

"My Experience in the Civil War"

My Life in the South, 4th ed., 1898; Ch. 3

by Jacob Stroyer

My knowledge of the Civil War extends from the time when the first gun was fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861 to the close of the War.

While the slaves were not pressed into the Confederate service as soldiers, yet they were used in all the slave-holding states at war points, not only to build fortifications but also to work on vessels used in the war.

The slaves were gathered in each state, anywhere from 6,000 to 8,000 or more, from different plantations, carried to some center and sent to various war points in the state.

It would be impossible to describe the intense excitement which prevailed among the Confederates in their united efforts to raise troops to meet the Union forces. They were loud in their expressions of the certainty of victory.

Many of the poor white men were encouraged by the promise of from three to five negroes to each man who would serve in the Confederate service, when the Confederate government should have gained the victory.

On the other hand, the negroes were threatened with an increase of the galling yoke of slavery. These threats were made with significant expressions, and the strongest assumption that the negro was the direct cause of the war.

HOW SLAVES WERE GATHERED AND CARRIED TO WAR POINTS.

No sooner had the war commenced in the spring of 1861 than the slaves were gathered from the various plantations and shipped by freight cars or boats to some center and apportioned out and sent to work at different war points. I do not know just how many slaves the Confederate Government required each master to furnish for its service, but I know that 15 of the 465 slaves on my master's, Col. M. R. Singleton's, plantation¹ were sent to work on fortifications each year during the war.

The war had been going on two years before my turn came. In the summer of 1863 with thousands of other negroes gathered from the various parts of the state, I was freighted to the city of Charleston, South Carolina, and the group in which my lot fell was sent to Sullivan's Island. We were taken on a boat from the city of Charleston and landed in a little village situated nearly opposite Fort Sumter on this island.

Leaving behind us Fort Moultrie, Fort Beauregard, and several small batteries, we marched down the white sandy beach of the island, below Fort Marshall, to the very extreme point where a little inlet of water divides Sullivan's from Long Island, and here we were quartered under Capt. Charles Haskell.

From this point on the island, turning our faces northward, with Morris Island northwest of us, and looking directly north out into the channel, we saw a number of Union gun boats like a flock of black sheep feeding on a plain of grass, while the men pacing their decks looked like faithful shepherds watching the flock. While we negroes remained upon Sullivan's Island, we watched every movement of the Union fleet with hearts of joy to think that they were a part of the means by which the liberty of four and one-half millions of slaves was to be effected in accordance with the emancipation proclamation made the January preceding. We kept such close watch upon them that some one among us, whether it was night or day, would be sure to see the discharge of a shot from the gun boat before the sound of the report was heard. During that summer there was no engagement between the Union fleet and the Confederates at that point in South Carolina. The Union gun boats, however, fired occasional shots over us, six miles, into the city of Charleston. They also fired a few shells into a marsh between Sullivan's Island and Mount Pleasant, but with no damage to us.

WHAT WORK THE NEGROES DID ON THE ISLAND.

After we had reached the island, our company was divided. One part was quartered at one end of the Island, around Fort Moultrie, and we were quartered at the other end, at Fort Marshall. Our work was to repair forts, build batteries, mount guns, and arrange them. While the men were engaged at such work, the boys of my age, namely, thirteen, and some older, waited on officers and carried water for the men at work, and in general acted as messengers between different points on the island.

ENGAGEMENT ON LONG ISLAND.

Though there was no fighting on Sullivan's Island during my stay there, Confederate soldiers at times crossed the inlet from Sullivan's to Long Island, in the night and engaged in skirmishes with Union soldiers, who had entered the upper end of that island and camped there. Whether these Confederate scouts were ever successful in routing the Union forces on the island or not I have never learned, but I

know that they were several times repulsed with considerable loss.

NEGROES ESCAPE.

