

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Shiloh

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In the grand scheme of the Union strategic objective of opening the Mississippi River Valley, Shiloh was never intended to be a battlefield. In fact, the area around Shiloh Church and even the entire Tennessee River Valley was not proposed to play any major role in the operations; Union commanders initially intended to advance straight down the main river itself. After the Confederates heavily fortified the tall bluffs at Columbus, Kentucky, however, there was no hope of passing that position without heavy naval losses, and a land campaign looked to be just as costly. Thus, Major General Henry Wager Halleck, Federal commander in the west, opted to go around Columbus, outflanking it to the east and rendering it useless to the enemy. As a result, the Tennessee River Valley, pointing like a dagger at the Confederate heartland, soon took on special importance.

Major General Ulysses S. Grant convinced Halleck to allow him to move along the Tennessee and Cumberland River systems, netting more gains than would have been possible in a successful attempt at passing Columbus. With major victories at Fort Henry on the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River in February 1862, Grant opened both river systems deep into enemy territory, allowing Federal armies to occupy Nashville, Tennessee's capital. Union naval vessels steamed all the way to Muscle Shoals in northern Alabama, destroying bridges, shelling enemy fortifications, and spreading alarm among the Confederate command system and population.

Grant had given Halleck a key artery of advance around Columbus, and Halleck did not miss the opportunity. The major thrust after those February victories at the river forts came in a continued advance by the Union Army of the Tennessee up its namesake river. After some shuffling in command and a short delay, Halleck sent the army nearly to the Mississippi border, where it occupied a series of small landings on the west bank of the river, most notably Pittsburg Landing. There Grant's army planned to wait, train, and rest before it set out toward its next objective, nearby Corinth, Mississippi, home to the crossing of two of the most important railroads in the Confederacy. The Shiloh and Pittsburg Landing area was intended to be only a staging area for the continual Federal advance, first on Corinth and then on down the Mississippi Valley. Grant and his 39,000 troops were to await the arrival of the Army of the Ohio under Major General Don Carlos Buell, and together, with Halleck in overall command, they would advance on Corinth.

The Confederate commanders had a say in the matter, however. General Albert Sidney Johnston and his second in command, General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, were struggling to concentrate their spread out commands to contain the surprisingly successful Union advance. Prior to the disasters at Forts Henry and Donelson, Johnston had strung his forces out across a defensive line hundreds of miles long, from Columbus on the Mississippi River through the river forts to Bowling Green, Kentucky, and finally to the Cumberland Gap. The objective was to garrison and hold chief transportation routes such as the Mississippi River, the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, the railroad from Louisville, Kentucky, to Nashville, and the gap itself. When Grant broke this line on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, however, Johnston had no choice but to fall back quickly, leaving in his retreat's wake Nashville, Columbus, a vast assortment of supplies, as well as 14,000 prisoners of war captured in the debacles at Forts Henry and Donelson. Considering the Union penetration deep into Confederate territory, Johnston had to find a place that would serve as a rallying point south of the Federal incursion, a locale that could handle an army of significant size. Most notably, he needed a place that had the transportation capability to bring the separated parts of his army together, to supply his troops, and to serve potentially as a base for a counterthrust and advance that would reclaim the lost territory.

Corinth, Mississippi, offered Johnston just such a location. If it was not well supplied with water, its other attributes were appealing. Of the utmost importance were the two railroads that crossed there, the north and south Mobile & Ohio and the east and west Memphis & Charleston. The railroads were so important that one former Confederate secretary of war declared them to be "the vertebrae of the Confederacy."¹ Johnston thus began concentrating his troops at and around Corinth, ushering in Major General William Joseph Hardee's troops that had garrisoned Bowling Green and then evacuated Nashville, as well as Major General Leonidas Polk's men who had held Columbus. Other troops also arrived from the far off Cumberland Gap. Johnston and President Jefferson Davis made the decision to bring in additional units too. Major General Braxton Bragg brought his troops to Corinth from Pensacola, Florida; Brigadier General Daniel Ruggles brought units from New Orleans. Johnston seemed to be putting all his faith in a concentration at Corinth, but he had to. Halleck had done almost the same thing, combining Grant's and Buell's armies for the advance on Corinth. Obviously, a major fight was shaping up somewhere around the small Mississippi railroad town.

