1882

The Burnside Expedition

Ambrose E. Burnside

Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society of Rhode Island.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

OF EVENTS IN THE

WAR OF THE REBELLION.

No. 6.— Second Series.

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BY

AMBROSE E. BURNSIDE,

Late Major-General, United States Army.

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BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE

RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS

HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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[Read before the Society, July 7, 1880.]

THE paper which I am about to read to you was hastily prepared last fall, to be read to a literary society in a neighboring town. Some of our comrades were present at the meeting at which it was read, and exacted from me a promise that it should be given to our society for publication. As I before said, it was hastily prepared, and I asked some time to revise it, before having it published; but up to this moment I have not found the time, and must read it to you in its original form.

Soon after the First Rhode Island regiment was mustered out of service, I was appointed by President Lincoln to the office of brigadier-general. My commission was given to me on the sixth of August, 1861, and I was ordered to report to General

McClellan, who placed me in charge of the division and brigades which were formed of the new troops as they arrived in Washington. My duty was to look after the drill and discipline of these brigades, with a view to giving the men the efficiency necessary for assignment to the older divisions of the army, which were then organizing in Washington under the name of the Army of the Potomac. The duty was interesting in some respects, but was in the main somewhat tame, so that I very naturally desired more active duty.

One evening in the following October, General McClellan and I were chatting together over the affairs of the war, when I mentioned to him a plan that I had given some thought to for the formation of a coast division. After giving him a somewhat detailed account of the plan, he asked me to put it in writing as soon as possible, which was done. The next day it was presented to him, and it met his approval. He laid it before the Secretary of War, by whom it was also approved. The general details of the plan were briefly as follows: To organize a division of from twelve to fifteen thousand men,

mainly from states bordering on the northern seacoast, many of whom would be familiar with the coasting trade, and among whom would be found a goodly number of mechanics, to fit out a fleet of light-draught steamers, sailing vessels and barges, large enough to transport the division, its armament and supplies, so that it could be rapidly thrown from point to point on the coast with a view to establishing lodgments on the southern coast, landing troops, and penetrating into the interior, thereby threatening the lines of transportation in the rear of the main army then concentrating in Virginia, and hold possession of the inland waters on the Atlantic coast.

After the approval of the plan I was ordered to New York to fit out the fleet; and on the twenty-third of October, orders were issued establishing my headquarters for the concentration of the troops of the division at Annapolis. The headquarters for the fitting out of the fleet were established at No. 7 Bowling Green, New York. Troops arrived from time to time at Annapolis, and all went well in the camp, which was established on beautiful grounds

just outside of the town. The improvement in drill and discipline was very rapid, but affairs did not progress so smoothly at the headquarters in New York. There was great difficulty in procuring vessels of a light draught, almost everything of that sort having been already called into service; but after much difficulty I was enabled to report to General McClellan on the twelfth of September that a sufficient amount of transportation and armament had been secured for the division. It was a motley fleet. North river barges and propellers had been strengthened from deck to keelson by heavy oak planks, and water-tight compartments were built in them. They were so arranged that parapets of sand-bags or bales of hay could be built upon their decks, and each one carried from four to six guns. Sailing vessels, formerly belonging to the coasting trade, had been fitted up in the same manner. Several large passenger steamers, which were guaranteed to draw less than eight feet of water, together with tug and ferry-boats, served to make up the fleet, which gave a capacity to transport fifteen thousand troops, with baggage, camp equipage, rations,

etc. Light-draught sailing vessels were also added to the fleet, on which were stored building material for bridges, rafts, scows, entrenching implements, quartermasters' stores, tools, extra ordnance, stores, etc., all of which were ordered to rendezvous at Fortress Monroe. Coal and water vessels were chartered in Baltimore, and ordered to rendezvous at the same place. The transports were ordered to Annapolis harbor, at which point, after most mortifying and vexatious delays, they all arrived by the fourth of January, 1862, and on this day, orders were promulgated for embarkation, which were received from one end of the camp to the other with most enthusiastic cheers.

