

SOLDIERS FROM EXPERIENCE:
THE EMERGENCE OF TACTICAL CULTURE IN SHERMAN'S FIFTEENTH ARMY CORPS,
1862-63

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ABSTRACT

Eric Michael Burke: *Soldiers from Experience: The Emergence of Tactical Culture in Sherman's Fifteenth Army Corps, 1862-63*
(Under the direction of Joseph T. Glatthaar)

This study examines the organic emergence and evolution of discernible patterns in the tactical behavior of Major General William T. Sherman's Fifteenth Army Corps of the Army of the Tennessee across its first year operating within the western theater of the American Civil War. It analyzes the ways in which specific experiences and patterns of meaning-making within the corps's regiments and batteries led to the emergence of a distinctive corps-level "tactical culture." This concept, introduced for the first time within the dissertation, is defined as a collection of shared, historically-derived, normative ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and habitual behaviors that inform a subordinate military command's particular approach to the prosecution of its assigned objectives on or off the battlefield. The dissertation employs the research methodologies of "new military history" to inform an older "traditional" historiography in an effort to frame what might be called a "new operational history." While historians frequently assert that generals somehow impart their character to their commands, this dissertation argues that the reverse was the case within Sherman's corps. Although Sherman habitually sought a frontal penetration of entrenched Rebel lines, a combination of factors – most especially the heavily wooded terrain of the Mississippi Valley – repeatedly prevented his corps from achieving such objectives. As a result of their perpetual failure, those in the ranks lost confidence whenever called upon to assault enemy lines, leaving Sherman with "no troops that can be made to assault." Instead, heavily cluttered Western battlefields rewarded the employment of open-order "clouds" of skirmishers.

While these “clouds” could not breach fortified Rebel positions, they could suppress enemy units and allow for maneuver elsewhere. Simultaneously, repeated experiences of success in raiding operations inspired an embrace of “war in earnest” tactics among those in the ranks traumatized from bloody repulse on the battlefield. By 1864, the corps reliably displayed a tactical culture borne of its particular past experiences which helped to shape its behavior during the campaigns for Atlanta, Savannah, and the Carolinas. An awareness of this tactical culture informed Sherman's employment of the command, as well as his larger operational art during his famous late war campaigns.

To Eddie, Jeremiah, Bobby, John, Sean, Mike, all the others we lost in the desert,
and the part of our youths we lost along with them.

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Finally, any and all errors and shortcomings contained within the pages that follow remain the sole responsibility of the author. It is my sincere hope that I have produced something that the aforementioned can be proud of after having played such a vital and pivotal role in enabling it.

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INTRODUCTION

“They spoke of other corps ... 'The Ninth' – 'The First' – 'The Fifth' – 'The Sixth' – 'The Third' – the simple numerals rang with eloquence, each having a meaning which was to float through many years as no intangible arithmetical mist, but as pregnant with individuality as the names of cities.”

~ Stephen Crane, *The Little Regiment* (1896)¹

“This feeling that grows up between regiments, brigades, divisions and corps is very strong and as strange.”

~ Charles Wills, 103d Illinois²

On a frigid December day in 1871, Lt. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman took the stand after a lengthy adjournment to finally answer for crimes allegedly committed six years prior in the city of Columbia, South Carolina. Partially destroyed in a violent blaze in February 1865 while occupied by his troops plodding northward through the state, considerable amounts of private property and cotton – much of it foreign-owned – had been incinerated along with a significant portion of the city, and the responsibility for its near total destruction needed to be ascertained. Most Northerners remained convinced that either the retreating remnants of the Rebel army, drunken slaves, the wind, or some combination of the three was to blame. Southerners, on the other hand, maintained that Sherman’s “devils” had deliberately fired the town with the same vindictive spirit they were sure had motivated all of the general’s fiery campaigns.

¹ Stephen Crane, *The Little Regiment, and Other Episodes of the American Civil War* (New York: Appleton, 1896, 19-20.

² Charles Wills to Brother, Mar. 15, 1864, John Y Simon, ed., *Army Life of an Illinois Soldier* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 218.

Cross-examining attorney George R. Walker thought he knew precisely how to illustrate that Sherman had taken deliberate steps to reduce the city to ashes from the moment he selected which of the four *corps d'armee* comprising his army group would enter Columbia first. After meandering through a long series of questions related to prior testimony, Walker came abruptly to the point. "Can you tell me anything about the 15th corps?" he asked directly. The corps had been the first to enter the city that day, and many of its inhabitants still invoked the particular temperament of the "diabolical 15th," as one of them called it, as an explanation for the ruinous conflagration's origins. Sherman's erstwhile somewhat defensive demeanor shifted immediately at mention of the command. "Yes, indeed I can," he quickly replied, beaming with pride. "I know all about it; they were as fine a body of men as ever trod shoe-leather." Walker took this in stride. "They had the reputation of doing their work well?" he asked, pointedly. "Yes, sir; thoroughly," Sherman replied, adding that when it came to "going into a fight and going through a fight, they were the men they are described to be." Indeed, the Fifteenth Corps had earned quite the name for itself in the victorious United States as among the hardest fighting and furthest marching contingents of "Sherman's veterans." But the corps's combat exploits were not what Walker was after. "Hadn't they a reputation in Mississippi?" he inquired. "They had a very high reputation," Sherman agreed, referencing the corps's famed service among Grant's "Vicksburg rats," prying open the Mississippi River in the summer of 1863.³

Recognizing a need for more direct questioning, Walker cut to the chase. "Had they not a reputation there [Mississippi] for leaving their mark upon the country?" he asked. "Yes, sir, they

³ United States, *Who Burnt Columbia? Official Depositions of Wm. Tecumseh Sherman, 'General of the Army of the United States,' and Gen. O. O. Howard, U.S.A., For the Defence* (Charleston: Walker, Evans & Cogswell, 1873), 82; Earl Schenk Miers, ed., *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), 43.

left their marks wherever they went,” Sherman said. With this, Walker could almost smell victory, or so he thought. “You were aware of this?” “Perfectly.” “When you reached Savannah?” “Indeed, I was; I knew every officer and every private in that corps.” Likely sporting a sly grin and intensely satisfied with his imminent coup, Walker did his best to rub it in. “They were a wild set, were they not?” he asked loadedly, only to receive an unsuspected rebuttal. “No, sir; they were composed of first rate men – farmers and mechanics, and men who are to-day as good citizens as we have in our country, but who went to war in earnest.” This caught Walker off guard. Certainly, Sherman had meant what he had said before, he insisted: “They were good men for destroying property?” The aging general again concurred: “Yes, sir; when told to do so, they destroyed it very quickly.” But what about when “they thought they might do it and it not be objectionable to their officers,” Walker prodded. Sherman tellingly evaded. “They could do their work very thoroughly when they undertook it.” Growing frustrated, Walker began to show his anger: “Do you mean to say that you were not aware ... before you reached Columbia, that the 15th corps were a corps distinguished for the marks they left upon the country through which they passed?” Still calm, Sherman replied, curtly: “I may have known it, and very likely I did; I knew generally what was going on.” His avoidance further irritated Walker. “I asked you did you know it; I should like you to answer that question,” he demanded, “were you not aware that the 15th corps were remarkable for the manner in which they left their mark upon the country through which they passed?” “Explain what you mean by mark,” Sherman asked. “Devastation,” Walker replied. “They killed every rebel within range of their guns and left their dead bodies to mark the ground,” Sherman smiled. “Devastation of property, I mean,” Walker clarified. “No more than the rest of the troops,” the general finally answered.⁴

⁴ United States, *Who Burnt Columbia?*, 82-83.

Sherman's answer was disingenuous. Just as divulged within one of his most famous dicta: "There is a soul to an army as well as to the individual man," the Fifteenth Corps, and indeed every corps of Sherman's army, had a soul all its own – a soul that, by the spring of 1865, Sherman knew better than all the rest.⁵ Writing to Major General Henry Halleck less than two months prior to reaching Columbia, Sherman had laid out his plans for his army's fiery forthcoming entry into the first state of the so-called Confederacy. "When I move, the Fifteenth Corps will be on the right of the right wing," he explained. Though later altered, his original plans for the Carolinas campaign would have naturally carried the corps into the streets of the Rebellion's first capital: Charleston. Contemplating the likely results of their arrival, along with Halleck's implication that South Carolina ought rightfully to pay heavily for its sins, Sherman did "not think 'salt' will be necessary." After all, "if you have watched the history of that corps, you will have remarked that they generally do their work pretty well." He had full confidence that the port city "deserves all that seems in store for her." He also added, after a brief glance at his map, that he "look[ed] upon Columbia as quite as bad as Charleston."⁶

Sherman had every reason to know the "soul" and "the history" of the Fifteenth Corps better than any other of the four which then comprised his army group. Having taken command of the veteran nucleus of the formation during the late winter of 1862, it had represented his first independent corps command in then Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's Army of the Tennessee. Much time had passed between those days and the moment at which he opted to send his beloved original corps into the streets of Columbia, and the mountain of intervening experience which he

⁵ W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman, Vol. I* (New York: The Library of America, 1990), 879.

⁶ W. T. Sherman to H. W. Halleck, Dec. 24, 1864, Brooks Simpson and Jean Berlin, ed. *Sherman's Civil War; Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865 [SCW]* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 776.

and the corps had mutually accrued had molded both of them into distinctive instruments of warfare. While historians have traditionally made much of the impress of “Uncle Billy” upon the character of his army, in truth the army, and even more especially the “diabolical 15th,” played a much more powerful role in shaping the character of “Uncle Billy” as a grand tactician and strategist. Although no longer commanding the corps directly since his promotion to field army command in the winter of 1863, even by the spring of 1865 Sherman knew just what he could dependably expect from the command, as well as what he could not. He was well acquainted with the “soul” of the Fifteenth Corps, in large part because he shared it. They had forged it together across a tempestuous year of bloody and intensely trying campaigns by which both the regiments of his command and Sherman himself were mutually molded into, to use his own phrase, “soldiers from experience.”

