

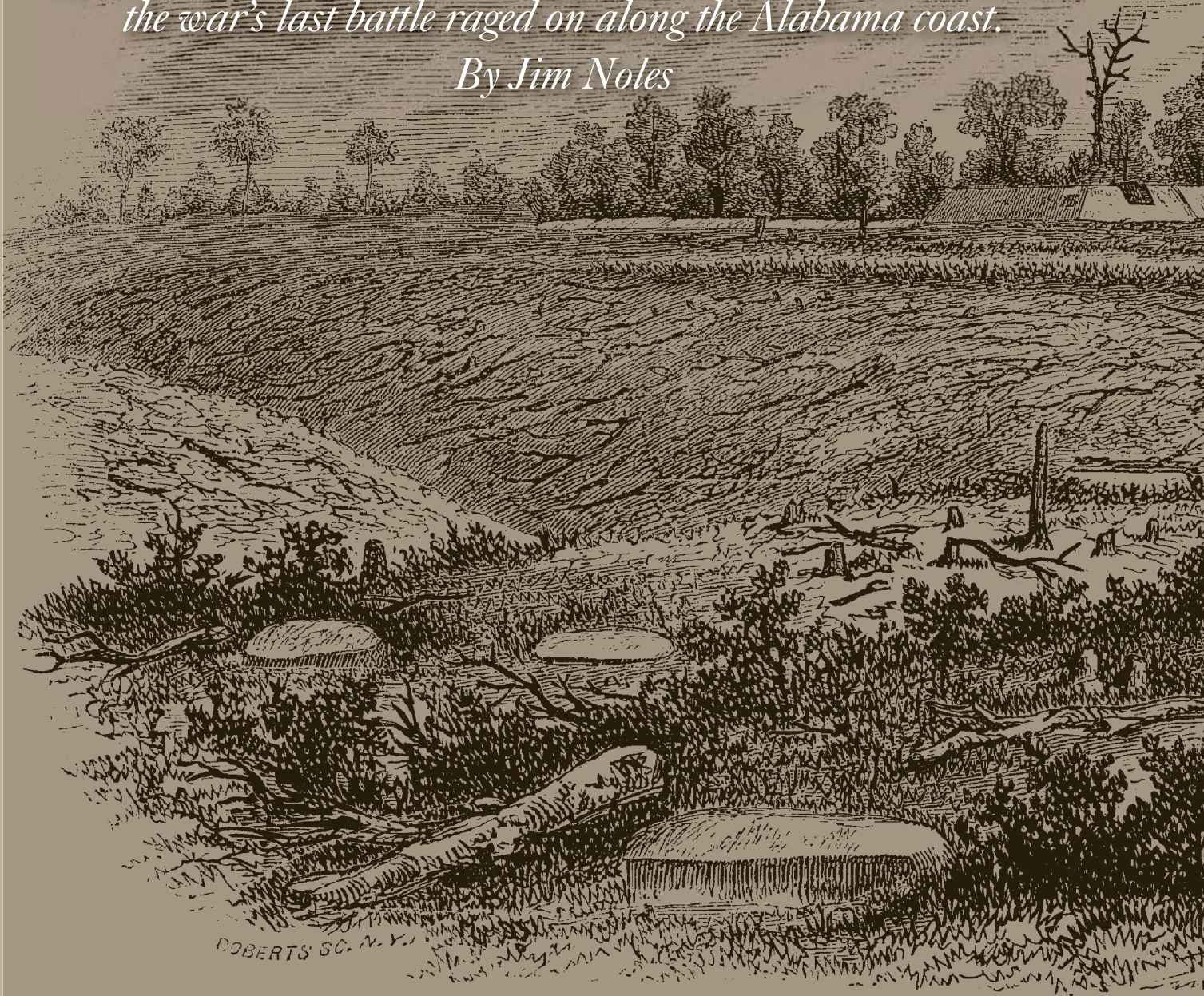
*The Fall of Fort Blakely*



# CONFEDERATE TWILIGHT

*As news of Lee's surrender at Appomattox slowly trickled south,  
the war's last battle raged on along the Alabama coast.*

*By Jim Noles*



*Fort Blakely's Redoubt No. 4, a structure assembled for protection and defense, would not repel the Union challenger. (Lithograph from History of the Campaign of Mobile, Alabama Department of Archives and History)*



