



SELECTED LETTERS OF WILLIAM F. DRAPER DURING HIS TIME WITH THE SIGNAL CORPS

On board Steamer S. R. Spaulding
off Roanoke Island
February 9, 1862

Dear Lilla:

The Burnside Expedition is successful in its first attack. Roanoke Island is ours with three thousand prisoners and a large quantity of artillery, small arms, ammunition, provisions and stores of every kind.

I will give you an account of the engagement, as detailed as I have time. We arrived here Friday morning, February 7th. Roanoke Island, as you probably know, is situated in Pamlico Sound, some forty miles from Hatters Inlet. The channels on each side of the island are very narrow and completely commanded by the batteries on the island.

The island was occupied by some five thousand men. The gunboats commenced firing on the batteries at 11 o'clock and 40 minutes, A.M. it was replied to by the Rebels and continued till dark. About four o'clock in the afternoon, our troops began to land and before the next morning they were all ashore except the 29th Massachusetts, which got aground. In the morning they took up their line of march for the rear of the shore batteries - the 25th ahead. After marching some two miles they encountered a battery which commanded the road. It was in a formidable position. The road, some ten feet wide, ran through and almost impassible swamp in a straight line in front of the battery for a space of some five hundred yards. The cannon of the battery were placed so as to sweep the road. The swamp as full of stumps of trees, briars, and etc., and the water and mud was two or three feet deep.

Our regiment stood waist deep in this swamp some three or four hours till others came up, when Hawkins' Zouaves and the 21st Massachusetts made a charge and carried the Battery. Our troops then followed the enemy to the shore battery when the unconditionally surrendered the Island and everything on it.

There are several batteries on the Island mounting twenty-eight large guns. The troops taken were mostly North Carolina and Virginia troops, but there were some Mississippi and Louisiana troops.

Perhaps you would like to know what I did all this time. I was stationed on this steamer and obliged to stay here during the action much against my wishes. Hope next time to take a more active part in the contest.

I have been ashore since and seen the place where the battle was fought. The dead and wounded were removed, but I saw a great many in hospitals. We lost about fifty killed and one hundred fifty wounded. Among the prisoners was O. Jennings Wise, who has since died.

Where we will strike next, I don't know, probably at Newbern. There is a report here that Norfolk is taken. Hope it is true. I got some Secesh money from a prisoner to-day, a note of which I will enclose. I have just been called to to receive a message and the purport of it is that Elizabeth City is taken, and all the Rebel Fleet either taken or destroyed. This expedition seems to be successful at every point.

I would give you a more detailed account of the fighting and etc., but my time is limited and you will read full accounts of everything in the New York papers. Our prisoners that we have taken are very poorly clothed - almost no

two alike. A large proportion of the men are of the class known as poor whites, and are as bad as they are represented to be. Many of the officers are educated men.

The Island itself, although it is an important strategic point, is a very undesirable place to inhabit. It is low, wet, swampy and muddy, and covered almost entirely by a pine forest. The roads or rather cartpaths are knee deep in mud, and the sun never shines here, or at least only at long intervals. The chief productions of the Island next to pine trees are hogs, hundreds of which have been killed by our soldiers since they have been on the Island. We shall leave a garrison here and then move on.

But I forget that I have given you no account of myself as yet. Soon after I wrote to you last, I received quite a number of letters, among which were three from you, which were welcome I assure you. Soon after writing you, I was detailed with three others to accompany General Burnside as Signal Officer. So that accounts for the change in my position. I was not sorry to leave the Satterly. There is one thing that has troubled me very much since I wrote last, and that is the report of the loss of the Colonel Satterly. Watching the papers as you were, you could not help seeing that report and even if you did not credit it, it must have caused you great uneasiness. Then my report of that vessel certainly would favor the idea that we were lost. But it is better to be reported lost than to be lost, and probably before this time you know that I am safe.

To-night I received the letter you sent me in care of General Foster. Although it was a long time on the road, it was none the less welcome. We here are cut off from the rest of the world, and a letter or even a paper is worth its weight in gold.

I am very well situated on the Spaulding; have good board and accommodations. I expect to leave it soon, however, as she is to be used in carrying prisoners to the North. Ere you hear from me again, I shall have passed through more stirring scenes without doubt. Every day life here is full of incidents that seem commonplace to us, although a year or two ago we should have thought them exceedingly remarkable. For instance, I will give you my yesterday's experience which was no more eventful than the average of days. At midnight and some time after the night before I was writing to you. Retired at one to a seat on the upper deck. I was on the watch that night for signals but was not disturbed. I rose at six and after breakfast went to the shore on business.