Unknown to Halleck, the decision where that battle would be fought had already been made. While Halleck, Grant, and the other Union commanders saw Shiloh as no more than a staging area, Johnston and Beauregard in Corinth saw it as the key to the coming fight. Knowing Grant would soon be reinforced by Buell's army, scheduled to arrive in Savannah, nine miles north of Pittsburg Landing, on April 5, Johnston knew his

¹ United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, series 1, volume 7, p. 888.

best chance to win was before the two enemy armies linked up. He put his 44,000-man Army of the Mississippi in motion, marching toward Shiloh and an anticipated attack on April 4. Confusion within the mostly untrained army, bad roads, heavy rains, and incompetence led to delays, however, and Johnston was forced to postpone the attack until the next day, April 5. The army was not prepared even then, and Johnston had to opt for an attack on Sunday morning, April 6. By this time, Johnston's second in command Beauregard was having second thoughts, convinced that the delay of two days had alerted the enemy and the element of surprise had been lost. He argued forcefully at a council of war on the evening of April 5 that the army should turn around and go back to Corinth; the enemy, he said, would be "entrenched to the eyes." Johnston was determined to fight, though, and made his famous statement, "I would fight them if they were a million."²

And he did. Launching his attack at dawn on April 6, a confident Johnston remarked that "tonight we will water our horses in the Tennessee River."³ The first indications were that, despite Beauregard's nervousness, the Confederates had caught the enemy by surprise. Although there had been some skirmishing in the days prior to April 6, most Federals had no idea they were about to be attacked in force. In fact, Grant was not even with the army, but kept his headquarters at Savannah, awaiting Buell's arrival. Only the nervousness of a brigade commander in Grant's army, Colonel Everett Peabody, mitigated a disastrous total surprise. Not convinced that it was only small roving Confederate units who were in his front, he sent a patrol of some two hundred men to scout the area in front of him. It was this patrol that the Confederate front line intercepted and attacked at dawn, thus beginning the Battle of Shiloh.

The Confederate army began to lurch forward early that morning, stacked in four corps commanded by Hardee, Bragg, Polk, and former vice president of the United States, Major General John Cabell Breckinridge. Johnston had aligned his troops perpendicular to the main road, but that road took a sharp swing to the north between the Confederate deployment area and the Union camps that faced south. As a result, the Confederate line hit the Federal camps at an angle, first on the left, where the fighting quickly grew into battle proportions; it took a while for the Confederate right to swing around and become so engaged. Thus, Hardee in the front line first hit Brigadier General William Tecumseh Sherman's division around Shiloh Church while Brigadier General Benjamin Mayberry Prentiss's Union division to Sherman's east was able to form up and advance ahead of their camps before the Confederate right swung around and engaged them.

The attacks on the Confederate left were unsuccessful, due mainly to terrain factors, especially Shiloh Branch. The Confederates had to cross this swampy area and attack uphill toward the church, with Sherman's infantry and artillery holding tight to the

² O. Edward Cunningham, Gary D.J. Joiner & Timothy B. Smith, eds., *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*. New York: Savas Beatie, 2007, p. 138.

³ Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1997, p. 145.

high ground. No such terrain aided Prentiss, however. He held tableland between two creek systems, which offered no defensive help. As a result, once the Confederate right made contact, they made quick work of Prentiss's two brigades along the Eastern Corinth Road, causing severe casualties. Having dislodged Prentiss by 9:00 a.m., the Confederates poured through the gap that was Prentiss's position, turned left, and outflanked Sherman's Shiloh Church line, causing him to withdraw by 10:00 a.m.

Johnston's original plan had been to turn the Union left flank and drive Grant's forces into the swampy morass of Owl and Snake creeks north and west of the battlefield. Johnston witnessed the heavy fighting from Prentiss's division westward, but saw no sign of any Union position to his right. He concluded that he had found and turned the Union left, and thus began his major drive to push the enemy into the swamps. Johnston sent the bulk of his force, which by this time had involved the first three stacked corps in intermingled units, to the north and west to end the battle in victory.

