

MAN OVERBOARD! JOHN BARRY'S CIVIL WAR ADVENTURE

by Eileen Maloney Condon

My great-grandfather John Barry (1837-1889) was a veteran of the American Civil War and research of this part of his life and the subsequent pension applications made by himself and his widow Hannah Curtin Barry (1852-1917) revealed an intriguing fact. In June of 1889, John applied to the US Marine Corps for a disability pension on the following basis:

"That while a member of the organization aforesaid in the service and in the line of his duty off Cape Hatteras in the State of North Carolina on or about the fall of 1861, deafness of both ears was caused by exposure and getting wet being washed by the sea during the wreck of the steamer "Governor"..."¹

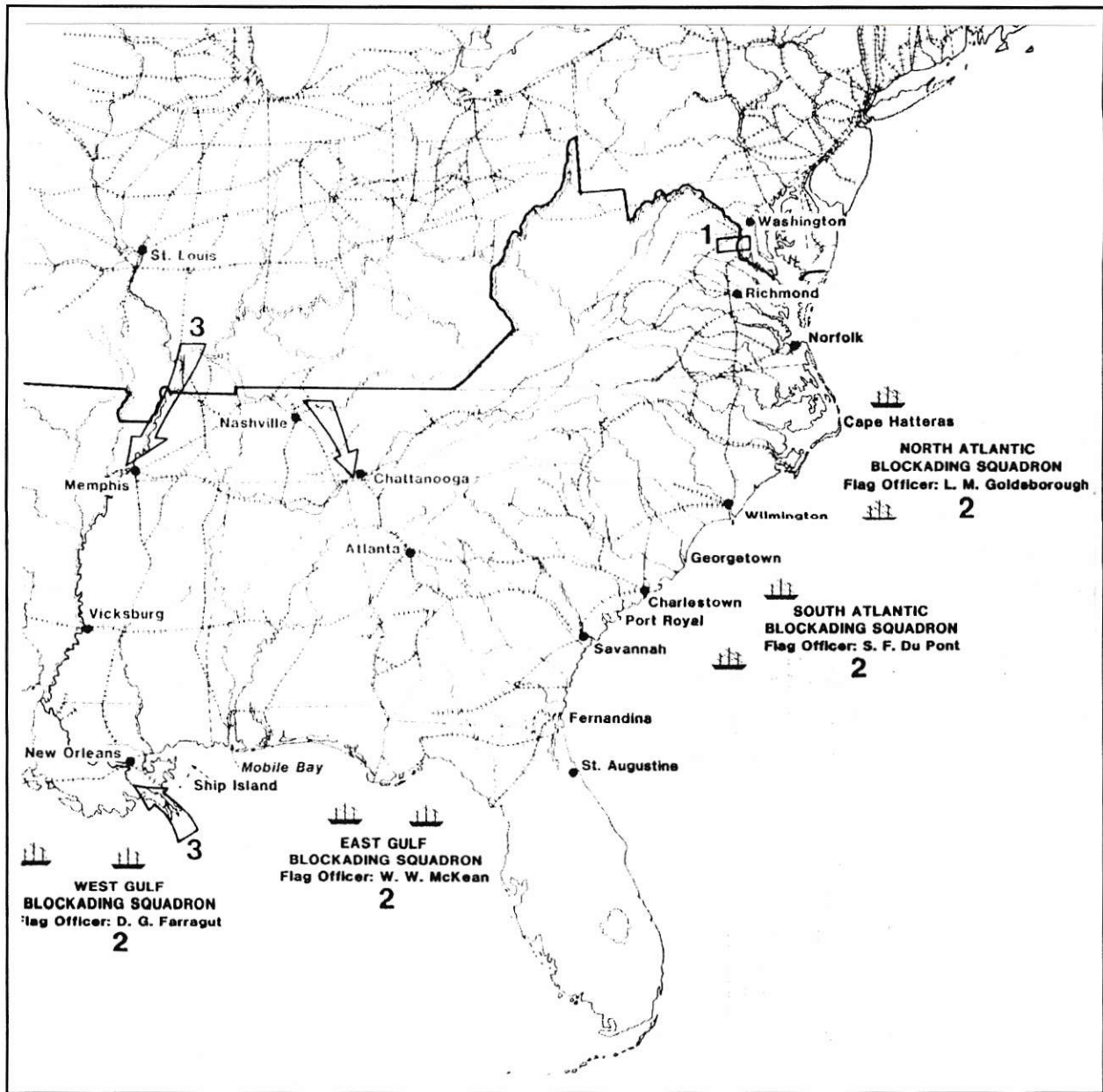
The records of the Civil War are extensive and well preserved and it was possible to determine the circumstances surrounding John's military service and his involvement in this incident.

