

"The Key to Victory"

An Overview of the Vicksburg Campaign

Terrence J. Winschel

Biographer and newspaperman Lloyd Lewis accurately portrays the Mississippi River in the mid-nineteenth century as being "The spinal column of America"--"the symbol of geographic unity." He refers to the great river as "the trunk of the American tree, with limbs and branches reaching to the Alleghenies, the Canadian border, the Rocky Mountains." For more than two thousand miles the river flows silently on its course to the sea providing a natural artery of commerce. Gliding along the Mississippi's muddy water were steamers and flatboats of all descriptions heavily laden with the rich agricultural produce of the land en route to world markets. Indeed, the silent water of the mighty river was the single most-important economic feature of the continent, the very lifeblood of America. One contemporary wrote emphatically that "The Valley of the Mississippi is America."¹

Upon the secession of the Southern states, and in particular Louisiana and Mississippi, the river was closed to unfettered navigation that threatened to strangle Northern commercial interests. With the advent of civil war, President Abraham Lincoln gathered his ranking civil and military leaders to discuss strategy for opening the Mississippi River and ending what he termed a "rebellion" in the southern states. Seated around a large table examining a map of the nation, Lincoln made a wide sweeping gesture with his hand then placed his finger on the map and said, "See what a lot of land these fellows hold, of which Vicksburg is the key. The war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket." It was the President's contention that "We can take all the northern ports of the Confederacy, and they can defy us from Vicksburg. It means hog and hominy without limit, fresh troops from all the states of the far South, and a cotton country where they can raise the staple without interference." Lincoln assured his listeners that "I am acquainted with that region and know what I am talking about, and, as valuable as New Orleans will be to us, Vicksburg will be more so."²

These powerful statements coming from the Sixteenth President were no exaggeration. Confederate cannon mounted along the bluffs commanding the Mississippi River at Vicksburg were not only trained on the river, but denied that important avenue of commerce to Northern shipping. It is important to further note that Vicksburg was also the connecting link between the eastern and western parts of the Confederacy, what Jefferson Davis referred to as "the nailhead that held the South's two halves together." In addition, the city sat astride a major Confederate supply route over which the armies of Braxton Bragg and Robert E. Lee received much needed food, clothing, medicine, and ammunition, as well as fresh troops.³

It was imperative for the administration in Washington to regain control of the lower Mississippi River, thereby reopening that important avenue of commerce enabling the rich agricultural produce of the Northwest to reach world markets. It would also split the Confederacy in two, sever that vital supply route, achieve a major objective of the Anaconda Plan, and effectively seal the doom of Richmond.

The following statements underscore the significance of the Mississippi River, and Vicksburg in particular:

- William T. Sherman, a man destined to play a prominent role in the military operations which centered on Vicksburg, wrote, "The Mississippi, source and mouth, must be controlled by one government." So firm was his belief that Sherman stated, "To secure the safety of the navigation of the Mississippi River I would slay millions. On that point I am not only insane, but mad."
- General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck wrote in similar, direct, albeit less eloquent terms, "In my opinion, the opening of the Mississippi River will be to us of more advantage than the capture of forty Richmonds."
- And finally, Confederate President Jefferson Davis in writing to Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton after the fall of Vicksburg stated his view, "I thought and still think you did right to risk an army for the purpose of keeping command of even a section of the Mississippi River. Had you succeeded, none would have blamed, had you not made the attempt few would have defended your course."⁴

In order to protect the Mississippi Valley, Confederate authorities established a line of defense which ran from Columbus, Kentucky, on the left overlooking the Mississippi River, through Bowling Green, to Cumberland Gap where the right flank was anchored on the mountains. On the great river south of Columbus, fortifications were also placed at Island No. 10, and on the Chickasaw Bluffs north of Memphis. Seventy miles below New Orleans, two powerful masonry forts, Forts Jackson and St. Philip, stood guard near the mouths of the Mississippi River.

Eager to confront the difficult task before them, Union land and naval forces moved with a vengeance from two directions in a massive converging attack to wrestle control of the river from Confederate troops. Driving south from Cairo, Illinois, Federal forces seized Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers respectively and opened the pathway of invasion to the Deep South. Continuing the drive, Union forces gained victory at Shiloh in April, Corinth in May, and having forced the surrender of Island No. 10, seized Memphis in June.

Moving upriver from the Gulf of Mexico were the ships of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron commanded by then Flag Officer David Glasgow Farragut. His ships bombarded and passed Forts Jackson and St. Philip on April 24 and compelled the surrender of New Orleans thirty-six hours later. With initial success behind him, Farragut sent an advance flotilla up river. Baton Rouge fell to the Federals on May 8, Natchez four days later, and the flotilla steamed on toward Vicksburg.

After the fall of New Orleans, as the Union pincer slowly closed along the river, the Confederates began to fortify Vicksburg. The city's geographical location made it ideal for defense. Equally important, existing rail lines which connected Vicksburg with Jackson and, via Jackson, points elsewhere in the Confederacy, enabled the shipment of big guns to the "Hill City." It was not long before Vicksburg became known as the "Gibraltar of the Confederacy," and it would prove a tough nut to crack. The strategic significance of Vicksburg greatly increased after the fall of Memphis as it then became the northern most point below Memphis where the bluffs met the river. It was only a matter of time before war in all its horror centered on Vicksburg.

