

Battle of Shiloh

Essential Questions: What was the outcome of the Battle of Shiloh? What was the significance of the Battle of Shiloh?

After victories at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, the Union army in the West seemed ready to defeat the Confederates anywhere they were. The Union Army of the Tennessee, led by Ulysses S. Grant, pushed deep into the state with the idea of linking up with Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio and pursuing the rebel army in Mississippi. The Confederates wanted to force Grant out of Tennessee. Grant moved his army to a small port called Pittsburgh Landing located on the western section of the Tennessee river. A small church named Shiloh, meaning "place of peace" in Hebrew stood nearby. It was there that the Confederates attacked on April 6, 1862. After two days of hard fighting, 20,000 men were either killed or wounded.¹ It was, up to that time, the largest battle to ever take place in the Western Hemisphere.

After defeating the Confederates at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, Grant continued to chase the rebels. He knew the defeated rebel 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 60,000.² 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 rebel force.³ 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."⁴

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.⁵ Knowing that Buell was seeking to

¹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 413.

² *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. II, p. 40.

³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 406.

⁴ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. I, p. 89.

⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 406.

link up with Grant's army, Johnston moved out in early April, ordering his troops "forward to offer battle near Pittsburg."⁶

After slight 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."⁷ The southerners pushed back Union forces all along the front, which stretched six miles. Grant, still at headquarters awaiting Buell, heard the gunfire at breakfast and reached the battlefield around 9 a.m.⁸

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 group of brave soldiers held a small part of the collapsing Union line. The Confederates labeled this area the "Hornets' Nest."⁹ 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.¹⁰ The Confederates had, as Beauregard described, won a "complete victory" on April 6, but it did so at a heavy cost.¹¹ 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."¹²

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 7.¹³ 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.

⁶ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. II, p. 387.

⁷ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. I, p. 386.

⁸ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 409.

⁹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 410.

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

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹² *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. I, p. 409.

¹³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 410.

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 combined.¹⁴ 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*.¹⁵ 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. Shiloh foreshadowed what the war would become, for the next three years would see battle after battle of a similar, horrendous magnitude.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹⁵ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 9, 1862.

Battle of Shiloh

Write a short newspaper article on the Battle of Shiloh. Use the graphic organizer below to plan your article.

Who?

What?

Where?

When?

How did the battle impact the Union?

How did the battle impact the Confederates?

Sample Headline