I had organized the division into three brigades, which were placed in command of General G. Foster, General Jesse L. Reno and General John G. Parke, three of my most trusted friends. We had been cadets at West Point together, and I had always entertained for them the greatest confidence and esteem; so that you can well imagine my gratification at having my request for their detail granted. In all future operations in the expedition, our close

friendly relations were maintained, and I was never disappointed in any reliance which I placed on their gallantry, skill and integrity. It may be well to state here that I had been notified by General McClellan that our destination would be Hatteras Inlet, with a view to operations in the inland waters of North Carolina. This order was afterwards formulated in an order supplemented to this paper.

On the fifth of January the troops began to embark. During that day there were some delays which resulted from inexperience in the maneuvering of the vessels and in the new work to which they were unaccustomed. On that night, snow to the extent of from two to three inches fell, which gave to the camp and surrounding country, on the morning of the sixth, a most picturesque appearance. Regiment after regiment struck their tents and marched to the point of embarkation, with bands playing, colors flying and the men cheering and singing from lightness of heart. The lines of troops, with their dark uniforms and glittering bayonets, contrasted markedly with the snow-clad fields and trees, as they passed through the quaint old town of

Annapolis, the inhabitants of which at that very day were not remarkable for their loyalty. The men were not cheered and encouraged by many friendly voices, such as they had heard whilst coming from their homes to the seat of war; but they were not at all chilled by the reception, and cheerfully marched on to the work before them. Embarkation had become more easy to each regiment than it was to the preceding one, owing to the greater facility with which the vessels were handled. The order to break camp had been obeyed with joyful alacrity, and more troops poured into the Academy grounds during the day than could be embarked, so that large numbers remained there for the night. This bivouac was one of the most enlivening and beautiful that I saw during the war. There was very little sleep, but great joyousness. The following day and night of the seventh was but a repetition of those of the sixth; and on Wednesday morning every regiment was on board except the Sixth New Hampshire, which arrived late on the night of the seventh, and was on the next morning embarked. The scene in the harbor was inspiring

beyond description. The vessels, as they passed each other from time to time, saluted each other with their steam whistles, while the bands played and the troops cheered, the decks being covered with blue-coats, some chattering, some sleeping, others writing their last letters to their loved ones at home. The whole fleet seemed to be under a mixed influence of excitement and contentment.

On the morning of the ninth, each vessel set sail, under orders to rendezvous at Fortress Monroe. Nothing of importance occurred as they passed down the bay. The trip was made without much regularity as to the order of the vessels, but rather in a go-as-you-please way. By the night of the tenth, all the vessels had joined the supply and other vessels which were concentrated at Fortress Monroe, making altogether a fleet of more than eighty vessels. The harbor probably never presented a finer appearance than on that night. All the vessels were illuminated, and the air was filled with the strains of martial music and the voices of the brave men who had left their homes to battle for the preservation of the authority of the government. Not a man in the

fleet knew his destination except myself, the brigade commanders and two or three staff officers, yet there was no complaint or inquisitiveness, but all seemed ready for whatever duty was before them.

Sealed orders were given to the commanders of each vessel, to be opened at sea. Much discouragement was expressed by nautical men and by men high in military authority as to the success of the expedition. The President and General McClellan were both approached, and the President was frequently warned that the vessels were unfit for sea, and that the expedition would be a total failure. Great anxiety was manifested to know its destination, but the secret had been well kept in Washington and at our headquarters. As Mr. Lincoln afterwards told me, a public man was very importunate, and, in fact, almost demanded that the President should tell him where we were going. Finally, the President said to him, "Now I will tell you in great confidence where they are going, if you will promise not to speak of it to any one." The promise was given, and Mr. Lincoln said, "Well, now, my friend, the expedition is going to sea." The inquir-

er left him without receiving any further information. In this jocular manner Mr. Lincoln was in the habit of throwing off the cares of state; and it often occurs to me, that but for that habit he would have broken down under the great weight of public responsibility which rested upon him from the first day of the war to the termination of his noble life. No man has ever lived, in my opinion, who could have gone through that struggle as he did. At no period of his life did I believe his heart was ever stirred with a feeling of enmity or resentment against any one. He was actuated by the simple desire and determination to maintain the authority of the government at all hazards.