The way the Confederates came to the knowledge that Union soldiers were on Long Island was that the group of negroes who preceded us on Sullivan's Island had found out that Union soldiers were camping on the upper end of Long Island. So one night quite a number of them escaped by swimming across the inlet that divides Sullivan's Island and Long Island, and succeeded in reaching the Union line.

The next day it was discovered that they had swam across the inlet, and the following night they were pursued by a number of Confederate scouts who crossed in a flat boat. Instead of the capture of the negroes, who would have been victims of the most cruel death, the Confederate scouts were met by soldiers from the Union line, and after a hot engagement they were repulsed, as they usually were.

BUILDING A BATTERY ON LONG ISLAND.

Finally the Confederates took a large number of the group of which I was a member from Sullivan's to the south shore of Long Island and there built a battery, and mounted several small field guns upon it. As they were afraid of being discovered in the daytime we were obliged to work on the battery nights and were taken back to Sullivan's in the morning, until the work was completed.

We were guarded by Confederate soldiers while building the battery, as, without a guard, it would have been easy for any of us to have reached the Union line on the north end of Long Island. Sullivan's Island was about five miles long.

A NEGRO SERVANT MURDERED.

One of the most heartless deeds committed while I was on Sullivan's Island was that of the murder of a negro boy by his master, a Confederate officer to whom the boy had been a body servant. What the rank of this officer was I am not sure, but I think he was a Major, and that he was from the state of Georgia. It was a common thing for southern men to carry dirks [straight-blade daggers], especially during the war. This officer had one, and for something the boy displeased him in, he drew the knife and made a fatal stab between the boy's collar bone and left shoulder. As the victim fell at the brutal master's feet, we negroes who had witnessed the fiendish and cowardly act upon a helpless member of our race expected an immediate interference from the hand of justice in some form or other. But we looked and waited in vain, for the horrible deed did not seem to have changed the manner of those in authority in the least, but they rather treated it as coolly as though nothing had happened. Finding that the

Confederates failed to lay the hand of justice upon the officer, we, with our vague ideas of moral justice, and with our extreme confidence that God would somehow do more for the oppressed negroes than he would ordinarily for any other people, anxiously waited a short time for some token of Divine vengeance, but as we found that no such token as we desired, in the heat of our passion, came, we finally concluded to wait God's way and time, as to how, and when this, as every other wrong act, should be visited with his unfailing justice.

But aside from this case we fared better on these fortifications than we had at home on the plantations. This was the case at least with those of us who were on Sullivan's Island. Our work in general on the fortifications was not hard, we had a great deal of spare time, and although we knew that our work in the Confederate service was against our liberty, yet we were delighted to be in military service.

We felt an exalted pride that, having spent a little time at these war points, we had gained some knowledge which would put us beyond our fellow negroes at home on the plantations, while they would increase our pride by crediting us with far more knowledge than it was possible for us to have gained.

Our daily rations from the Commissary was a quart of rice or hard-tack, and a half pound of salt pork or corn-beef.

The change from the cabins and from the labor on the old plantations so filled our cup of joy that we were sorry when the two months of our stay on the island was ended.

At the end of about two months, I, with the rest of my fellow negroes of that group, was sent back to the plantation again, while others took our places.

MY EXPERIENCE IN FORT SUMTER.

In the summer of 1864, when I was in my fourteenth year, another call was made for negro laborers for the Confederate government, and fifteen from our plantation, including myself, with thousands from other plantations, were sent down to Charleston again.

There the negroes were apportioned in groups to be sent to the different fortifications. My lot fell among the group of three hundred and sixty who were assigned to Fort Sumter. I shall never forget with what care they had to move in carrying us in a steamer from the government wharf in Charleston to John's island wharf, on account of the network of torpedo mines in Charleston Harbor.

From John's island wharf they carried us in rowboats to Fort Sumter, and, as those boats could not carry many, it took all night to convey us with other freighting to Fort Sumter.