John Barry had emigrated from Ireland to Massachusetts and it was at Charlestown on August 13, 1861, that he enlisted in the US Marines for his four-year term. He described himself as a labourer, born in Rathcormac (County Cork), aged 26, 5'7 1/2" and having dark brown eyes, dark hair and dark complexion.² He spent the next six weeks in Boston presumably undergoing training before being transferred to the Washington DC Barracks to await posting.

At the time of John's enlistment, plans were under way for the massive blockading operations of the Atlantic Coast by the Union forces. Discussions had been held since June regarding this operation and it was decided to divide the blockade into two sections (North Atlantic Blockading Squadron and the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron) with the dividing point being the border between North and South Carolina. Captain S.F. Dupont was ordered to command the South Atlantic Squadron and on Sept 18, 1861, he accepted these orders and made his requests for specific ships and personnel. One request was that "a special battalion of 300 marines should be attached to my command".³

These marines were to form part of the planned November attack on Port Royal, South Carolina. It was to be a joint Army-Navy expedition--the land operations to be commanded by Army Brigadier T.W. Sherman.⁴ Private John Barry was transferred to this battalion on October 15, 1861 and the men embarked on the USS Pawnee for transport to Port Royal.⁵

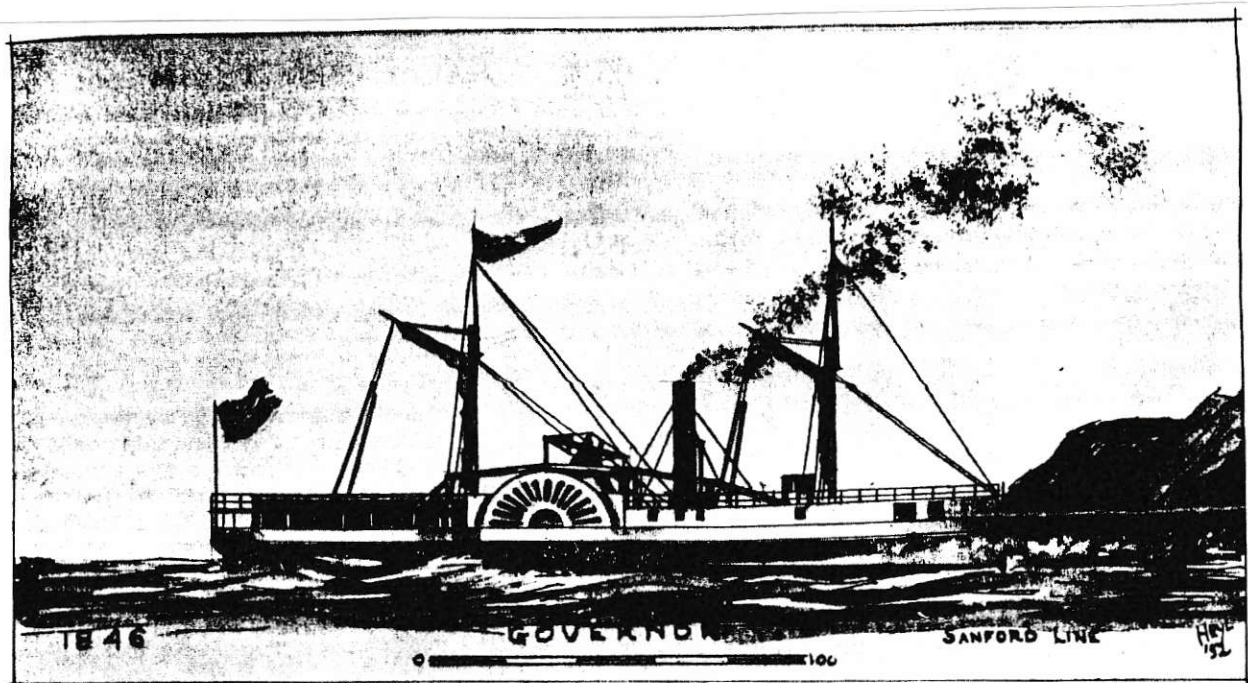
However on October 19th, Commodore Dupont modified the plans by chartering the Governor, a non-military vessel, to transport the battalion.⁶ He feared an attack on the Pawnee before it reached



- reprinted from A Battlefield Atlas of the Civil War (See Note 4)

Port Royal. He also reported that travelling conditions for the marines would be improved as the men would be under cover and better protected on the Governor, a 644-ton sidewheel steamer built in New York in 1846.