On the night of the eleventh the signal for sailing was given, and very soon the fleet was under way. My headquarters were on board a large steamer, the "George Peabody," but I took for my headquarters during the voyage a small propeller called the "Picket," which was in reality the smallest vessel in the fleet, and had with me two or three of my staff officers. I was moved to do this because of the great criticism which had been made as to the unseaworthiness of the vessels of the fleet, and because of a desire to show to the men my faith in their adaptability to the service. Their weaknesses were known to me, but they were the best that could be procured, and it was necessary that the service should be performed even at the risk of losing lives by shipwreck. The weather was threatening, but I did not foresee the storm by which we were afterwards overtaken. At that time we had no weather signal reports, but the sailing would not have been delayed in any event, because the orders to proceed to our work were imperative. It was, of course, learned by all, after reaching the sea, that the destination of the fleet was Hatteras Inlet.

Just before midnight the "Picket" weighed anchor, and we were soon at sea, and it was not long before the little vessel was called upon to test her sea-going ability. On rounding Cape Hatteras we met a very strong breeze, and the little vessel got into the trough of the sea. It seemed for a time as if she would surely be swamped; but by skillful management the captain brought her head to, after which she behaved better. We passed a most un-

comfortable night. Everything on the deck that was not lashed was swept overboard; and the men, furniture and crockery below decks were thrown about in a most promiscuous manner. The breeze died away towards morning, soon after which a heavy fog arose and continued the greater part of the day. The ocean's swell during the day, which was something terrible, kept one in constant thought that the little vessel was in momentary danger of going under.

Towards night the wind arose, and within a short time it increased to a terrible gale, and we experienced on that night more discomfort and dread, if possible, than on the preceding one. At times, it seemed as if the waves, which appeared to us mountain high, would engulf us, but then the little vessel would ride them and stagger forward in her course. The great trouble, the captain said, was to keep her head to the wind, but his presence of mind never seemed to leave him for a moment, and every instant of our extreme danger from time to time would be followed by a demonstration of his ability to keep his vessel above water.

The fog had hidden from us the fleet during the day before, (the twelfth,) but at about midnight we discovered a large steamer upon our port bow. We fired a shot astern of her, which she answered by coming near to us. It was the "Eastern Queen"; but we dared not go too near to her for fear of being crushed. She seemed to us a mammoth, and we were all delighted when she answered the signal to lay by us until daylight, but to keep off. In the morning more vessels were found to be in sight, and just before noon of the thirteenth, we hove to, off Hatteras Inlet. Soon after, a tug-boat came out from the Inlet, which, it will be remembered, had been occupied by General Butler and Commodore Stringham. The little boat undertook to do the duty of piloting the fleet over the bar. The "Picket" led the way, and bravely fought the breakers until she was safely anchored inside the harbor.

In thinking of it now, it seems almost miraculous that she escaped the great dangers through which she passed at sea, and the still greater danger of the breakers on the bar. Vessel after vessel followed us in, until we were ready to wish that the fleet were

not so large. At one time it seemed as if our little boat would be crushed between two of the larger vessels which had dragged their anchors and were coming down upon her. Fortunately, the commanders of the vessels succeeded in checking them just as they came in contact with us. Most of the fleet arrived inside the bar during the afternoon.

The propeller, "The City of New York," which was laden with supplies and ordnance stores, grounded on the bar, and proved a total loss. Her officers and crew clung to the rigging until the next day, when they were rescued by surf-boats sent to their assistance. One of the troop vessels also grounded on the bar, after nightfall, and it seemed for a time as if she and her precious cargo would be lost. Some gallant volunteers went to her relief with a tug-boat, which succeded in getting her off the bar and into the harbor. The water and coal vessels did not approach the Inlet, but went to sea as a matter of safety.

Such of the vessels as were of too heavy draught to pass over the bar, anchored under the cape. From one of these vessels, two officers, Colonel Allen and Sergeant Weller, of the Ninth New Jersey, started in a surf-boat to report to me. They succeeded in reaching my headquarters, but on their return the boat was swamped by the breakers on the bar, and they were lost. The crew, who were more skilled in such service, clung to the boat and were rescued. Strange to say, these were the only two lives lost during the entire voyage and entrance into the Inlet, notwithstanding the gloomy prognostications touching the seaworthiness of the vessels of the fleet.

