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## The Failed Powder Boat Explosion During the First Attack on Fort Fisher in December 1864.

### Abstract

This paper attempts to provide a detailed understanding of how General Benjamin Butler's proposal to detonate an **explosive laden ship** to secure **Fort Fisher** and ultimately Wilmington, North Carolina failed because of a flawed plan, a gross failure of communication and a desire for personal glory over intelligent planning led to an embarrassing **Union defeat in 1864**.

### Keywords

Fort Fisher, Civil War, Powder Boat Explosion, General Benjamin Butler

The Failed Powder Boat Explosion During the First Attack on Fort Fisher in December 1864.

Christopher Steven Carroll

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In the fall of 1864, President Abraham Lincoln and Union General Ulysses Grant searched for a quick end to the Civil War. Since 1861, the Union had engaged in a vicious battle, stretching from Georgia to Pennsylvania, bringing both success and defeat to the Union and Confederate forces. The fall of 1864 saw the Confederacy living on life-support and barring something drastic, the end was near. Though the Union had created a naval blockade that had “steadily choked the Confederacy into isolation,” the Confederacy survived in part to the port of Wilmington, North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> It was the only port still open within the Confederacy and served as a major supply route for the Confederacy. As Union officials studied various military options to close this strategic port, General Benjamin Butler proposed detonating an explosive-laden steamer that would devastate Fort Fisher and allow the Union army to easily secure the fort and ultimately Wilmington. The failure of the powder ship explosion, the first of the setbacks in Butler's bid to take Fort Fisher, resulted from the flawed concept of the plan, having underestimated the powder boat design, a gross failure of communication among the principal leaders, and a desperate attempt at personal glory leading to an embarrassing Union defeat.

The Wilmington port had concerned the Union since 1862 when Secretary of War Gideon Wells tried to close the port as Confederate blockade runners supplied the army with arms and provisions exceeding seventy million dollars.<sup>2</sup> Failure to close the port would prolong the war and aggravate a Northern population weary of war. In 1864, Welles again pleaded for the capture of Fort Fisher, which stood between the Union forces and the Wilmington port. Over time, the fort had become “one of the most formidable series of works in the Confederacy.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rod Gragg, *The Battle of Fort Fisher* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 3, accessed February 18, 2019, <https://archive.org/details/confederategolia0000grag/page/n7>.

<sup>2</sup> David D. Porter, *The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 683, accessed February 18, 2019, Google Scholar.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 683.

Colonel William Lamb had assumed command of the Confederate fort and immediately recognized its importance. After a quick survey, he created a massive fortress designed to resist the strongest assault by the Union navy, while protecting blockade runners.<sup>4</sup>

Secretary Welles understood that closing the port would require tremendous resources and sought capable experienced leaders to command the expedition. Having been rebuffed numerous times by well-qualified admirals, Welles settled on his fifth choice, Rear Admiral David Porter to lead the naval forces.<sup>5</sup> Though not preferred, Porter possessed the qualifications needed to lead the navy against the impregnable fort and worked with Grant to select the army commander. At this moment, the first setback was exposed as General Benjamin Butler reconnected with Admiral Porter. These two individuals had clashed previously causing Porter to beg Grant not to require them to “cooperate in so important an affair as the attack on Fort Fisher...as they are not likely ever again to be in complete accord.”<sup>6</sup> General Grant, ignoring Porter’s request, selected General Godfrey Weitzel, second in command to Butler, to lead the seven thousand soldiers alongside Porter’s navy. After being selected, General Weitzel, according to Butler, felt unprepared to lead this campaign causing Butler to feel persuaded to “accompany the junior commander on the expedition.”<sup>7</sup>

Butler proposed using a retrofitted steamer with three hundred pounds of explosives to run aground near the fort and explode using a complex series of fuses and timers. He conceived this idea from a newspaper article detailing a similar explosion in England in October 1864. Two

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<sup>4</sup> Gragg, *Confederate Goliath* 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> David D. Porter, *Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1886), 262, accessed February 18, 2019. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t0js9hw99;view=1up;seq=9>.