But Johnston had made his turn too early. He had heard no fighting to his east because there was a half mile gap between Prentiss and the next unit, a detached brigade of Sherman's division guarding a road to the river. Johnston soon learned of these enemy troops and redirected a portion of his major turning movement to deal with them; he also sent in his reserves. These four brigades moved to the right and engaged the badly frightened but steadfast Union brigade in fighting that raged amid the huge ravines bordering the Tennessee River.

By 11:00 a.m., the Confederate surge had taken the front line of Union camps, but it had been a slow process. It had taken hours to move from the initial Confederate attack positions against Sherman's and Prentiss's divisions. And worse for the Confederates, heavy casualties had occurred, particularly in the numerous unsuccessful attacks across the creek at Shiloh Church. Even worse, many of the green Confederate soldiers could not resist looting the Union camps, finding all sorts of nice things to eat. Perhaps most detrimental of all was that Johnston had engaged nearly his entire army by 11:00 a.m.; only one of his sixteen brigades was not on line at this point. Johnston had certainly hit Sherman and Prentiss hard, particularly Prentiss, but it had taken his entire army and six hours to do so. By this time, the Confederate army was becoming alarmingly bloodied, tired, and confused.

Just the opposite effect had occurred in the Union army. The Peabody patrol had uncovered the Confederate advance far out from the Union camps, thus giving warning of the enemy's advance. Each Federal unit as a result had time to form up and prepare for the onslaught. And while Prentiss and Sherman had withdrawn from their camps, they constituted only six of fifteen Union brigades on the field, and the rest had moved forward and taken positions in highly defensive areas, there meeting Sherman's and Prentiss's fleeing refugees from the first line. Thus, a tiring and increasingly bloody and confused Confederate army ran up against a firm and fresh new Union line extending from Brigadier General Stephen Augustus Hurlbut's division and other isolated units around a peach orchard near the river to Brigadier General W. H. L. Wallace's division

along a sunken road, fronting large fields and thickets. The line then ran on to Brigadier John Alexander McClernand's position on the Union right. When Sherman and Prentiss withdrew, the refugees of their divisions took positions in this new line, Sherman alongside McClernand and Prentiss intermingled with Wallace. Moreover, those Union divisions not yet engaged were the veteran units in the army; the Confederates had taken six hours to dislodge totally green divisions. The veterans of Fort Donelson particularly in McClernand's and Wallace's divisions could be counted on to make a stronger stand.

And even better, the army commander was now on the field. Grant had heard the sounds of battle early that morning and had quickly moved to Pittsburg Landing, there rushing ammunition to the front, organizing reserves, and visiting each division commander with orders to hold "at all hazards."⁴ And, Grant had good news. He had stopped by Crump's Landing on the way to Shiloh, where Major General Lewis "Lew" Wallace's division was encamped and ordered it forward. That division would add strength to the Union line when it arrived. Likewise, Grant had ordered the lead elements of Buell's army to the battlefield. Grant realized and related to his commanders and men that they had only to hold their positions and survive the day to win the battle. By nightfall, surely Wallace and Buell would arrive and tip the balance in Grant's favor. Grant was trading space for time.

If it sounded simple on paper, it was more difficult in practice. Johnston launched hammer blows at the new Union line, with repeated assaults hitting all parts of this second major position. The big Confederate blow came on the left, where the weight of Johnston's massive but premature turning movement hit Sherman and McClernand around a small crossroads. Heavy fighting erupted as the Confederates threw the two divisions back. When the Confederates stopped to pilfer more Union camps and rest and replace ammunition, however, Sherman and McClernand on the Union right launched an early afternoon counterattack. They caught the mass of Confederates off guard and drove them back, recapturing much of the lost territory. They could not hope to hold their regained territory in the face of the final Confederate reserves thrown in to stem the tide and then lead a Confederate counterattack, but Sherman and McClernand had nevertheless bought valuable time. They eventually withdrew across Tilghman Branch and into a third major (and last) line of defense. But their stubborn resistance had made a difference.