On the tug on which I went were quite a number of the victims of the battle. The first thing that met my eyes was two of my regiment dead - laid out on the open deck exposed to a hard hail storm. In the cabin where I rode were some twenty wounded men. One of them with a wound in the head from which the brain protruded slightly over the bandage was up walking around, his mind wandering on all sorts of things.

After arriving on shore I found I had some ten miles to walk. I examined the shore batteries and then proceeded on my way.

A little way on I overtook some of my regiment escorting four rebel prisoners to the grave of young Wise. On the way we stopped at a hospital for wounded Rebels, several of whom I conversed with. The traveling was very unromantic - a foot deep in mud. We met squads of soldiers, some with prisoners and some foraging, and occasionally the hissing of a bullet near us told us that they found something to fire at. We soon came to the battlefield and after looking around some little time proceeded on my way. Next I came to where they were burying the dead. The Rebels were thrown in one hole together - our men each had a grave with a board on which was written their name and regiment. Some of them were horribly mangled. One of them had both feet and one arm shot away, and when the battery was carried he swung his hat with the other hand and gave three cheers.

Having dined off half a row of sweet potatoes, I proceeded to the landing, executed my orders and started for the shore. Found a rowboat going near our vessel and waited from three till eight o'clock in the mud and rain for a chance to get there. However, I succeeded and after doing so wrote a part of this letter and laid down to be called in half an hour to receive the news that Elizabeth City was taken.

To-night I have left my writing four times to send or receive messages. A flag of truce is now here from Norfolk.

You must excuse the disconnectedness of my letters now for I write a few lines, am called away, then write a few more and am again called away, so that I can not concentrate my mind at all. With a world of love,

I subscribe myself
William F. Draper

On board the S.R. Spaulding
off Roanoke Island, Feb. 9, 1862

Dear Father:

Roanoke Island is ours with three thousand prisoners, and large quantities of ammunition, provisions, artillery, and camp equipage. This is the greatest victory of the war. Our regiment distinguished themselves very much. I will endeavor to give you a detailed account of the action.

We arrived here Friday morning, and the Navy commenced firing into the batteries on shore at twenty minutes of twelve. At about four in the afternoon, the troops began to land and before morning they were all on shore except the 27th Massachusetts regiment, which had run aground. The next morning they were all on shore except the 27th Massachusetts regiment, which ran aground. The next morning they commenced moving towards the rear of the shore battery. After marching about two miles through mud about a foot deep, they came across a battery which opened on them. The 25th was in front and received the first fire. They held their ground until other regiments came up, when Hawkins's Zouaves and the 21st made a charge and carried the battery. Our men pursued them until they came to the shore battery, when they surrendered unconditionally.

The battery was not injured much. There were seven large guns in this battery; twelve in another further on; three or rather five in the battery in the woods, and two in another. The soldiers on the other side were wretchedly clothed, but were better fed than our men.

The loss on our side was about fifty killed and two hundred wounded. Company B only had one man, Edwin F. Pond wounded in the arm by a fragment of a shell. They all did their duty nobly. The place where the battle was fought was a miserable one. The battery was just beyond a swamp with water two or three feet deep, and full of briars and stumps of trees. A road ten feet wide runs through the swamp, which was completely swept by the battery. Some of our men stood two hours in the mud and water waist deep, firing on the enemy. O. Jennings Wise was mortally wounded in the battle, and has since died.

Perhaps you would like to know what I was doing all this time. Staying on board the Spaulding, impatient to be on shore. But I do not know but it was all for the best. Just before we left Hatteras, we Signal Officers were divided among the different Generals, and I came with General Burnside on the Spaulding. Four of us were here. I am second in command of the party. We, the corps, have been of great service on the water, but as the land here is low and covered with a dense pine forest we can not operate on shore. We had a good chance to see the Naval fight however. There were several secesh gunboats which came down occasionally and were driven back. Quite a number of Rebels escaped to the mainland. They were commanded by Henry and Wise, who escaped.

Where we shall go next, I have no idea, probably to Newbern. There is a report here that Norfolk is taken. For Heaven's sake, send me some Boston Journals or other papers, as they are worth their weight in gold. Another thing, find out the provisions of the Signal Bill, and if I am not promoted I desire to get out of this service. I find that the only way I can do so is by promotion. This service takes one entirely out of the line of promotion and more than quadruples our hardships and expenses. If we are not promoted, I wish you to obtain me a higher appointment in the army. I know I am capable of filling a higher position. This service is rather an inglorious one, while the men are fighting we keep back out of all danger. Talk of being under the eye of the General! I do not believe that General Burnside knows that there is such an officer as I am. The senior officer, one of the old corps, does all the business while I do most of the work. But I shall command a station probably the next detail, as I am the best versed in the

code of any one in the corps, except my commander here. To-morrow I expect to go ashore, after which I will finish my letter.

