

**The Ironclad Attack Against Fort Sumter, April 7, 1863**  
**By William Hamilton**

After the Confederates took possession of Ft. Sumter in 1861 the 60 foot tall fort's six foot thick brick walls were regarded as impregnable to sea attack. Most of the guns used against it during the 1861 bombardment did little damage except for setting fire to the buildings. There were no casualties. For the next two years Sumter was a symbol of the South's first victory. It was a popular site with visitors and balls were held there with the women of Charleston coming out to the Fort by steamer to dance.

Events elsewhere indicated this massive brick fort might not be as impregnable as thought. In 1862 the Confederate Ironclad Virginia (Merrimack) and the Federal Ironclad Monitor dueled at Hampton Roads and the smaller, more technically advanced federal vessel barely saved Washington from coming under direct bombardment. In fall of 1863 Gen. Quincy Gilmore brought the North's new rifled canon to bear against Ft. Pulaski, a massive brick fort outside of Savannah, GA and forced the Fort's surrender in 2 days.

In March of 1863 the largest fleet of ironclads the world had ever seen began to concentrate at Charleston off Beaufort and Folly Island, both occupied by the Federal Army and Navy. This fleet included six monitors of improved design, a massive iron ship, The New Ironsides, most powerful in the Federal Fleet and the double turret tinclad, Keokuk. These vessels carried larger, more powerful canon and their iron protection could allow them to come closer to their targets and accept a pounding while they delivered one.

The Confederates were not unprepared. They had two ironclads of their own at Charleston, the Chicora and The Palmetto State, both badly underpowered but bearing powerful guns. The artillery in the harbor forts was improved. The harbor was blocked with obstructions, most importantly mines. Additional forts on Morris Island were constructed and the existing batteries around the harbor were improved. Most importantly a system of signals, markers, charts and indicator marks on the gun carriages were developed that allowed the Confederate artillerists to

fire their more accurate land based guns at predetermined locations. With all calculations worked out in advance, the Confederate Batteries would wait for a ship to move into a predetermined position marked with flag and buoys and when it was in the targeted location, fire. The guns would then be set to the next location up or down the channel. Batteries were arranged and prepared to present a gauntlet of precisely controlled fire to any ship moving up the narrow harbor channel.

While the ironclads were powerful ships, it was nearly impossible for the crew to escape if they were holed in deep water by a mine. Temperatures inside the Monitors often exceeded 140 degrees. Plunging fire from Sumter could pierce their decks. This attack would test their capabilities.

When the Federal fleet went into line of battle on the afternoon of April 7, the Confederate Garrison at Sumter met it with the chivalry which was still part of the war at that time. The Fort ran up all its flags and the band was sent to the parapet to play the national airs.

The details on the attack itself can be best determined from the official reports and records found linked below. The Federal Navy was unable or unwilling to come close in to Sumter and operated near the limit of its weapons. The tinclad Keokuk, whose master protested her unfitness for the work, came in closest, took the worst pounding, was disabled and sank the next day. Several of the monitors were damaged and had to go to the Federal Navy Yard at Beaufort for repairs. The powerful Ironsides kept her distance. The Ironsides paused for twenty minutes over a Confederate electrical mine packed with 1000 pounds of gunpowder but the operators on the shore could not detonate it. Ultimately the iron fleet withdrew under pressure from the more accurate Confederate Fire, which had the advantage of fixed and stable positions on the land.

There is also some indication that the Navy might have been worse off had they won the battle. If the ironclad fleet had managed to pass Sumter and entered the Harbor, it would have been completely surrounded by powerful land batteries and possibly trapped by the Confederate Ironclads, which though slow and unfit for pursuit and engagement, could

have effectively blocked the escape channel behind them. The Federal Ironclads could have been attacked by fleets of smaller vessels and their crews overwhelmed. Some of the Federal Captains believed a victory at the harbor mouth might have become a disaster inside. As it was, the Confederates could claim a defensive victory at Charleston and the Federal Fleet joined the Army in land operations against Charleston that summer on Folly, Morris and James Islands.

