

In early 1864, on direct orders from General Robert E. Lee, Confederate forces attempted to re-capture Union-held New Bern. Fighting ranged up and down the railroad from Newport to New Bern with action at Havelock, Croatan and at other places in Craven County. The attempt failed. Below is the "After Action Report" and a collection of dispatches related to the operation. -- EBE

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**Report of Gen. J.G. Martin of the
Operations of his Command in
Eastern Carolina, February 1864**

Headquarters, Martins Brigade
Wilmington, N.C., Feb. 12, 1864

Maj. J.H. Hill, A. A.' General, Department of Cape Fear:

GENERAL:--To execute Gen. Lee's instruction to Maj. Gen. Whiting, by letter of January 20th, copy marked No. 1, and after a short interview with Brig. Gen. Hoke at Goldsboro, on the subject of this letter, I left this city on Thursday, Jan 28th, by direction of Gen. Whiting, with parts of the 17th and 42nd of N.C. Troops. The next day the command was increased by a company of cavalry, Capt. Harlan's, a battery of six guns under Capt. Paris, two companies of the 17th that were on picket at Topsail, the remainder of the 42nd, which had been at work on the fortifications at Virginia Creek.

A dispatch, copy marked No. 2, was sent that evening to Gen. Barton. Reached Jacksonville on Saturday, crossed the wagons and artillery over the river in a single flat during the afternoon and night, and moved the next morning to Whiteoak River. At this point, Col. Jackson with the remaining companies of the 17th regiment, one battery of artillery, and parts of three companies of cavalry joined the commands. Pickets were sent over Whiteoak at once to arrest every person moving about, and the same order given on this side. Couriers were also sent to Gen. Barton. Dispatch marked No. 3 was received from him by return courier. Capt. Starke, acting Brigade Inspector, was at once set to work to bridge the river. This work required nearly the whole night. Crossed the bridge and sent dispatch, copy marked No. 4, to Gen. Barton. Before night marched halfway to Newport barracks, and during the day caught deserter from the enemy and derived from him valuable information of the position, strength, and condition of the enemy, on which I acted, and all of which was true. I am of the opinion this man should be treated differently from the other prisoners. It rained this Monday night and fearing the condition of the road the transportation that could be spared was sent back over White Oak.

Early next morning, still raining, the command moved the following order: Col. Jackson, commanding the advance composed of all the cavalry under Lieut. Col. Jeffords, four pieces of artillery, Ellis battery, Moore's battalion, the major also with it, two companies of the 17th and one of the 42nd.—Then the 17th under Lieut. Col. Lamb, and the 42nd under Col. Brown, Paris' battery, followed by the train and rear guard.—About 12 o'clock the advance came on the enemy's pickets and charged them over the most dreadful piece of road, killing and capturing I believe the whole picket. In this charge, Lieut. Muse of Capt. Harlan's company of cavalry was killed just as he was in the act of striking his enemy. His blow fell wounding his enemy apparently after he had been himself killed.

Moving rapidly and spreading forward soon came to first blockhouse, which was hurriedly left by the enemy after a few discharges from our artillery.

About four miles further came to the second blockhouse, at the juncture of the Main Sound road to Morehead City and the road to Newport barracks, distant about four miles. In this blockhouse was a piece of artillery and the enemy indicated an intention to hold it. The artillery of the advance had already opened fire on it when I came up. A company of the 17th well instructed as skirmishers was at once thrown forward under the fire of our artillery with orders to take it if practicable.—Capt. Bigg's company was designated for this attack. Lieut. Hassell, acting Brigade Ordnance officer, belonging to the company asked and received permission to join it for this service. When within about two hundred yards, Capt. Bigg's charged the works with such energy, that after a few discharges, the enemy fled in disorder.

After a short delay, moved off for the road to Newport barracks. Advancing about two miles, as we emerged from a thick wood to a prairie and swamp, the enemy opened on us with artillery. He had formed line on rising ground, his front without trees, then a swamp, then an unweeded field. In this second opening the 17th and the 42nd formed line on right and left of the road. Col. Jackson's infantry still further to the left, and the cavalry in reserve. Two companies from each regiment were thrown forward as skirmishers. The artillery was ordered to move forward on the road and use their guns as best they could. As soon as arrangements were made the whole command advanced. And a little later the order was given to charge the enemy.

He broke and fled in disorder after a few rounds and passing by the barracks, firing the storehouses and stable with some horses tied in them, crossed Newport river, tearing up and setting fire to the county bridges. The fire on the railroad bridge was extinguished, but later in the evening I judged it best to burn it.—It was now too dark to follow the enemy.