I. “Veteran Character”

In his landmark 1985 study of Sherman’s army group during its famed late war campaigns for Savannah and the Carolinas, Joseph T. Glatthaar highlighted the importance of what he called the Western army’s “veteran character” in enabling its success during those legendary operations. “At the expense of rigid discipline, precision drills, and tidy appearance, all trademarks of the Army of the Potomac,” Glatthaar explained, “Sherman’s command [had] developed a sense of self-reliance and self-confidence based upon the lessons of several years of active campaigning.” The Western veterans “had learned the best ways to perform certain duties and how to handle themselves in all sorts of situations.” The resultant “veteran character ... utterly dominated Sherman’s army,” enabling operations that “required company-level officers

and enlisted men to bear a much greater burden and shoulder a much larger share of the responsibility for success” than in most other campaigns of the American Civil War.⁷

Glatthaar never explicitly outlined the individual components of this “veteran character,” though he did allude to many throughout the course of his masterful work. Above all else, the Western army was one filled with experienced soldiers “who knew what to do and how to care for themselves.”⁸ They had, as two of them put it, already “learned nearly all that was worth knowing” and by the latter campaigns of the war understood “just what to do and what not to do” in and out of battle.⁹ Across a lengthy tenure in uniform, they “had learned to perform those small yet critical tasks that often decided engagements,” even if such mastery occasionally “undercut strong discipline by fostering a sense of independence and self-reliance.”¹⁰ Sherman, Glatthaar argues, had himself learned to masterfully realize the natural advantages accruing to such an army of veterans by allowing the men and officers of his army “enough freedom to put their experience to work.”¹¹

To be sure, Sherman’s learned legions were by no means confident in all things. “Experience had taught Sherman’s men the foolhardiness of frontal assaults,” Glatthaar observed, “particularly against earthworks held by nearly equal numbers.” Instead, they much preferred flanking maneuvers, which usually “conserved lives and were much more successful.” The same lessons which had impressed upon them the “foolhardiness of frontal assaults” had

⁷ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman’s Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), xi-xii.

⁸ Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 15.

⁹ Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 28.

¹⁰ Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 30, 32.

¹¹ Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 38.

likewise taught them the immense advantages accruing to fortified defensive positions as well as the accompanying “importance of pure firepower” when delivered from their protection.¹² They had also learned to pay relatively little attention to Army-prescribed drill manuals when it came to tactical maneuvering under fire. After all, “marching in step elbow to elbow, [was] a physical impossibility in the heavily wooded South.” These rigid tactics were replaced by predominately open-order skirmishing in battle and an experienced soldier’s innate understanding for “the underlying principles that troops act as a coherent unit and remain manageable under all circumstances,” even when outside of tight formations.¹³

The process by which the conversion of green citizen-soldier recruits into Sherman’s battle-wise veterans took place, the manner in which his corps and army gained its “soul,” has long been alluded to, but never systematically unpacked by historians. In fact, the process of what might be called “veteranization” or even the expression “veteran troops” has been employed colloquially by both military practitioners and historians since at least the Roman era, but has rarely enjoyed a clear and unambiguous definition. “Veteran,” “crack,” “elite,” or “experienced” units are still today somehow known primarily when they are seen. One of the many problems with such vague employment of the terms “veteran” or “experienced” in reference to any individual or group, past or present, is that all experiences have specific content. Each of us accrues experience from the day we are born, but the differences in our experiences, and the different ways in which we make sense of them, play a powerful role in molding us into the particular individuals we become. While merely being human beings means that all of us share a number of experiences that are remarkably similar, even those experiences that are most

¹² Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 157-158.

¹³ Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 157.

similar to those of another individual still contain distinctive and unique aspects that may become more or less important over the course of our lives. The very same applies to groups – most especially groups that maintain a lengthy tenure of stable membership, and which are called upon to engage in the most traumatic of human activities: warfare. Soldiers living and serving alongside one another naturally accrue shared experience that, just as with individuals, tends to produce a unique group “personality” or “character.” In large part, the distinguishable characteristics of such “regimental character” (as Civil War contemporaries referred to it) that an outside observer can discern represent artifacts of the unit’s “tactical culture”: the body of shared normative ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and habitual behaviors that shape the command’s prosecution of its assigned objectives.

Also like the individual volunteers that comprised them, the “character” and tactical culture of Civil War commands, like Sherman’s Fifteenth Corps, was forged by an interrelated combination of factors borne of both “nature” and “nurture.” Instead of genetic code, the organizational structure and doctrine to which a regiment trained and drilled represented certain imperatives that substantively shaped and limited the ways in which it could behave in and out of combat. Whether or not a regiment was an infantry or artillery command, how many regiments a given brigade contained and at what strengths, and the specific drill maneuvers *Casey’s* or *Hardee’s Infantry Tactics* or the *U.S. Army Revised Regulations* prescribed for movement on the battlefield were all structures which operated in a manner similar to that of genetic code, or “nature,” in shaping how Civil War units behaved.

Just as the behavior of individuals is not exclusively borne of genetic destiny, neither were all the volunteer units serving in the U.S. Army during the American Civil War confined to, or even capable of, responding to any particular tactical situation in exactly the same manner as

any other. Despite subscribing to precisely the same linear maneuver doctrine and maintaining more or less the same structure, Civil War military organizations frequently differed dramatically from one another in the manner in which they approached the tactical objectives assigned to them. Although all U.S. volunteers trained and drilled in choreographed maneuvers drawn from the very same Army-prescribed drill manuals, as late as the 1880s these works remained exclusively focused on the efficient maneuvering of formations of men to, about, and from the battlefield. In the words of Bvt. Maj. Gen. Emory Upton, they were “simply a collection of rules for passing from one formation to another,” but provided no practical instruction in “how to fight” – a topic which was habitually “left to actual experience in war.”¹⁴ Tactics, first concretely defined by the Army in 1891 as the “art of handling troops in the presence of the enemy, *i.e.*, applying on the battlefield the movements learned at drill,” was during the Civil War left entirely to practitioners to learn from experience. Thus, to explain the differences in the ways in which specific commands and commanders conducted themselves under fire, the historian must historicize their behavior by analyzing how their distinctive past experience, or “nurture,” played a role in shaping future decisions or actions under fire.¹⁵

This study represents an attempt to illustrate how this very evolutionary process shaped the emergent tactical culture of Sherman’s Fifteenth Corps during its powerfully impressionable first year serving together across the long Vicksburg and Chattanooga campaigns of 1862-63. In doing so, it makes clear how the apparent distinctive penchant of the “diabolical 15th” for the destruction of Rebel property and what historians now call “war in earnest” arose from the

¹⁴ Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1899* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 93, 108.

¹⁵ War Department, *Infantry Drill Regulations, United States Army* (New York: Army and Navy Journal, 1891), 6.

specific historical experiences of its component regiments. It also shows how many of these same experiences shaped the manner in which the corps behaved on the battlefield, how its members organically developed an informal doctrine which anticipated most all of the postwar Army's tactical doctrine of predominately open-order light infantry tactics, a culture that emphasized the pairing of the strategic offense with the tactical defense, and a powerful preference for the indirect approach of strategic "war in earnest" over direct confrontation with usually entrenched Rebels on the battlefield. Finally, it offers a new window into Sherman's own development as a military leader, showing how the experience of commanding the corps gradually transformed "Sherman the Stormer" into the famed "Sherman the Flanker."

II. "New Operational History"

Operational military historiography, the historical examination of military operations on and off the battlefield, has come under fire in the academy over the past half-century. Post-1970s trends have shifted the historiographical lens to wider social and cultural factors in an effort to explain war often without the need for much examination of direct military confrontation. Professional military historians today often exert considerable energy explaining to colleagues how they do not engage in what is commonly stereotyped as 'drums and trumpets' history. Academic discussions concerning why any given general zigged when he should have zagged have fallen dramatically out of favor. In fact, many assert that such zigging and zagging was often of little real import historically to the outcome of any particular conflict. For the most part, academic military historians have adapted to these trends by refocusing their collective efforts on not only warfare but organized human violence more generally. With this tack, the field has experienced a veritable rebirth in recent years as among the most *avant garde* within the discipline. Trends in what is still referred to as "new military history," despite its now lengthy tenure, continue to push the field into an array of interesting and invaluable directions, shining

light into many erstwhile ignored corners of both war and warfare. Cutting-edge scholarship in the “war and society” school addresses the nuanced differences between historical societies and the ways in which they have defended themselves, organized for war, and exerted power through violence.¹⁶

For the most part, American Civil War military historiography has marched in lockstep with these developments. The vast majority of Civil War historians studying military topics in recent years have all but abandoned operational history completely. Instead, heavily influenced by John Keegan’s canonical *Face of Battle* (1976), they have applied the theories and research methodologies of non-military social and cultural history to produce a deluge of “soldier studies” scholarship aimed at understanding the motivations, ideologies, and experiences of the “common soldiers” of both sides. Today, the sheer extant volume of such literature is daunting. As historian Drew Bledsoe notes, historians have now critically assessed “common soldiers’ combat motivation, their will to fight, their beliefs about death and religion, their understanding of nations and nationalism, their feelings about the home front and morale, and their attitudes toward victory and defeat, courage and cowardice, slavery and emancipation, race, sexuality, family, class, gender, manhood, violence, and almost every other imaginable subject.” While this scholarship has provided substantial insight into the lives of “common soldiers,” very little of it has contributed to deepening our understanding of the prosecution of specific military operations during the war. Exploring the nuances of motivations for enlistment, disparate conceptions of manhood within the ranks, or the relative devotion of volunteers to emancipation provides compelling insight into the ways Northern society was reflected by the “Boys in Blue,” but few

¹⁶ Robert M. Citino, “Review Essay: Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction,” *American Historical Review* 112 (October 2007): 1070-1090; Dennis Showalter, “A Modest Plea for Drums and Trumpets,” *Military Affairs* 39, No. 2 (1975): 72.

of these explorations claim, or even seek, any explanatory utility related to the quest for understanding what these men actually did on or off specific battlefields, beyond showing up and staying put. The effort to wrestle with the political ideologies, gendered identities, and motivations of the volunteers has instead been primarily aimed at developing a robust ethnography of Civil War soldiers as a group or “class” of nineteenth century Americans. In the process of this largely successful project, professional historians have mostly missed the opportunity to fully employ its many fruits to inform its older, perhaps more traditional, operational counterpart.¹⁷

Perhaps the most problematic trend within the voluminous “soldier studies” scholarship has been one of treating Civil War soldiers collectively as largely interchangeable members of a relatively homogeneous sociocultural bloc. Whereas a collection of Iowa corn farmers and a trade union of Boston mechanics would naturally, within most historiography, be treated as markedly distinct groups, for whatever reason once these same individuals convert their prewar associations into volunteer companies and take up arms, they are analyzed simply as “common soldiers” within the U.S. Army. While most scholars at least focus on either U.S. or Rebel volunteers, much recent work blurs even this critical distinction prior to embarking upon analysis of “randomly” selected manuscript collections. Of course, the U.S. Army, an institution containing nearly two million men over the course of the Civil War, never operated as a single, uniform, homogeneous operational entity at any point. Instead, it was divided into operationally manageable components: departments contained field armies; field armies were composed, after

¹⁷ Andrew Bledsoe, *Citizen-Officers: The Union and Confederate Volunteer Junior Officer Corps in the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), xi. While an exhaustive listing of “soldier studies” scholarship is well beyond the space limitations of this dissertation, a thorough overview and bibliography of the sub-field is Lorien Foote, “Soldiers,” in Aaron Sheehan-Dean, ed., *Blackwell Companion to the U.S. Civil War*, 2 vols. (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 114-131.