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Gen. Roswell Riley's Report on the Ironclad Attack From the Official Records . . .

HEADQUARTERS FIRST MILITARY DISTRICT, DEPT. OF SOUTH CAROLINA, GEORGIA, AND FLORIDA,  
Charleston, April 13, 1863.

GENERAL: Upon the 1st instant the increase of the enemy's force in the Stono (River) and information from North Edisto (River) gave warning that the long threatened combined movement upon Charleston was about to take place. Brig. Gen. S. R. Gist, commanding first sub-division of this district, James Island, and Saint Andrew's, took prompt measures for the observation and repulse of any attack in that direction. Col. R. F. Graham, commanding third sub-division, occupied the shore of Morris Island, on Light House Inlet, to control the passage from Folly Island, and a strict watch has been kept up to the present time on the land movements of the enemy.

On the 5th the iron-clad fleet of the Abolitionists, consisting of seven monitors and one double.-turreted vessel, hove in sight from Fort Sumter and came to anchor outside, in the vicinity of the Ironsides frigate, then a part of the blockading squadron. The 6th was apparently spent by the enemy in preparation and by our artillerists in verifying the condition of their material.

On the morning of the 7th the enemy was inside the bar with all his ironclad, including the frigate, but from his proximity to the shoals and the haze of the atmosphere his position could not be determined.

The various works of preparation were progressed with both on the exterior and interior lines of defense until about 2 o'clock p.m., when the enemy steamed directly up the channel, the Weehawken, with a false prow for removing torpedoes attached, leading, followed by three monitors, the Ironsides (flag-ship), three other monitors; the Keokuk, double-turret, bringing up the rear.

At each fort and battery officers and men made preparation for immediate action, while the enemy came slowly and steadily on. At 3 o'clock Fort Moultrie opened fire. At five minutes past 3 the leading vessel, having arrived at 1,400 yards of Fort Sumter, opened upon it with two guns. The eastern battery of Fort Sumter replied. Batteries Bee, Beauregard, Wagner, and Cummings Point opened about this time and the action became general, the four leading monitors closing up on the Weehawken, and taking position at an average distance from the forts and batteries of about 1,500 yards.

In accordance with instructions, the fire from the different points was concentrated upon the leading vessels, and the effect was soon apparent from the withdrawal of the leading monitor from action, her false prow having been detached and she otherwise apparently injured. The remaining monitors in advance of the flag-ship held their position, directing their fire principally at Fort Sumter, but giving occasional shots at Fort Moultrie (of which the flag-staff was shot away), Batteries Beauregard and Bee.

The Ironsides meantime opened fire, and drew the attention of Forts Moultrie and Sumter and the Cummings Point Battery. A few heavy and concentrated discharges caused her to withdraw out of range, where she was soon followed by two other monitors.

At five minutes past 4 the Keokuk left her consorts and came to the front, approaching to within 900 yards of Fort Sumter, 1,200 from Battery Bee, and 1,000 of Fort Moultrie. Her advance was characterized by more boldness than had hitherto been shown by any of the enemy's fleet, but receiving full attention from the powerful batteries opposed to her the effect was soon apparent. The 10-inch shot and 7-inch rifle bolts crashed through her armor; her hull and turrets were riddled and stove in, her boats were

shot away, and in less than forty minutes she retired with such speed as her disabled condition would permit.

The remaining monitors kept their positions for a time, but soon one by one dropped down the channel and came to anchor out of range, after an action of two hours and twenty-five minutes, at ranges varying from 900 to 1,500 yards.

The full effect of our batteries upon the enemy could not be precisely ascertained, and as our strength had not been entirely put forth it was believed that the action would soon be renewed. The monitor which had led into the action, however, proceeded south inside of the bar on the same evening.