<sup>7</sup> Richard S. West, *Lincoln’s Scapegoat General: A Life of Benjamin Butler, 1818-1893* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 280, accessed February 19, 2019, <https://archive.org/details/lincolnsscapegoa00west/page/280>

barges filled with gunpowder were tied to the dock along the Thames River and upon discharge destroyed several cottages and was felt fifteen miles away in London.<sup>8</sup> Butler knew this example would not be large enough to destroy the fort, but it did present a framework. As the research proceeded there was disagreement at the highest levels as to the potential success of this plan. In November 1864, chief engineer General Delafield expected the expedition to have the same result on the fort as “firing feathers from muskets would have upon the enemy.”<sup>9</sup> However, others believed Butler’s plan was feasible. Even Porter supported his rival’s plan and recommended fifteen thousand pounds of powder be requisitioned instead of the one hundred fifteen pounds requested by Butler.<sup>10</sup> While Grant and Lincoln were not ardent supporters, they did not stand in the way and authorized Butler to proceed. Butler immediately went to work and assembled the pieces necessary to bring a Union victory, but also glory to his name.

To achieve success, the powder was arranged to explode through an intricate system of detonation devices including “clock-work, candles with fuses and a slow match.”<sup>11</sup> An effective explosion would require absolute precision from all critical elements of the design. For instance, as the clock wound down, a grape-shot would fall onto an explosive cap, igniting the fuses.<sup>12</sup> As the clock-work began, a second system, composed of slow burning candles cut to specific

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<sup>8</sup> Charles L. Price and Claude C. Sturgill, “Shock and Assault in the First Battle of Fort Fisher,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 47, no.1 (January 1970): 27, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23518295>

<sup>9</sup> United States Congress, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War: Red River Expedition, Fort Fisher Expedition, Heavy Ordinance. 38th Congress, Second Session, 1865, Committee Print, 51, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://archive.org/details/reportofjointcom02unit/page/260>.

<sup>10</sup> Porter, *Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War*, 269.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Franklin Butler, *Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of Major General Benjamin Butler: Butler’s Book* (Boston: A.M. Thayer and Company, 1892), 800, accessed February 21, 2019, Google Scholar.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 128 volumes, (Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901). Series 1, vol. 42, pt. 1, 989, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924077725905;view=1up;seq=985>.

lengths, worked with the ignition system, igniting the powder and setting off another explosion.<sup>13</sup> The engineers also offered a fail-safe measure in case of malfunction or possible capture by the enemy. Before exiting, the crew would light a small fire in the stern so that “the flames might not reach the powder until the clocks and chandelier should have had ample time to react.”<sup>14</sup>

Admiral Porter chose the *USS Louisiana*, a recently retired two hundred and ninety-five-ton boat for the expedition. It was a “fitting end for the old war-worn steamer, as she should go from the ranks of the fleet...into the forefront of battle; and then gloriously expire in one brilliant flash; slaying...more at her death than...her whole lifetime.”<sup>15</sup> The *Louisiana* was transformed into a well-constructed torpedo destined to bring victory and glory to Butler and Porter. The *Louisiana* would be disguised as a Confederate blockade runner and placed “in the desired position without being discovered by the enemy.”<sup>16</sup> During preparation, two significant events unknowingly aided the expedition’s failure. First, the ordnance department supplied the vessel with damaged powder, creating the possibility of a malfunction.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the engineering department advised storing the powder above the waterline of the ship, leaving the cargo hold empty.<sup>18</sup> This allowed only two hundred and fifteen pounds of powder on the vessel. Porter later recalled it was unanimously agreed that three hundred pounds of explosives were needed to destroy the fort.<sup>19</sup> Why after such detailed preparation did officials change their plans? One

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 989.

<sup>14</sup> “Story of the Powder Boat.” *The Galaxy* 9 (January 1870):83, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924080782174;view=1up;seq=83>.

<sup>15</sup> John Gilchrist Barrett, *The Civil War in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina University Press, 1963), 264 accessed February 22, 2019, <https://archive.org/details/civilwarinnorthc00barr/page/266>

<sup>16</sup> U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion*, 988.

<sup>17</sup> Butler, *Autobiography*, 776.

<sup>18</sup> United States Congress, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 244.