In this fight, Col. Leith of the 17th, a brave and efficient officer was mortally wounded while commanding his company as skirmishers; also, five privates killed or mortally wounded. About 8 o'clock the troops were ordered to camp to be ready to move at daylight in the morning. As soon as possible Gen. Whiting was advised of our success by dispatch, copy marked No. 5. By the same courier copy No. 6, was sent to General Barton. At 2 (?) o'clock, on the morning of the 3rd a dispatch copy, No. 7, was received from Gen. Barton. Two hours later another copy, No. 7, was received from Gen. Barton. Two hours later another copy marked No. 8. In consequence of this last it was determined to hold the Railroad where the command was at the junction of the county roads from Morehead City and Beaufort. A detachment of cavalry under Col.

Jackson was sent toward Morehead City on the morning of the 3rd, and another under Lieut. Col. Jeffords toward Newbern. Smaller ones were also sent on other roads. Dispatch copy No. 9 was sent Gen. Barton. On the return of Col. Jackson, he reported the roads so blocked up with trees to be impassable for cavalry. An infantry party was then ordered to Morehead City, but before reaching it was recalled on account of Gen. Barton's dispatches, copies marked No. 10 and 11. Lieut. Col. Jeffords made his reconnoissance to within 1½ miles of Newbern, with an energy and soundness of judgment worthy of high commendation. (See copies of his report marked Nos. 12 to 16.) Copies were sent at the time to Gens. Whiting and Barton. The results of this expedition are four heavy forts captured, three blockhouses, with one flag, ten pieces of artillery, several hundred small arms, two hundred boxes of ammunition for artillery, twenty barrels powder, a considerable quantity of forage and other stores, one thousand barrels of turpentine belonging to the U.S., the quarters, stables and storehouses called Newport barracks for a thousand infantry, two companies of cavalry and one of artillery. Three railroad bridges, trestles works and some of the tracks at Croatan and two large county bridges all burnt or destroyed, except one valuable piece of artillery brought away. About thirty horses and two wagons were also brought off and the telegraph wire was cut. The men saved from the burning buildings many overcoats, blankets, and other articles of clothing. My officers report about twenty of the enemy killed and forty to fifty wounded. One Lieutenant and seventy-three men were brought to this city prisoner and four men paroled who were so badly wounded as to unable to bear the journey, also six negroes brought in.

During the night of the 2nd there was a large fire in Morehead City since reported to be the burning of the enemy's stores at that place.

About 8 o'clock the morning of the 4th inst., we left Newport barracks on our return, and the troops reached this city on the 10th.

I cannot close this report without expressing my gratification at the gallant behavior of the troops during the fight and their patient endurance of a march of nearly two hundred and forty miles over very heavy roads.

I am, Major, very respectfully,
Your obedient servant,
(Signed) J. G. Martin, Brig. Gen.

The following are copies of the dispatches referred to in the foregoing report:

(Copy No. 1)

Hd. Qr. 20 Jan

Genl.—An attack on Newbern is contemplated by the forces under the command of Gen. Pickett. The time will be between 25th and 30th inst. I request you will give all the assistance in your power, especially by threatening simultaneously with your troops south of the Cape Fear, the enemy's position so as to prevent their reinforcing Newbern. Gen Pickett will telegraph you the day, by which you will know what is meant. Commit nothing to the telegraph on the subject. Keep the matter secret.

Very res'y yr. obt. serv.
R.E. Lee, General

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(No. 2)

Hd. Qrs. Martin's Brigade
34 miles from Wilmington
4 o'clock, Friday afternoon, Jan. 29

General: —My command (two regiments and a battery) will be here tonight and at Jacksonville 18 miles hence about noon tomorrow. Thence I shall move to Whiteoak (Smith's Mill) where I shall hope to receive some information or direction as to my further movement, especially as to time. Please let me hear something.

Very respectfully,
J.G. Martin, Brig. Gen.
Gen. Barton, Comdg, Kinston, N.C.

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(No. 3)

Mill Creek, 12 miles from Newbern
January 31st

General—All goes smoothly with us. You will hear us at half past five in the morning. I am afraid you will not reach the point designated by P at the time we expected. Nevertheless, push on and reach there as quickly as possible. I will keep you advised.

S.M.B (Gen. Barton)

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(No. 4)

Smith's Mill, Whiteoak Creek
8 o'clock a.m. February () 1864

General: -- My Artillery is now crossing the bridge I made last night. If for any reason you fall back, inform me promptly as my rear is entirely uncovered except by your force. I have couriers on the road. It is forty miles hence to Shepardsville. Please keep me informed. I have not yet heard your guns.