**F**OR FIVE LONG DAYS, Priv. Isaac Jackson and his comrades in Company D, 83rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry had scraped and shoveled trenches through the stubborn Alabama clay. “We are kept digging day and night,” Jackson wrote to his brother, “which is very hard duty.” But with each swing of a pick, the Union soldiers dug closer to their ultimate goal—a log and earthen fort marked on the engineers’ maps as simply Fort Blakely’s Redoubt No. 4. And even though this particular day—April 9, 1865—had already witnessed Robert E. Lee surrendering the ragged remnants of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox, the inexorable excavating at Fort Blakely continued.

By this point in the war, Jackson was as seasoned a veteran as most men in either army. Shortly after Vicksburg, the former tinsmith apprentice had penned a letter home to his brother Ethan: “I have gone through hardships that I would not believed I could have . . . and

*Right: Edward Canby’s murder during the Indian Wars was reportedly met with enthusiasm in some southern towns. One Georgia paper even declared his death “revenge” for the South’s oppression. (Library of Congress) Below: This view from Spanish Fort reveals the types of fortifications troops made to prepare for combat. (Lithograph from History of the Campaign of Mobile, Alabama Department of Archives and History)*



*The impending assault promised the climax of a military campaign conceived by Maj. Gen. Edward R. S. Canby three months earlier.*

expect to go through more before my time is out. But I can willingly do it all, if we can conquer the Rebels.”

Now, as this warm Sunday afternoon in Alabama wore on, Jackson’s moment of conquest loomed, even though at least one line of abatis—sharpened, interlocking wooden stakes—still stood between the trench and the redoubt. As the shadows cast by the treacherous spikes grew long, the 83rd Ohio put away its picks and shovels and took rifles in hand. If the Confederate defenders of Redoubt No. 4 hoped to mark the end of another day in the successful defense of Fort Blakely, then they hoped in vain. Their blue-bloused besiegers were operating on a far more aggressive timetable. Within minutes, the last great charge of the Civil War would be unleashed.

**T**HE IMPENDING ASSAULT promised the climax of a military campaign conceived by Maj. Gen. Edward R. S. Canby three months earlier. For the 1835 graduate of West Point, Mobile presented an alluring target. Although the Union capture of Fort Morgan had cut Mobile off from the Gulf of Mexico, the port remained the largest city still flying a

flag of rebellion. Mobile’s loss, and the capture of its garrison, would be a bitter blow to the Confederacy.

But Mobile would be a tough nut to crack. Three lines of entrenched fortifications encircled the city. The middle line, the newest of the three, connected nineteen forts and eight redoubts. The redoubts boasted parapets twenty to thirty feet thick, ditches twenty feet deep and at least the same in width. To guard Mobile from an amphibious assault, Mobile’s defenders constructed ten batteries designed to protect the Spanish River channel. Rows of piles guarded the channel, directing any ships navigating it directly under the muzzles of the cannon. A pair of floating batteries shielded an alternate approach up the Apalachee River and around to Mobile via the Tensaw River. Scores of floating mines tethered in Mobile Bay further complemented the overall defense.

The Confederates also fortified Spanish Fort, which lay seven miles due east of Mobile, and the Baldwin

*Troops often used natural or man-made inclines as defensive positions, as they offered some protection from oncoming fire. (Lithograph from History of the Campaign of Mobile, Alabama Department of Archives and History)*



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County seat of Blakeley. The latter guarded the marshy eastern approaches to Mobile and, in gaining the garrison of Fort “Blakely,” inexplicably lost an “e” in the process. Two generations earlier, Blakeley, with its “fine natural port” across from the confluence of the Apalachee and Tensaw rivers, had been a thriving city of three thousand souls to rival Mobile. But yellow fever and greedy land speculation doomed the town, and when Alabama left the Union, barely one hundred people still called it home. In 1865 residents clustered around a modest two-story brick courthouse, a half-dozen wooden buildings, and a brickyard, all sheltered by massive oaks festooned with Spanish moss.

By 1865 Fort Blakely’s military importance eclipsed the community’s faded stature as the county seat. The Confederate fortifications stretched nearly three miles in length, arranged in somewhat of a semicircle that stretched from a bluff close to the river on the extreme left to the high ground along the river and swamp on the right flank. Nine well-built redoubts served as the fortified lynchpins of the defensive line.