Initial efforts by Union land and naval forces to capture Vicksburg and open the great waterway to navigation ended in failure. The first threat developed on May 18, 1862, when the ships of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron arrived below Vicksburg and demand was made for the city's surrender. In terse words the demand was refused. Lt. Col. James L. Autry, the post commander, replied, "Mississippians don't know,

and refuse to learn, how to surrender to an enemy." Incensed, Federal authorities opened fire upon the city and maintained an intermittent bombardment from late May, all through June, and into late July, but to no avail. The bombardment was ineffective and Farragut's fleet, wracked with sickness and plagued by rapidly falling waters, withdrew to New Orleans and deeper waters.⁵

It was then and there realized by both Union and Confederate high commands that if Vicksburg were going to fall it would be at the hands of a combined land and naval effort. The batteries which overlooked the Mississippi River at Vicksburg were powerful, indeed formidable. But all the land accesses were open. The decision was made to construct a line of defense to guard the city's landward approaches and control the roads and railroad access to Vicksburg. The responsibility for design and construction of these works was assigned to Maj. Samuel Lockett, Chief Engineer of the Department of Mississippi and East Louisiana. Lockett, a graduate of West Point, Class of 1859 in which he stood second, was a skilled and trained engineer who set about his task with vigor.

Reconnoitering through the hills and hollows around Vicksburg, Lockett quickly realized that the city was naturally defensible. Because of the series of sharp narrow ridges, fronted by deep steep ravines, Vicksburg was a natural fortress that he planned to make even stronger by the construction of field fortifications. The line as constructed consisted of nine major forts connected by a continuous line of trenches and rifle pits. The line formed a huge semicircle around Vicksburg the flanks of which rested on the river above and below the city. It would be manned by a garrison of 30,000 troops, mount 172 big guns, and pose the major challenge to Union domination of the river.

Late that same year, a two prong Federal advance on Vicksburg met with disaster. Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the Union Army of the Tennessee, had divided his force in two for an advance on Vicksburg. One column, under Grant's personal command, marched overland from Grand Junction, Tennessee, into north Mississippi. The object was to draw Confederate forces responsible for the defense of Vicksburg into the northern portion of the state and there keep them pinned while the other column, under Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman, made a rapid push down the Mississippi River and seized Vicksburg.



*Major General Ulysses S. Grant.
This image was taken in Vicksburg
after the city's capture.
Library of Congress*

As Grant's column pushed south through Holly Springs and Oxford toward Grenada, his ever-lengthening supply and communications line became dangerously exposed. The Mobile & Ohio Railroad, on which Grant depended for supplies, fell prey to raiding Confederate cavalry under Nathan Bedford Forrest. His advance base at Holly Springs also fell victim to raiding Confederate cavalry under Earl Van Dorn. Destruction of the vital rail line and his advance base at Holly Springs compelled Grant to begin a pull back to Memphis. This retrograde enabled Confederate forces, utilizing interior rail lines, to rush to Vicksburg arriving in time to thwart Sherman's strike just northeast of the city along the banks of Chickasaw Bayou. In reporting the action, Sherman simply wrote, "I reached Vicksburg at the time appointed, landed, assaulted and failed."⁶

Checked on the overland route, Grant seized upon Federal naval supremacy on the inland waters to transfer his army to Milliken's Bend and Young's Point, Louisiana, on the Mississippi River just north of and opposite Vicksburg. He also stationed troops farther to the north at Lake Providence, Louisiana. During the winter months, Federal forces stockpiled tremendous quantities of rations, clothing, medicine, ammunition, and countless other items for the

spring campaign aimed at Vicksburg. Grant also orchestrated a series of ill-fated bayou expeditions the object of which was to reach the rear of Vicksburg.

After months of frustration and failure, Grant was at a crossroads in his military career. There was tremendous clamor in the Northern press to remove him from command. Even members of the Cabinet urged Lincoln to replace Grant as commander of the western army. But the President responded to those critical of Grant by saying, "I can't spare this man, he fights. I'll try him a little longer." Aware of the clamor against him, Grant examined his options.⁷

Three options were discussed at army headquarters. The first was to launch a direct amphibious assault across the Mississippi River and storm the Vicksburg stronghold. The second was to pull back to Memphis and try the overland route once again. And, the third, was to march the army down the west side of the river, search for a favorable crossing point, and transfer the field of operations to the area south and east of Vicksburg. In characteristic fashion and with grim determination, Grant boldly opted for the march south. On March 29, 1863, Grant ordered Maj. Gen. John A. McClernand of the XIII Corps to open a road from Milliken's Bend to New Carthage on the Mississippi River below Vicksburg. The movement began on March 31, and thus the Vicksburg campaign began in earnest.

As Grant's infantrymen slogged their way south through Louisiana corduroying roads and building bridges each step of the way, the Union fleet commanded by R. Adm. David Dixon Porter prepared to run by the batteries at Vicksburg. On the dark, moonless night of April 16, Porter's vessels raised anchor and moved downriver toward the citadel of Vicksburg. With engines muffled and running lights extinguished, Porter hoped to slip pass the batteries undetected. Suddenly the night sky was ablaze from bales of cotton soaked in turpentine which lined the river on both banks and barrels of tar set afire by the Confederates to illuminate the river and silhouette the fleet as it passed the batteries.