1862, of multiple corps; corps of multiple divisions, divisions of brigades, and brigades of regiments. Moreover, unlike today's U.S. military, most volunteers almost never experienced transfer beyond the confines of their original regiment. When reinforcements were needed, entire commands and not individual soldiers were habitually deployed by the War Department. Thus, although today's U.S. Army battalions, when not deployed abroad, constitute little more than administrative and training containers for ostensibly interchangeable service members, many of whom will serve in multiple such commands over the course of their service, Union volunteers were fundamentally inseparable from their units. The importance of this distinction in even beginning the process of understanding Civil War soldiers cannot be overstated. Put another way, as far as the Union soldier was concerned, there was never any singular "U.S. Army," but rather thousands of individually distinctive regiments, brigades, divisions, and corps, each containing between several hundred and several thousand men apiece. The size and scale of these "units" was dependent upon how many men and commands served in close proximity to one another over relatively lengthy tenures, naturally developing a shared identity and distinguishable tactical culture over time. When modern "soldier studies" scholarship divorces volunteers from these critical associations, "randomly" pooling them together with all other "common soldiers" generally, the contextual provenance of their thoughts and statements is utterly destroyed along with much of their analytical value.¹⁸

To be sure, Civil War operational historiography is not entirely extinct as a species within the academy. A handful of professionals continue to strive to advance and revolutionize the operational historiography of the conflict. Chief among these are Joseph Glatthaar and Earl Hess.

¹⁸ This problematic trend in the historiography is most clearly laid out by Jason Phillips, "Battling Stereotypes: A Taxonomy of Common Soldiers in Civil War history," *History Compass* 6 (November 2008): 1407-1425.

While Glatthaar's sociocultural explorations of first Sherman's army and then General Robert E. Lee's Rebel Army of Northern Virginia have illustrated how the origins of the men in the ranks of particular commands played a powerful role in shaping their wartime experiences, the voluminous work of Hess provides another model for the analytical study of operational topics. Mixing more traditional operational narratives with strictly analytical monographs addressing particular elements relevant to military operations during the war in general (i.e., infantry tactics, arms and munitions, logistics, and entrenchments), Hess continues to contribute new and often provocative work to the operational canon. While Hess and Glatthaar represent only two of many historians still engaged in thoroughgoing operational history (other prominent professionals including Gary Gallagher, Steven Woodworth, Andrew Bledsoe, Timothy B. Smith, Mark Grimsley, and Brent Nosworthy all building upon older works like those of Paddy Griffith and Stephen Sears), they are emblematic of what could become a gradual analytical-turn within professional Civil War operational historiography which might even eventually be termed "new operational history."¹⁹

Soldiers from Experience contributes to all of these broader conversations by seeking to bridge the growing chasm between "new" and "traditional/operational" Civil War military history. The dissertation retains a fine sensitivity to the structural intricacies of Civil War military organizations by focusing on a specific collection of regiments serving within a particular *corps*

¹⁹ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse* (New York: Free Press, 2008); Joseph T. Glatthaar, "A Tale of Two Armies: The Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and the Union Army of the Potomac and Their Cultures," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 6 (2016): 315-346; Earl Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015); Earl Hess, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat: Reality and Myth* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Earl Hess, *Civil War Logistics: A Study of Military Transportation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017); Earl Hess, *In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications and Confederate Defeat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); For an especially recent example of the emerging wave of what might be called "new operational history," see Andrew Bledsoe, Andrew F. Lang, and Gary Gallagher, eds., *Upon the Fields of Battle: Essays on the Military History of America's Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018).

d'armee. While deeply influenced by Keegan's canonical *Face of Battle*, it seeks to return to his original clarion call to not only examine the experiences of those in the ranks, but to employ such analyses in a manner that helps to better understand the relationship between individual or group experiences and operational behaviors and outcomes in and out of battle. Though Keegan argued that the “face” of any particular engagement played a pivotal role in influencing the soldiers fighting it, *Soldiers from Experience* evaluates how the accrued experience of past battles, their particular lessons stored within a unit’s tactical culture, likewise played a signal role in shaping the behavior of the men of the Fifteenth Corps on later fields.

III. Tactical Culture

The study of the complex interactions between culture and human behavior by scholars across many disciplines has evolved significantly over the past half-century. Most now agree that while culture provides a repertoire, or “tool-kit” of shared values, norms, and standards of behavior within a society or group, it does not dictate human behavior. Rather, it functions in a way that brackets and directs individual vision, delimiting perceptions of what is possible, acceptable, or correct behavior in a given circumstance or environment.²⁰ Military historians have begun to examine closely the structure and function of “military culture,” its relationship to prevailing cultural norms in a parent society, as well as its historical role in influencing the behavior of soldiers. Historian Isabel Hull has defined the concept of “military culture” as “habitual practices, default programs, hidden assumptions, and unreflected cognitive frames” embraced by the members of a nation's military.²¹ While usually conceived of as informing the

²⁰ Anne Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (2): 273-286.

²¹ Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 2; For more on military culture, see: John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2008) and Wayne Lee, ed., *Warfare and Culture in World History* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

entirety of a nation's military in a relatively homogeneous manner resulting from uniform training and indoctrination, like all forms of culture, military culture exists simultaneously on many different (and often conflicting) levels. Historians are only beginning to understand this multi-level structure of military culture and its historical influence on military behavior.²²

The complicated and confusing multi-level structure of military culture was prominently on display within both U.S. and Rebel armies throughout the American Civil War. Only five days after formally taking command of his newly formed Fifteenth Army Corps, Sherman was already complaining to his brother, Senator John Sherman, about the perplexing challenges of bringing order to a polyglot collection of volunteer regiments. “Human power is limited and you cannot appreciate the difficulty of moulding into an homogeneous machine, the discordant elements which go to make up our armies,” he wrote. The vast majority were “new & strange to me,” making it especially difficult to anticipate their likely future behavior under fire.²³ Still, professional soldiers like Sherman maintained an assumption borne of the antebellum Regular Army's military culture, that sufficient amounts of standardized drill and discipline could eventually produce a kind of cultural homogenization among volunteers that would mold their regiments into more or less functionally interchangeable units. Alas, these prevailing assumptions about the power of indoctrination through training ignored the natural tendencies of all human groups to forge their own distinct way of doing things based on shared experiences and learned behaviors, even if such habits ultimately represented mere “variations on a theme.”

²² Tony Ingesson has recently carried this research into a study of military subcultures at the branch-level (though he inaccurately refers to these as “unit” subcultures). Tony Ingesson, *The Politics of Combat: The Political and Strategic Impact of Tactical-Level Subcultures, 1939-1995*, Dissertation, Lund University, 2016. This dissertation evaluates emergent subcultures at the truly unit-level.

²³ William T. Sherman to John Sherman, Jan. 17, 1863, *SCW*, 362.

The idea that individual military units naturally evolve their own cultures and “ways of doing things” over time has a deep past. Military commanders and theorists across the globe have long wrestled with ways of either mitigating these differences and culturally homogenizing their commands through uniform training and indoctrination or, alternatively, leveraging the distinctive capabilities of idiosyncratic subordinate units when preparing their campaign and battle plans. Ancient Greek commanders put considerable thought into the assignment of particular phalanges to certain particular portions of their battle formations, placing those particular units with a reputation for high performance, endurance, or raw strength in positions of greatest advantage.²⁴ Despite Roman efforts to standardize the training and organization of the post-Marian legions, martial reformer Vegetius, in his classic *De re militari* (c. 4th century, C.E.), observed how each and every legion and auxiliary command inevitably developed its own distinctive *consuetudinem* — habits, manners, culture — which commanders ignored at their own peril.²⁵ Even the French theorist Maurice Count de Saxe, in his widely influential *Reveries* (1759) lamented the “variety and ... difference in their methods of performing the service” between even regiments of even a single brigade. “The same words [often] do not signify the same things among them,” he observed. As a result, brigadiers all too often were forced to look upon their subordinate commands, just as Sherman initially did, “as strangers to him.”²⁶

Today, social scientists who study the emergence of such cultural “variations on a theme,” which organically arise within all wider cultures, refer to such phenomena as “subcultures.” According to sociologist Edgar Schein, subcultures “form around the functional

²⁴ Roel Konijnendijk, *Classical Greek Tactics: A Cultural History* (Leiden: Brill NV, 2018), 117-118, 124.

²⁵ Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *De re militari* (Leonaaur, 2012), 84.

²⁶ Maurice Count de Saxe, *Reveries, or, memoirs concerning the art of war* (Edinburgh: Sands, Donaldson, Murray, and Cochran, 1759), 304-305.

units of [an] organization” that include most of the cultural values and artifacts of a larger organization, but also additional assumptions, beliefs, and habitual behaviors derived from their fundamentally unique responsibilities, tasks, experiences, and shared histories.²⁷ Insofar as such subcultures inform the manner in which any specific “functional unit” of a particular military command (i.e., corps, division, brigade, regiment, battalion, etc.) prosecutes its assigned tactical objectives on and off the battlefield, they constitute unit-level tactical subcultures. In an effort to simplify language, throughout this dissertation they will be referred to as tactical cultures.