Each individual redoubt, occupied by infantry and artillery pieces, was a veritable fortress unto itself. The

*Trees were felled to a distance of eight hundred yards from each redoubt. Brush and debris, likely used to thwart charging opponents, added to the defenses at Fort Blakely. (Lithograph from History of the Campaign of Mobile, Alabama Department of Archives and History)*

defenders guaranteed clear fields of fire by felling trees out to a distance of some eight hundred yards in front of each redoubt. They sharpened many of those same tree trunks and used them to erect a line of protective abatis and placed it fifty yards to the immediate front of each redoubt. Another line of felled and tangled trees, guarded by a series of rifle pits, ran 250 yards past that first line. Some redoubts even boasted a similar third barrier between the inner and outer lines.

But the fort’s controversial use of torpedoes was even more diabolical than the killing fields of fire and the sharp abatis. Also known as subterra shells, today these torpedoes would simply be called land mines. Faced with what would undoubtedly be overwhelming odds deployed against them, Fort Blakely’s defenders seemed to have exhibited little hesitancy in mining the approaches to their redoubts with the crude torpedoes.

CANBY TURNED HIS ATTENTION to Mobile early in 1865, opting for an end-run into the city from the east with a two-pronged operation. Most of his forces, either ferrying across Mobile Bay from Dauphin Island or marching north from Fort Morgan, would rendezvous near the Fish River on the bay's eastern shore. Meanwhile, another force, under the command of Maj. Gen. Frederick Steele and composed primarily of United States Colored Troops (USCT), would leave Pensacola and march north as well.

At that point, Canby would have two options. If the Confederate defenses in Mobile appeared vulnerable, he could strike west to overwhelm the garrisons of Fort Blakely and Spanish Fort and descend upon Mobile. Otherwise, he could surge north, aiming for Montgomery and hoping to rendezvous with Maj. Gen. James Wilson's own massive Union cavalry raid that would be descending from northern Alabama at the same time.

Despite difficult terrain and hostile weather, Canby's strategy unfolded more or less according to plan. Ships ferried the Union XVI Corps across Mobile Bay from Dauphin Island to the Fish River. Meanwhile, the troops of the XIII Corps marched up from Fort Morgan. The two corps completed their convergence on March 22 and, with Canby deciding to put Mobile rather than Montgomery in his initial crosshairs, pushed north toward the defenses of Spanish Fort.

Confederate Brig. Gen. St. John Richardson Liddell exercised overall command of both Spanish Fort and Fort Blakely. A former Louisiana planter, Liddell had briefly attended West Point in 1837. He never graduated, but his lack of a diploma did not stymie a solid Civil War military career. Somewhat ironically, he bore scars not from battle but from burns he suffered trying to save the life of a small black child fourteen years earlier.

At first Liddell aggressively maneuvered his men to the north of D'Olive Creek to meet the advancing enemy. But when he realized that he faced two well-equipped Union corps, he decided that discretion was the better part of valor and withdrew his outnumbered soldiers back into the breastworks of Spanish Fort and Fort Blakely. By March 27, the Union forces had closed on the former and its garrison of four thousand infantrymen and artillerymen. A thirteen-day siege ensued, culminating with a night assault that revealed that the bulk of Spanish Fort's garrison had slipped away to safety under the cover of darkness.

Meanwhile, Steele's column had advanced from Pensacola, fought several sharp engagements, and reached



*After befriending Ulysses S. Grant at West Point, Frederick Steele pursued a military career that culminated with his command of the Department of the Columbia. (Library of Congress)*

the outskirts of Fort Blakely by April 1. Once Canby was able to shift his victorious forces from Spanish Fort to Fort Blakely, he was able to mass some sixteen thousand men against the latter fortress. On April 9, Fort Blakely was both surrounded and massively outnumbered.

Looking out at the gathering Union forces, Liddell must have rued the Confederacy's rejection of his call to arm emancipated slaves back in December. Efforts to obtain a similar force for construction work within the fortress were equally frustrating. "If you could spare me a hundred negroes for a few nights I could get all of the traverses and approaches constructed promptly and spare the men," he begged the Confederate commander in Mobile. "It is better to use them than to lose them." A quick visit from a friend likely did little to lift the general's spirits. "You are bound to go up," Liddell's friend told him as he boarded a boat to return to Mobile. "I feel sorry for you. Good bye. I hope you live through all of this."

