

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## The Battles of Iuka and Corinth

By **Daniel T. Davis**

The cold, grim specters of death and destruction had visited the area and surrounding country once before. Unassuming to the solitary traveler, Corinth was a small town situated near the northeast corner of Mississippi. To the opposing Union and Confederate high commands, it was a strategic epicenter. Corinth was a vital rail junction. The Memphis and Charleston stretched from the Mississippi River in the west to the Atlantic Ocean. From the north, the Mobile and Ohio ran from Kentucky to the Gulf of Mexico. This logistical hub was a major artery for transporting men and supplies. An early Confederate Secretary of War, Leroy Pope Walker, called these rail lines the “vertebrae of the Confederacy.”<sup>1</sup>

Following his capture of Forts Henry and Donelson in northeast Tennessee in February, 1862, Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant’s army had advanced up the Tennessee River. The Union forces went into camp at Pittsburgh Landing, a little over twenty-five miles northeast of Corinth. Grant’s immediate superior, Major General Henry Wager Halleck, commander of all Union forces in the West, set his eyes on the town’s fall. To Halleck, the capture of the town and its rail lines was another step in taking control of the Mississippi River Valley.

Grant’s movement had forced the Confederate commander in the Western Theater, General Albert Sidney Johnston, to abandon his line in Kentucky and withdraw via Nashville overland to Corinth. From there, Johnston planned to strike at Grant’s forces. On April 6, Johnston attacked. In a two-day engagement that came to be known as the Battle of Shiloh, the Confederates failed to destroy Grant’s army and withdrew back to Corinth. Johnston was mortally wounded and died on the first day of fighting. Command of the army devolved to General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard.

Halleck arrived at Grant’s headquarters soon after the battle ended. The Union general had planned to direct an offensive against Corinth from his headquarters in St. Louis. News of the slaughter at Shiloh, combined with reports of Grant’s misconduct had changed his mind. Combined with an abiding contempt for Grant due to his perceived

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<sup>1</sup> United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 7, part 1, p. 888 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 7, pt. 1, 888).

unsoldierly conduct, Halleck had decided to lead the operation in person. Grant was relegated to Halleck's second in command, but with no direct authority. Together with Major General Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio and reinforced by Major General John Pope's Army of the Mississippi, Halleck began a lethargic advance on Corinth. Over the course of the next month, Halleck's armies slowly but steadily invested the town. In late May, due to deteriorating conditions within his lines and in an effort to save his army from surrender, Beauregard abandoned Corinth to the enemy. Beauregard himself took a leave of absence following his evacuation and command devolved upon Lieutenant General Braxton Bragg.

Halleck's capture of Corinth did not go unnoticed by his superiors in Washington. That summer, Halleck was appointed General-in-Chief and left the Western Theater for Washington, D.C. For his performance in the early stages of the conflict and during the Union movement on Corinth, John Pope was transferred to an army command in Virginia. These command vacancies were respectively filled by Grant and Brigadier General William Starke Rosecrans, respectively. As commander of the District of West Tennessee, Grant spent his time solidifying his position while he kept his eye on the Confederates in nearby Tupelo. Grant, however, did not have to wait long for the next phase of campaigning. Braxton Bragg had set his own plan in motion.

Bragg planned to secure the city of Chattanooga. Prior to his departure, Halleck had dispatched Buell and his army eastward in an effort to capture the city, which could then be used as a springboard into the Deep South. By late July, Bragg was on the move and arrived in Chattanooga ahead of Buell. In the hopes of building on his success, he planned an offensive northward through Tennessee and then beyond into Kentucky. Such a movement was certain to force Buell to give up his current objective and follow Bragg's army north. The plan worked and Buell followed Bragg into the Bluegrass State.

