for the last three-quarters of a mile, curved to the north and west. Upon the northern extremity of Morris Island was "Battery Gregg," mounting

three guns. Some three-quarters of a mile south of Gregg, at the narrowest point of the island, was the strongest single earthwork ever constructed.

Named after a Confederate officer, "Battery Wagner" was of bold profile, and stretched from the sea to Vincent's Creek six hundred and thirty feet east and west; its front, except thirty-three yards, covered by an easterly bend of that creek and its marshes, but a short distance south of the work. It was of irregular form, consisting of two salients at either extremity of the southern, or land, face, connected by a curtain, with a sea-face in rear of the south-east salient. Only an infantry parapet closed its rear, or northerly, face. Along its front was a deep moat with sluice-gates. Large bomb-proofs and magazines were within the work. Its armament on July 15 was three guns bearing on the sea, ten guns and one mortar bearing on the land, and some field-pieces. The guns, sweeping the only approach by land, were mounted so as to give a flanking as well as a direct fire upon an advancing column; while the whole northerly portion of Morris Island was in range, and commanded by the heavy guns in Sumter, the James and Sullivan Island batteries, as well as Gregg. Wagner's position was exceptionally strong; its parapets and traverses thick and high; and it floated the red Rebel battle-flag defiantly.

Brig.-Gen. Quincy A. Gillmore, the greatest artillerist the civil war produced, had relieved Major-Gen. David Hunter in command of the Department of the South on June 12, and previous to July 10 concentrated all his available force on Folly and James Islands. After constructing proper batteries on that date he had, by a brilliant *coup-de-main*, and under cover of their fire, crossed Lighthouse Inlet in boats in the face of the foe, capturing all the enemy's works and guns on the south end of Morris Island, with many prisoners. His force then advanced to within cannon-range of Battery Wagner. This descent upon Morris Island had been materially assisted by Brig.-Gen. A. H. Terry's division of the Tenth Corps, which on July 9 landed on James Island, and, supported by some vessels of the navy, engaged the enemy's attention, and detained a large Rebel force in his front. Gen. Gillmore

on the 11th had unsuccessfully assaulted Wagner with a column of three regiments under Brig.-Gen. George C. Strong. Between that date and July 18 he had been busily engaged in constructing a siege line, preparatory to another attack. Gen. Terry's troops had, after an attempt of the enemy to break his lines on July 16, been ordered to withdraw from James Island, and bring his force to Morris and Folly Islands. This was done by the afternoon of the 18th.

Upon that memorable 18th of July at ten A.M. the first gun was fired from one of our mortar batteries, and soon the cannonade was general. The navy joined action at half-past twelve P.M., and threw into Wagner a stream of shells. Sumter, Wagner, and Gregg had replied with more or less vigor the whole afternoon. Great clouds of smoke hung over the iron-clads, our batteries, the earthwork, and Sumter's massive walls. Shells and solid shot crossed each other's course on high; the air was rent with the thunders of countless explosions, simultaneous or in quick succession. By sunset, the grim earthwork seemed to be beaten out of shape. Every huge shell that struck sent a column of sand high in air; great furrows seamed and scarred the slopes; while avalanches of sand were driven over into the battery, burying the men, obstructing the entrances, and half-filling the ditch.

Those within our lines, who from points of vantage viewed this almost unprecedented bombardment (with but few exceptions), held the opinion that every gun in the work had been silenced, that the garrison had been driven from their shelters, and that any force beyond the work had been slaughtered or driven away. How they were mistaken is now known; for the garrison, consisting of seventeen hundred men — South Carolinians, North Carolinians, and Georgians — under Brig.-Gen. William B. Taliaferro, still clung to the work, and despite the terrible fire had but four men killed and fourteen wounded previous to the assault. Their light guns had been protected with sand-bags, the garrison been assigned to certain positions for repelling the assault they knew was sure to follow the cannonade; and the work itself was still strong and formidable. So the afternoon had passed with ebb and flow of thundering cannon. There had been a

waving of signal-flags from the lookout, and at the summons Gen. Gillmore's principal officers gathered for a momentous conference. No friendly hand has written the words there spoken; but it resulted in the determination that Wagner should be assaulted that night. Brig.-Gen. Truman Seymour was to command the assaulting column, fixed its organization and formation, and was charged with all the details. Doubtless Gens. Seymour and Strong approved and advocated the attempt; but Col. H. S. Putnam of the Seventh New Hampshire, commanding a brigade, and a regular officer, when he rejoined his men, is stated to have said, "I did not think we could take the fort so; but Seymour overruled me. Seymour is a devil of a fellow for dash." To an officer of the Seventh he remarked, "We are all going into Wagner like a flock of sheep." To notify Admiral Dahlgren of his resolve, Gen. Gillmore sent him a pencilled note by a staff-officer, who was rowed to the flag-ship in a small boat. Meanwhile, during the formation of the column, the fire from our batteries and vessels was renewed.

Seymour organized his force as follows: Strong's brigade of the Sixth Connecticut, Forty-eighth New York, Third New Hampshire, Ninth Maine, and Seventy-sixth Pennsylvania was to storm the earthwork; Putnam's brigade of the Seventh New Hampshire, One Hundredth New York, Sixty-second and Sixty-seventh Ohio was the support. Brig.-Gen. Thomas G. Stevenson's brigade of the Twenty-fourth Massachusetts, Tenth Connecticut, Ninety-seventh Pennsylvania, and Second South Carolina (colored) was the reserve. These were all small regiments. Our batteries were managed by regular and volunteer artillerymen and the Seventh Connecticut battalion. It was after six o'clock, and Strong's brigade was put in rear of our artillery line, awaiting the formation of the supports, along the sea-beach.

Just at this time, those upon the high hills discovered a single regiment marching toward the front, along the middle road, which ran to the west of the sand-hills. Over the line fluttered the national flag; and nestling and caressing its folds as they shook in the breeze was the great white banner of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This body of