Besides the propeller, "The City of New York," before spoken of, we lost the ship "Pocahontas," with over a hundred horses on board. The gunboat "Zouave" was sunk in the Inlet after she crossed the bar, and proved a total loss, but no lives were lost.

From the fourteenth until the twenty-sixth we had terrific weather, and it required the utmost care on the part of the commanders of the vessels to prevent a general disaster. Many of the vessels were driven from their anchors and grounded on the swash and bar. Many collisions occurred, which caused great damage to the fleet. At times it seemed

as if nothing could prevent general disaster. As I before said, the water and most of the coal vessels were driven to sea by the stress of the weather, and the entire fleet was for many days on short rations of water. Much suffering resulted from this, and at one time a flag of distress was hoisted on many of the vessels in consequence of the want of water.

On one of these dreary days I for a time gave up all hope, and walked to the bow of the vessel that I might be alone. Soon after, a small, black cloud appeared in the angry gray sky, just above the horizon, and very soon spread so as to cover the entire canopy; and in a few moments after, a most copious fall of rain came to our relief. Signals were given to spread sails to catch the water, and in a short time an abundance was secured for the entire fleet. I was at once cheered up, but very much ashamed of the distrust which I had allowed to get the master of me.

To go into a detailed description of all that we suffered during those terrible days would require more time than I can give to this paper. From time to time we made efforts to cross the fleet from the In-

let into Pamlico Sound, over what was called the swash, which separated it from the Inlet. We had been led to believe that there were eight feet of water upon the swash, but when we arrived we discovered to our sorrow that there were but six feet; and as most of our vessels, as well as the vessels of the naval fleet which we found at Hatteras Inlet on our arrival, drew more water than that, it was necessary to deepen the channel by some process. The current was very swift upon the swash, which circumstance proved to be much in our favor. Large vessels were used in going ahead, under full steam, on the bar when the tide was running out, and then anchors were carried out by boats in advance, so as to hold the vessels in position. The swift current would wash the sand from under them and allow them to float, after which they were driven further on by steam and anchored again, when the sand would again wash out from under them, and so on the process was continued for days, until a broad channel of over eight feet was made, deep enough to allow the passage of the fleet into the sound.

On the twenty-sixth, one of our largest steamers

got safely over the swash and anchored in the sound, where some of the gunboats had preceded them. By the fourth of February the entire fleet had anchored and had passed into the sound, and orders were given for the advance on Roanoke Island. Detailed instructions were given for the landing of the troops and the mode of attack.

At an early hour on the morning of the fifth the start was made. The naval vessels, under Commodore Goldsborough, were in advance and on the flanks. The sailing vessels containing troops were taken in tow by steamers. There were in all sixty-five vessels. The fleet presented a most imposing appearance as they started up the sound. The day was most beautiful, and the sail was enjoyed beyond measure by the soldiers, who had been so long penned up in the desolate Inlet. At sundown, signal was given to come to anchor within ten miles of Roanoke Island. At eight o'clock the next morning the signal to weigh anchor was given, but our progress was very much retarded by a gale that sprung up, so we anchored, but very little in advance of our position of the night before. During

that night all lights were carefully concealed. The naval vessels were well out in advance to protect the transports from the inroads of the rebel gunboats.

On the morning of the seventh the gunboats passed inside the narrow passage known as Roanoke Inlet, and were soon abreast of the lower part of Roanoke Island. Soon after the naval fleet had passed through, the transport fleet began its passage. The rebel gunboats were seen close in shore under the batteries of the island. At half-past ten o'clock a signal gun was fired from one of the forts, announcing our approach. At half-past eleven, one of the naval vessels opened fire, which was replied to by the rebels. Signals were given by the commodore of the fleet to begin the action, and by noon the firing became rapid, and soon after the engagement became general. The rebels had driven a line of piles across the main channel to obstruct the progress of our vessels, leaving a narrow space for them to retreat through, and as our naval vessels pressed them they availed themselves of this means of safety. Our guns soon got the range of their batteries, and by most extraordinary skill and rapidity of fir-

ing, almost silenced them. I ordered a reconnoissance, just before noon, by a small boat, with a view of ascertaining a point of landing. A young negro, who had escaped from the island on our arrival at Hatteras Inlet, had given me most valuable information as to the nature of the shore of the island, from which I had determined that our point of landing would be at Ashby's Harbor, which was nearly midway up the shore. The reconnoitering party was accompanied by this young negro, and all that he had told us proved to be correct, so that I directed the landing to be made there.