To cover his western flank and divert Union troops from reinforcing Buell, Bragg directed the Confederate force that remained in north Mississippi, under the command of Major General Sterling Price, to march north into Tennessee. At the same time, Major General Earl Van Dorn, commanding the Confederates at Vicksburg, Mississippi, hoped himself to strike north and to cooperate with Price as the two forces marched into Tennessee. With Union forces squarely on Van Dorn's and Price's line of advance, war would once again visit Corinth.

On September 13, 1862, Price's command reached the town of Iuka, several miles west of Corinth. Not willing to sit idly by, Grant decided to attack Price. He resolved on a pincers movement designed to entrap Price within the town. Major General Edward Otho Cresap Ord was to lead a column in from the west while Rosecrans attacked from the southwest.

By 2:30 on the afternoon of September 19, Ord's men were in position to make their assault above Iuka. Rosecrans' column had run into Confederate skirmishers, who delayed their advance. Unfortunately, according to Grant's plan, Rosecrans was to open

the battle and Ord was to attack at the sound of his guns. A strong wind<sup>2</sup>, however, kept the sound of gunfire from traveling in Ord's direction. Apprised of Rosecrans' movement, Price was able to shift men to meet Rosecrans while Ord's infantry stood idly by. To counter Rosecrans' advance, Price dispatched the brigades of Brigadier General Louis Hébert and Colonel John Donelson Martin from Brigadier General Lewis Henry Little's division to confront Rosecrans.

Rosecrans' leading division commanded by Brigadier General Charles Smith Hamilton collided with Hébert and Martin as he advanced along the Jacinto Road. Following the first volleys, Hamilton hastily deployed his men as each regiment arrived on the field. The Confederates concentrated on Lieutenant Cyrus Sears' 11<sup>th</sup> Ohio Battery which was supported by the 5<sup>th</sup> Iowa Infantry. Hamilton successfully repulsed several enemy assaults but the Confederate infantry was determined to drive the Federals from the field. Price hoped to flank and overwhelm Hamilton's line. "The fight became an infantry duel" Hamilton wrote. "I never saw a hotter or more destructive engagement."<sup>3</sup>

During one of the attacks, Henry Little was struck in the forehead by a bullet while he conferred with Price. He died instantly and command devolved to Louis Hébert.

Under intense pressure from the determined Confederates, Hamilton called for reinforcements in the form of Brigadier General David Sloane Stanley's division. Rosecrans also sensed trouble and ordered one of Stanley's brigades, commanded by Colonel Joseph Anthony Mower, into the fight. Through some miscommunication, the 11<sup>th</sup> Missouri from Mower's brigade forged ahead of their comrades while the rest of Stanley's men deployed along the Union line.

Curiously, the Missourians were the only regiment from Stanley's entire division to engage Price's infantry. "The smoke of ours and the enemy's guns was so dense that an object could not be seen five paces distant" Major Andrew Weber of the 11<sup>th</sup> Missouri wrote. "We were charged upon three different times by the enemy...each time the charge was equally unsuccessful. In several instances, the enemy was received on the point of the bayonet."<sup>4</sup> Rosecrans' line held on until darkness brought an end to the fighting.

The engagement was relatively short, but costly for both sides. Rosecrans lost 144 men killed, 598 wounded and 40 missing. This compared to 86 killed and 496 wounded suffered by Price.

That night, Price's columns slipped away from Iuka and marched toward the town of Baldwyn. Upon his arrival, he received a dispatch from Van Dorn. Price was directed

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<sup>2</sup> Ulysses S. Grant. *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York, Charles L. Webster & Company 1885),1:412.

<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Hamilton. "The Battle of Iuka," in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., 4 vols. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: The Century Co. 1887-1888), 2:734-6

<sup>4</sup> *O.R.*, I, 17, pt. 1, 88.

to march to Ripley where the two Confederate generals were to link up. Price arrived there on September 28. With Van Dorn in overall command, the Confederates struck to the north. Three days later, Van Dorn and Price were in Pocahontas, Tennessee, northwest of Corinth. From there, Van Dorn decided to attack the Union garrison at Corinth and secure the Mobile and Ohio as a supply line as he moved farther into Tennessee. Waiting for him in Corinth was Price's old nemesis from Iuka, William S. Rosecrans.