A mirror image of the fighting on the Union right took place on the Union left, even though it was not as dramatic as Sherman's and McClernand's counterattack. Hurlbut commanded the Union left, and with better ground to defend, mostly open fields and huge ravines along the Tennessee River, he was able to parry numerous Confederate assaults. It was during one of these assaults that Johnston, the Confederate commander, was hit and bled to death, leaving command of the army to Beauregard. Despite Johnston's death, the Confederate advance continued, slowly driving Hurlbut from position after position in this second major line of defense. It was slow and undramatic,

⁴ Wiley Sword, *Shiloh: Bloody April*, revised edition. Dayton: Morningside, 2001, p. 284.

but the Confederates were making progress. Ultimately, like Sherman and McClelland, Hurlbut withdrew to a final line of defense north of Dill Branch and its huge ravine. However, he too had bought several valuable hours.

As the wings of the Union army withdrew by 4:00 p.m., one section of this second Union line still offered resistance. That was in the center where the area soon became known as the Hornet's Nest, because Confederates said the sounds of Union bullets passing their ears sounded like swarms of angry hornets. The Confederates launched repeated assaults against this position through a dense thicket and an open field, but they were never able to break the enemy line. Finally, they brought up scores of cannon to blast the position, but that only succeeded in driving away the opposing Union artillery. Wallace and Prentiss's divisions hunkered down and held their line, never giving way to the frontal assaults.

But much as they had done to Sherman's strong position at Shiloh Church earlier in the day, the Confederates flanked Wallace and Prentiss late that afternoon. Interpreting literally Grant's order to hold to the end, Prentiss and Wallace remained in position while Hurlbut, McClelland, and Sherman withdrew on their flanks. The Confederates were then quick to turn the position on both flanks and ultimately surrounded the Hornet's Nest. Some units successfully ran the gauntlet later termed "Hell's Hollow," which was so named because of the interconnecting fire from the nearing Confederate flanks, but several other regiments were not able to escape and had to surrender. Wallace was mortally wounded in the attempt to withdraw, leaving Prentiss as the ranking commander. He surrendered the 2,200 defenders of the Hornet's Nest around 5:30 that afternoon.

Veterans of the Hornet's Nest later claimed that they had been the sacrificial lambs that had allowed Grant to establish another line of defense and ultimately win the battle. Grant certainly did not think so. He later faulted Wallace and Prentiss for not withdrawing with the rest of the army. In reality, Grant did not need the sacrifice to take place, having already begun to establish his final line by 2:30 that afternoon. Thus by the time Wallace and Prentiss surrendered, the last line contained elements of Hurlbut's, McClelland's, and Sherman's divisions with massed artillery, including siege guns intended to be used at Corinth, and two gunboats in the river, the USS *Lexington* and USS *Tyler*. On top of that, Buell was beginning to arrive, and Wallace, despite a delay because of a countermarch not entirely of his own making, would also be there soon. Perhaps most importantly, this line faced two huge ravines, Dill Branch on the left and Tilghman branch on the right, through which the Confederates would have to assault to get to the final line. Had Prentiss and Wallace withdrawn into this third and last line, they would have made it only that much more formidable.

The Confederates, after reorganizing themselves and taking care of the 2,200 prisoners, managed to assault this final line. One brigade of Louisianans and assorted other units attempted to take Sherman's and McClelland's position along Tilghman Branch. Heavy casualties convinced them that it was impossible that day. A brigade of Mississippians tried to advance across Dill Branch, but they were hit by artillery, gunboat

fire, and infantry (including a few of Buell's leading companies), so they also withdrew, convinced they could not break the line unless an all-out assault took place.

With the night closing in quickly, Beauregard called off any other assaults, preferring to finish up the battle the next morning. He had Grant trapped between the river and the creeks and could finish him off later. He also believed that Buell was in north Alabama, but while one of Buell's divisions was there, five more had crossed or soon would cross the river at Pittsburg Landing. Many Confederates, and not a few historians since, have claimed that Beauregard thus threw Johnston's victory away that night.

Grant had traded enough space for time, but just because he had managed to hold on during April 6 did not mean the battle was over or that he had won it. In fact, Grant could still have lost Shiloh had he withdrawn from Pittsburg Landing, something both Buell and Sherman (and no doubt others) apparently thought he would do. Numerous commanders had done or would do just that after getting soundly thrashed as Grant had done that day. But Grant was no ordinary commander, and he made a career of not retreating when others would have. Grant chose to remain in his defensive line and fight it out. That Wallace finally marched in and Buell was able to put several divisions across the river that night obviously helped him.