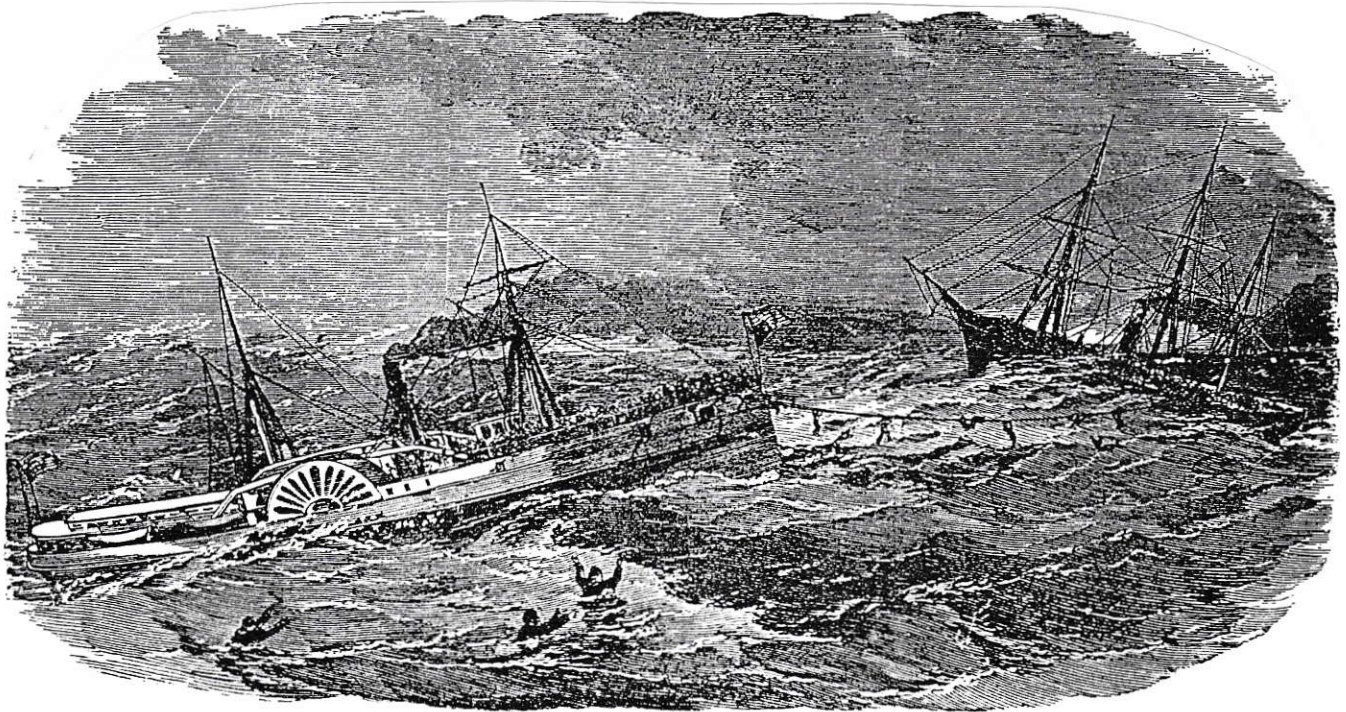
The convoy left Hampton Roads, Virginia, on the morning of Tuesday, October 29th.⁷ Besides the flagship Wabash, and the chartered Governor, it included several other ships which were to join others already at sea off the southern coast.



