

The Siege and Battle of Corinth

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Corinth, Mississippi was one of the most strategic locations in the western theater of the Civil War. The town of about one thousand residents held two rail lines, the Memphis and Charleston Railroad which ran east to west and the Mobile and Ohio Railroad which ran north to south.¹ These two railroads linked the south and were considered, “the vertebrae of the Confederacy.”² One Confederate general stated that, “if defeated here [Corinth], we lose the Mississippi Valley and probably our cause.”³ The campaign to take Corinth included one of the most famous battles of the Civil War, Shiloh. After a close victory, the Union began to move on Corinth, where the Confederate Army had retreated.

Charged with taking Corinth, commanding General Henry Halleck had a very cautious style of strategy and intended to lay siege to the town of Corinth. Halleck, upset with Major General Ulysses S. Grant’s conduct in the battle of Shiloh, demoted him to second in command of the armies of the west. Upset with this decision, Grant considered leaving the Army.⁴ With 120,000 men including the 8th, 10th, 16th, 22nd, 26th, 27th, 32nd, 42nd, 47th, 51st and 52nd Illinois Regiments,⁵ Halleck arrived on the outskirts of Corinth on May 28th, 1862. Bombardment of the Confederate defenses commenced the next day.⁶

Many expected a large confrontation to occur soon after. Confederate Soldier George Dawson wrote to his wife that, “We are expecting a fight at Corinth which will be the biggest fight that will be on record in the next 100 years.”⁷ General P.G.T Beauregard of the Confederate garrison had other ideas. Aware that his Army was outnumbered almost two to one and that any defense of the city would be futile, Gen. Beauregard orchestrated a secret evacuation of the city. He kept the Union forces in the dark by the use of clever deception. “On his orders, locomotives chugged in and out of town periodically to

the accompaniment of loud cheering. Beauregard intended to convince the Federals that he was receiving massive reinforcements.”⁸ While this was going on, Beauregard evacuated the town of his entire Army. Halleck did not advance on the city until he heard explosions, coming from the destruction of Confederate supplies. His Army found Corinth empty with, as General Lew Wallace described, “not a sick prisoner, not a rusty bayonet, not a bite of bacon- nothing but an empty town.”⁹

Despite the relative bloodlessness of the siege, the loss of Corinth devastated the Confederates, who had lost one of their most significant railroad hubs. The Union was now in position to dominate the western theater. A Confederate counterattack seemed imminent. Halleck was appointed general in chief of the Federal Army in July and left Grant in charge. Halleck cut the size of the Army Grant would command and limited his offensive capabilities. While Grant regained some of his power, he suffered from these limitations while charged with defending Corinth’s railroads.¹⁰

After the summer of Union occupation, Confederate Major General Earl Van Dorn attempted counteroffensive in October of 1862. Van Dorn commanded an Army of 22,000 Soldiers and attempted to assault the Union garrison of 23,000 and Major General William S. Rosecrans in command.¹¹ From Illinois, the 7th, 9th, 12th, 26th, 47th, 52nd, 56th, 57th and an independent regiment were present among the defensive line.¹² Col. Oscar Jackson of the 65th Ohio described the Confederate amassment of troops: “They formed one column of perhaps two thousand men in plain view, then another, and crowding out of the woods another, and so on. I thought they would never stop coming out of the timber.”¹³ The Confederates directly assaulted the earthworks of the city with a focus on the center of the Federals which include the Battery Robinett. Confederate Lt. Charles Labruzan described the assault on the battery, “we were now met by a perfect storm of grape, canister, cannon balls and Minnie balls. Oh, God! I have never seen the like! The men fell like grass, even here.”¹⁴ The Confederate assault drove the Union line at Battery Powell into the inner defenses. However, the Confederate casualties

were too significant and the Union forces had managed to recapture the battery, so Van Dorn was forced to retreat with his Army.¹⁵ The Union held Corinth but, Gen. Rosecrans chose not to pursue the fleeing Confederates until the next day, which was unsuccessful. The Union suffered 2,839 casualties while the Confederates lost 4,838 men, more than 20% of their attacking force.¹⁶

While the Union was successful in capturing and holding Corinth, criticism was levied against Halleck and Rosecrans for being too cautious and not pressing the Confederates further. Rosecrans would be transferred to Nashville and assigned to the newly formed Army of the Cumberland. Grant, in full command of his Army again, began drafting proposals to look towards a new target, the city of Vicksburg.¹⁷

¹ Timothy B. Smith, *Mississippi History Now*. "Corinth in the Civil War: At the Crossroads of History" Mississippi Historical Society. An online publication of the Mississippi Historical Society, (Archival vertical files, "War Files," Command Historian office, Camp Lincoln, Springfield IL.)

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ David Nevin. *The Road to Shiloh: Early Battles in the West*. (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1983)155-157.

⁵ Victor Hicken, *Illinois in the Civil War*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) 73-75.

⁶ David Nevin. *The Road to Shiloh: Early Battles in the West*. (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1983) 157.

⁷ Stephen Sears. *The Civil War: The Second Year Told by Those Who Lived it*. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States 2012) 169.

⁸ David Nevin. *The Road to Shiloh: Early Battles in the West*. (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1983) 157.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jerry Korn, *War on the Mississippi: Grant's Vicksburg Campaign*. (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1985) 34.

¹¹ Ibid 40

¹² Maps of Corinth, Mississippi (1862), Civil War Trust.

¹³ Stephen Sears. *The Civil War: The Second Year Told by Those Who Lived it*. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States 2012) 578.

¹⁴ Ibid 586

¹⁵ Jerry Korn, *War on the Mississippi: Grant's Vicksburg Campaign*. (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1985)42.

¹⁶ Ibid 44

¹⁷ Ibid

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