**I**NSIDE FORT BLAKELY'S PERIMETER, Liddell commanded nearly four thousand men, all positioned among the nine redoubts and along the defensive lines that linked them.

French's Division, now commanded by Brig. Gen. Francis M. Cockrell, occupied the left wing. Cockrell was a thirty-one-year-old officer who left his law practice in Warrensburg, Missouri, to volunteer for military service. At Fort Blakely, he was still recovering from a wound received at the Battle of Franklin in Tennessee the previous year.

Cockrell garrisoned his two left-most redoubts with regiments from Mississippi, the remnants of the so-called Sears Brigade. These units were no strangers to hard fighting—or to sieges, for that matter. In fact, many of the Mississippians had already been captured (and subsequently exchanged) during the war, first at Fort Donelson and then later at Vicksburg.

In the redoubts that guarded the Stockton Road, Cockrell positioned the veteran infantrymen and dismounted cavalymen of the famed Missouri Brigade. Maj. Gen. Dabney Maury, who commanded the Confederacy's District of the Gulf, called these men "the noble brigade of Missourians . . . the survivors of more than twenty battles, and the finest troops I had ever seen." These hardy souls occupied Redoubt No. 4 and, like their comrades from Mississippi, had also endured Vicksburg's siege before being captured and exchanged.

Further down the line, the so-called "Boy Reserves" of Brig. Gen. Bryan M. Thomas occupied the arc of redoubts that made up the Confederate right flank. Thomas's brigade consisted of the 62nd and 63rd Alabama Infantry Regiments. The former consisted in large part of teenage boys and former cadets from the University of Alabama's Corps of Cadets. Their numbers included such men as Sgt. Thomas J. Seay, who had enlisted the previous summer only to be captured two months later at Fort Gaines.

After being exchanged in January, Seay was back in the trenches once again. It was a far cry from the governor's mansion he would occupy in Montgomery two decades later (1886–1890).



The 63rd Alabama was mostly filled with conscripts drafted in and around Mobile the previous summer. Lt. Col. Junius A. Law, formerly of Macon, Alabama, commanded the regiment. On April 7 Law had led his regiment out in a nocturnal sortie that cost him fifteen killed and twenty-two wounded. The costly attack only succeeded in making the encroaching Union soldiers more cautious.

Scattered among the redoubts, a collection of artillery batteries manned some forty guns. Their numbers included Tarrant's Battery, posted with the Mississippians in Redoubt No. 1. Capt. Edward W. Tarrant's father, a former school headmaster in Taylorsville, Alabama, had raised the battery and led it against Sherman in Georgia and in Hood's ill-fated Tennessee campaign. Now the younger Tarrant commanded the unit's seventy-five artillerists, who manned nine three-inch Parrot guns and one twelve-pound cannon.



*Above left: Several years after the war's end, St. John R. Liddell was gunned down by a neighbor in a property dispute. (Library of Congress) Left: After serving in the Confederate army, Francis Cockrell returned to his native Missouri, where he was elected to the U.S. Senate for five terms. (Alabama Department of Archives and History) Opposite page, above: Although determined to fight for the Confederacy, Dabney Maury harbored few illusions about the military, calling his studies at West Point "the only unhappy years of a very happy life." (Alabama Department of Archives and History) Opposite page, below: Capt. Edward Tarrant commanded the battery that had been raised by his father earlier in the war. After surrendering to Union troops, Tarrant and his men were taken to Vicksburg for an exchange of prisoners. (Alabama Department of Archives and History)*

*Despite difficult terrain and hostile weather, Canby's strategy unfolded more or less according to plan.*

**O**N SUNDAY, April 9, Canby and his commanders drew plans for a massive assault on Fort Blakely, intent on bagging Liddell's troops before they could escape in the same manner as the Spanish Fort garrison. Encouraged by a noticeable decrease in the amount of gunfire from the fort's ramparts and breastworks, the Union commanders planned a late afternoon charge. But on the Union's right flank, several USCT regiments had other ideas. Brig. Gen. William Pile ordered his brigade of African American soldiers to push forward against the enemy fortifications. They responded rigorously, only to encounter a hailstorm of gunfire from the Confederate defenses.