<sup>19</sup> United States Navy, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of Rebellion* (Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, 1900) Series 1, vol. 11, 215, Accessed February 22, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924051350902;view=1up;seq=7>.

possibility was Grant's frustration at the extended time required to load the powder, causing him to order the Wilmington expedition to begin immediately "with or without the powder- boat."<sup>20</sup>

Having recently assumed command, Porter sought the perfect team for the mission seeking volunteers "for a hazardous duty stating the chances were 'death, or glory, honor and promotion.'"<sup>21</sup> After receiving numerous applications, Porter selected Commander Alexander Rhind, an officer known for "brilliant and judicious conception, and cool and daring execution, and had made his name famous among his comrades" to lead the mission.<sup>22</sup> Rhind completed his team with volunteers from his own crew for the assignment. Porter reminded the team they would encounter "great risks...and may lose your life in this adventure, but the risk is worth the running when the importance of this object is to be considered and the fame to be gained."<sup>23</sup> As the expedition set sail for Fort Fisher on December 13, 1864, Porter asked to leave thirty-six hours ahead of Butler since the *Louisiana* was a slower vessel. However, Butler, without any discussion, left before Porter in an effort to "deceive enemy scouts."<sup>24</sup> Failing to communicate with Porter created significant delays as Butler arrived at Fort Fisher expecting to meet Porter, while Porter was biding time in Beaufort waiting on the arrival of Butler. This not only created confusion among the Union troops but caused the Confederates to become aware of an imminent attack. Governor Zebulon Vance of North Carolina ordered all individuals who could "stand behind breastworks and fire a musket" to hurry to Wilmington and defend the fort and he even promised to "meet you at the fort and share with you the worse."<sup>25</sup> The Confederates were

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<sup>20</sup> Porter, *The Naval History of the Civil War*, 750.

<sup>21</sup> "Story of the Powder Boat", *The Galaxy*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Cragg, *Confederate Goliath*, 50.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>25</sup> Zebulon Vance, *By the Governor of North Carolina, a Proclamation; Governor Zebulon B. Vance, December 20, 1864*, 1, State Archives of North Carolina, accessed February 28, 2019, <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15012coll8/id/14038/rec/2>



expecting a massive attack while Butler and Porter had become more focused on a personal agenda designed to bring individual glory.

At Fort Fisher, Porter refused to meet with Butler and indirectly sent word to attack on December 18. Due to rough seas, Butler requested a delay allowing for better conditions to land his army.<sup>26</sup> During the delay, Butler returned to Beaufort, sixty miles away, to refuel and resupply. While there, he studied various weather and sea reports and insisted the attack occur on December 25. Butler's prideful heart is exposed as he claimed his knowledge of naval operations was superior to Porter's, a naval commander whose career was spent on the water planning such attacks. Porter ignored Butler's request and ordered the explosion to occur on December 24, leaving Butler unavailable for the attack. Butler saw this as an intentional act as Porter wanted sole recognition for the successful mission and could tell Butler, "Here General, this is Admiral Porter's fort, taken by him, his work...take care of it."<sup>27</sup> On December 24, the *Louisiana* was towed to within three hundred yards of the shore and Commander Rhind and his crew proceeded to light the fuses, candles, fire and exit the ship.<sup>28</sup> Anticipating a seismic explosion, the result of the powder boat was a shock "nothing like so severe as expected."<sup>29</sup> The *Louisiana* created nothing more than an ignominious failure, only rousing the Confederacy from sleep and creating embarrassment, not glory, for Porter.<sup>30</sup> With no other options, Porter ordered a naval artillery assault directly upon the fort. Colonel William Lamb observing from the fort stated, "never,

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<sup>26</sup> Porter, *The Naval History of the Civil War*, 695.

<sup>27</sup> West, *Lincoln's Scapegoat General*, 286.

<sup>28</sup> Francis P.B. Sands, *The Last of the Blockade and the Fall of Fort Fisher* (Washington, D.C: Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, Commandery of the District of Columbia, 1902), 14, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://archive.org/details/lastofblockadefa00sand/page/4>.

<sup>29</sup> "Wilmington: The Attack on Fort Fisher, Official Report from Admiral Porter. Clear Account of Our Special Correspondent," *New York Times*, December 30, 1864, accessed March 1, 2019, ProQuest.