Grant's critical decision to stay led to another critical decision: what to do the next day. With retreat out of the question, he could either remain on the defensive, or he could counterattack. The reinforcements no doubt gave Grant a numerical luxury, but many other commanders still would have not made the decision to counterattack. Grant did, and that decision determined the extent of his victory at Shiloh. While remaining on the defensive would have garnered a semi-victory much like Major General William Starke Rosecrans would later do at Stones River, Grant chose to take the fight to the enemy and thus won the major Union victory that was Shiloh.

The fighting began at dawn on April 7, and the Confederates were so unprepared that the Union forces, Buell on the left and Grant on the right, faced little opposition for a mile or so after crossing Dill and Tilghman branches. Most of the Confederate units had retired from the front lines, some completely off the battlefield to get away from the gunboats that shelled the battlefield during the night. The Confederates were not able to form a major defensive line until hours after sunup, but they soon did so along the same area the Federals had situated their second defensive line the day before. Fighting raged around the Peach Orchard as Buell's divisions commanded by Brigadier General William "Bull" Nelson, Brigadier General Alexander McDowell McCook, and Brigadier General Thomas Leonidas Crittenden pushed southward.

The most heavily fought-over ground near the Peach Orchard was in the Davis Wheatfield, where portions of Crittenden's division ran into major opposition. Some of the fighting took place over a battery of the famous Washington Artillery captured by the Federals and recaptured by the Confederates. Farther to the Union right, Crittenden and

McCook fought over the same Hornet's Nest area, with substantial Confederate resistance causing the advance to be slow and plodding. More heavy fighting occurred on the Union right, where Grant's exhausted forces augmented by Lew Wallace's fresh division advanced into Jones Field and endured heavy combat.

By noon, the Confederate army had been driven back far enough that their line had begun to contract into a more narrow space to take advantage of the main avenue of entrance and exit to and from the battlefield, the Corinth road. That led the Confederate front to the same crossroads area that McClellan and Sherman had defended the day before, and more Confederate counterattacks drove wedges of troops between divisions and even the two Union armies, letting the Federals know that the Confederates were not giving in gracefully. Beauregard realized the situation, however, and knew he could not win a victory. In order to save his army from destruction, something other Confederate commanders during the war did not do and lost both their positions and their armies, Beauregard ordered his troops to retreat to Corinth.

Grant let the Confederates slip away, sending only a partial pursuit the next day. Sherman met Confederate cavalry at Fallen Timbers, but after a small skirmish, Sherman let the Confederates go their way. The bloody, disorganized, and defeated Confederate army made its tortured way back to Corinth in the ensuing days. Grant's army reoccupied their original camps, finding them shot up and looted, much to their chagrin.

The Battle of Shiloh was over, but it had changed the war forever. The strategic effects were profound. Halleck later arrived at Pittsburg Landing to take over Grant's and Buell's armies, as well as another commanded by Major General John Pope brought in from the Mississippi River. All three later advanced on Corinth and ultimately took it almost bloodlessly from Beauregard. The Confederate commander evacuated the town rather than risk losing his army in a fight he thought he could not win. So, the battle for Corinth and her railroads was fought at Shiloh. And Corinth's capture allowed the Union commanders to push farther into the Mississippi Valley, outflanking as they did Memphis, which fell to Union forces in early June. It was of course the Memphis to Corinth line from which Grant later launched and then supported his eventually successful Vicksburg Campaign, which finally opened the river, the goal of the entire campaign to begin with.

It was the human effect that was the most important, however. Causing an official total of 23,746 casualties, but much higher in reality, Shiloh was the first mammoth battle of the war and as such served as the wake-up-call for the nation. There were many more bloody battles as the war continued, some even larger, but Shiloh was the earliest and was thus the battle that first alerted the nation that this war would not be short, but one long nightmare that would engulf everyone.

One contemporary observer noted that “the South never smiled again after Shiloh,” but⁵ that could be said of the nation as a whole. People of both sections slowly came to the realization, in large part due to Shiloh, that this terrific catastrophe of the 1860s was consuming America’s innocence.

⁵ James L. McDonough, *Shiloh: In Hell Before Night*. Knoxville: University Press of Tennessee, 1977, p. 225.