The relatively uncoordinated assault fragmented and stalled, although it did succeed in driving the redoubts' defenders back from their rifle pits and into their bastions. Of equal importance, it also succeeded in convincing Liddell to shift some of his Missouri troops out of the center of his defenses and to his left to help beat back the USCT regiments' assault.

Such shuttling of forces unbalanced the already weak Confederate defenses, and at 5:45 PM the rest of the Union line readied for its own advance. Near the attacking center, Private Jackson and his comrades in the 83rd Ohio occupied a skirmish line slightly ahead of the men of their brigade. "I never saw the boys in better spirits nor seem[ing] cooler than they did when they were looking for the word 'Forward,'" Jackson recalled, "But everything was done with the greatest of quietness."

At the appointed hour, Jackson's brigade commander, Col. Frederick W. Moore, signaled his regimental commanders to advance. At the head of the 83rd Ohio, Lt.



Col. William H. Baldwin calmly received Moore's order. Baldwin, a thirty-three-year-old graduate of Harvard Law School, had practiced law for a short time in Cincinnati before leaving Ohio in 1860 to join Garibaldi's forces in Italy. Upon the outbreak of war, he returned to the United States to take command of the newly formed 83rd. "[Baldwin] has proven himself," Moore later marveled, "by his unflinching courage and remarkable coolness on this occasion, to be every inch a soldier and a man."

Turning to his veteran soldiers, Baldwin ordered, "Forward!" In response, Jackson and the rest of the regiment "went with a whoop running as fast as possible." With the 83rd pushing ahead as skirmishers, the rest of the brigade followed several hundred feet behind. Elsewhere along the line, regiments from Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, New York, New Jersey, Vermont, Missouri, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, in addition to the USCT regiments, surged forward as well.

"There was but little firing from the skirmish line but the Rebs piled it in thick and fast," Jackson remembered. The Ohio troops sprinted for nearly two hundred yards before pausing to take a quick breath. They rested only a moment as Confederate bullets kicked up the dirt beside them. Then they charged forward once more and reached a barrier of felled trees. There, the regimental musicians, who had exchanged their instruments for axes, chopped frantically through the twisted logs and cut a path for the rest of the regiment.

Clearing the first obstacle, the Ohioans crossed a ravine, paused for another quick breath, pushed through another barrier of logs and tree branches, and then charged toward a sharpened abatis ahead of them, calling out warnings of "torpedo!" as they ran. Shaken by



*Today, wildlife and woodlands reign over the battlefield, oblivious to such historical “what ifs.”*



the attackers' apparent determination, the Confederates manning the outlying rifle pits abandoned their positions and fled for the redoubt and its supporting breastworks. Just before they reached the abatis, many of the Ohioans tripped over an ankle-high wire apparently intended to cast them upon the sharpened stakes. Fortunately for them, the fort's defenders had positioned the wire too far forward. Only the Ohio soldiers' pride suffered as they tumbled and fell. "They were pouring their shot into us, but we were a little too close for them," Jackson recalled, "and the first they knew we were on the fort."

Capt. John Gary was among the regiment's first to climb the redoubt's parapet, while 1st Sgt. Joseph Stickels captured a Confederate regimental flag to earn himself a Medal of Honor. Stickels would be one of a half-dozen Union officers and soldiers to be awarded the medal for gallantry during the battle. As more Union soldiers poured into the fort, Baldwin mounted the parapet and called for the redoubt's defenders to surrender.

"To whom do we surrender?" the Missouri officer asked.

"To the 83rd Ohio," Baldwin responded.

"I believe we did that once before," the Missourian responded resignedly, remembering that his regiment had done the same two years earlier at Vicksburg.

In other redoubts, similar scenes played out as the wave of blue washed over the outnumbered Confederates. On the Union right flank, the USCT stormed forward with a zest that resonated with their commanders. "Greater gallantry than was shown by the officers and the men could hardly be desired," Union Brig. Gen. Christopher C. Andrews wrote. "The latter were

burning with an impulse to do honor to their race, and rushed forward with an intense enthusiasm, in the face of a terrible fire."