The steamer which carried us from Charleston to John's island wharf had to run at night. Indeed every move the Confederates made about there near the close of the war had to be made at night because the Yankees on gunboats outside the channel and those on Morris island kept so close a watch it was very dangerous to convey us from John's island wharf to Fort Sumter because the oars dipping into the salt water at night made sparks like fire, and thus the Yankees on Morris island were able to see us. Indeed their shots oftentimes took effect.

Many of the negroes were killed. Of the fifteen from our plantation, one boy of about my age was struck by a parrot shell while climbing from the boat into the fort. We were told of the perils we were to meet, both before and after we reached our destination. For one of the most disheartening things was the sad report of the survivors of those whose places we were to fill. As the rowboats left them on John's island wharf and as we were about to embark they told us of the great danger to which we would be exposed – of the liability of some of us being killed before we reached the fort, which proved true, and of how fast their comrades were killed in Fort Sumter. A number, it was said, died from fright before reaching Sumter.

THE OFFICERS AND QUARTERS.

The officers who were then in command of the fort were Capt. J. C. Mitchell and Major John Johnson. The name of the overseer in charge of the negroes in the fort was Deburgh – whether that was his right name I can not say.

Deburgh was a foreigner by birth. He was one of the most cruel men I ever knew. As he and his atrocious deeds will come up later in this history, I will say no more of him here.

CONDITION OF THE FORT.

Fort Sumter, which previous to this, had not only been silenced by the Union forces, but also partly demolished, had but one gun mounted on it, on the west side. That cannon we used to call the "Sundown Gun" because it was fired every evening as the sun went down – as well as at sunrise. On this west side the Confederate officers and soldiers were sheltered in the bomb-proof safe during bombardment. On the east side of the fort, facing Morris island, opposite Fort Wagner, there was another apartment called the "Rat-hole" in which we negroes were quartered.

WHAT THE NEGROES DID IN FORT SUMTER.

Fort Sumter had been so badly damaged by the Union forces in 1863 that unless something had been

done upon the top, the continued bombardment which it suffered up to the close of the war would have rendered it uninhabitable.

The fort was being fired upon every five minutes with mortar and parrot shells by the Yankees from Morris Island.

The principal work of the negroes was to secure the top and other parts against the damage from the Union guns.

Large timbers were put on the rampart of the fort, and boards laid on them, then baskets, without bottoms, about two feet wide and four feet high, were put close together on the rampart and filled with sand by the negroes.

The work could only be done at night, because, besides the bombardment from Fort Wagner, which was about a mile or little less from us, there were also sharp-shooters there who picked men off whenever they showed their heads on the rampart.

The mortar and parrot shells rained

alternately upon Fort Sumter every five minutes, day and night, but the sharp-shooters could only fire by day-light.

The negroes were principally exposed to the bombardment. The only time the few Confederate soldiers were exposed to danger was while they were putting the Chevaldefrise [see photo, left] on the parapet at night.

The "Chevaldefrise" is a piece of timber with wooden spikes pointed with iron, and used for defense on fortifications.

In the late war between the Spaniards and the Americans, the former used barbed wire for the same purpose.

If my readers could have been in Fort Sumter in the summer of 1864 they would have heard the sentinel cry, every five minutes, "Look out! Mortar!" Then they would have seen the negroes running about in the fort yard in a confused state, seeking places of

safety from the missile sure to bring death to one or more of them. Another five minutes, and again the cry of the sentinel, "Look out," means a parrot shell, which is far more deadly than is the mortar because it comes so quickly that one has no chance to seek a place of safety.

The next moment the survivors of us, expecting that it would be our turn next, would be picking up,

here and there, parts of the severed bodies of our fellow negroes; many of those bodies so mutilated as not to be recognizable.

DEBURGH, THE OVERSEER.

Deburgh, the overseer of whom I have spoken, was a small man, of light complexion, and very light hair.

If my readers could have been in Fort Sumter in July 1864, they would have seen Deburgh with a small bar of iron or a piece of shell in his hand, forcing the surviving portion of the negroes back into line and adding to these other negroes kept in the Rat-hole as reserves to fill the places of those who were killed and wounded.