Though boasting an authorized strength of 800, each of the forty regiments that formed the nucleus of Sherman's corps averaged only about 300 men during its first year together under arms. This extreme deficit was not due to an inability of the government to procure recruits, but rather a combination of constant attrition and the Lincoln administration's politically-motivated policy of organizing fresh recruits into brand new regiments instead of assigning them to existing commands. This policy severely limited the Army's ability to replace its losses during the war, and Sherman, for one, regarded its reform as “more important, than any other [matter] that could possibly arrest the attention of President Lincoln” – even more important, in fact, “than the conquest of Vicksburg, and Richmond together.”²⁸ But the policy also had another overlooked influence. While most regiments did eventually receive a handful of replacements late in the war, most remained, despite many years in service, predominately single generation organizations. That is, the majority of those in their ranks at the end of the war had been with their respective regiments from the date of their original formation. Volunteer regiments functioned as veritable

²⁷ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 55-56.

²⁸ WTS to Grant, June 2, 1863, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901) [OR], III, 3, 387.

silos of particular shared experience and institutional memory to an extent almost singular in American military history. The subcultures within these commands, shared among all of their veteran members, rarely required transmission to newcomers because newcomers were rare. Moreover, due in large part to the relatively close physical proximity in which a regiment's members usually conducted operations, and to the limitations of what John Keegan termed their "personal angle of vision," which could make their experience of an action so different from that of even an immediately adjacent command, the regimental tactical cultures contained within a single brigade could be remarkably diverse.²⁹ The diversity of tactical cultures within a command as large as a corps was entirely contingent upon the diversity of experience between "personal angles of vision" within its subordinate units over time.

Tactical cultures were the organic byproduct of cycles of perception, action, reflection, and adaptation within each regiment. Colonel James Powell, in his study of the 112th Cavalry Regiment in World War II, has offered an excellent model for analyzing such processes. Small-units do not experience war as it exists in the minds of general officers. Instead, they simply find themselves "plugged into" an operational-level stream, most aloof of the specifics of large plans, performing some small part in the greater whole, and then reflecting on their limited experiences while awaiting re-insertion into the next operation. Lacking any formal "Lessons Learned" initiative as exists in today's U.S. Army, Union volunteers could only reflect upon the particular tactical circumstances they had encountered, and thus developed highly specific assumptions, skills, mental models, and habits of thinking and acting derived only from the particular situations they had confronted together in the past. Any given unit, Powell explains, "could only interpret the knowledge it acquired," and thus each tended to develop highly specific tactical

²⁹ John Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 128-129.

“toolkits” and skills most immediately relevant to the particular battlefield problems they had previously come up against. Specific combat experiences imparted “the context that allowed leaders [and the men] to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their outfit,” generating varying levels of collective confidence and efficacy when confronting particular tactical assignments in the future. All of this became a part of the unit’s tactical culture, a finite body of assumptions, skills, mental models, and habitual behaviors that could either prove useful in future operations, or conversely, depending upon the particular character and exigencies of such future assignments, prove utterly disastrous. When fate, or insensitivity to a unit’s tactical culture by commanding generals thrust a command into a mission for which its tactical culture was fundamentally incompatible, either because it had not yet had a chance to learn and develop adequate skills, had evolved maladaptive habits of thought or action, or lacked crucial confidence relevant to a specific task, disaster could strike.³⁰

Although several historians and sociologists have explored the evolution of military culture at the national and branch-levels, few have examined its impact on tactical-level unit behavior, and none have yet analyzed military culture within the highly focused context of a particular military command smaller than an entire field army. *Soldiers from Experience* provides a model for probing the lowest levels of military culture through an investigation into the ways in which unit-level tactical cultures, in the form of shared beliefs, ideas, and varying levels of confidence emerged and played a powerful role in informing the tactical behavior of a specific collection of U.S. regiments during the Civil War.

³⁰ James S. Powell, *Learning Under Fire: The 112th Cavalry Regiment in World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010), 186.

The Fifteenth Army Corps was born in the late winter of 1862, as Sherman hurriedly gathered together all the troops he could find scattered across the vast Western theater in preparation for an amphibious expedition to capture Rebel Vicksburg. He ultimately drew the raw material for the expedition from three primary sources, each embodying an already distinctive if embryonic tactical culture borne of specific past experiences and the impress of particular officers. The first chapter analyzes each of these streams of past experience which coalesced to forge the character of the nascent corps. It also explains the risks Sherman took by ignoring the many qualitative differences that existed between the regiments, brigades, and divisions of his new command.

The brutal baptism by fire the corps experienced at the battle of Chickasaw Bayou made clear the severe coordinative handicaps organic to a corps containing such high levels of diversity in the tactical cultures of its subordinate units. As explained in the second chapter, these handicaps were exacerbated by the nightmarish terrain of the Yazoo bottoms and an uneven adherence to prevailing maneuver doctrine by Sherman's lieutenants. In the aftermath of multiple brutal repulses, the dejected members of the new corps forged the foundations of a new corps-level tactical culture based primarily upon a toxic lack of trust in Sherman's headquarters and an intense wariness of frontal assaults. At the same time, a very different retrospective narrative took shape within corps headquarters, threatening a dangerous cultural discontinuity within the command.

While historians have traditionally portrayed the battle of Arkansas Post as a resounding success for Federal arms, banishing the despondency of the Chickasaw Bayou defeat, the third chapter paints a much more complicated picture. A combination of smoke and difficult terrain across a broad front mixed with Rebel "shock volleys" to prevent Sherman's corps from

successfully prosecuting a frontal assault against the rudest of entrenchments containing a mere a fraction of their number. Though the Rebel garrison did eventually surrender, almost by accident, the bitter sweet experience reified the rank-and-file's lack of trust in Sherman and their conviction that frontal assaults were all but impossible. The experience likewise caused Sherman to double-down on his own convictions that the corps simply lacked the spirit and will to overcome enemy works from the front. This interpretation, a product of the Army's lingering obsession with the aggressive "French combat method," proved increasingly out of step with the tactical realities on the ground as experienced by those in the ranks of his corps. Even as Sherman remained fixated on employing massed close-order assault columns to achieve a tactically decisive, if perpetually elusive, "physical penetration of the enemy line" at the point of the bayonet, the men and junior officers of the Fifteenth Corps instead habitually found their tight formations broken up by terrain and deadly fire from enemy entrenchments. In response, they began to forge their own informal tactical doctrine that looked at least as much to survival as victory. This new "way of war," emerging first in the ranks of Second Division, emphasized the employment of open-order "clouds" of light infantry skirmishers deployed well to the front of advancing assault columns and charged with gaining fire superiority while the massed formations to the rear advanced by a series of rushes. Once near enough to the enemy works to add the weight of their own fire to the active suppression of the enemy, the massed formations likewise dispersed behind cover after laying down. These new tactics were in many ways in diametric opposition to Sherman's plans, but they also allowed the rank and file to preserve the honor of themselves and their regiments while simultaneously avoiding what they almost universally deemed a suicidal "physical penetration of the enemy line."

Despite this lingering discontinuity between the prevailing tactical cultures within the ranks of the corps's regiments and that embraced at headquarters, Sherman took no substantive action to alleviate the command's glaring tactical weaknesses across subsequent months. The fourth chapter examines this period, during the late winter and early spring of 1863, when Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant assigned Sherman's Fifteenth Corps to a variety of non-combat missions designed to support his efforts to capture Vicksburg without the necessity of any more Chickasaw Bayou-style assaults. These missions required adaptive organizational and cultural responses within all of the corps's subordinate units. The experience of conducting ad-hoc engineering projects and aggressive area denial raids into the Mississippi hinterland produced a panoply of new tactical skills and widespread beliefs within the ranks of the corps which were added to those accumulated under fire at Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post. As the Lincoln Administration's Emancipation Proclamation began to take effect on the ground, the men and officers of Sherman's corps quickly recognized the strategic efficacy of "war in earnest" as they operated deep within the bowels of the so-called Southern Confederacy. As intense trials of disease and hardship took a heavy toll on the strength of every regiment in the corps, the command's successes at levying "hard war" on the hamlets north of Vicksburg offered a glimpse of a possible alternative recipe for victory to those in the ranks hoping to both win the war and survive it.

The particular assignments Grant handed down to the corps during the subsequent legendary campaign for Vicksburg during the late spring and early summer of 1863 were heavily influenced by his abiding confidence in and friendship with Sherman, its commander. The fifth chapter chronicles the corps's participation in the army's long circuitous march from its camps at Young's Point, Louisiana, across the river, and east to Jackson, Mississippi. As the Fifteenth

Corps trailed the remainder of Grant's army during the daring maneuver, it suffered significant hardships along the way due to a severe lack of available forage not already consumed by the remainder of the massive Federal host. These trials forged an impressive capacity for endurance within the ranks, even as the cathartic culmination of the movement at Jackson offered the corps a chance to apply its recently fine-tuned capacity for destruction of Rebel property in the state capital. Intensely proud of their accomplishments on the march despite constant hardship, the men began to grow more confident in the capacity of "our Generals" to out-smart the Rebels. Unfortunately, after being launched by Grant and Sherman into a series of horrific and utterly futile frontal assaults immediately upon their arrival at the well-fortified gates of Vicksburg, this budding confidence was severely challenged and the corps once again sunk into a pit of despondency only slightly less traumatic than that which had followed in the wake of Chickasaw Bayou. Still, the army had made it to its long sought-after objective, even if it had suffered grievously trying to pry open the front door. While the men rightfully prided themselves on their accomplishments in maneuver warfare, their now deeply rooted conviction that frontal assaults against enemy works were suicidal affairs had been reified once again.

Opting to avoid any further frontal assaults against the Vicksburg works, Grant turned instead to siegecraft. The sixth chapter examines the long Vicksburg siege, and another at Jackson following it, through the lens of the many lessons it taught to the men of the Fifteenth Corps, as well as the many critical skills it provided them with an unparalleled opportunity to hone. Many weeks spent in the trenches sharpshooting at the enemy works allowed for nearly every member of the command to practice their marksmanship to an extent unexampled throughout the rest of the wartime volunteer Army. Even more importantly, it offered similar opportunities to the gun crews of the corps's batteries, molding the rifled gun teams into an

almost surgical long-range tactical tool which would be used to deadly effect on future fields. In all, the veterans of the Fifteenth Corps found the Vicksburg siege “one of the best training schools” they could have ever hoped for.