For several hours the fleet withstood the punishing fire which was poured from Confederate batteries. Admiral Porter paid close attention to where the shot and shell were landing and noticed they were hitting his smokestacks, the pilothouses and hurricane decks, some were even hitting the gundecks, but few were hitting any lower where the vital parts of his boats--the engines, boilers, steam-drums, and mud drums were located. He reasoned that the Confederates were either poor gunners, or else there was a fatal flaw in the placement of their batteries which prevented them from depressing the guns to direct an effective fire against the gunboats and transports. After two years of war, he knew the Confederates to be skilled artillerymen. Porter quickly directed his vessels to move across the channel and hug the Mississippi shore. As they did so, the shot and shell began to fly harmlessly overhead. So close did the fleet approach Vicksburg, that sailors reported hearing Confederate gun captains giving commands. They also heard bricks tumbling into the city streets, the effect of their own gunfire. When the shelling stopped, Porter tallied the damage to his fleet and recorded the loss of only one transport vessel. What was deemed impossible by many was achieved. With Porter's fleet now below Vicksburg, Grant had the wherewithal to cross the mighty river.

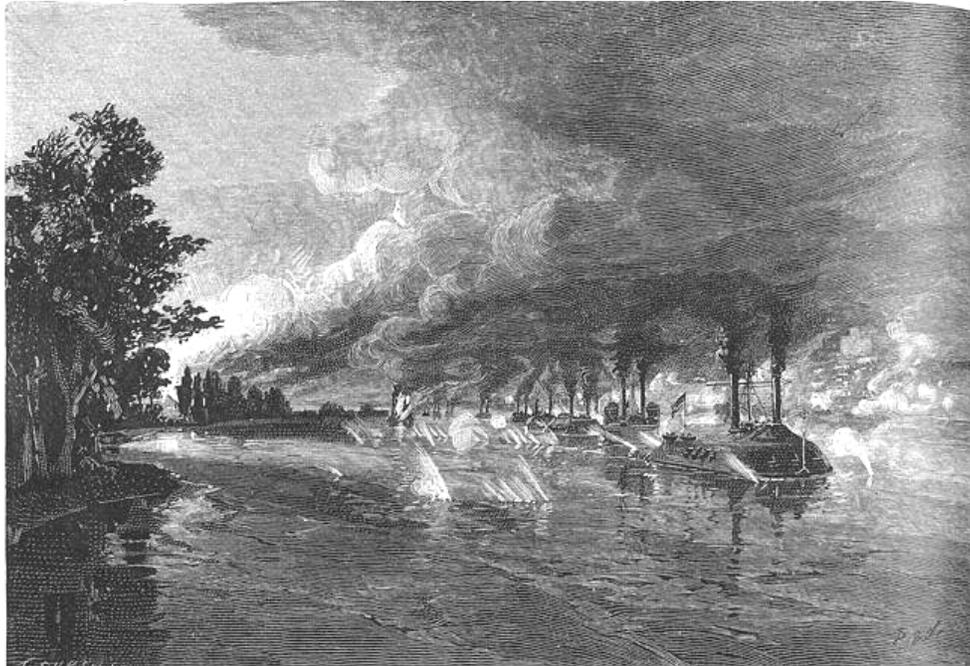
It was Grant's intention to force a crossing of the river at Grand Gulf where there was a good all weather landing and from which point roads radiated deep into the interior of Mississippi. Two forts guarded Grand



Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter.
U.S. Army Military History Institute

Gulf and posed an obstacle to Federal plans. On April 29, Porter's gunboats bombarded the Grand Gulf defenses in preparation for a landing by Grant's troops. The fleet silenced the guns of Fort Wade, but could not quiet those of Fort Cobun.

Ever adaptive, Grant disembarked his men from the transports and marched them five miles farther down the levee. That evening, Porter's fleet ran passed the Confederate batteries and rendezvoused with Grant at



Admiral Porter's flotilla passing the Vicksburg batteries on the night of April 16 with the flagship "Benton" in the lead. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence Buel, ed., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, 4 vols. (The Century Co., 1888)