Very respectfully,

J.G. Martin
Brigadier General

General Barton, Mill Creek

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(No. 5)

Newport Barracks, N.C.
Tuesday, 8 p.m., February 2, 1864

General: -- After several light skirmishes, beginning about 12 o'clock today nine miles from this point, we had quite a serious engagement from 4 to 6, terminating by driving the enemy over Newport river. They burnt their barracks and most of their store. Our loss is not very severe, though I am unable to say what is. Lieut. Muse of Capt. Harris' company of cavalry was killed, and Capt. Leith of the 17th supposed to be mortally wounded. We have some prisoners but

most of the enemy escaped. The fort at this place is quite strong. On account of my entire ignorance of the movements about Newbern I felt unwilling to risk the safety of my command and ordered the bridge (R.R.) to be burnt. The county bridge at the request of Col. Jackson, I have left for the present. There are now only a few organized commands on this point of land between the Newport river and the sound. I shall send early in the morning to Morehead City and occupy it.

I am very much embarrassed to know what to do, on account of my entire ignorance of the state of affairs at Newbern. I have heard from Gen. Barton only once, of which I wrote you before. Lieut. Fairly has been of very great service to me.

I am, General, yours respectfully,
J.G. Martin, Brig. Gen.

Maj. Gen. Whiting, Commanding Wilmington

Since writing the above, the information I received leads me to believe I ought to fall back unless I hear from Gen. Lee.

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(No. 6)

Newport Barrack, N.C.
Tuesday, Feb. 2, 9½ p.m.

General: -- We drove the enemy from this place just at dusk this evening. I am at loss to know what to do as I have heard nothing from you or from Newbern.

In this state of information I deemed it best to burn the railroad bridge.

Please ask Gen. Lee or Gen. Pickett to give me some instruction at once. You know my rear is all exposed to an attack from New Bern the moment you leave it open. Please let me hear from you or the General commanding our forces around Newbern.

Very respectfully,
J.G. Martin, Brig. Gen.

Gen. Barton or the Com'dg. General around Newbern

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(No. 7)

General: -- My part of the expedition has failed—has accomplished very little and I now leave to join the main body. There is therefore no force between you and Newbern. I am disappointed in not hearing from you to-day. Will send you other courier from Pollocksville. Everything has gone well across Trent.

Very respectfully,
S.M.B. (Gen. Barton)

Received at Newport barracks, Feb. 2, 1864

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(No. 8)

Headquarters, Feb. 2, 1864, 5 P.M.

General: Picket has had good luck—his dispatch rider directs you to cut and hold the railroad.

Very respectfully,
S.M. Barton, Brig. Gen

Brig. Gen. J. G. Martin

Received at Newport barracks, Feb. 4, 1864, 6½ P.M.

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(No. 9)

Newport Barracks, N.C.
Wednesday, Feb. 3, 1864, 10½ P.M.

General: I have received dispatch of 5 o'clock P.M. yesterday telling me Gen. Pickett wishes me to cut and hold the railroad.

I informed you by courier last night that I had taken this place and burnt the railroad bridge. I should have left this morning for my return but for your late dispatch. My situation here is very precarious if the enemy should throw reinforcements into Morehead City. I have sent out scouting parties in very direction this morning. For my information I am hardly able to take Morehead City and a failure would injure me more than not making the attempt. Please keep me informed at least once a day of the state of affairs.

You did not say in your dispatch whether you were still to join the main attack and thus leave my rear exposed.

Yours respectfully,
J.G. Martin, Brig. Gen.

Gen. Barton, or commanding General in front of New Bern

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(No. 10)

Head Quarters, Kinston
February 3, 1864 6 A.M.

Brig. Gen. J. G. Martin—Fall back, all the troops are withdrawn. I do not know what it means.

Very respectfully,
S. M. Barton, Brig. Gen.

Received at Newport Barracks, Feb. 3d, 1864, 6½ P.M.

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(No. 11)

Hd. Qrs., Feb. 3, 1864, 10.15 A.M.

Gen. J. G. Martin—Fall back, all the troops are withdrawn. I do not know what it means.

S. M. Barton, Brig. Gen.

Duplicate sent at 5 o'clock a.m. and received at Newport Barracks; Feb. 3, 1864, 7 p.m.

(No. 12)

Havelock 12 o'clock M
February 3, 1864

General—I have reached this point. The fort has been deserted. One brass six pounder rifle gun spiked. The fort is now being burnt with quarters, the enemy (one company artillery) left this morning in the direction of Croatan, where from last information I can get, the enemy have a redoubt fort with one or two guns. I shall move forward immediately and see whether Croatan is occupied or not. It is six miles from this point. I met Hunter this morning (Confederate scout so Dickinson says) and he informed me that a terrible fight was going on from dawn until about 9 o'clock, he also says that a guide was sent Gen. Barton yesterday and he is now in between Croatan and Newbern. I shall forward you accurate information if it is possible to be obtained. A gentleman just brought in by my scout reports Croatan deserted. Troops going toward New Bern, he says he saw a dispatch from Newbern last night to Commanding Officer at Croatan stating that unless they get reinforcements by this Railroad last night they would be obliged to surrender the town this morning. I am fully impressed that the town is in our possession.