I have been ashore all day and have seen the different batteries and the battleground. I will make you a sketch of the place as correctly as I can. By the way some of our Signal Officers got ashore and distinguished themselves during the action. Be sure and acquaint me with the provisions of the Signal Corps Bill. By the way, how you must have felt to hear the report of the Colonel Satterly's loss. I must believe too that several of Company B wrote home that I was lost. Hope you got my letter written at Hatteras. Soon after I wrote it, I received several letters from home while I was there, and they were very welcome I assure you. [*At this point Draper draws his sketch. See below.*]

I will enclose you a twenty-five cent Secesh note which I got from a prisoner. I saw a large number of our killed and wounded to-day. There were some horrible wounds. Our exact loss, I believe is twenty-eight killed and one hundred ninety wounded. The 25th lost eight killed and forty seven wounded.

I have had several adventures that would perhaps be interesting to tell, but they seem so commonplace that I will not write them now. We expect more exciting work soon. Remember me to all my friends and remember my requests.

Yours truly,
W.F. Draper

Don't forget to ascertain full particulars in regard to the Signal Bill.

Twelve thirty o'clock at night. By Signal. Have just received news that Elizabeth City is taken and the Rebel gunboats either destroyed or taken.

Newbern, N.C.
March 15, 1862

Dear Father:

As you have probably heard we have taken this town as the second part of the part which is assigned to us. Fifty-nine cannon and six hundred prisoners have fallen into our hands besides an immense amount of stores of every kind. Since I wrote you last I took part in a little expedition to Columbia which I thought would fill a letter, but I have no time now to write about it.

After a pleasant sail from Hatteras in which by the way the Signal Corps were of great service, we arrived at Slocombs Creek where we anchored for the night. I forgot to mention that I command a station now, General Burnside's. We landed early in the morning and marched all day through the mud and got about eight miles. I was fortunate enough to get a shelter for the night.

The next morning we heard fighting ahead and as the flag men were tired out carrying the things they stopped to rest and I pushed ahead. The shells and shot began to fall around me pretty thick, and I met stragglers coming back. A little further on and I came across the twenty-seventh Massachusetts. They were directly in front of the battery and about twenty rods from it. I saw a dead man near me and took his gun and ammunition and went in. I experienced no sick feelings as I expected to, not even a desire to "dodge bullets." I fired some ten rounds one of which I think took effect when the regiment was ordered to fall back on account of want of ammunition.

I kept along the lines until I found the 25th, when I took my old place for the day. We occupied the ground that the 27th had occupied when we were ordered to charge, which we did together with the 24th and carried the battery. We then pushed forward again and came up with the enemy whom we charged again. They scattered in every direction.

We took some prisoners. Forward was the order again, and we took up our march for Newbern. When we came in sight, we thought it was all in flames but only a few buildings were destroyed. The bridge across the river was destroyed, so we crossed in boats. I stayed with Company B all night and came on board the Alice Price in the morning.

Company B lost two men killed and three wounded. Orson Fiske and C.A. Rogers were killed; Hadley lost his right arm, Davenport had his arm broken, and Tilton was hit in the stomach by a piece of shell. Fiske was shot immediately in front of me.

I may get a mention in the report. The Major of our regiment has resigned. Captain Clark told me last night that as he suffered some from rheumatism that he thought some of resigning, and he told me to get the command of the company in that case. Don't mention this as it was told me in confidence.

I have got or rather had any quantity of trophies. I now have a gun, a knife, a hatchet, a quilt, a coat, a pair of pants and several little things.

I don't know whether we shall advance further or not. Remember me to all my friends.

Yours truly,
W.F. Draper

Newbern, N.C.
April 5, 1862

Dear Father:

To-day a mail arrived and in it were quite a large number of letters for me, ten I believe. I was right glad to receive them of course.

I am afraid that when I wrote home before, I made too much of a hero of myself for all the letters received speak of my wonderful coolness, and some censure me for rashness. In regard to courage, I displayed no more than thousands of other men that day, nor do I think that any soldier should be particularly proud of that, as it is expected of him from the very fact of his being a soldier.

You ask what were my duties as Signal Officer that day, and what if the General had wished to send a message. In the first place, the smoke of battle is so thick that no message can be sent, and in the second, the General was mounted and I on foot so that it was impossible for me to keep near him. So I had the choice of either to remain behind out of range, or to go in as I did. And I would not miss another battle if it were possible to be there. There is a kind of fascination about it. As one of my men told me after the battle, "Lieutenant, I believe you like to fight." I think I do.

