

The Battle of Belmont

By Jonathon Kirkham-Intern

On November 7, 1861, Union and Confederate forces engaged in combat on the banks of the Missouri side of the Mississippi River near the small hamlet of Belmont. In the larger context of the Civil War, this confrontation was largely irrelevant. However, the battle would be most significant for being the first military engagement with Illinois General and future president Ulysses S. Grant in command.

The lead up to the engagement at Belmont was part of a campaign to counter the presence of the fort at Columbus, Kentucky. The Confederate fort, commanded by Major General Leonidas Polk, proved to be a significant threat to the region with a 19,000 man garrison and 140 artillery pieces. Directly across the Mississippi river in Missouri, the Confederates had an outpost, called Camp Johnston.¹ This camp became the target of Grant's attack. Fearing that a Union detachment sent to engage the Missouri based partisan Confederate commander, Major Jeff Thompson, was about to be cut off by Polk's troop movements, Grant intended to attack the camp. This battle proved to be a distraction for the Confederates at Columbus, keeping the Union detachment out of danger.²

Grant ordered a flotilla of ships to carry himself and 3,114 men from Cairo, Illinois to Hunter's point two miles above Belmont. This army included the 22nd, 27th, 30th, and 31st Illinois regiments and the 7th Iowa regiment, making the upcoming engagement the first combat experience of the war for most of the Soldiers present.³ His troops were nervous and apprehensive about the upcoming engagement, a Soldier from the 27th wrote that he perceived, "'dark forebodings' about the coming day and as he observed the rising morning sun, it seemed 'to be bathed in blood.'"⁴

The Union forces made their way through brush and forests and eventually came into contact with four Confederate infantry regiments. The Illinois regiments fought with valor. A Captain of the 22nd Illinois called his men together and said, "I wish to remind you of the fact that Illinois troops became famous in the war with Mexico, and that today the eyes of Illinois are upon us and we must...preserve the escutcheon unsullied."⁵ During the engagement, the 27th captured two Confederate cannons and quickly used them against their former owners.⁶ The 30th Illinois earned the distinction of capturing the rebel Watson's New Orleans battery.⁷ The famous Illinois Senator, John A. Logan commanded the 31st infantry during the battle. When Logan's unit was not in formation with the rest of the battle line, he reportedly yelled, "I don't give a d—n where I am, so long as I get into this fight!"⁸ A testament to the man's fiery spirit.

Despite having relatively equal troop strength, the Confederates were unprepared for such an attack. They ran low on ammunition and then were routed by Grant's forces and retreated into the woods. Grant's men advanced upon the camp and overran the remaining defenders. The Union army, thinking it had won the battle began to loot the camp in celebration. This proved to be a grave error as the Confederates received reinforcements from Columbus and attempted to cut off Grant's army from the transports that had brought them to Belmont.⁹

Grant later detailed this point in the battle when he wrote, "At first some of the officers seemed to think that to be surrounded was to be placed in a hopeless positions, where there was nothing to do with surrender. But when I announced that we had cut our way in and could cut our way out just as well, it seemed a new revelation for the officers and Soldiers."¹⁰ With this new zeal, the Union army was able to break out of the trap and escape to the transport boats, despite heavy fighting. Grant was one of the last men to board the ship, guiding his horse along a narrow plank leading onto the boat.¹¹ Despite the simplicity and inconclusiveness of the battle, the casualties were still prevalent. The Union casualties

included 120 killed, 383 wounded, and 104 captured or missing while the Confederate casualties consisted of 105 dead, 419 wounded, and 117 captured or missing.¹²

The strategic importance of the battle was limited and Grant acknowledged the criticisms from the North where many leading publications considered the battle as waste of good men for little reason.¹³ However, Grant defended his actions by saying it helped to contain Polk's troop movements and gave his men valuable combat experience and as Grant would write later, "a confidence in themselves at Belmont that did not desert them through the war."¹⁴ Many also recognized Grant for his competent leadership skills at the Battle of Belmont. The Battle of Belmont served as a key learning experience for the man that would eventually command the entire Union army in the final decisive stages of the war.¹⁵

¹ The Historical Marker Database, "The Battle of Belmont," National Park Service, <http://hmdb.org/marker.asp?MarkerID=17763&Print=1> (accessed May 15, 2012).

² Ibid

³ Victor Hicken, *Illinois in the Civil War*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 20

⁴ Ibid, 21

⁵ Ibid, 21

⁶ Adjutant General's Report. *History of Twenty-Seventh Infantry* (Springfield IL: Command Historians Office, War Files) 413

⁷ Adjutant General's Report. *History of Thirtieth Infantry* (Springfield IL: Command Historians Office, War Files) 537

⁸ Victor Hicken, *Illinois in the Civil War*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 22

⁹ The Historical Marker Database, "The Battle of Belmont," National Park Service, <http://hmdb.org/marker.asp?MarkerID=17763&Print=1> (accessed May 15, 2012).

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Victor Hicken, *Illinois in the Civil War* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 24

¹⁴ The Historical Marker Database, "The Battle of Belmont," National Park Service, <http://hmdb.org/marker.asp?MarkerID=17763&Print=1> (accessed May 15, 2012).

¹⁵ Ibid

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