Before the commencement of the affair I was proceeding in a boat to Battery Bee, and watched the progress of the cannonade from that point. The guns were worked with as much precision as the range would admit. There were no damages or casualties. Visiting Fort Moultrie, the damaged flag-staff was being replaced and everything prepared for the renewal of the fire should the enemy approach again. One man had been mortally wounded by the falling of the staff. Crossing the channel to Fort Sumter, the effect of impact of the heavy shot sent by the enemy against the fort which they are so anxious to repossess, greater in caliber and supposed distinctive force than any hitherto used in war, was found to have been much less than had been anticipated. Five men had been injured by splinters from the traverse, one 8-inch columbiad had exploded, one 10-inch carriage had its rear transom shot away, and one rifled 42-pounder had been temporarily disabled from the effect of recoil on defective carriages.

The garrison was immediately set to work to repair damages, and the strength of the enemy's projectiles having been ascertained, to guard such points as might be exposed to their effect should the attack be renewed.

Cummings Point Battery and Battery Wagner were uninjured, except from the accidental explosion of an ammunition chest in Battery Wagner.

During the night of the 7th stores were replenished, threatened points upon land re-enforced, working parties

from the Forty-sixth Georgia Regiment brought to Fort Sumter, and the renewal of the struggle in the morning awaited with confidence.

When day dawned on the morning of the 8th the enemy's fleet was discovered in the same position as noticed on the previous evening. About 9 o'clock the Keokuk, which had been evidently the most damaged in the action, went down about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Fort Sumter and three-fourths of a mile from Morris Island. The remainder of the fleet were repairing damages. Preparations for repulsing a renewed attack were progressed with in accordance with the instructions of the commanding general (Bueregard), who visited Fort Sumter on that day. A detachment of seamen under Flag-Officer W. F. Lynch arrived from Wilmington, and on the 9th temporarily relieved the artillerists in charge of the Cummings Point Battery. The operations of the enemy's fleet consisted only in supply and repair.

Toward evening of the 9th a raft, apparently for removing torpedoes or obstructions, was towed inside of the bar. Nothing occurred of importance during the 10th.

During the night of the 10th Lieutenant-Colonel Dargan, of Colonel Graham's command, crossed Light-House Inlet (going on to the North end of Folly Island, the old Coast Guard Loran Station), drove back the enemy's pickets with loss, and returned with 1 prisoner.

On the 11th there were indications that the attacking fleet was about to withdraw; and on the 12th, at high water, the Ironsides crossed the bar and took up her position with the blockading fleet, and the monitors steamed and were towed to the southward, leaving only the sunken Keokuk as a monument of their attack and discomfiture.

In this the first trial of the Abolition iron fleet against brick fortifications and their first attempt to enter the harbor of Charleston, in which they were beaten before their adversaries thought the action had well commenced, they were opposed by seventy-six pieces in all, including mortars. Thirty-seven of these, exclusive of mortars, were above the caliber of 32-pounders. The expenditure of shot against the fleet was 2,229 projectiles, of which over 1,600 were over the caliber of 32-pounders.

The guns which the enemy brought to bear were, if their own account is to be believed, 30 in number, including 8-inch rifled and 11 and 15 inch guns, which would make their weight of metal at one discharge nearly, if not quite, equal to that thrown by the batteries.

During the action Brigadier General Trapier, commanding econd sub-division of this district, was present at Fort Moultrie; Brigadier-General Gist, commanding first sub-division, at Fort Johnson; Col. R. F. Graham, commanding third sub-division, on Morris Island, and Col. L. M. Keitt, commanding Sullivan's Island, at Battery Bee, attending to these duties and awaiting the development of the attack. The action, however, was purely of artillery; forts and batteries against the iron-clad vessels of the enemy; other means of defense, obstructions and torpedoes, not having come into play.

Fort Sumter was the principal object of the enemy's attack, and to that garrison, under its gallant commander, Col. Alfred Rhett, ably seconded by Lieut. Col. J. A. Yates and Maj. Ormsby Blanding, and all the officers and men, special credit is due for sustaining the shock and with their powerful armament contributing principally to the repulse.