They would also have heard him swearing at the top of his voice, while forcing the negroes to rearrange themselves in line from the base of the fort to the top.

This arrangement of the negroes enabled them to sling to each other the bags of sand which was put in the baskets on the top of the fort. My readers ask, what was the sand put on the fort for? It was to smother the fuses of such shells as reached the ramparts before bursting.

After the bombardment of Fort Sumter in 1863 by the Union forces, its top of fourteen or sixteen feet in thickness, built of New Hampshire granite, was left bare. From that time all through 1864, the shells were so aimed as to burst right over the fort, and it was pieces of these shells which flew in every direction that were so destructive.

The fuses of many of these shells fired on Fort Sumter did not burn in time to cause the shells to burst before falling. Now as the shells fell on the rampart of the fort instead of falling and bursting on the stone, they buried themselves harmlessly in the sand, which put out the fuse and also kept them from bursting.

But while the destruction of life was lessened by the sand, it was fully made up by the hand of that brute, the overseer. God only knows how many negroes he killed in Fort Sumter under the shadow of night. Every one he reached, while forcing the slaves back into working position after they had been scattered by the shells, he would strike on the head with the piece of iron he carried in his hand, and, as his victim fell, would cry out to some other negro, "Put that fellow in his box," meaning his coffin.

Whether the superior officers in Fort Sumter knew that Deburgh was killing the negroes off almost as fast as the shells from Fort Wagner, or whether they did not know, and did not care, I never have learned. But I have every reason to believe that one of them at least, namely, Major John Johnson, would not have allowed such a wholesale slaughter, had he known. On the other hand I believe that Capt. J. C. Mitchell

was not only mean enough to have allowed it, but that he was fully as heartless himself.

Whatever became of Deburgh, whether he was killed in Fort Sumter or not, I never knew.

OUR SUPERIOR OFFICERS.

The two officers in command of Fort Sumter in July of 1864 were Capt. J[ohn]. C. Mitchell, and Major John Johnson.

Major Johnson was as kind, gentle, and humane to the negroes as could have been expected.

On the other hand, the actions of Capt.

Mitchell were harsh and very cruel. He had a bitter hatred toward the Yankees, and during the rain of shells on Fort Sumter, he sought every opportunity to expose the negroes to as much danger as he dared.

I remember that one night Capt. Mitchell ordered us outside of Fort Sumter to a projection of the stone-bed upon which the Fort was built, right in front of Fort Wagner. At that place we were in far greater danger from the deadly missiles of the Union forces than we were exposed to on the inside of Sumter, and I could see no other reasons for his ordering us outside of the fort that night than that we might be killed off faster.

It seems that during the incessant firing on Fort Sumter the officers held a consultation as to whether it was not best to evacuate the fort. It was at this time that it was rumored – a rumor that we had every reason to believe – that Capt. Mitchell plotted to lock us negroes up in our quarters in Sumter, known as the Rat-hole, and put powder to it and arrange it so that both the negroes and the Yankees should be blown up, when the latter should have taken possession after the evacuation of the fort by the Confederates.

But we learned that Major John Johnson, who has since become an Episcopal minister in Charleston, S.C., wholly refused to agree with Capt. Mitchell in such a barbarous and cowardly act, and, as though Providence were watching over the innocent and oppressed negroes, and over the Yankees as well, because they were fighting in a righteous cause, Capt. Mitchell's career and further chances of carrying out his cruel intentions were cut short. He was mortally wounded by the sharp-shooters of Fort Wagner on the 14th of July, 1864, and died four hours afterwards.

OUR RATIONS IN SUMTER.

The working forces of negroes in Sumter, with the exception of the boys who carried messages to the different parts of the fort day and night, were locked up days, and turned out nights, to work. We drew

our rations of hard-tack and salt pork twice a day – mornings when we ceased work and turned in for the day, and again between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, so as to have supper eaten in time to go to work at dark.