<sup>30</sup> Chris E. Fonvielle, "Closing Down the Kingdom: Union Combined Operations Against Wilmington." In *Union Combined Operation in the Civil War*, edited by Craig L. Symonds, 96-114. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 104, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13wzx8w.14>

since the invention of gunpowder was there so much harmlessly expended, as in the first day's attack upon Fort Fisher."<sup>31</sup> Having failed twice to capture Fort Fisher, Butler and Porter's feud continued as Porter refused to meet with Butler's assistant late on December 24 citing excessive fatigue.<sup>32</sup> If only pride would have given way to cooperation, the fort could have been captured. Yet, "nothing...was accomplished by the bombardment."<sup>33</sup>

Butler blamed the failure on Porter's selfish pursuits and prepared to remove the army. However, his advisors asked him to send in a scout team to test the enemy's defense before retreating.<sup>34</sup> On December 25, Weitzel conducted an inspection of the fort and discovered Porter's bombardment had only created minimal damage.<sup>35</sup> After discovering Porter's failure once again, the army leaders agreed to retreat. Weitzel said "it will be murder," if an assault was attempted on the fort."<sup>36</sup> A fortified fort along with an approaching storm compelled Butler to decide the lives of his soldiers were more important than Porter's ego driven attempt at glory. Reminding Porter of all of his mistakes and disasters he had inflicted on this mission, Butler advised, "nothing further can be done by land forces."<sup>37</sup> The attack had fizzled out.

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<sup>31</sup> G. William Quatman, *A Young General and the Fall of Richmond: The Life and Career of General Godfrey Weitzel* (Athens, Ohio: University of Ohio Press) accessed March 1, 2019, Google Scholar.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Butler, *Speech of Maj.-Gen. Benj. F. Butler, Upon the Campaign Before Richmond, 1864: Delivered at Lowell, Mass., January 29, 1865, with an Appendix, the Two Attacks on Fort Fisher, Speech on the Treatment of the Negro, Delivered at Boston, Mass., February 4, 1865, Speech of Hon. Geo. S. Boutwell, in Reply to Charges of Hon. James Brooks ... against Gen. Benj. F. Butler, Delivered in the House of Representatives, January 24, 1865* (Boston: Wright and Potter Printers, 1865), 19, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009589880>

<sup>33</sup> United States Navy. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy with an Appendix Containing Reports from Officers. December 1865*, (Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, 1865), iv, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.a0008327470;view=1up;seq=9>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Coffin, *Stories of Our Soldiers*, vol. 2 (Boston: The Journal Newspaper Company, 1898) 212, accessed March 2, 2019, Google Scholar.

<sup>36</sup> Butler, *Speech of Major General Butler*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler, During the Period of the Civil War*, Vol. V. (Norwood Mass: Plimpton Press, 1917) 434, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000601920>.

As Butler retreated and Porter awaited new orders, the Confederates rejoiced. General Braxton Bragg believed the defense of Fort Fisher would bring a “renewed series of Confederate victories.”<sup>38</sup> In 1865, the Joint Committee on the Conduct of War investigated Butler’s motives and retreat at Fort Fisher. Porter testified how Butler’s abandonment “created the greatest indignation on the part of the Navy, who had seen the prize so nearly in reach.”<sup>39</sup> Butler testified if the powder boat experiment had been carried out according to his plan, “there would have been no doubt of its success.”<sup>40</sup> Butler also faulted Rhind for leaving the boat fifteen hundred yards offshore and on the wrong side of the fort where “only the owls were frightened.”<sup>41</sup> After careful review, the committee found Butler’s withdrawal “fully justified.”<sup>42</sup>

Was Butler’s powder boat experiment simply a whimsical attempt at glory, or, if it had been placed in the proper position and used according to plan, would it have changed the outcome? Even Butler’s nemesis Porter strongly supported the powder boat’s inclusion in the expedition, “for, though it failed to blow up Fort Fisher, it did what nothing else could have done---it started the expedition off.”<sup>43</sup> Simply put, the attack failed not because of the events off the coast of Fort Fisher, but within the prideful hearts of men like Porter and Butler. In 1865, General Butler said, “and whatever mistakes I may have made, whatever mistakes other Generals have made...it is not for us to remember these, or allow them for a moment to affect our action; it is the country we serve, it is the Union to which our allegiance is due.”<sup>44</sup> If only he and others

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<sup>38</sup> Samuel Martin, *General Braxton Bragg, C.S.A.* (Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland and Company, 2011) 425, accessed March 2, 2019, Google Scholar.

<sup>39</sup> Porter, *The Naval History of the Civil War*, 700-701.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 801.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion*, 682.

<sup>42</sup> United States Congress, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 464.

<sup>43</sup> Porter, *Incidents and Anecdotes*, 272.

<sup>44</sup> Butler, *Speech of Major General Butler*, 28.

would have applied these words to their actions, not only might the powder boat have changed the art of war, but peace might have been obtained sooner and possibly fewer lives killed.

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