- from Early American Steamers Vol IV by Erik Heyl. Courtesy of University of Baltimore S.S.H.S.A Collection

The marine battalion itself was under the command of Major John George Reynolds, a veteran of the Mexican War, and the first three days of the trip were apparently routine until the convoy reached Cape Hatteras. On Friday morning (November 1st) the weather began to deteriorate and by early afternoon the Governor was having difficulty holding its course in the hurricane-force winds. Some damage was done to the ship by the strong waves; then the chains supporting the smokestack broke and most of the stack toppled. The engine faltered and finally gave out during the night. Captain Litchfield of the Governor apparently was unable to handle the crisis and a navy officer was placed in charge. He later reported that the original crew of the Governor were "... very very worthless. The chief engineer and the chief mate conducted themselves as cowards and traitors only know how."⁸ The Captain and his crew (about fifteen in all) were later sent back to New York on the Vandalia.

The marines were kept busy pumping, bailing and trying to hold fast the supporting ropes. Several nearby vessels responded to the distress signals and attempts were made to rescue the men, but the wind and heavy seas prevented this being done successfully. By mid-afternoon on Saturday, November 2nd, the frigate Sabine neared and attempted to secure the sinking Governor. The storm had not abated and it was not until 9:00 p.m. that the Sabine was able to come alongside. Attempts were made for some of the men to jump to safety, but only about thirty men were rescued in this manner. Almost immediately, the ships crashed together in the rough seas. The Governor was further damaged and it was necessary to slacken the ropes and separate, hoping to hold on until morning and a possible improvement in the weather.



This sketch of the rescue appeared in "Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper", a New York publication which began in 1855.

All provisions, equipment and movable articles were thrown overboard in an attempt to lighten the Governor. Daylight did not bring the hoped-for improvement in the weather and the Sabine could not safely approach. Smaller boats were despatched and the crew and the remaining marines were forced to jump into the icy water to be hauled into the small boats. Seven marines were drowned "through their disobedience of orders in leaving the ranks, or abandoning their posts" reported Major Reynolds.⁹ Some ammunition was saved but nearly all the knapsacks, haversacks, and canteens were lost as well as the battalion's books and staff returns. By 3:30 p.m. the Governor had sunk.

Major Reynolds obtained replacements for his missing marines from the Sabine's crew and the battalion continued to Port Royal on the Sabine arriving there on November 8th--one day too late to aid in the successful attack on Port Royal.

Various military despatches describing the storm indicate that it was very intense. At that time there was no official weather reporting agency in the United States, but weather historians have since been able to establish the specifics and this storm is now known as the "Expedition Hurricane".¹⁰ It produced record high tides as far north as New York City and resulted in extensive flooding throughout New England.

Commander Ringgold of the Sabine was subsequently honoured for the rescue by many authorities including the New York City Life Saving Benevolent Association (which awarded him a gold medal); the Mayor of New York City; the Government of the State of Maryland, as well as the U.S. Congress.¹¹

Major Reynolds and the marine battalion spent the next few months stationed at Port Royal (Hilton Head), leaving there on February 28, 1862 aboard the USS McClellan.¹² They headed south along the coast towards Florida for further military operations in the Fernandina area where the Confederate defenses were being hastily abandoned. In mid-March the battalion was ordered to occupy and hold St. Augustine, but Brigadier-General Sherman overruled the order and, despite a plea by the St. Augustine city officials that they remain to garrison the city,¹³ Major Reynolds and his marines were ordered back to Marine Headquarters in Washington.

John Barry's transfer to Washington is dated March 31, 1862. He was posted to Norfolk VA in May of that year and was stationed there for the remaining three years of his service. He received his honourable discharge on August 16, 1865 at Norfolk, still as Private. This war service later enabled him to be granted a homestead in Minnesota (Stevens County) which he occupied in the spring of 1876.

Ironically his June 1889 pension application was denied on July 15, 1889, only a few days after his death on July 6th at the age of 52. It is interesting to note that his obituary, despite being written almost 25 years after the end of the Civil War, indicates that war veterans were still being held in high regard.

ANOTHER OLD VETERAN GONE

One by one the old veterans who defended the stars and stripes and stood firmly by the Republic in the time of its greatest need are passing away, and all over the land, chairs once occupied by the heroes of the Union are becoming vacant.

Died, on Saturday last, July 6th, John Barry, of the town of Scott, this county, aged 54 years. About a week before his death, he was kicked by a horse, breaking two of his ribs and otherwise bruising his side. He said but little about the injury, and neglected to apply remedies. On Saturday morning he came in from work in the garden or field and complained to his wife that he felt darting pains all through him. A boy was immediately sent for a physician, but some time before his arrival Mr. Barry was dead.