The garrison of Fort Moultrie, under Col. William Butler, seconded by Major Baker and the other officers and soldiers, upheld the historic reputation of that fort and contributed their full share to the result. The powerful batteries of Battery Bee were commanded by Lieut. Col. J.C. Simkins, and were served with great effect.

Battery Wagner, under Maj. C.K. Huger; Cummings Point Battery, under Lieutenant Lesesne, and Battery Beauregard, under Captain Sitgreaves, all did their part according to their armament. Indeed, from the reports of the commanders, it is hard to make any distinction where all did their duty with devotion and zeal. Those cases which have been ascertained will be found in the reports of the subordinate commanders. The steady preparation for receiving a renewed attack by the officers and the good conduct and discipline of the troops, especially in the garrison of Fort Sumter, where the labor was necessarily great, have been quite as creditable as their conduct under fire.

While service in immediate action is that which is most conspicuous, after such a result as has been accomplished, the greatest credit is due to that long, patient, and laborious preparation by which our works and material, never originally intended to withstand such an attack as has been encountered, have been so re-secured as to enable our gallant and well-instructed officers and men to obtain their end with comparatively small loss. In that preparation the late Lieut. Col. Thomas M. Wagner contributed much on both sides of the channel, and Colonel Rhett, Lieutenant-Colonel Yates, Major Blanding, and other officers of Fort Sumter have been more or less engaged since the fort fell into our hands two years since.

Colonel Butler, Lieutenant-Colonel Simkins, and other officers of the First South Carolina infantry have been for more than a year engaged at the works on Sullivan's Island. Besides these, various officers of engineers and other branches of the department staff, known to the commanding general, have been at different times principal contributors in the work, and, although in the limits of this report it is impossible to mention all to whom credit is due, it is well that works like these, without which in such emergencies as the present personal gallantry avails naught, should be appreciated.

During the seven days while the presence of the fleet threatened action Capt. William F. Nance, principal assistant adjutant-general on the district staff, performed his difficult duties in the administration of a command of 20,000 men in a prompt, judicious, and efficient manner. He was assisted by Lieuts. H. H. Rogers and W. H. Wagner, aides-de-camp. Capt. F. B. DuBarry, district ordnance officer, was especially active and energetic in the supply of ammunition and material for the batteries. He was assisted by Lieut. C. C. Pinckney. Capt. B. H. Read, assistant adjutant-general; Col. Edward Manigault, and Lieut. Col. St. Clair Dearing, volunteers upon the staff, were present during the action at Fort Sumter.

Capt. E. M. Seabrook, volunteer aide-de-camp, and Lieutenant Sehnierle, enrolling officer and acting aide-de-camp, were generally with me during the active period, and

all were energetic and prompt in the discharge of the duties required of them.

Capt. John S. Ryan acted on my immediate staff.

To Maj. Motte A. Pringle and Norman W. Smith, post and district quartermasters, and Captain McClenahan, acting commissary of subsistence many thanks should be rendered. The duties of the quartermaster's department were excessively laborious on account of the limited means of transportation, and it is a matter of congratulation that with such means they were so well performed.

The reports of engineer officers will inform the commanding general of the condition of the various works, as well as of the acts of officers in that branch of the service.

I have the honor to transmit herewith a sketch of the position of the enemy's fleet at 4.15 p.m. on the 7th; a return of the guns engaged ; a return of ammunition expended; a numerical return of casualties, and the reports of different commanders. To the last I beg respectfully to refer for such information as is not included in this report. (\*)I have also to transmit herewith two Abolition ensigns obtained from the Keokuk, as she lies off Morris Island Beach, by Lieutenant Glassell, C. S. Navy, one of which is evidently the ensign under which she fought and was worsted.

None of the iron-clads flew large flags, the object having doubtless been to avoid presenting a mark to our artillery.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

R. S. RIPLEY,  
Brigadier-General, Commanding.