



The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

“Like the Crash of a Thousand Pieces of Artillery”

*An Accidental Explosion near New Bern
Was One of the Deadliest Incidents of the Civil War
In North Carolina*

David A. Norris

602 Larchmont Drive
Wilmington NC 28403
Dave195701@aol.com

May 26, 1864 was one of the deadliest days of the Civil War for the Union Army in North Carolina. If that date doesn't call forth the recollection of a battle in your memory, that's because there was no battle on that day in this state, but there was a devastating accident.

After the fall of New Bern in March 1862, the Atlantic & North Carolina Railroad was cut in two. The railroad bridge at Batchelder's Creek (also spelled Bachelor's Creek), 8 miles west of New Bern, marked the western edge of Federal control. East from New Bern, the railroad ran to Morehead City. West of the creek and east of Kinston, Confederate troops had pulled up some of the rails to patch other Southern railway lines.

Twice a day, a US Military Railroad train made the round trip from New Bern. The afternoon train on May 26, 1864 left town about 3 pm, and stopped at Batchelder's Creek about 4:00.

The Federal commanders in New Bern knew that the Confederates were building an ironclad gunboat, the *CSS Neuse*, up the Neuse River from New Bern. Only a month before, the *CSS Albemarle* had steamed down the Roanoke River and helped Brig. Gen. Robert F. Hoke capture the Union garrison at Plymouth. To protect New Bern from the ironclad, army engineer Lt. William Rice King was setting a barrier of nautical mines or “torpedoes” in the Neuse near Batchelder's Creek.

King had made the torpedoes in New Bern. Each “250 pounds of powder, and were made in barrels, environed with heavy iron hoops” According to a newspaper, “From previous experiment they were found to answer all the requirements for destruction, and in this instance gave terrible proof of their efficiency.” By May 26, nine torpedoes were already set in the river, and the last four were due to arrive at Batchelder's Creek.

Lieutenant King was not at hand when the train arrived. The deadly torpedoes, which after all were fashioned out of ready-made barrels, just looked like ordinary barrels to the workers. It seems that they bore no warning marks, and had been heaved onto a wagon like ordinary freight before they were loaded onto the train at New Bern. At the Batchelder's Creek station, the first torpedo was rolled down out of a freight car. With no instructions to the contrary, the torpedo barrels were apparently going to be taken by mistake to the nearby commissary building.

Camp Claasen, the home of the 132nd New York Infantry (named after its commander, Col. Peter A. Claasen) sprawled out around the station. Men from that regiment and other units stationed nearby heard the afternoon train arrive and wandered over to the station, hoping for mail, newspapers, or other diversions from the monotony of life in camp.

Adjutant Joseph E. Palmer, Jr. of the 158th New York rode toward the train, but his horse "showed great uneasiness, being restive and apparently much terrified." Palmer was puzzled because his horse had never before been afraid of the locomotive. Annoyed, the adjutant urged his horse closer to the train.

Another torpedo, then another, was rolled off of the train. Pvt. Frank Towle of the 132nd New York was in the commissary building near the station, "drawing whiskey from a barrel". Near Towle, another soldier bent over a barrel of rice.

As the workmen pushed the fourth and last torpedo toward the boxcar door, Palmer's horse "still evinced unusual fear". His nervous horse "made several sudden bounds away from the spot", as if "possessing a prescience of the coming danger".

No one ever knew what made Palmer's horse afraid, but the animal's fear saved his life. As workmen rolled the fourth of the torpedoes out of the boxcar, something struck its detonator cap. 250 pounds of gunpowder exploded instantly, communicating the fire to the other three torpedoes, which also exploded. The blasts occurred so quickly that the men near the scene, as well as the residents of New Bern, heard them as a single "mighty report, like the crash of a thousand pieces of artillery fired simultaneously."

The twenty-by-eighty foot commissary building, which was built of logs, was shattered. Private Towle was thrown "headlong" into the whiskey barrel; he was one of the lucky men who recovered from their injuries. The soldier bending over the rice barrel died, with grains of rice driven into his face. The severed arm of Commissary Sgt. David Jones of the 132nd New York was identified by a distinctive ring that still remained on one of his fingers.

One account states that the explosion killed 35 men instantly and fatally injured 32 more. (By comparison, 90 Union soldiers were killed in the March 14, 1862 Battle of New Bern.) The death toll was heaviest on the 132nd New York Infantry, which lost 28 men killed. Most of them were from New York City or Brooklyn. Other fatalities were from the 158th New York and the 12th New York Cavalry.

Casualty lists note that some of the dead soldiers were teamsters, perhaps who had been sent to bring newly-arrived supplies from the train. Others were noted as on assignment on commissary duty, and were in or near the ill-fated commissary building.

In addition to the soldiers, from “twenty to twenty-five” of the dead were “contrabands”. This was a term for former slaves who reached Union lines. Many had found civilian jobs with the army. One man who was killed was an officer’s servant.

Also killed was a Hezekiah Davis, “an old citizen of that neighborhood”, who happened to be on the scene.

The explosion occurred near a signal station that was “built across the railroad track”. The New York Herald claimed that the signal tower as well as the nearby commissary building were “were thrown into the air a distance of eight hundred feet”. Two of the dead soldiers were flagmen who were assigned to the signal tower.

Fragments of men and shattered debris were scattered for hundreds of yards. Blood and gore spattered the engine, but “strange to say”, reported a newspaper, “the train received little or no injury, a passenger car being partly demolished and the locomotive slightly battered. ”

The *State Journal*, a Confederate newspaper of Goldsboro, said that the noise was heard twenty miles away. This paper went on to say that at New Bern, the explosion sparked a “scene of wild confusion” as “the long roll was beaten, signal guns were fired, and every preparation was made” in case the blast heralded a Confederate attack on the city.

Colonel Claasen telegraphed to New Bern for medical help and coffins. Meanwhile, three wooden hardtack boxes were filled with fragments of the men who a few minutes before had been waiting for letters and newspapers from home.

Wounded men were taken back to New Bern to Foster General Hospital, but there was little that could be done for many of them. A large number of burials in the New Bern National Cemetery, dated May 26, 1864, are a reminder of the deadly torpedo explosion at Batchelder’s Creek.

