

A Ball at Sunrise

A Ball at Sunrise began on the morning of March 8, with Confederate artillery stationed at Fort Moultrie and Cummings Point firing their guns, initially seeming to be part of a routine practice drill. The first three shots fired were blanks, creating no harm or concern, but the subsequent rounds unexpectedly included a live cannonball. This shot traveled dangerously close to Fort Sumter, striking the water about thirty yards away and ricocheting off the surface, causing damage to the fort's wharf. This sudden disruption spurred an immediate response from the guards at the fort, who were already on high alert for any sign of aggression. The ricochet from the cannonball further intensified the sense of urgency and dread, quickly escalating a seemingly innocent drill into a more dangerous scenario.

The confusion caused by the cannonball's impact immediately reached the soldiers at Fort Sumter, one of whom was a German-born soldier. He swiftly closed the main gate, triggering an alarm that sent the gunnery teams rushing to their posts. The loud long roll echoed across the fort, a call to action that signified the readiness of the soldiers for a potential attack. Assistant Surgeon Crawford's journal entry from that day provides a vivid account of the chaos and tension that unfolded. Major Anderson, along with other officers, took up positions on the parapet of the fort, observing the Confederate soldiers' erratic behavior. In a panic, the Confederate gunners fled from their positions, abandoning their equipment and horses in their attempt to escape the threat of retaliation. Their sudden retreat was a striking display of fear, contrasting sharply with the composed response from Fort Sumter's defenders.

Despite the initial panic, Anderson recognized that the cannonball's flight had been an accident and made the decision not to return fire. The soldiers within Fort Sumter, once braced for battle, were soon able to laugh at the situation, as the tension began to dissipate. The incident was swiftly reduced to a minor setback in the daily

operations of the fort. However, Anderson remained resolute in seeking an apology for the misfire, signaling that although the response was lighthearted, there was still a desire for formal acknowledgment of the mishap. The resolution came later that morning when a Confederate boat arrived, bringing Major Peter F. Stevens under a flag of truce. Stevens delivered an explanation for the cannonball's accidental discharge, admitting that a loading error during a routine drill had caused the mishap. The dialogue between Stevens and Anderson remained civil, with both men expressing their desire to avoid further conflict, despite the underlying tensions.

Although the meeting between Stevens and Anderson was cordial, Captain Doubleday and others within the fort were less patient, eager for a more decisive response to the perceived aggression. They were ready to engage, reflecting the more aggressive stance some within Fort Sumter were willing to take. Despite this, Anderson remained diplomatic, careful not to escalate the situation further. He was mindful that a rash response could lead to an open conflict that might spiral out of control. When Stevens departed, he expressed hope that the incident would be a singular occurrence, an unfortunate mistake that could be forgotten. However, Anderson subtly acknowledged that the cannonball had indeed come dangerously close to causing serious damage, even though, upon reflection, it had not struck the fort directly. Later reflections by Crawford would reveal that the situation could have been far more catastrophic, further emphasizing the delicate balance Anderson sought to maintain during such a tense period. The incident highlighted the thin line between peace and conflict and underscored the precarious situation at Fort Sumter in the days leading up to the Civil War.