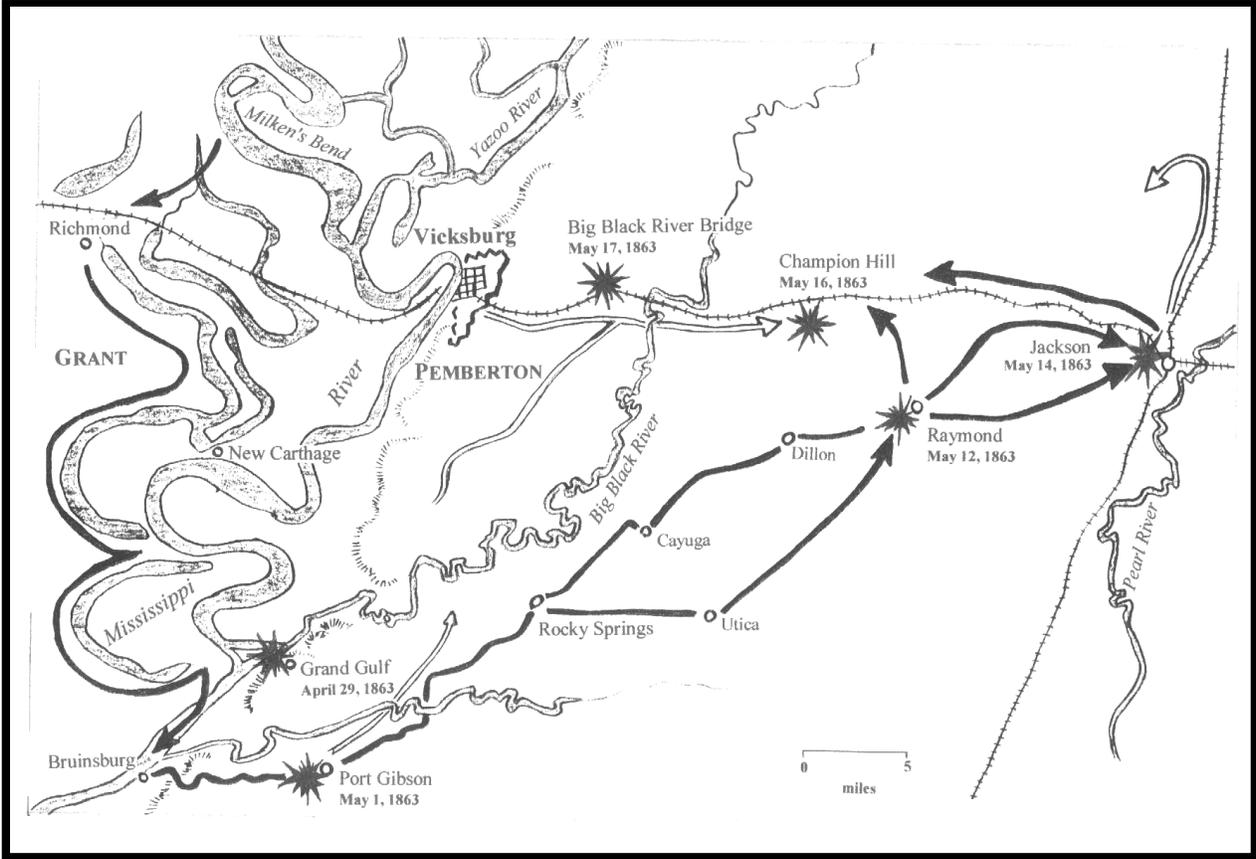
Disharoon's plantation. On April 30--May 1 Grant hurled his army across the mighty river and onto Mississippi soil at Bruinsburg. A band aboard the flagship *Benton* struck up "The Red, White, and Blue" as Grant's infantrymen came ashore. In one of the largest amphibious operations in American history up to that time, Grant landed 22,000 men and began the inland campaign to capture Vicksburg.

Once ashore, Grant's forces pushed rapidly inland and marched through the night. In the early morning hours of May 1, Confederate resistance was encountered west of Port Gibson. In a furious battle that raged throughout the day, Union soldiers fought with grim determination to secure their beachhead on Mississippi soil while Confederate soldiers fought with equal determination to drive the invaders into the river. By day's end, Confederate forces, outnumbered and hard-pressed, retired from the field.

Rather than march north on Vicksburg, Grant directed his army in a northeasterly direction. It was his intention to cut the rail line which connected Vicksburg with Jackson and sever that vital line of communications and supply, cutting the Confederate garrison off from supplies and reinforcements. In a seventeen-day period, which is often referred to as the blitzkrieg of the Vicksburg campaign, Grant's army marched more than 200 miles, fought five battles, and drove the Confederates into the city's defenses.

The campaign thus far had been a stunning success for the Union army. Grant's force had met and overcome Confederate resistance at Port Gibson on May 1, Raymond on May 12, and two days later captured the capital of Mississippi. Not wishing to waste combat troops on occupation, Grant neutralized Jackson with

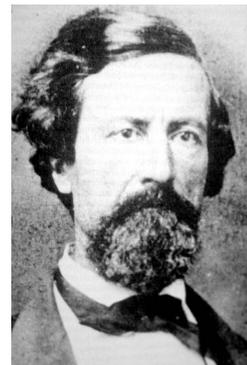
the torch then turned west toward his objective--Vicksburg. En route from Jackson to Vicksburg, his force inflicted devastating casualties on the Confederate army commanded by Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton at the battle of Champion Hill on May 16. The following day, May 17, Grant soundly defeated Confederate forces at the Big Black River Bridge and hurled Pemberton's army into the defenses of Vicksburg.