By the conclusion of the long Vicksburg campaign and siege, the Fifteenth Corps’s tactical culture had fully matured. The particular experiences endured and specific tactical situations confronted by its component regiments had forged the command into a particular weapon of warfare with distinctive strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, when Grant called Sherman and his corps northward for participation in the effort to break out of the Rebel siege at Chattanooga, he seems to have paid little attention to these subtle realities – much as Sherman had done before him.

By the winter of 1863, the corps could reliably be expected to march great distances at impressive speed, even across the most inhospitable terrain. It could dependably sustain itself off even the most denuded of countrysides and strip even the most abundant of regions all but completely bare if ordered to do so. It could swiftly dismantle railroads and other strategic infrastructure and manage the liberation of large numbers of slaves. In combat, its extensive marksmanship experience paired with its long tenure of operating primarily in dispersed small groups led by junior leaders combined to make it a premiere light infantry force. Its brigades preferred to approach any and all direct combat with the enemy deployed in open-order skirmisher “clouds” instead of massed in tight vulnerable formations. In large part because of this habitual preference, nothing in the corps’s operational heritage suggested that it could or should have been reliably expected to successfully carry fortified Rebel positions from the front at the point of the bayonet. Nor had the command ever been tried under fire against an enemy force in the open. These two major historical liabilities were among the gravest any mid-

nineteenth century military organization could maintain, but they had nevertheless been proven to be indisputable weaknesses of the Fifteenth Corps.

The final chapter of the dissertation analyzes the corps's operations across the several battles for Chattanooga in the late fall and early winter of 1863. It illustrates the profound degree of self-awareness the men and officers of the command had developed about their own collective capabilities as a military organization, as well as the deep influence of their evolved tactical culture on the manner in which the corps's veteran First and Second Divisions prosecuted the objectives assigned to them. Unsurprisingly, when the objectives assigned to either command were well calibrated for the corps's tactical culture, they performed admirably. When they were not, they failed miserably. These successes and failures only served to deepen the widespread beliefs and convictions of the rank and file embedded within their tactical culture. Finally, the chapter argues that Sherman's infamous reticence and supposedly excessive caution during the battle of Missionary Ridge might instead be seen as powerful evidence of his own imbibing of his corps's tactical culture, and thus of the beginnings of his personal evolution into a legendary practitioner of maneuver warfare.

CHAPTER I: "SOLDIERS FROM EXPERIENCE": CHRISTMAS DAY, 1862

"Many are fast becoming soldiers from experience."

~ Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman, Dec. 14, 1862³¹

It seemed impossible, given the warmth of the air, that it could really be Christmas. It was the kind of day that one doffed his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and breathed in deeply what fresh humid breeze was available upon the cramped hurricane decks of the forty smoke-belching steamers plowing southward through the drab Mississippi. With eyes closed, it could have been an Iowa summer or Missouri spring. Only the sight of the deserted riverbanks revealed the truth: this was Dixie. Dense groves of cypress festooned with long waving Spanish moss arose from the swamps on both flanks of the channel. Lazy alligators and monstrous snapping turtles, perched atop half-submerged rotting logs, watched as the boats crawled past. In many places the river seemed to have no discernible bank at all, its waters gradually disappearing as they slipped into the darkness of the woods.³²

By now, the novelty of amphibious life had long worn off. A week aboard the boats with little more to do than play cards, spit tobacco over the handrails, gnaw on hardtack and raw bacon, or await evening portage at some unsuspecting planter's landing had dampened much of the initial enthusiasm of the more than thirty thousand Federal volunteers filling the decks of

³¹ WTS to John Sherman, Dec. 14, 1862, Brooks Simpson and Jean Berlin, eds., *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865 [SCW]* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 127.

³² Thomas Kilby Smith to Wife, Dec. 26, 1862, Walter G. Smith, *Life and Letters of Thomas Kilby Smith, Brevet Major-General, United States Volunteers, 1820-1887* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1898), 250-251.

each steamer to the brim. Trips to the pilot house offered a quick glimpse of the impressive host of craft, half shrouded in their own pitch-black exhaust and extending well beyond sight in either direction. The awe inspired by such a sight was short-lived, and the remainder of one's time had to be filled with the usual horseplay, ribald jokes, and ceaseless gambling that were the timeless mainstays of a soldier's life. Occasionally, the vessels swept one-by-one past massive plantations "so large the only way I can distinguish them from villages is the uniformity with which all the [slave] cabins are built," one observer remarked. At other times, enraptured bondsmen and women climbed atop the levees, guarding the property of their absentee masters from the fickle "Father of Waters," and waved or shouted to the passing boats. Groups of shadowy riders occasionally meandered their mounts through the cottonwoods along the bank, brazenly casting menacing looks toward the invaders, but never dreaming of molesting the free passage of what those aboard referred to, somewhat ingloriously, as "the Castor Oil Expedition."³³

No bystander watching the vessels float past could have guessed they were observing the passage of the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Army Corps. In fact, even those crammed aboard the boats were wholly unaware of this fact. Few could keep up with the seemingly constant changes made to their official military identity anyway. For the most part, each volunteer thought of himself as a member of a particular company, regiment, and occasionally brigade. His officers, he assumed, most especially the "big bugs," kept track of all the rest. This time, however, even the highest ranking "big bug" among them, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, then commanding the four divisions enroute to the Yazoo River and Rebel-held Vicksburg, was completely ignorant of the most recent changes to the army's organizational structure. Three

³³ Abraham J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Dec. 24, 1862, Virginia Sigler and A. J. Sigler, ed., *The Civil War Diary of Col. A. J. Seay* (Virginia A. Sigler and A. J. Sigler, 1968), 13; Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).

days prior, and nearly two hundred miles away at Holly Springs, Mississippi, Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant had, on the War Department and President Lincoln's orders, formally reorganized the divisions of his Army and Department of the Tennessee into four *corps d'armée*. Cut off from all communication with Grant, the flotilla had no way of knowing of General Order No. 14, which formally assigned half of them to the command of an officer then absent — Maj. Gen. John A. McClernand — officially designating them the Thirteenth Army Corps. The other half, embracing troops of Sherman's own original command in Grant's army, now led by Brig. Gen. Morgan Lewis Smith — along with that of Brig. Gen. Frederick Steele, which had just joined the flotilla from Helena, Arkansas, were to remain under Sherman's command and thenceforth be formally recognized in all official dispatches and reports as the Fifteenth Army Corps.³⁴

Just sixteen days prior, Sherman had departed Grant's headquarters north of Grenada, Mississippi with orders to return to Memphis with the 7,000 men of Smith's division. Upon arrival, he was to somehow rapidly acquire an additional 33,000 along with sufficient transportation to carry all of them 450 winding miles downriver to Vicksburg while Grant held the main body of the western Rebel army at bay in central Mississippi. If successful, they both hoped the expedition could sneakily bag the Rebel garrison at Vicksburg and finally pry open the river for Western commerce and the Navy after having remained shuttered by Secessionist batteries atop the bluffs for more than a year and a half. When apprised of the daring plan, Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, then acting General-in-Chief of all Union armies, thought a force of about 25,000 men, along with whatever troops might be gleaned while enroute downriver from the garrison at Helena, Arkansas would be more than ample. Ever the strategic conservative, he urged Grant to avoid stripping too many troops from his army for the foray, just in case the

³⁴ G.O. 14, HQ Department of the Tennessee, Dec. 22, 1862, *OR*, I:17, I, 461.

Rebels had a surprise hidden somewhere up their sleeve. Despite these concerns, both Grant and Sherman worried that any force capable of overcoming the major defensive advantages favoring the allegedly 30,000 Rebels at Vicksburg required overwhelming numerical superiority. To attempt such an operation with any force smaller than 40,000 courted disaster. But where was Sherman to find such numbers of volunteers armed, supplied, trained, and ready for a long-distance stab deep into the bowels of the Southern Confederacy? It had proven nothing if not an exceedingly tall order.³⁵

On December 9, Sherman departed from the banks of the Tallahatchie River with Smith's division, and after a four-day forced march of over sixty miles, the 7,000-man nucleus of the forthcoming Vicksburg expedition trudged into Memphis. These men Sherman considered his "best fighting division."³⁶ After more than a year of hard service as their commander, Sherman was confident that their ranks were filled with "men I can depend upon."³⁷ An additional 14,000 of Brig. Gen. A. J. Smith's and Brig. Gen. George Morgan's divisions he found in the city upon his arrival. These, he thought, "seem to be good troops," but were wholly alien to him. Like Morgan Smith's division, both were a mixture of "old" veteran regiments and "new" regiments of recruits freshly raised during the summer. The former had arrived only recently to Memphis as "mere skeletons" until being bolstered by the attachment of the new units that brought their brigades closer to, but still well short of, full authorized strength. Most of their green regiments hailed from Illinois and Indiana, and had originally been ordered to Memphis in anticipation of joining an independent operation to seize Vicksburg under the command of Maj. Gen. John

³⁵ Halleck to USG, Dec. 5, 1862, *OR*, I:17, I, 473; Halleck to USG, Dec. 9, 1862, *OR*, I:17, I, 474.

³⁶ WTS to JS, Dec. 14, 1862, *SCW*, 345; WTS to EES, Dec. 14, 1862, *SCW*, 342.

³⁷ WTS to JS, Dec. 14, 1862, *SCW*, 345; WTS to EES, Dec. 14, 1862, *SCW*, 342.