We often ate our salt pork raw with the hard-tack, as there were no special means of cooking in the negroes' apartment. We were not only in danger, while at work, from the continued rain of shells, but oftentimes when we were put in line to draw our rations some of us were killed or wounded.

I cannot say how they got fresh water in Fort Sumter, as I do not remember seeing any brought there in boats, neither did I notice any conveniences there for the catching of rain water.

The water we negroes used was kept in large hogsheads with coal tar in them; I do not know what the tar was put in the water for unless it was for our health. The "rat-hole" into which we were locked was like a sweat box; it was so hot and close, that, although we were exposed to death by shells when we were turned out to work, we were glad to get into the fresh air.

We had little cups in which they used to give us whiskey mornings when we went in, and again when we were going out to work at night.

I don't know how many of the forty survivors of the three hundred and sixty of us who were carried into the Fort in the summer of 1864 besides myself are still alive. But if there are any with the keen tenderness of a negro, they cannot help joining me in an undying sense of gratitude to Major John Johnson, not only for his kind and gentle dealings with us which meant so much to a negro in the days of slavery, but also for his humane protection which saved us from some of the danger from shells to which we were exposed in Sumter.

A short time after Capt. J. C. Mitchell had been killed, Major Johnson was dangerously wounded in the head by a piece of shell.

MY LAST NIGHT IN FORT SUMTER AND THE GLORIOUS END OF THE WAR.

During the time we spent in Fort Sumter we had not seen a clear day or night. In harmony with the continual danger by which we were surrounded, the very atmosphere wore the pall of death; for it was always rainy and cloudy. The mutilated bodies of the negroes, mingled with the black mud and water in the fort yard, added to the awfulness of the scene. Pieces of bombshells and other pieces of iron, and also large southern pine timbers were scattered all over the yard of the fort. There was also a little lime house in the middle of the yard, into which we were warned not to go when seeking places of safety from the deadly missiles at the cry of the sentinel.

The orders were that we should get as near the center of the fort yard as possible and lie down. The reason for this was that the shells which were fired upon Sumter were so measured that they would burst in the air, and the pieces would generally fly toward the sides of the fort. But the orders were not strictly carried out because, at the warning cries of the sentinel, we became confused. That night, at the cry of the sentinel, I ran and lay down on one of the large southern pine timbers, and several of my fellow negroes followed and piled in upon me. Their weight was so heavy that I cried out as for life. The sense of that crush I feel at certain times even now.

At the next report of a shell I ran toward the lime house, but someone tripped me up, and, by the time I had got to my feet again, twelve or thirteen others were crowded into it. Another negro and I reached the doorway, but we were not more than there before a mortar shell came crushing down upon the little lime house, and all within were so mangled that their bodies were not recognizable.

Only we two were saved. My companion had one of his legs broken, and a piece of shell had wounded me over my right eye and cut open my under lip. At the moment I was wounded I was not unconscious, but I did not know what had hurt me. I became almost blind from the effect of my wounds, but not directly after I was wounded, and I felt no pain for a day or so. With other wounded I was taken to the bombproof in the fort. I shall never forget this first and last visit to the hospital department. To witness the rough handling of the wounded patients, to see them thrown on a table as one would a piece of beef, and to see the doctor use his knife and saw, cutting off a leg, or arm, and sometimes both, with as much indifference as if he were simply cutting up beef, and to hear the doctor say, of almost every other one of these victims, after a leg or an arm was amputated, "Put that fellow in his box," meaning his coffin, was an awful experience. After the surgeon had asked to whom I belonged, he dressed my wounds.

My readers will remember that I stated that no big boat could run to Fort Sumter at that time on account of the bombardment. We had to be conveyed back to John's Island wharf in rowboats, which was the nearest distance a steamer could go to Fort Sumter.

As one of those rowboats was pushed out to take the dead and wounded from the fort, and as the for men were put into the boat, which was generally done before they put in the latter, fortunately, just before the wounded were put in, a Parrott shell was fired into it from Fort Wagner by the Union forces, which sunk both the boat and the coffins, with their remains.