The deceased served in the Union navy during the war and came near losing his life while gallantly fighting to sustain the Republic. He was a man of kind and generous disposition, and universally respected by all that knew him. He leaves a wife and several small children. The funeral took place from the

Catholic Church of this city last Monday forenoon, and the remains were followed to the grave by a very large procession of relatives and friends.¹⁴

John's widow Hannah was left with six young children ranging in age from 10 years to 3 months. Her widow's pension was \$8 per month with a \$2 allowance for each child under sixteen. Hannah died on August 18, 1917 and at that time was receiving \$36 a month.¹⁵

John and Hannah are both buried in Calvary Cemetery in Morris, Minnesota. John's grave has two markers, both of which are inscribed: "P Marine U.S.S. Norfolk". One also indicates "G.A.R. Post 99". Survivors of civil war veterans were eligible to apply for funds for a military headstone; however, staff of the National Archives Administration have been unable to locate an application in this case.¹⁶ Also at the gravesite is the metal star-shaped marker of the G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic). John had been a member of Overton Post No. 99 in Morris which hosted the G.A.R. State Encampment in 1888. Eight thousand people arrived for the four-day event which included a parade, a large mock battle, ball games, horse racing, singing, dancing and general celebrations.¹⁷ One can only presume that John took an active part in this event.

This is only one episode in John's military service and the possibilities for further research are difficult to resist. His service records seem to indicate that he spent the period of 1862-1865 at the Norfolk Navy Yard, whereas the gravestone markers mention the USS Norfolk, indicating possible further service at sea.

Even more intriguing is the fact that John Barry's service file contains a re-enlistment at Gosport VA on Feb 10, 1866 for a further four-year term -- and the notation that he deserted on March 11, 1866.¹⁸ It would be convenient to assume that this is another Marine with the same name as my great-grandfather. However, a comparison of the signatures, date and place of birth, and the physical descriptions on the two enlistment forms, leave little doubt that it is the same man. The second enlistment affidavit also notes the previous enlistment.

Many questions arise: How was desertion defined during that period of history? After the War ended, was this a common occurrence? Why, after an honourable discharge and four difficult years service, would he re-enlist and desert after only one month? Is it possible that there was disciplinary action taken against him and, if so, was he absolved of guilt? Why would he have been granted homestead land in Minnesota on the basis of his military service if the desertion was a dishonourable action? Would not the G.A.R. be reluctant to accept him as a member?

As with any genealogical project, the research possibilities are almost endless. Hopefully it will be possible to locate the evidence required to continue the story!

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "Declaration for Original Invalid Pension" John Barry Pension Application File # Nav WC5211, US Navy, Civil War, Records of the Veterans Administration (R.G.15), National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC. Photocopy in poss. of writer. Cited herein as Pension File.
2. "Size Roll 13 Aug 1861" John Barry Case File #11W1 7/1/B Box 153. Records of the US Marine Corps (R.G.127). National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC. Photocopy in possession of writer. Cited herein as Marine Records.
3. Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion. (Washington: U.S.Government Printing Office 1901) Ser.1, v.12, p 209. Cited herein as Navy Records.
4. Brigadier-General Thomas W. Sherman was not related to General William T. Sherman who led the 1864 campaign through Georgia that included the burning of Atlanta. Craig L. Symonds, Battlefield Atlas of the Civil War (Baltimore: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1983) p.15
5. Navy Records, p.217
6. ibid p.223
7. ibid p.230
8. ibid p.238
9. ibid p.235
10. David M. Ludlum Early American Hurricanes 1492-1870 (1963, Rpt. Boston: American Meteorological Society, 1990), pp. 101-102
11. Navy Records, pp.249-253
12. ibid, p.573
13. ibid p.659
14. Morris Tribune, (Morris, Stevens County MN), 10 July 1889. Handwritten transcription made by Edna Mae Busch (509 11th St, Morris MN 56267) in November 1989, in possession of writer.
15. "Widow's Pension File Form 3-128a" Pension File
16. Gary Morgan (Assistant Chief, Military Reference Branch, Textual Reference Division) to writer, 25 April 1991. Original in possession of writer.
17. Edna Mae Busch, The History of Stevens County, (Morris MN: by author, 1976) p. 21
18. "Size Roll 10 Feb 1866" Marine Records