McClermand. McClermand had only just recently obtained Presidential authority to attempt the daring expedition, much to the chagrin of both Halleck and Grant, who hoped Sherman might covertly co-opt McClermand's troops and thereby prevent a command crisis in the theater. It worked. Having not yet arrived in Memphis to take command of his private legions due to the combined maneuvering of Halleck and Grant to delay his orders from the War Department, McClermand was not available to guard against the scheme.³⁸

Even after stealing McClermand's two divisions, Sherman was still well short of his needs. Accordingly, he took Halleck's advice and sent an aide southward to Helena with a hurriedly scrawled message for Brig. Gen. William Gorman, commanding the garrison there, requesting "at least" an additional 10,000. He privately hoped these would be "some good men,"³⁹ but most importantly made a point of requesting that Gorman send Brig. Gen. Frederick Steele, with whom he was personally familiar. Beyond this, he made few other specific requests as to the character or quality of the troops he needed.⁴⁰ They should be "organized into say three strong brigades," he suggested, "with a reasonable proportion of field artillery, cavalry only enough for scouts, pickets, and to keep up communications; transportation say three or four six-mule teams per regiment; camp equipage full, and at least twenty days' rations." He apologized for the "irregularity of receiving these orders," but emphasized "the importance of dispatch" in preparations. "The enemy was in full retreat before Grant" when he had left Mississippi, "and it

³⁸ David Work, *Lincoln's Political Generals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 78-81.

³⁹ WTS to W. A. Gorman, Dec. 13, 1862, *OR*, I:17, II, 409.

⁴⁰ WTS to W. A. Gorman, Dec. 12, 1862, *OR*, I:17, II, 402-403; WTS to EES, Jan. 4, 1863, *SCW*, 350.

is all-important that we be ready by the 18th.”⁴¹ Grant was “ready and impatient” he emphasized. Now was “the appointed time for striking below, and all things should bend to it.”⁴²

Preparation for such a desperate operation required careful consideration of the mission’s many special exigencies, as well as evaluation of the real capabilities of one’s command so as to determine its fitness for the task at hand. In compiling his impromptu expeditionary force, Sherman thought in almost exclusively quantitative terms, seeking aggregate raw numbers *sans* much qualitative consideration. After all, left to beg, borrow, and literally steal any and all troops he could find, he did not have the luxury of being too picky. Even in this comparatively modest quest, however, he fell short. Gradually, it became clear that the number 40,000 was pure fantasy, and he reluctantly accepted 35,000. When finally all efforts to secure any more than 32,000 proved fruitless, he grew pessimistic.

The lack of available manpower for what he fervently believed was likely to be the decisive campaign of the Western war seemed a perfect example of flagging Northern resolve. “Like much of Our Boasts of the ‘Myriads of the North West’ ‘sweeping a way to the Gulf’ ‘breaking the Backbone’ &c. &c.,” he griped to his wife Ellen, “the Great Mississip[p]i Expedition will be [only] 32,000 men.” While by no means a paltry command — the largest he had ever led — the force was only slightly greater than a quarter the size of the amphibious force Maj. Gen. George McClellan had taken up the James Peninsula in Virginia just six months prior in a similar bid to swiftly bag a Rebel stronghold — the so-called Secessionist capital at Richmond. McClellan had failed disastrously, in large part, the vainglorious general insisted, due to lack of sufficient numbers. If prevailing estimates were correct, Sherman’s command would

⁴¹ WTS to W. A. Gorman, Dec. 12, 1862, *OR*, I:17, II, 402-403

⁴² WTS to W. A. Gorman, Dec. 13, 1862, *OR*, I:17, II, 409.

only enjoy a negligible advantage of about 2,000 men, just more than two full strength regiments — hardly enough for the job. More than that would be required to merely guard supplies off-loaded from steamers before offensive maneuvers could even begin. Any remaining numerical advantage, and then some, would be neutralized by the sundry advantages accruing to a defender on any ground, let alone the twisted bayous and towering bluffs Sherman knew from personal experience dominated the lower Mississippi bottomlands. “Therefore don[’]t expect me to achieve miracles,” he cautioned.⁴³

The idea that there were also very real qualitative differences in the relative operational capabilities of different regiments brigades, and divisions, despite their reporting comparable numbers of men present for duty and equipped, was by no means alien to general officers like Sherman. Still, comparatively little attention was usually paid to the idiosyncratic differences between subordinate units on or off the battlefield by most Civil War commanders when selecting particular commands for particular tasks. Though he would later boast about having personally known every soldier and officer in his corps, in private Sherman admitted that the truth of the matter was that generals paid about as much attention to the selection of particular units for specific missions as they did to the selection of horses for their daily ride. “You use those which are hardiest, and nearest,” he explained. He did not “know” most of the regiments assigned to his headquarters, certainly not those beyond the confines of his beloved "old Division." All he really knew was that each "by the merest accident" had somehow come under his control.⁴⁴

⁴³ WTS to EES, Dec. 20, 1862, *SCW*, 348; In reality, the Rebels guarding Vicksburg then numbered less than 14,000 men.

⁴⁴ WTS to Charles Ewing, July 8, 1862, *SCW*, 249.

This willful ignorance of the distinctive differences between units that extended further than merely the personalities of their commanders was in part a byproduct of mid-nineteenth century American military culture. Professional soldiers, as well as ex-professionals like Sherman, believed deeply in the capacity of discipline and drill to forge erstwhile heterogeneous individuals into cohesive and functionally interchangeable regiments, each of which had undergone a long process of cultural homogenization that began as soon as each recruit mustered into Federal service. *Casey's* and *Hardee's Infantry Tactics*, the drill manuals officially adopted by the Army, were founded upon a pedagogical philosophy of “progressive instruction,” beginning with the individualized coaching of recruits, followed by that of companies, regiments, brigades, and eventually even divisions and corps. At each level of instruction in drill, emphasis was placed on developing “precision,” “harmony,” habituation, and “above all ... regularity.” In order to maintain cohesion and ease inter-unit coordination, the “use of the same commands, the same principles, and the same means of execution,” by all the regiments of an army was deemed absolutely “indispensable.” All regiments were to “conform themselves, without addition or curtailment,” to the prescribed tactical doctrine. Similarly, the *1861 Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States* provided clear and unambiguous direction on nearly every conceivable aspect of Army life. Volunteers in Federal service were “at all times” to be “governed by these rules,” and were subsequently subject to trial by courts-martial for any and all deviations.⁴⁵

The objective of such uniformity was not to create an army of veritable automatons – indeed, Northerners prided themselves on their army of “thinking bayonets,” capable of adapting

⁴⁵ W. J. Hardee, *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1861), 14, 26, 87; Silas Casey, *Infantry Tactics*, Vol. 2 (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1862), 3; United States, *Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1863).

on the fly to whatever the Rebels might throw at them. Rather, doctrinal systems, along with the entire body of formalized military culture, was intended to impart a kind of interchangeability between regiments that would simplify the challenge of task assignment confronted by commanders in the field. Undergirding the system, though, was the central unexamined assumption that uniform drill and discipline could in fact make regiments more or less functionally identical, each similarly trained and capable of effectively conducting the same tactical tasks, with the single important exception of quantifiable differences in available manpower. Alas, this assumption was not founded in any realistic understanding of human groups or how they inevitably and organically develop, function, learn, and evolve. Nor did it contemplate the profound levels of cultural diversity that were innate to a volunteer army raised and organized as the Union Army had been. Though Sherman might have been mostly ambivalent about precisely which 32,000 men he commanded, or which particular regiments they happened to be organized within, in reality such specifics played a profound role in shaping the real character and operational capabilities of his new Fifteenth Army Corps.⁴⁶

I. The Zouave

One aspect of force composition that neither Sherman nor Grant were ever ambivalent about was the selection of officers to command the divisions of the flotilla. Both Morgan Lewis Smith and Frederick Steele were handpicked by Sherman for their assignments. Nor was it any

⁴⁶ Frank Burt Freidel, *Union Pamphlets of the Civil War, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1028; Unfortunately, the tendency of military officers and analysts to measure a force's capabilities through primarily quantitative means has not abated much in the past century and a half. In his groundbreaking approach to the measurement of *Military Power* in a book by the same name, Stephen Biddle argues that effective and "holistic assessments" of the true capabilities of any given military force or organization require both rigor and breadth, as well as "a systematic treatment of both material and non-material variables." In many ways, this chapter seeks to provide such an assessment of the capabilities of the regiments assigned to Sherman's future Fifteenth Corps. Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 2.

coincidence that, of the four divisions initially assigned to Sherman's expedition, it was their two that Grant ultimately chose to remain under the control of his most cherished lieutenant following the army's reorganization into *corps d'armée*. Grant took good care of his friends, and over the course of their now nearly yearlong service together he and Sherman had already become the closest companions either had in uniform.⁴⁷ Grant knew, unquestionably, that Smith was Sherman's favorite subordinate.

Although having only known each another for fewer than eight months, Morgan Lewis Smith and Sherman had already developed much the same kind of relationship as the latter enjoyed with Grant. To "Cump," Smith was not only his most trusted lieutenant, but also his personal friend, confidant, and living proof that all so-called "citizen-soldiers" were not necessarily inherently incompetent. To be fair, Smith was nobody's stereotypical version of a volunteer officer. Having enlisted under a pseudonym into the Regular Army in the summer of 1845, he was eventually promoted to Sergeant and spent five years as a drill instructor on the parade fields of Newport Barracks in Kentucky during the Mexican War.⁴⁸ His natural skill in disciplining and training recruits who arrived at the barracks enroute to Mexico prompted post commander Captain Nathaniel Macrae to deny his requests for re-assignment to the active Army in the field. Instead, he spent five long years developing an impressive command of tactical doctrine and drill nearly unparalleled in the Army, even among his West Pointer peers now holding commands well above his grade.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 135-161. See also, Charles Bracelen Flood, *Grant and Sherman: The Friendship that Won the Civil War* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005).

⁴⁸ "General Morgan L. Smith," *The Inter Ocean*, Jan. 2, 1875, p. 10; "Correction," *St. Louis Daily Missouri Republican*, June 1, 1861.

⁴⁹ H. W. Smith to B. F. Wade, Mar. 22, 1862, "Morgan L. Smith," M619, NARA.