Movements of the armies and locations of significant actions during the Vicksburg Campaign from April 29 to May 17, 1863. Map by Eric Campbell

Having witnessed the debacle at the Big Black River and the wild flight of his troops, Pemberton dejectedly stated, "Just thirty years ago I began my military career by receiving my appointment to a cadetship at the U.S. Military Academy, and to-day--that same date--that career is ended in disaster and disgrace." For all practical purpose it was, but it was a disaster that would effect an entire nation.⁸

The citizens of Vicksburg watched in fear as the shattered remnants of Pemberton's army poured into the city on that fateful day. Emma Balfour, wife of a prominent Vicksburg physician, stood in her doorway as the demoralized mass of humanity filled the streets. She later wrote with trepidation, "I hope never to witness again such a scene as the return of our routed army!" With pen in hand she recorded the scene which enveloped her, "From twelve o'clock until late in the night the streets and roads were jammed with wagons, cannons, horses, men, mules, stock, sheep, everything you can imagine that appertains to an army being brought hurriedly within the intrenchment." She confided to her diary the fears of many in Vicksburg as she wrote, "What is to become of all the living things in this place...shut up as in a trap...God only knows."⁹



Lt. General John C. Pemberton.
National Archives

On through the long day and into the evening marched the weary soldiers clad in butternut, gray, and undyed wool. Singly or in small groups, with no sense of order or discipline, the men filed into the rifle-pits and turned to meet Grant's rapidly approaching army. A medley of sounds filled the night air as the Confederates readied their defenses: officers shouted orders, teamsters whipped their animals and dragged artillery into position, and, as the soldiers worked with picks and shovels, some men cursed while others prayed. Throughout the night, the ringing of axes was constant as additional trees were felled to strengthen fortifications, clear fields of fire, and form abatis. Work continued at a feverish pace and, by sunrise, the city was in a good state of defense.

Late in the afternoon, Confederate soldiers peering over their parapets spotted long columns of Union infantrymen moving slowly toward the city. It was a terrifying spectacle, and yet magnificent in the extreme as battleflags snapped in the breeze above the columns and bayonets glistened in the sunlight. Union skirmishers were quickly deployed and artillery roared into action, but the day wore away with nothing more than a long-range artillery duel. That night, as darkness enveloped the fields, the soldiers of both armies rested on their arms. Each knew that the bloody work at hand would commence with the rising sun and prepared for battle in his own way.

Grant was anxious for a quick victory and, after making a hasty reconnaissance, ordered an attack. On the morning of May 19, Union cannon opened fire and bombarded the Confederate works with solid shot and shell. The thick smoke from the guns shrouded the fields and made it virtually impossible to see. At 2:00 p.m., when the guns fell silent, Union soldiers deployed into line of battle astride Graveyard Road, northeast of Vicksburg, and stormed toward the city's defenses. They succeeded in planting several stands of colors near the parapets of Vicksburg, but were driven back with the loss of 942 men.

Among the soldiers who stormed fortress Vicksburg on May 19, were the men of the 1st Battalion, 13th United States Infantry, one of only two Regular Army units with Grant at Vicksburg. Pouring out of a ravine north of Graveyard Road, the men formed line of battle on an open ridge only 400 yards from the city's defenses. As the Confederate soldiers peered over the parapet, they caught sight of the Union forces forming for the assault with man touching man, rank pressing rank, and line supporting line. They could see officers in blue riding up and down the lines, making sure that all was set for the advance. They watched as the Federals uncased their colors that caught the breeze above them and listened to the sound of the cold steel as the soldiers clad in blue affixed their bayonets in final preparation for the assault.

First at a slow and steady pace the Regulars moved across the field. Pouring down into the ravines that fronted the Confederate works, the men of the 13th U.S. Infantry filtered their way through the dense obstruction of felled trees and clawed their way up the slope toward Stockade Redan. A handful of the Regulars reached the ditch in front of the fort and planted both the national and regimental colors of the Battalion on the exterior slope, the first Northern unit to do so. Checked and finally driven back, the Battalion suffered 43 percent casualties that day, but gained imperishable glory. Following the siege, the men of the 1st Battalion, 13th U.S. Infantry were ordered to inscribe on their flag the honor "First at Vicksburg." So proud were the officers and men of this distinction that they adopted it as their unit motto. To this date, "First at Vicksburg" is emblazoned on the shoulder patches of the men of the 13th Infantry.

As the men of the 13th United States Infantry battled their way into the ditches fronting Stockade Redan, several regiments were pinned to the ground less than 125 yards from the Confederate works. Under a sweltering sun the men on the firing line began to run low on ammunition. One unit in desperate need of cartridges was the Fifty-fifth Illinois Infantry led by Col. Oscar Malmborg. Faced with the decision to either re-supply his men or pull his regiment back, Malmborg asked for volunteers to run to the rear and call up a fresh supply of cartridges.

Four men volunteered for the hazardous assignment including a young musician named Orion P. Howe. Braving a murderous fire of musketry, they ran to the rear along Graveyard Road just as fast as their legs would carry them. Three of the four men were killed en route. The sole survivor, Orion Howe, was badly wounded--taking a bullet in the leg--and was toppled hard to the ground. Despite his wound, the lad picked himself up, dusted himself off, and continued down the road.