Even those redoubts that resisted the initial surge were eventually overwhelmed by Union troops breaking through on the left or right and then outflanking them. From his command post, Liddell offered his own succinct assessment of the fall of the fortress:

*Just at sunset [the Union fire] suddenly ceased, and the plain around our front swarmed with assaulting lines. The enemy scrambled over brush, abatis, stretched wires, [and] through subterra explosions, added to [by] our fire of grape, canister, and musketry. It was well and quickly done.*

Liddell personally surrendered to a Union captain. Three days later, Mobile itself capitulated to Canby's soldiers even as the armies calculated the final butcher's bill for the battle. In the final tally, approximately twenty-seven hundred Confederates were now prisoners of war; another hundred lay dead or dying on the battlefield. On the Union side, Canby lost 127 men killed and 527 others wounded.

**D**ESPITE LIDDELL'S characterization, the men of Tarrant's Battery would not have agreed that the fall of Fort Blakely was "well and quickly done." Stationed in Redoubt No. 1, the battery had fought defiantly against the assaulting USCT troops, with Sgt. John J. Gray firing a canister shot from his twelve-pounder into the flank of an enemy



*Above: Surviving veterans of the 63rd Alabama reconvened for a reunion circa 1900. (Alabama Department of Archives and History) Opposite page: Perhaps the earliest depiction of the assault on Fort Blakely, this etching dates to May 1865 and details the complexity of battle. (Harper's Weekly)*

charge. Gray's blast sent "the contents hurtling through the crowded ranks of the enemy" and thus claimed the last shot fired in defense of the redoubt. "The resulting casualties were great," Tarrant reported. But as the rest of Fort Blakely's defenses to his right collapsed, "nothing was left for us except to run up a white flag." Tarrant's anecdote illustrates the confusion that reigned on the Confederate left flank in the final moments of the Battle of Fort Blakely. Some men threw down their weapons. Others fled for the river or down the line of fortifications to surrender to white troops, and still others battled to the end—and beyond it. Tarrant recalled the chaos:

*The negro troops rushed over our works, brandishing their guns in great rage, accusing us of having fired upon them after we had surrendered. It looked as though we were to be butchered in cold blood, so I passed word along the line that if another man was shot I would seize a musket, as would every man of us, and we would die fighting to the last. The officer of the negroes, however, succeeded in getting control of them, and there were no other outrages.*

Tarrant's recollection echoes the most troubling aspect of Fort Blakely's fall—the allegations of captured Confederates being murdered by vengeful Union

troops, particularly USCT soldiers inflamed by earlier reports of a massacre at Fort Pillow by Confederate soldiers. In the years to come, the issue would be argued repeatedly, first by the battle's participants and later by their descendants. Even Andrews wrote of some of his troops having to be restrained from shooting prisoners—and of two of his officers being shot by their own men as they attempted to do so.

Today, a review of various first-hand accounts of the battle makes it difficult to accept the proposition that no Confederates were killed after white flags were raised. At the

same time, however, one can readily imagine how such deaths would have occurred in the confused final minutes of the fortress's collapse, particularly as individual men and units made their own decisions to fight, flee, or surrender.

**I**N THE AFTERMATH of Fort Blakely's fall, some questioned—or at least discounted—the value of the fierce assault launched hours after Lee's surrender at Appomattox. The future rendered it little more than a footnote to the Civil War story. Such hindsight, however, ignores the very real possibility that Liddell and his hardy band of defiant Confederates might have departed Blakely, rejoining Confederate forces still operating at the time in Alabama and Mississippi, and carrying on the fight. Today, wild-life and woodlands reign over the battlefield, oblivious to such historical "what ifs." But thanks to International Paper's donation of the land in 1990, the scene of the last great charge of the Civil War is preserved as Historic Blakeley State Park.

For the past ten years, Jo Ann Flirt has been the park's director. Flirt, who describes her workplace as "hallowed ground," is working to increase the park's offerings. Eventually, it is hoped that the park will hold an interpretative center where visitors would learn more about battle conditions, and where other educational and research opportunities would be available. Until such a time, it seems appropriate to let *Harper's Weekly* have the last word. "Probably the last charge of the war," the magazine reported on May 27, 1865, "it was as gallant as any on record." AH