My readers would ask how the Confederates disposed of the negroes who were killed in Fort Sumter.

Those who were not too badly mutilated were sent over to the city of Charleston and were buried in a place which was set apart to bury the negroes. But others, who were so badly cut up by shells, were put

into boxes with pieces of iron in them and carried out a little away from Sumter and thrown overboard.

I was then taken to John's Island wharf, and from there to the city of Charleston in a steamer, and carried to Doctor Rag's hospital where I stopped until September. Then I was sent back home to my master's plantation. Quoting the exact words of Major John Johnson, a Confederate officer under whom I was a part of the time at the above-named place, I would say: "July 7th, Fort Sumter's third great bombardment, lasting sixty days and nights, with a total of 14,666 rounds fired at the fort, with eighty-one casualties."

WHAT TOOKPLACE AFTER.

I said that after I got well enough to travel I was sent back home to my master's plantation, about a hundred miles from the city of Charleston, in central South Carolina. This was in September of 1864, and I, with the rest of my fellow-negroes on this extensive plantation, and with other slaves all over the South, were held in suspense waiting the final outcome of the emancipation proclamation, issued January, 1863, but as the war continued, it had not taken effect until the spring of 1865.

Here I had less work than before the war, for the nearer the war approached its close the less the slaves had to do, as the masters were at the end of their wits what to do. In the latter part of 1864 Gen. Sherman, with his army of a hundred thousand men and almost as many stragglers, covered the space of about sixty miles in width while marching from Georgia through South Carolina. The army camped around Columbia, the capital of South Carolina, for a short time. Early in the spring of 1865 the commissary building first took fire, which soon spread to such extent that the whole city of Columbia was consumed; just a few houses on the suburbs were left.

The commissary building was set on fire by one of the two parties, but it was never fully settled whether it was done by Gen. Sherman's men or by the Confederates, who might have, as surmised by some, as they had to evacuate the city, set it on fire to keep Gen. Sherman's men from getting the food. After this Columbia was occupied by a portion of Sherman's men, while the others marched on toward North Carolina.

THE GLORIOUS END.

In closing this brief sketch of my experiences in the war, I would ask my readers to go back of the war a little with me. I want to show them a few of the dark pictures of the slave system. Hark! I hear the clanking of the ploughman's chains in the fields; I hear the tramping of the feet of the hoe-hands. I hear the coarse and harsh voice of the negro driver and the shrill voice of the white overseer swearing at the

slaves. I hear the swash of the lash upon the backs of the unfortunates; I hear them crying for mercy from the merciless. Amidst these cruelties I hear the fathers and mothers pour out their souls in prayer – “O, Lord, how long!” and their cries not only awaken the sympathy of their white brothers and sisters of the North, but also mightily trouble the slave masters of the South.

The firing on Fort Sumter, in April of 1861, brought hope to the slaves that the long looked for year of jubilee was near at hand. And though the South won victory after victory, and the Union reeled to and fro like a drunken man, the negroes never lost hope, but faithfully supported the Union cause with their prayers.

Thank God, where Christianity exists slavery cannot exist.

At last came freedom. And what joy it brought! I am now standing, in imagination, on a high place just outside the city of Columbia, in the spring of 1865. The stars and stripes float in the air. The sun is just making its appearance from behind the hills and throwing its beautiful light upon green bush and tree. The mockingbirds and jay birds sing this morning more sweetly than ever before. Beneath the flag of liberty there is congregated a perfect network of the emancipated slaves from the different plantations, their swarthy faces, from a distance, looking like the smooth water of a black sea. Their voices, like distant thunder, rend the air –

“Old master gone away, and the darkies all at home,

There must be now the kingdom come and the year of jubilee.”

The old men and women, bent over by reason of age and servitude, bound from their staves, praising God for deliverance. ⁽²²⁾

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