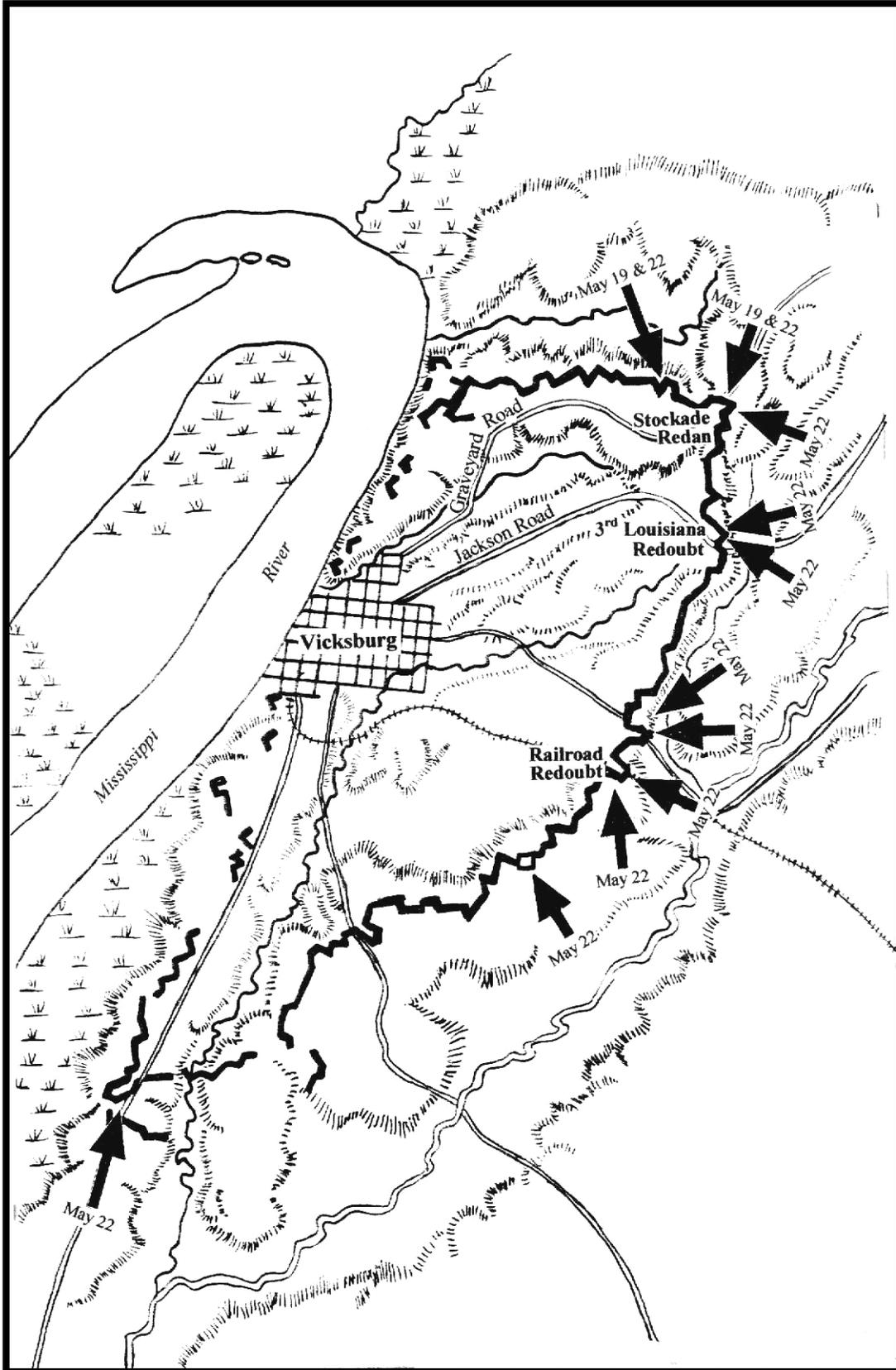
Howe hobbled up to a familiar figure on horseback and cried: "General Sherman, send some cartridges to Colonel Malmborg, our men are all out." Although he could tell by the ashen complexion on his face and the blood streaming down his leg that the boy was wounded, Sherman listened intently to his story then sent Howe to the rear and medical treatment. As he limped along, the young soldier wheeled about and shouted "Caliber 54." The requested cartridges were carried to the front and distributed to the men on the firing line, but to no avail as they were the wrong caliber and the attack was checked and driven back.¹⁰

Recalling the bravery demonstrated by Howe, Sherman wrote Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton recommending that the young musician be given a medal. In time he was--no less an award than the Medal of Honor. Although the medal was not issued until 1896, on May 19, 1863, the day he performed the action for which he was a recipient of the medal, Orion Howe was 14 years of age.

Undaunted by his failure on the 19th, Grant decided to make a more thorough reconnaissance then hurl his entire force against Vicksburg on May 22. Early that morning Union artillery roared into action and for four hours bombarded the works with solid shot and shell tearing large holes in the earthen fortifications. At 10 a.m., the prearranged time for the assault to begin, the artillery fell silent. Union soldiers moved forward over a three-mile front toward the defenses of Vicksburg. They succeeded in planting their colors on the parapets of Vicksburg in several areas and made a short-lived penetration at Railroad Redoubt, but were driven back a second time with severe loss. In the assault on May 22, Grant lost more than 3,000 officers and men killed, wounded, or missing.