At one o'clock, the quarters of the garrison in one of the forts were fired by one of our shells. The rebel gunboats retired up the sound, but still continued a brisk fire as they were followed by our vessels. Orders were given for the troops to land at three o'clock. The ground in the rear of Ashby's Harbor was cleared by shells from the naval vessels, and our large surf-boats were lowered, rapidly filled with troops and towed up in long lines by light-draught vessels until they came near to the shore of the harbor, when each of the surf-boats was cut loose

and steered for the shore. There was no obstruction to their landing. In less than an hour four thousand troops were ashore, and before midnight the entire force was landed, with the exception of one regiment, which was landed on the morning of the eighth.

I will not go into a description of the island and its fortifications, because it has been so well described in books which are entirely familiar to all of you. It is enough to say that the advance of our troops was ordered on the morning of the eighth—General Foster being in the advance and centre, General Reno on the left, and General Parke on the right.

Just above Ashby's Harbor, the island from shore to shore was marshy, swampy ground. A causeway had been built up the centre of the island, and on this, about one mile and a half from the harbor, was a fort, which was flanked by what seemed to be impassable ground, but it did not prove to be so to our troops. General Foster pressed the rebels in front, General Reno passed around the left with his brigade, often waist deep in marsh, through most impen-

etrable thickets, until he gained the right flank of the enemy's line. General Parke performed equally good service on the right, and after advantageous positions had been obtained, the work was carried by a simultaneous assault, and there was no hindrance from that time to the march of our troops to the head of the island and to the forts on the shore, where the entire garrison was captured.

The naval fleet pursued the rebel gunboats, nearly all of which, however, were destroyed by their crews, to prevent capture.

The results of this important victory were great, particularly in inspiring the confidence of the country in the efficiency of their armies in the field.

The troops enjoyed their rest at Roanoke Island, but were not allowed to remain idle long. On the twenty-sixth of February, orders were given to make arrangements to embark for New Berne, and within four days they were all on board.

On the twelfth of March, the entire command was anchored off the mouth of Slocum's Creek, and about fourteen miles from New Berne. The approach to the city had been obstructed by piles and sunken

vessels. About four miles from New Berne a large fort on the shore had been built, with a heavy armament, and a line of earthworks extended from the fort inland, a distance of some two miles, where it ended in almost impassable ground.

On the night of the twelfth, orders were given for landing, and on the morning of the thirteenth the troops were put ashore, in very much the same way that they were at Roanoke. By one o'clock the debarkation was finished, and the troops were put in line of march. About this time the rain began to fall, and the road became almost impassable. No ammunition could be carried except what the men could carry themselves. No artillery could be taken except the small howitzers, which were hauled by the troops with drag ropes. This was one of the most disagreeable and difficult marches that I witnessed during the war. We came in contact with the enemy's pickets just before dark, when it was decided to delay the attack until morning. A most dreary bivouac followed that night. Early the next morning, notwithstanding the fog, the disposition for the attack was made. General Foster was ordered to

engage the enemy on the right, General Reno to pass around on the extreme left, and General Parke to occupy the centre. We were much nearer to the enemy than we expected, and were soon in contact with them. General Foster rapidly closed with them, and met with severe resistance. He asked for reinforcements, but was told that every man had been ordered into action, and that there were no reserves. The contest was sharp, but brief. The Fourth Rhode Island broke the enemy's line near where it crossed the railroad, after which the enemy wavered, and a general advance of our whole line placed us in possession of the works. The enemy fled to New Berne, burning the bridge behind them. Our troops rapidly pursued, but the fact that they had to cross the river in boats, prevented them from capturing the main body of the enemy. As it was, large numbers of prisoners and armament fell into our hands.

