

Battle of Shiloh

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After defeating the Confederates at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, Grant continued to chase the rebels. He knew the defeated army was regrouping around Corinth, Mississippi, and it was Grant's intention to build up his own forces and strike the enemy there. So, even with the "weather cold and roads impassable," Grant went south toward Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River. Grant estimated the Confederate strength at Corinth to be between 50,000 and 60,000 men.¹ When he arrived at Pittsburg Landing, Grant did not order his soldiers to entrench, but instead waited patiently for Major-General Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio to arrive from the north. When they were united, they would have a mass of 75,000 men who were confident and ready to crush the smaller Confederate force.² Although Grant had heard rumors of a Confederate force advancing on his location, he thought it was only a rumor. "I have scarcely the faintest idea of an attack (general one) being made upon us," Grant reported, "but will be prepared should such a thing take place."³

At Corinth, Generals Albert Sidney Johnston and P.G.T. Beauregard were not content to dig in and wait for Grant's advance. Instead, Johnston decided to march back into Tennessee and drive Grant from the state. General Braxton Bragg brought up 15,000 men from the Gulf Coast to join the attack. In all, the Confederates had 42,000 men.⁴ Knowing that Buell was seeking to link up with Grant's army, Johnston moved out in early April, ordering his troops "forward to offer battle near Pittsburg."⁵ After slight

¹ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. II, p. 40.

² McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 406.

³ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. I, p. 89.

⁴ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 406.

⁵ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. II, p. 387.

delays, Johnston's advance troops reached Grant's advance troops, and the two forces skirmished on April 5 with a small handful of casualties. Grant did not take the Confederate threat seriously.

With the element of surprise on his side Johnston sent his army charging at the Union line on the morning of April 6, 1862. According to Beauregard, the rebel soldiers advanced like an "Alpine avalanche."⁶ The southerners pushed back Union forces all along the six mile front. Grant, still at headquarters awaiting Buell, heard the gunfire at breakfast and reached the battlefield around 9 a.m.⁷ The fighting proved incredibly fierce. Two large, inexperienced armies clashed and butchered each other. Bullets ripped through leaves and severed tree limbs. Smoke blanketed the field. Many soldiers, Union and Confederate, seeing action for the first time, fled horrified from the fight.

In the midst of the chaos, however, the Confederates managed to push the Federals back past Shiloh church and then to Pittsburg Landing and the river. It looked as if the Union might be routed. But at the middle of the action, along a sunken road, General Benjamin M. Prentiss and a group of brave soldiers held a small part of the collapsing Union line. The Confederates labeled this area the "Hornets' Nest".⁸ Upon Grant's order, and despite being outnumbered four to one, Prentiss held the sunken road for most of the day. Just before sunset, when Prentiss feared that "further resistance must result in the slaughter of every man" in his command, he surrendered his depleted force of 2,200 men.⁹

⁶ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. I, p. 386.

⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 409.

⁸ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 410.

⁹ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. I, p. 279.

The Confederates had, as Beauregard described, won a “complete victory” on April 6, but they did so at a heavy cost.¹⁰ General Albert Sidney Johnston, Commander of the Army of the Mississippi (Confederate), took a bullet to his leg and bled to death. The Confederacy, it was said, would “mourn his loss, revere his name, and cherish his manly virtues.”¹¹ For the Union, the defeat of April 6 was a setback. But, in the middle of the night, Buell’s army arrived. By the morning, three more divisions were ready for action. Overall, Grant commanded 25,000 more men on the morning of April 7.¹² With renewed confidence, Grant ordered his army to attack.

Beauregard and his men were caught completely by surprise as they relaxed at the former Union camp they had captured the day before. Grant’s force swept the Confederates all the way back to the lines they possessed at the beginning of April 6. There, they stiffened and resisted. The hard fighting of the previous day resumed as if it had never quit. Beauregard saw that if he pressed the fight, his army would be destroyed. He therefore ordered a retreat. The Confederates, outnumbered and dispirited, fell back. Nathan Bedford Forrest led a number of cavalry charges to slow down the advancing Union troops, giving the Confederates time to escape.

April 7 proved a complete turnaround from the events of April 6. Instead of the complete Confederate victory which Beauregard had bragged about, his battered army staggered back into Mississippi. The Union victors, tired and bogged down in a downpour, did not offer a serious pursuit. Shiloh was over, and 20,000 men were dead or wounded. There were more casualties than all other Civil War battles up to that point

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹¹ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. I, p. 409

¹² McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 410.

combined.¹³ Yet, no ground had been gained. The Union remained at Pittsburg Landing, and the Confederates went back to Corinth. “In the pages of history the hard won field of Shiloh [sic] will have a name among the great battlefields of the world,” stated the *Memphis Daily Appeal*.¹⁴ That publication, however, reported on what it believed to be an overwhelming Confederate victory and not a Union triumph. Regardless of the victor, the Battle of Shiloh was significant because it changed the nation’s expectations. Instead of a quick, bloodless campaign, Shiloh showed that the war would be a bitter, bloody struggle of horrendous magnitude.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹⁴ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 9, 1862.