After abandoning the Army in 1850 and returning to civil life as a steamboat agent in Newport, Smith maintained a keen interest in contemporary trends in the military art.⁵⁰ Most compelling of all to him were the French *chasseurs-à-pied* ("hunters on foot"), then experimenting with a new form of light infantry tactics in their colonial African campaigns. Though their exact origins remain contested, the *chasseurs-à-pied* are most frequently credited to the visionary Duc d'Orléans, who raised his famed battalion of *Tirailleurs de Vincennes* in the late 1830s. D'Orléans's *Tirailleurs* broke dramatically with the tradition of linear maneuver systems which had dominated Western infantry tactics since the arrival of the firearm to Europe four centuries prior. Advances in weapons technology, most importantly the development of the rifled musket, along with careful observation of the fighting styles of indigenous African enemies, inspired an altogether fresh approach to infantry warfare. Though the *Tirailleurs* were expected to master the same system of linear maneuver officially adopted by the rest of the French army, the bulk of their training represented a major departure from the European and American norm. Beginning with a rigorous regimen of calisthenics and strenuous cardiovascular training, the men were required to perform all evolutions at the feverish pace of between 165 and 180 paces a minute -- double the ordinary "quick step." Instead of aligning elbow-to-elbow and wheeling to-and-fro across the battlefield in a compact body, in combat each man was instructed to instead take advantage of any and all available cover, maneuvering with a spirit of individual independence, even while remaining closely coordinated with comrades dispersed to his right and left. Loading and firing was done uniformly from the prone or while kneeling, significantly

⁵⁰ Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, From its Organization, September 29, 1789, to March 2, 1903* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903) 902. The Heitman Register incorrectly identifies Smith's pseudonym as "Martin L. Sanford," when in fact it was "Mortimer L. Sandford," Register of Enlistments in the U.S. Army, 1798-1914, July 19, 1845, RG 94, NARA; "Smith, Morgan Lewis," Paul A. Tenkotte and James C. Claypool, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 839.

limiting the exposure of each *Tirailleur* to enemy fire. Extensive rifle marksmanship training and instruction in the "scientific" estimation of ranges completed the transformation of recruit into *Tirailleur*, and his subsequent donning of a flamboyantly colorful if somewhat gaudy uniform visually set he and his comrades apart from the line infantry. Success in Africa while commanding his *Tirailleurs* inspired D'Orléans to return to France and raise an additional ten full battalions, which he dubbed the *chasseurs-à-pied*. Brigaded in Africa with rugged native Berber fighters of the "Zouave" tribe, the Arabs were so impressed with the novel tactics of the *chasseurs-à-pied* that they promptly adopted the novel fighting style themselves. Somewhere along the line, D'Orléans's command was erroneously referred to as "Zouaves" in the French press. The name stuck.⁵¹

Smith was by no means alone in his fascination with Zouaves. Indeed, the entire country was utterly "Zouave-struck" during the summer of 1860 when the famed militia Colonel Elmer Ellsworth's "Chicago Zouaves" toured the major cities of the Northeast and West giving demonstrations of the *avant-garde* tactical maneuvers.⁵² Ellsworth's Zouaves, at that time little more than a well-choreographed traveling martial exposition, responded to a friendly drill challenge from St. Louis's militia "Guards," who were soundly trounced before an immense audience. Ellsworth's "corps appeared like a perfect automatic machine, all the parts of which were responding magically to a single volition, as if every muscle belonged equally to one and the same will," the *Daily Missouri Democrat* raved. The Zouaves had mastered the intricate and highly athletic maneuvers of their French examples, moving with "rapid but mathematical

⁵¹ Brent Nosworthy, *The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 53-58, 97-101.

⁵² William Hyde and Howard Louis Conard, ed., *Encyclopedia of the History of St. Louis: A Compendium of History and Biography for Ready Reference, Vol. III* (New York: The Southern History Company, 1899), 1499; "The Parade and Drill of the Chicago Zouaves," *Daily Missouri Democrat*, Aug. 13, 1860, 2.

precision" as their lines "broke and re-formed, now apparently confused and anon emerging in faultless order." Despite their unexampled discipline, these were not the rigid, hidebound maneuvers of tightly-massed Napoleonic battle-lines. Most impressive of all was "the covert and fleet approach and firing of lines alternately prostrate and advancing over each other" in a display of coordination well beyond the skills of most militias. The Zouaves bounded past and literally over each other as they darted from cover to cover, protected by the fire of comrades in the prone. The crowd roared its approval, and even the few "'old line' tacticians" in the crowd, perhaps including Smith himself who frequented St. Louis on business, were forced to applaud.⁵³

With the outbreak of the rebellion, Smith again determined to fulfill his civic obligation to the republic by donning a uniform, but this time as a volunteer officer instead of a Regular enlisted man. Alongside his brother, Giles Alexander Smith, the two set out to organize the "American Zouaves," hoping to train an especially lethal force of volunteers to maneuver and fight just like their Gallic counterparts.⁵⁴ Initial recruiting advertisements promised service in an exclusively native-born outfit, but ultimately more than three of every ten of the "American Zouaves" were foreign-born. Moreover, although the regiment was eventually designated the 8th Missouri Volunteer Infantry upon muster into Federal service, the vast majority of those in its ranks were in fact recruited from Illinois. Their native state having far surpassed its volunteer

⁵³ "The Parade and Drill of the Chicago Zouaves," *Daily Missouri Democrat*, Aug. 13, 1860, 2.

⁵⁴ Most Civil War military historians have observed that the vast majority of "zouave" regiments on either side during the war (and there were many) tended to adopt the gaudy uniforms but not the tactics of the *chasseurs-à-pied* in any meaningful way on the battlefield. Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 101-102; Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 33. Hess, however, observes that Smith's 8th Missouri, along with Lew Wallace's 11th Indiana – with whom the 8th would soon be brigaded – may have been the only regiments of the war who were trained from the beginning as, and actually fought like, zouaves. Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics*, 70.

quota during the first summer of the war, these “Suckers” crossed the Mississippi in hopes of finding an opening in the ranks of Missouri regiments.⁵⁵

Smith instructed himself and his new cohort of eager Illinoisans filling Lafayette Park in the novel Zouave drill. Taking them step-by-step through the same movements and exercises Ellsworth's cohort had performed the previous summer over the very same ground, the "American Zouave Corps" slowly started to live up to its name. In the beginning mistakes were commonplace, but this was to be expected given the complexity of the Zouave evolutions. Smith set each of his ten companies at competing with one another to master their maneuvers, jogging them at the double-quick around the perimeter of the park to build their stamina when they were not practicing skirmish or bayonet drill on the parade field. On top of their rigorous Zouave training like D'Orléan's *chasseurs*, Smith also required the men and junior officers to practice and master the standard tactical systems outlined within the Army's prescribed *Hardee's* manual. He knew that in order to coordinate with non-Zouave units, comprising most the rest of the Union Army, the regiment would have to know both forms of drill. As an ex-enlisted man, he also knew what tended to motivate soldiers, and accordingly incentivized martial competition with alcohol. "The Colonel is going to give two gallons of whiskey to the best packed [k]napsack," one Zouave wrote home.⁵⁶ Any downtime during duty hours was filled with blocks of instruction on relevant topics taught by experienced junior or non-commissioned officers. The men were even required to regularly practice pitching and striking their tents, so as to increase the speed with which the regiment could be put on the march from nightly bivouac.⁵⁷ Once each

⁵⁵ “Our St. Louis Correspondence,” *New York Herald*, Jun. 2, 1861, 9; 8th Missouri Volunteer Infantry Descriptive Rolls, RG 133, Missouri State Archives; “Suckers” was a common period slang term for Illinoisans.

⁵⁶ David Monlux [8 MO] to Parents, Undated 1861, David Monlux Letters, Missouri History Museum.

⁵⁷ David Monlux [8 MO] to Parents, Undated 1861, David Monlux Letters, Missouri History Museum.

training day finally came to a merciful end, the men completed dress parade and sang the "Star Spangled Banner" or "Red, White, and Blue" to bolster their spirits. In this manner, the "American Zouaves" were born.⁵⁸

The regiment initially cut its teeth as most volunteer Missouri regiments inevitably did: on the deadly "household war" raging between neighbors in the interior of the state. After several months of hunting bushwhackers through the brush and trying to avoid ambush on foot patrols through Missouri towns and along the Northern Missouri Railroad, in the fall of 1861 the Zouaves were finally called east to Paducah to join Federal forces gathering for a plunge into Kentucky. After several more months of drill and consummate practice of their Zouave tactics on the parade field, Smith's volunteers finally got their first taste of combat in February 1862 when Grant moved to seize Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River in an attempt to pry open a water route deep into the Southern Confederacy.⁵⁹

Although still a colonel, Smith commanded what amounted to a "demi-brigade" during the campaign for Donelson, constituting a pair of Zouave regiments, his own and that of Brig. Gen. Lew Wallace's original 11th Indiana. Ordered by Wallace, commanding the division, to seize a wooded bluff from the enemy on the first day of the battle, Smith advanced coolly toward the objective with his demi-brigade while puffing a fresh cigar when suddenly a Rebel volley opened along the crest. This being their first experience of receiving concentrated enemy fire, the Zouave line initially wavered. "Try the Zouave on them, colonel!" Wallace screamed over the din.⁶⁰ Deep snow and difficult terrain likely would have undone a conventional massed bayonet

⁵⁸ Anthony J. Baurdick [8 MO] Diary, Undated 1861, Anthony J. Baurdick Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁵⁹ Frederick Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Volume II* (Des Moines: Dyer Publishing Company, 1908), 1326.

⁶⁰ Lew Wallace, Jim Leeke, ed., *Smoke, Sound & Fury: The Civil War Memoirs of Major-General Lew Wallace, U.S.*

charge, but Smith's attack was anything but conventional. On his order, three companies of Zouaves broke into four-man teams each separated by twenty-yard intervals. Each of the four then spread out behind any available cover and commenced firing back, two men covering the other two as they advanced to the next available cover.⁶¹ The two regiments of Zouaves "were nimble on their hands and knees far beyond the ordinary infantryman," Wallace later observed, "[so] that they could load on their backs and fire with precision on their bellies." Each man behaved "like any old Indian fighter," one Zouave proudly recalled, patiently holding their fire while "waiting for secession to show its head" then firing with careful aim when it did.⁶² Unlike volunteers trained to obediently abide by the rigid dictates of *Hardee's* or *Casey's* tactics, the Zouaves "were instinctively observant of order in the midst of disorder," he explained. "Indeed, *purpose* with them answered all the ends of alignment elbow to elbow."⁶³

Amid the pitched firefight, in the rear Wallace was terrified to glimpse Smith through his looking-glass, the only officer still mounted, riding immediately behind the Zouaves, still puffing his cigar while urging his mount uphill through the snow and smoke.⁶⁴ Intent on making a show of his complete indefatigability, he had thrown caution, even prudence, to the wind. At one point a Rebel ball actually severed the smoldering end of his cigar, prompting him to calmly if frustratedly call out to his staff, "One of you fellows bring me a match!" This colorful display

Volunteers (Portland: Strawberry Hill Press, 1998), 88.