When Rosecrans received word of Van Dorn's presence at Pocahontas, he prepared his divisions for the imminent fight. In the early hours of October 3, Van Dorn set his columns in motion for Corinth. By mid-morning they had arrived within three miles of the town. Van Dorn halted and deployed for battle. Price's command made up the left of the line. Brigadier General Mansfield Lovell's made up the Confederate right. To meet the Confederates that morning, Rosecrans' soldiers had taken up a position north and west of the main Union works that defended Corinth and between the outer entrenchments constructed by the Confederates earlier in the year. Brigadier General Thomas Jefferson McKean's division held the left while Brigadier General Thomas Alfred Davies made up the center of the Federal line. Brigadier General Charles Hamilton's division stood to the right and held the old enemy earthworks.

To connect with Hamilton, Davies also marched his men into these fortifications. Davies' movement inadvertently contributed to a growing gap in Rosecrans' line. Sighting high ground to his immediate front, one of McKean's brigade commanders, Brigadier General John MacArthur occupied a ridge that commanded a road which Van Dorn would have to use upon his approach. By the time Van Dorn launched his assault, MacArthur and Davies were already in position and the Federals would have to make the best of the situation.

With great fury, just like at Iuka, the Confederate divisions attacked Rosecrans' position. "The front regiments of the enemy took deliberate aim at us and the whole line fired into us and we heard the Rebel shout and yell" recalled an Iowa soldier. "Then somebody commenced firing and we shot way in the smoke...every one now took to a tree or some place to protect himself. The Rebs soon closed upon us and came on with countless numbers. They swarmed around our left and fired from behind trees and logs and kept pressing forward."<sup>5</sup>

It was not long before Van Dorn's ranks discovered the gap created by MacArthur and Davies. Brigadier General John Creed Moore's brigade pressed in and threatened to blow a hole in the Union line. To avert disaster, MacArthur and Davies skillfully withdrew their men approximately a mile and reformed. Still, the Confederate divisions came on, pressing the Federals back to their inner line of works. By 6:00 p.m., after

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<sup>5</sup> Mildred Throne, ed., *The Civil War Diary of Cyrus F. Boyd, Fifteenth Iowa Infantry 1861-1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 72.

several hours of fighting, Van Dorn decided to call off the assaults. His men were spent and he could resume the offensive early the next morning.

Meanwhile, Rosecrans prepared for a renewal of the fighting. In July, the Federals had begun work on an inner line of artillery redoubts to protect Corinth on the south and west. This line was made up of five batteries: Lothrop, Tanrath, Phillips, Williams and Robinett. They consisted of parapets for defending infantry and embrasures for artillery. Rosecrans positioned his men in a new line anchored on the redoubts. Although he had been pushed back from the outer line during the fight on the third, Rosecrans now held an edge when the battle resumed.

Before sunrise on October 4, Van Dorn prepared to assault the Union line once again. His efforts, however, did not start smoothly. Louis Hébert, who had succeeded to Henry Little's command after his death at Iuka, had taken sick. However, he failed to relinquish his responsibilities to his senior brigade commander, leaving one of Van Dorn's divisions without direction. This failure caused a delay in the timing of the assault. As the Confederates finally got underway, the fighting centered upon Battery Robinett.

This fortification was named after Captain Henry Robinett of the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Infantry. Robinett and his infantrymen now manned his namesake battery as artillerymen. The first Confederates to make the assault against the position were from Brigadier General Charles W. Phifer's brigade. Supported by a brigade of Ohioans along with Joe Mower's hard fighting 11<sup>th</sup> Missouri, Robinett poured volley after volley into Phifer's ranks. The devastating musketry and artillery fire tore through the Confederate line and the advance ground to a halt.