In the meantime, the naval vessels had worked their way up to the city, and aided in the transportation of the troops across, and New Berne was occupied on the afternoon of the fourteenth.

It still remained for us to reduce Fort Macon. To

this work General Parke's brigade was ordered. The country between New Berne and Beaufort was immediately occupied, and a passage by hand-car was made between the two places, all the rolling stock having been run off the road. By the morning of the eleventh of April, regular siege operations had been begun by General Parke, and were pressed rapidly forward, and by the twenty-sixth of April the garrison at Beaufort had been forced to surrender.

Thus another victory was to be inscribed upon our banner. The Rhode Island troops bore the most honorable part in this conflict. After that, several small expeditions were sent into the interior of the country, all of which were successful.

Much to my sorrow, on the third of the following July, I was ordered to go to the Peninsula to consult with General McClellan, and after that my duties as commanding officer in North Carolina ended, but a large proportion of the troops of the expedition served under me during the remainder of the war, as members of the gallant Ninth Corps.

The Burnside expedition has passed into history;

its record we can be proud of. No body of troops ever had more difficulties to overcome in the same space of time. Its perils were both by land and water. Defeat never befell it. No gun was lost by it. Its experience was a succession of honorable victories.

GENERAL McCLELLAN'S ORDER.

HEADQUARTERS OF THE ARMY,
WASHINGTON, January 7, 1862.

BRIGADIER-GENERAL AMBROSE E. BURNSIDE,
Commanding Expedition:

GENERAL: In accordance with verbal instructions heretofore given you, you will, after uniting with Flag-Officer Goldsborough at Fort Monroe, proceed under his convoy to Hatteras Inlet, when you will in connection with him take the most prompt measures for crossing the fleet into the "bulkhead" into the waters of the sound. Under the accompanying general order, constituting the Department of North Carolina, you will assume the command of the garrison at Hatteras Inlet, and make such dispositions in regard to that place as your ulterior operations may render necessary, always being careful to provide for the safety of that very important station in any contingency.

Your first point of attack will be Roanoke Island and its dependencies. It is presumed that the navy can reduce the batteries on the marshes and cover the landing of your troops on the main island, by which, in connection with a rapid movement of the gunboats to the northern extremity as soon as the marsh battery is reduced, it may be hoped to capture the entire garrison of the place.

Having occupied the island and its dependencies you will at once proceed to the erection of the batteries and defences necessary to hold the position with a small force. Should the flag-officer require any assistance in seizing or holding the debouches of the canals from Norfolk, you will please afford it to him.

The Commodore and yourself having completed your arrangements in regard to Roanoke Island and the waters north of it, you will please at once make a descent upon New Berne, having gained possession of which and the railroad passing through it you will at once throw a sufficient force upon Beaufort, and take the steps necessary to reduce Fort Macon and open that port. When you seize New Berne you will endeavor to seize the railroad as far west as Goldsborough, should circumstances favor such a movement. The temper of the people, the rebel force at hand, &c., will go far toward determining the question as to how far west the railroad can be safely occupied and held. Should circumstances render it advisable to seize and hold Raleigh, the main north and south line of railroad passing through Goldsborough should be so effectually destroyed for considerable distances north and south of that point as to render it impossible for the rebels to use it to your disadvantage. A great point would be gained in any event by the effectual destruction of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad.

I would advise great caution in moving so far into the interior as upon Raleigh. Having accomplished the objects mentioned, the next point of interest would probably be Wilmington, the reduction of which may require that additional means shall be afforded you. I would urge great caution in regard to proclamation. In no case would I go beyond a moderate joint proclamation with the naval commander, which should say as little as possible about politics or the negro. Merely state that the true issue for which we are fighting is the preservation of the Union and upholding the laws of the General Government, and stating that all who conduct themselves properly will as far as possible be protected in their persons and property.

You will please report your operations as often as an opportunity offers itself.

With my best wishes for your success, I am, &c.,

GEO. B. MCCLELLAN,

Major-General, Commanding-in-Chief.

P. S.—Any prisoners you take should be sent to the most convenient Northern post. You can, however, exchange any of them for any of your own men who may be taken.