Although his nose was bloodied a second time, Grant was not yet willing to toss in the towel and lay siege to the city. As he contemplated his next move, Grant left behind his dead and wounded, many of whom had been lying exposed since May 19. Exposed to the sun and heat the bodies of the dead began to bloat and turn black--the stench was sickening. One Confederate soldier complained that, "the Yanks are trying to stink us out of Vicksburg." On May 25, white flags appeared along the Confederate line. Union soldiers were hopeful that the city would soon be surrendered. Their hopes were dashed as word quickly spread that a note was passed from Pemberton to Grant "imploring in the name of humanity" that Grant bury his dead as the odor

had become quite offensive.¹¹



Map showing the siege lines at Vicksburg and location of Grant's May 19 and 22 attacks. Map by

A truce was granted for two and one-half hours during which time men in blue and gray mingled between the lines. "Here a group of four played cards," recalled one soldiers, "two Yanks and two Rebs," while others swapped tobacco for coffee. While the gruesome task of the burial details was completed, it was almost as if there were no war in progress. At the appointed time, however, the flags were taken down and everyone ran for cover. The siege of Vicksburg began in earnest that day.¹²

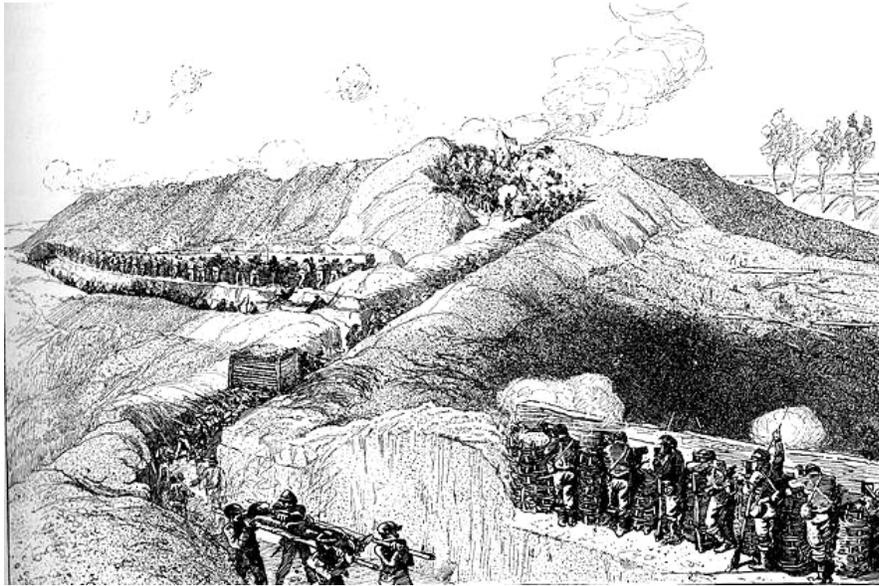
Throughout the month of May and into June Union soldiers slowly extended their lines to the left and right until they invested the beleaguered city. Once the investment was complete, Pemberton's garrison was effectively cut off from all supply and communications with the outside world. The Confederates had to subsist solely on what they had stockpiled in Vicksburg prior to the siege. With each passing day those supplies dwindled until they were nearly exhausted. In order to conserve what food supplies were on hand, Pemberton ordered the daily ration cut to three-quarters, then to half, then to quarter, then they were cut again, and yet again, and yet again. By the end of June the garrison was issued only a handful of peas and rice per man per day. Even their water was rationed.

Disease began to spread rapidly through the ranks. Dysentery, diarrhea, malaria, and various fevers all took a heavy toll of human life and were more certain of death than were Union sharpshooters. At first, scores then hundreds of men could be seen laying their weapons aside and walk or crawl as best they could to the hospitals in Vicksburg. Public buildings were filled to capacity, many handsome private residences were converted to hospitals. But even there, there was no succor as medicines were in short supply. Each day the "dead wagons" made the rounds of the hospitals and the dead were brought out in ever increasing number and carried to their long rest northeast of town in the city cemetery.

As May slowly faded into June, Union soldiers began to dig approaches toward the Confederate line. Forming zigzags and then parallels, Grant moved up his infantry and artillery first to within 300 yards, then 200 yards, then 100 yards. The digging then continued as Union soldiers worked their way up to the parapets of Vicksburg. The object was to get as close as possible wherefore if an attack was order all they need do is pour out of their trench, over the parapet, and among the enemy. This would minimize their casualties and maximize the troop strength with which they hit the enemy. Hopefully it would be with enough strength of numbers to seize the forts and gain access to Vicksburg. An option was to tunnel underneath the enemy works, hollow out chambers, fill them with black powder, and destroy the fortifications of Vicksburg.

Thirteen approaches were excavated by Union soldiers at different points along the siege line with the object of mining the Confederate works. Of these thirteen approaches, the most successful was known as "Logan's Approach." Situated along the Jackson road, Logan's Approach inched forward toward the Third Louisiana Redan. Excavating a sap, or trench if you will, that was seven feet deep and eight feet wide, Union fatigue parties reached the Third Louisiana Redan on June 23. A gallery was then carved under the fort and preparations made for mining.

On June 25, 2,200 pounds of black powder were placed in the mine. At 3 p.m. the fuse was lit. Tense moments passed as the Federals waited to storm into the breach and seize Vicksburg. Suddenly there was a muffled thud, then a loud explosion as the ground began to heave and a column of flame and dirt reached to the sky. Inside the column of flame one could see men, mules, and accouterments blown skyward. Before the dust could even settle, Union soldiers poured into the crater and attempted to secure the breach. In the wild melee which ensued clubbed muskets and bayonets were freely used and hand grenades were tossed back and forth. The battle raged in unabated fury for twenty-six hours as Grant threw in one fresh regiment after another, all to no avail. The breach was sealed by the Confederates at the point of bayonet. The great gamble had failed.