The next Confederate brigade to try their hand was John Moore's. His advance was spearheaded by Colonel William Peleg Rogers and his 2<sup>nd</sup> Texas Infantry. The Texans came on with "terrific yells." "The guns from the fort loaded with grape and canister mowed them down by the hundreds" remembered a Union soldier. Unlike their comrades in Phifer's brigade, Rogers' determined advance continued. Rogers himself rode forward on horseback. "The Rebs...began climbing over its walls and some ran around the embankment and got possession of the guns and had them turned on our men when a long blue line of uniforms could be seen rising out of the grass and bushes" recalled an Iowa infantryman. "With a cheer" the Federals "rushed on the victorious enemy. Muskets were clubbed and many were killed with the bayonet. The ranks of the rebels melted like snow and most of them stood their ground and died in and around the little fort."<sup>6</sup> Rogers was one of the dead, struck by at least seven bullets.

The Confederate advance, however, managed to bypass Robinett and its sister Battery Powell along a creek bed and stormed into Corinth itself. Along with their comrades who had overrun Union positions to the north, this mingled mass of gray

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 74.

soldiers nearly captured the town. Instead, they were met by a determined Union counterattack. Outnumbered and unsupported, Van Dorn's men were forced to abandon the town and retreat. The fighting was over by 1:00 p.m. After two days of fighting, Van Dorn was forced to withdraw.

The carnage in and around Corinth, especially near Battery Robinett was staggering. Corinth had proven to be costly battle for Van Dorn. Out of the 22,000 men who had marched into battle, Van Dorn lost 505 killed, 2,150 wounded and 2,183 missing. Of the 23,000 Federals who held the town, 355 were killed, 1,841 were wounded and 324 were missing.

Van Dorn managed to stave off a Federal attempt a few days later to cut off his line of retreat on the Hatchie River in Tennessee and slipped away. The great offensive he envisioned into Tennessee had been broken about the ridges, ravines and plains about Corinth.

It was not long before Van Dorn's conduct came into question. His overly aggressive approach on the first day of battle completely exhausted his men. Having to march through the sweltering heat and humidity to reach Corinth, the Confederates were dog-tired when the attack finally began. With victory in his grasp that night, Van Dorn called off the assault, only to face the Federals in a stronger position the next day. Van Dorn was eventually replaced and transferred to the cavalry. Later in the year, he led a successful raid on the Union supply base at Holly Springs. In May, 1863, he was killed by the husband of one of his lovers.

Rosecrans, however, had performed well. Despite his inability to coordinate with Grant and Ord at Iuka, which was beyond his control, he managed to coordinate a defensive action that kept his command from being shattered piecemeal. At Corinth, he had the foresight to deploy enough men in reserve so that they could be ready at any moment of crisis. This decision proved beneficial when the Confederates overran his inner line and nearly captured the town. Like Halleck and Pope, Corinth also propelled Rosecrans career. His success at Corinth later got him command of Buell's Army of the Ohio, which Rosecrans rechristened the Army of the Cumberland.

The twin victories at Iuka and Corinth came at a critical time for the Union war effort. Across the Confederacy that autumn, her armies were on the move north. Along with Bragg's offensive into Kentucky, General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia had invaded Maryland after a string of victories in Virginia. Lee was eventually turned back after an intense day long battle on the banks of Antietam Creek. Bragg was also forced to withdraw back to Tennessee following the Battle of Perryville.

These engagements have largely overshadowed Corinth. From a strategic perspective, Ulysses S. Grant and the Union forces in Tennessee and Mississippi held the initiative in the Western Theater. The repulse of Van Dorn solidified Federal control of northern Mississippi. Corinth provided Grant with a springboard for future campaigning.

Within a few weeks of the Battle of Corinth, he began operations to capture the vital Mississippi River town of Vicksburg.

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