Very respectfully,
R.J. Jeffords, Lt. Col. Cavalry

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(No. 13)

Head of Bryce's Creek
Five o'clock, February 3

General: -- I dispatch you from Havelock this morning 12 M. I then moved up to Croatan which was evacuated—gun left in fort spiked. As I could get no definite information there from Newbern, I moved to this point five miles from Newbern, where the yankees had a Blockhouse on main road from New Bern to Pollocks-ville. There is no living person here, all houses are vacant.

A fight has occurred at Blockhouse. Horses lie dead around and the cannon is out on road. One matter I can't understand is that the bridge here is torn up and not put down—the road is much cut up and many cavalry at least have gone toward Newbern. The citizens inform me that two transports passed up this morning about 11 o'clock with troops. All has been quiet; I hear no firing and am still fully impressed the town has fallen. A sunset gun (I suppose) has just fired. I will move cautiously and endeavor to procure accurate information by morning.

Very respectfully,
R.J. Jeffords, Lt. Col. Cavalry

Gen. Martin, commanding

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(No. 14)

Croatan, 10 o'clock, p.m. Feb 3

Genl. – I dispatched you from Evan's Mill (head of Bryce's Creek) at 5 p.m. this day from I moved forward to within 1½ miles of Newbern, passing the outposts

of the enemy by a detour and going within 150 yards of the main picket from where I sent a file of men and brought a citizen from within their lines, from whom obtained following information which from being confirmed by three subsequent citizens I regard pretty accurate, viz: that Gen. Pickett had carried Deep Gully capturing 500 troops, one light battery, and all the earthworks on the line of defense. Today at 12 o'clock our forces were planting their siege guns one half mile in front of Fort Totten (which stands on out line of city) the Yankees were playing upon them, but the guns were being brought up. The gunboats or forts on this side of the Trent were playing on our forces up the Trent on both sides of the river. From all I have learned I can hear no information on Gen. Barton.

I don't think he has attacked forts on this side of the Trent, he doubtless reduced fort at Evan's Mill and I imagine from bridge being up, probably crossed the Trent to support centre. At least the forts on this side of the Trent have not been attacked so far as I can learn, and their main picket to-night was about two companies from 1 to 1½ miles out. – Col. Wood has burned one of their gunboats.

They now have three there. They covered the road with their fire leading from Shepardsville to Newbern, as if apprehensive of an advance this afternoon and evening. They have been reinforced by two transports, not over 600 to 800 men—their forces, the highest estimate is 5000 to 6000. Great alarm is prevailing and the citizens say 10,000 negroes have gone into Newbern from all this country. As I am unable to procure and forage I had to fall back to this point to-night to get some. I have strong pickets on both sides of me and will bivouac for the night. I shall move around tomorrow and endeavor to furnish promptest information. Should you desire otherwise, a dispatch sent here can reach me.

I am yr. most obt. servt.,
R.J. Jeffords, Lt. Col.

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(No. 15)

Croatan, 9 o'clock

General: -- Your dispatch this moment to hand. As the bridges across Bryce's and Mill creeks torn up, I shall return by way of Newport and move immediately to join you.

Respectfully,
R.J. Jeffords, Lt. Col.

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(No. 16)

Hunter's Creek
Near Whiteoak River
Feb. 4, 1864, 9 p.m.

Captain: -- In obedience to your order I left Croatan (7 or 8 miles from New Bern) at 9 o'clock, a.m. this day, and reached this point via Newport. In my route I destroyed several road bridges and burnt Railroad bridge and trestle at Havelock.

The Railroad track is torn up about 100 yards at Croatan. Any troops landing at Morehead City must be detained several days before reaching Newbern.

The firing was commenced at Newbern at sunrise this morning, until I got out of hearing at about 11 o'clock. I heard from Newbern last night through a party that went in and he says the forces are not over 3000, with 600 to 800 reinforcements landed yesterday a.m.

That Gen. Peck had telegraphed Gen. Butler if reinforcements were not sent promptly forward he could not hold city and that Butler replied hold on, a brigade would reach him between 30 to 40 hours—up to 11 o'clock this morning they had not passed up the Neuse River—that the greatest panic prevails in New Bern.

The city is crowded and no transportation in way of shipping to take them away. The troops are very much demoralized. My movements last night within a mile of the city on the south side of the Trent annoyed them very much. I stated that I was but the advance guard to main body, etc. I cannot account why Gen. Barton fell back. The bridge at Evan's Mill was torn up by Yankees as all the planks, etc., are on the side next to Newbern. They admit loss of 1500 men killed, wounded, and captured. I am fully impressed that determination south of the Trent would have carried the day.

I am very resp'y yr. obt. servt.,
R.J. Jeffords, Lt. Col. 5th S.C. Cav.

Capt. Elliott, A.A.G.