By the way, Captain Clark has sent in his resignation, and if it is accepted I shall be a First Lieutenant. I hope it will take me out of the [Signal] Corps for I do not like the business. Another thing, two adjutants who distinguished themselves by their cowardice during the battle have been put into the corps as an alternative, instead of resigning. If you can do anything either at Boston or Washington to get me back to my Regiment, whether I am promoted or not, as they say now a promotion will not take one back, do it as you value my future prospects and happiness. My Colonel, of course, will not promote me if he knows that I cannot get back, and owing to mismanagement I am perfectly disgusted with the Corps. I was led into it through misrepresentations of what it was and, of course, desire to get clear of it. Just now I have nothing to do and shall keep in that situation as far as signal duty is concerned if I can till I hear from you.

By the way, there is trouble in the 25th on account of a change of line. New regiments have arrived here and as

they are senior to us they take the post of honor from us, although they have never seen fighting and we have fought so well to keep it. Probably many of the officers will resign on that account. I shall not as I have not finished what I came out for yet. But I do not blame those officers that do. Military affairs are governed almost entirely by money and influence joined with wine suppers and such things. I can see more and more of that every day. These influences have been brought to bear against the Twenty-fifth most of the officers think - hence their resignations. Then again, as you said at first, there are a class of men holding some of the positions in our regiment who are determined to have what they want or resign, in other words to rule or ruin and they will leave now without doubt.

If I were free from the Signal Corps, I might be made a Captain and certainly should be a First Lieutenant. I am in hopes that you can find some way to get me out of this. If I thought I could get another position, at least if it were not for going home before the war was over, I would resign although I know that I should always regret such a step.

As I casually mentioned before about 4000 men have arrived here including the Massachusetts 17th and the Second Maryland. The first is a splendid regiment - full. It does one's soul good to see a full regiment once more. The Maryland Regiment was raised in Baltimore where all these troops have been stationed.

We shall not make an outward movement till Fort Macon is taken. Lieutenant Niles of the Corps has just got a furlough, and I wish to write a line to Lilla so I must close.

I will send some things home by him. Tell Mother although anything she sends or has sent will be very acceptable, yet I have found that the less a man has the better, and if I had a chance I would send home some of the things I brought out with me.

Yours truly,
W.F.Draper

You ask me my weight. Yesterday afternoon I weighed 163 pounds. I sent you some trophies. Give a big knife to George Knight, and hang up the other things where they can be seen. But I must close.

P.S. I have seen the bill to organize the Corps and if it passes we shall only keep the same rank. Do as I desired you to do and leave no stone unturned to obtain and order for me to report to my regiment. If my name is sent in for promotion, it may change the form of the order so you would do well to know whether it is or not. Never mind that part of it, however, as I can write you if that is the case.

Newbern, N.C.
May 2, 1862

Dear Father:

Yesterday I received two letters from you; one from Mother and one each from Ba and Mary Draper as well as others from a different part of the country.

I am now a First Lieutenant and also am again with my Company and Regiment so there will be no necessity of doing anything to give me that position. I hope you heard of it before writing to the Colonel. I knew that I should be promoted as soon as there was a vacancy as the Colonel told me so. I expect my commission will get here by the next boat.

By the way, Thomas Earle has got himself a commission and also into trouble. He, as you know, was a private in Company A wealthy but without much military capacity, so I am informed. A vacancy having occurred in his Company, a Sergeant was appointed Second Lieutenant and commenced acting as such giving up his warrant, purchasing a uniform and so forth. After a fortnight the commission arrived for Thomas Earle. I don't know what will

be done about it, but think Early will be court-martialed and perhaps cashiered on account of certain statements made by him.

You say Captain Clark gave you his reason for coming home. From letters received in the Company, I should think there was considerable said on that subject in Milford. We are getting along very well with the Company. Everything goes along smoothly. The men are on guard every other day so we do not do much drilling. Captain Emery does not board with the Company, and only comes down here once or twice a day, so I have considerable to do when off guard. I like him very well as Captain, better than I expected. Sergeant McCarter makes a splendid officer, as I expected he would. Sergeant Holmes is Orderly. Guard duty continues as usual and I suppose we shall guard the city till an advance movement.

Suppose you know or will know before you receive this the particulars of the capture of Fort Macon. These old forts are not good for much in these days of rifled cannon and iron-clad vessels. By the way, Fort Totten, an earthwork built to defend the city, is nearly finished and a large number of guns mounted. It was built by contrabands. You ask what has become of Arthur Johnson. I think he is well. The last time I saw him was just before the battle at Newbern. He was then in the best of spirits. I saw Mr. Gibson last night. He is teaming all round the country. I must close this letter in time for the mail. Remember that my address has changed. Love to all.

Yours truly,
William F. Draper