The fight in the crater created by the explosion of the mine on June 25. The view is from the Union approaches. Johnson and Buel, ed., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War.

Undaunted, a second mine was planted and detonated on July 1, but was not followed by an infantry assault. The Confederates had sunk a countermine in a futile effort to locate the Union tunnel before a mine could be planted or detonated. Not wishing to lose irreplaceable white soldiers, they pressed eight black men into service to do the digging. At the bottom of the countermine the air was stifling; it was almost impossible to breath. On July 1, when the mine was detonated at 3:00 p.m.,

seven of the blacks were killed instantly. One, however, a man named Abraham, was blown into the air and landed behind Union lines. A Northern soldier recalled, “one Negro was thrown a 150 feet, lighting on his head and shoulders, scarcely hurting him. He attempted to run back, but a half dozen leveled muskets brought him back.” One soldier even had the audacity to ask the poor man “How high did you go?” to which he responded, “Dunno, massa, but t’ink about t’ree mile.” (Abraham became an instant celebrity and for the few remaining days of the siege, some enterprising soldiers placed him in a tent and charged an admission for their curious comrades to see America’s first man in space.”¹³

That day, Grant was notified by his subordinates that given just a few more days of digging, thirteen mines



Grant's arrival at Pemberton's headquarters on July 4, 1863, from a sketch made that day. Johnson and Buel, ed., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War.

could be planted and detonated simultaneously. This was the moment Grant and his army had been working

toward all these many weeks of siege. It is not likely that the Confederates could have withstood such an attack.

On the hot afternoon of July 3, Grant was in the process of planning an attack (which he scheduled for July 6), when white flags of truce again appeared along the lines. Riding out from the city came a trio of officers in gray led by Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton. Grant rode to meet with him between the lines. Pemberton asked Grant on what terms would he receive the surrender of the garrison and city of Vicksburg. Grant replied that he had no terms other than immediate and unconditional surrender. These terms were unacceptable to Pemberton who assured Grant that he would bury many more of his men before he gained entrance to Vicksburg. The generals agreed only upon a cessation of hostilities, then rode their separate ways. Grant assured Pemberton that he would have his final terms by ten o'clock that night.

True to his word, Grant sent in his final, amended terms. Instead of an unconditional surrender of Vicksburg, Grant offered parole to the garrison. Pemberton received the note in the quiet of his headquarters. In the company of his generals, Pemberton read the note then passed it around for his subordinates to read and comment upon. Almost to a man, they agreed they were the best terms to be had.

On the morning of July 4, 1863, white flags fluttered in the breeze above the fortifications of Vicksburg. Marching out from their works, Confederate soldiers furled their flags, stacked their arms, and turned over their accouterments at which time a victorious Union army marched in and took possession of Vicksburg--the fortress city on the Mississippi River which had eluded them for so long.

Grant rode in along the Jackson Road and down to the Warren County Court House where he watched the Stars and Stripes placed atop the building. He then rode down to the waterfront where he personally thanked and congratulated Admiral Porter for the assistance rendered by the United States Navy during the operations against Vicksburg. Almost as an afterthought, he sent a message to Washington informing President Lincoln of the city's surrender. It took several days for the message to reach the capital and within less than 2 days thereafter the only remaining Confederate bastion on the Mississippi River--Port Hudson, Louisiana, fell into Union hands. Upon receipt of Grant's message, Lincoln sighed, "Thank God," and declared that "The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea."¹⁴

NOTES

¹ Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman Fighting Prophet* (New York, 1932), pp. 252; U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1890-1901), series I, vol. 30, pt. 3, p. 694. Hereinafter cited as *OR*. All references are to series I unless otherwise noted.

² David Dixon Porter, *Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War* (New York, 1885), pp. 95-96.

³ Jerry Korn, *War on the Mississippi* (Alexandria, 1985), p. 16.

⁴ *OR* 31, pt. 3, p. 459; *OR* 24, pt. 1, p. 22; John C. Pemberton, *Pemberton: Defender of Vicksburg* (Chapel Hill, 1942), p. 261.

⁵ U.S. War Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 31 vols. (Washington, D.C., 181895-1929), series 1, vol. 18, pp. 782-783.

⁶ *OR* vol. 17, pt. 1, p. 613.

⁷ John Fiske, *The Mississippi Valley in the Civil War* (New York, 1900), p. 225.

⁸ Samuel H. Lockett, "The Defense of Vicksburg," in Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York, 1884-1889), vol. 3, p. 488.

⁹ Diary (copy) of Emma Balfour, Diary Collection of Vicksburg National Military Park.

¹⁰ Edwin C. Bearss, ed., *The Story of the Fifty-fifth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War 1861-1865*, (Huntington, 1993), pp.237-240.

¹¹ *OR* 24, pt. 1, pp. 276-277.

¹² Osborn H. Oldroyd, *A Soldier's Story of the Siege of Vicksburg* (Springfield, 1885), p. 35.

¹³ Seth J. Wells, *The Siege of Vicksburg from the Diary of Seth J. Wells, Including Weeks of Preparation and of Occupation After the Surrender* (Detroit, 1915), p. 85.

¹⁴ Henry Steele Commager (editor), *The Blue and Gray: The Story of the Civil War as Told by Participants*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis, 1950), vol. 2, p. 677.