⁶¹ Walter Hunter [8 MO] to Thomas Hunter, Feb. 19, 1862, Walter Hunter Letter, Trempealeau County Historical Society.

⁶² Walter Hunter [8 MO] to Thomas Hunter, Feb. 19, 1862, Walter Hunter Letter, Trempealeau County Historical Society.

⁶³ Lew Wallace, Jim Leeke, ed., *Smoke, Sound & Fury: The Civil War Memoirs of Major-General Lew Wallace, U.S. Volunteers* (Portland: Strawberry Hill Press, 1998), 89.

⁶⁴ H. W. Smith to B. F. Wade, Mar. 22, 1862, "Morgan L. Smith," M619, NARA.

was not lost on the men, upon which "it had a very quieting effect," one later remembered.⁶⁵ It had the same effect on Wallace, who later wrote in awe how the assault "was the most extraordinary feat of arms I ever beheld."⁶⁶

After driving the Rebel foe from their positions on the ridge, the dispersed Zouaves re-consolidated and awaited further orders. His blood still up, Smith lobbied Wallace for a follow-on attack on the main enemy works at Donelson, but was turned down.⁶⁷ When the smoke had cleared, Rebel prisoners admitted the confusion the novel Zouave tactics had sewn amongst them. "They thought they had killed all of our men [with] the first fire but when their guns was empty we was up and a firing," one Zouave crowed. "They said that they Could see us lying on our backs striking as though we were in great agony and all the time we was loading," he explained.⁶⁸ Another overheard prisoners talking about how "they could not understand our drill."⁶⁹

Less than two months later along the Tennessee River at the Battle of Shiloh, Smith's Zouaves demonstrated their acumen once again. After Wallace's brigade arrived notoriously late onto the field, missing the entire climactic first day of the fight, the command joined Grant's counteroffensive on the second day of the battle. Ordered to push the exhausted Rebels toward

⁶⁵ Thomas Wise Durham [11 IN], Jeffrey L. Patrick, ed., *Three Years With Wallace's Zouaves: The Civil War Memoirs of Thomas Wise Durham* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 72.

⁶⁶ Lew Wallace, Jim Leeke, ed., *Smoke, Sound & Fury: The Civil War Memoirs of Major-General Lew Wallace, U.S. Volunteers* (Portland: Strawberry Hill Press, 1998), 89.

⁶⁷ Walter Hunter [8 MO] to Thomas Hunter, Feb. 19, 1862.

⁶⁸ David Monlux [8 MO] to Father, February 1862, David Monlux Letters, Missouri History Museum.

⁶⁹ Walter Hunter [8 MO] to Thomas Hunter, Feb. 19, 1862; Even after the passage of thirty years, Smith's Zouave-assault at Donelson was still considered by military theorist Brig. Gen. Arthur Wagner to have been a "brilliant movement ... far in advance of the tactics then generally in use." Arthur L. Wagner, *Organization and Tactics* (Kansas City: Hudson-Kimberly Publishing Co., 1906), 266. See also John K. Mahon, "Civil War Infantry Assault Tactics," *Military Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Aug. 1961), 63-64.

Corinth in support of Sherman's division on their left, Wallace gave Smith's brigade the foremost position immediately adjacent to Sherman's right flank. Impressed by the relatively minimal casualties sustained during the assault at Donelson by virtue of the men's laying prone while receiving enemy volleys, Wallace again ordered the unconventional tactic be employed liberally. Every time the division halted, each regiment was to lie down on their bellies until further orders were received.⁷⁰ Accordingly, as they advanced and eventually encountered Rebel infantry, the battle lines "lay Zouave style, and let the shot, shell, grape & shrapnel pass over us," one remembered.⁷¹ Using the terrain to their advantage, Smith and Wallace masked their lines at each opportunity by bringing them to the prone behind undulating "frequent swells" that both hid and protected their commands from enemy fire.⁷² A dense screen of skirmishers moving independently from cover to cover ahead of the division kept up a rolling firefight with the enemy while the rest of the command surged forward at moments of opportunity before again returning to the prone. As soon as the Rebels began to reload, the brigade would again stand and bound forward to the next available cover, consolidating the gains of the skirmishers.

These Zouave-style tactics, Wallace later admitted, were "the secret to my small loss" despite the ferocity and volume of Rebel fire.⁷³ "You better believe we learned to dodge and lay close to the ground," one Hoosier wrote.⁷⁴ Another in Wallace's division emerged convinced that

⁷⁰ Gail Stephens, *Shadow of Shiloh: Major General Lew Wallace in the Civil War* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010), 95.

⁷¹ Gail Stephens, *Shadow of Shiloh: Major General Lew Wallace in the Civil War* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010), 97.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

"we could not possibly have escaped as well as we did" had they not been "ordered to lie down" with frequency.⁷⁵ Brig. Gen. John Thayer, then commanding another of Wallace's brigades alongside Smith, now at the helm of a brigade in Steele's division of Sherman's flotilla, likewise agreed that in "adopting this course and continuing it throughout the day I have no doubt but that the lives of hundreds of our men were saved."⁷⁶ The lessons learned at Donelson had been reinforced.

The efficiency and effectiveness of these tactics inspired a rather singular confidence within Smith, appropriately balanced with just the right amount of conservative caution. At one point during a lull in the fighting, Sherman later remembered, "I was sitting on my horse, when a strange Colonel joined my group, and after some time inquired of me what we were waiting for." Sherman "explained to him that in the night Gen. Buell had crossed the Tennessee with three divisions, and was advancing slowly and cautiously on the general left." Further, he advised that "all we had to do was to patiently wait until they were abreast of us, when we could all advance simultaneously." He was quite content to do this, still lacking much confidence in the offensive capabilities of his raw volunteers. The mysterious Colonel disagreed. Pointing to a regiment of Zouaves he identified as his own, he "said there was a force in front of him which he thought he ought to charge." Sherman "advised him to lay low, and perhaps they would feel forward for him, when he could knock them to pieces." The Colonel promptly departed, "and in a short time I heard the firing of skirmishers, and very soon three or four full volleys, when silence ensued in that quarter." Shortly thereafter, the officer "reappeared, sat on his horse with his right leg across in front of the pommel of the saddle and said it had occurred just as I had said, and that he had

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁷⁶ *OR*, 1:10, I, 193.

'knocked' them.” Struck immediately with the officer's “undisturbed, so perfectly cool” disposition and his apparent capacity to “comprehend so well the whole situation,” Sherman was “immediately attracted to him.” Inquiring of his name, the man replied that he was “Col. Morgan L. Smith, Eighth Missouri.”⁷⁷

Despite their success in driving the Rebel line away from the first day's battlefield at Shiloh, Wallace's tardy arrival on the field led to his own lasting personal ignominy and his division's assignment to reserve during the army's subsequent slog toward Corinth. The reassignment initially promised a respite for Smith and his veteran Zouaves until early May, when an order arrived from Sherman's division headquarters transferring both the Colonel and his original regiment to Sherman's command.⁷⁸ “Cump” liked what he saw at Shiloh, and had accordingly pulled the necessary strings with Grant in order to obtain the mysterious Colonel and his impressive command as a replacement for a regiment of Ohioans who had ignobly shown “the white feather” under fire.

The Zouaves joined Sherman's division on May 12, and almost immediately Smith began to make his mark. Shuffling the regiments of his division of Shiloh veterans to make room for the newcomers, Sherman gave Smith command of the new First Brigade of his Fifth Division. Smith's Zouaves, Col. David Stuart's 55th Illinois, Col. T. Kilby Smith's 54th Ohio, and Lt. Col. Americus V. Rice's 57th Ohio comprised the formation. Though none present could have known it, the brigade represented the future veteran nucleus of the division now churning its way southward to the Yazoo.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ “Gen. Morgan L. Smith. A Generous Tribute from Gen. Sherman,” *New York Times*, January 5, 1875, p. 6.

⁷⁸ Gail Stephens, *Shadow of Shiloh: Major General Lew Wallace in the Civil War* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010), 111.

⁷⁹ Frederick Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Volume I* (Des Moines: Dyer Publishing Company,

II. "My 'Old' Division"

The battered Shiloh survivors of Stuart's, Kilby Smith's and Rice's regiments had emerged from their baptism by fire proud of their victory, but thoroughly shaken and with a growing aversion to combat. Heavy losses mixed with the blatantly obvious tactical inexperience (and, in some cases, even ineptitude) of their citizen-soldier officers inspired them with a general reluctance to pursue any objective too vigorously.⁸⁰ When Grant was superseded by Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck in command of the Army of the Tennessee after the bloodbath at Shiloh, the men enjoyed a chance to catch their breath. Though still oft criticized for the painstakingly slow “feel our way step by step” manner by which Halleck nudged the army towards Corinth, Mississippi – the army’s next major strategic objective – his strategy provided invaluable opportunities for the regiments of Sherman’s division to learn and practice the combined arts of siegecraft and skirmishing.⁸¹ These particular brands of soldiering promoted tactical skillsets that were erstwhile unfamiliar to even most of the Donelson and Shiloh veterans in the ranks. Having thus far always “regarded the campaign as an offensive one,” Grant had never before required the army to dig in while on campaign.⁸² Most of the fighting during the recent battle had been conducted in massed lines of battle on the defense, limiting the opportunities for the employment of aggressive skirmishing tactics like those conducted by the Zouaves at Donelson.

1908), 481.

⁸⁰ Joseph Allan Frank and George A. Reaves, *“Seeing the Elephant”: Raw Recruits at the Battle of Shiloh* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989);

⁸¹ Timothy B. Smith, *Corinth 1862: Siege, Battle, Occupation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 49.

⁸² U. S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1952), 171; Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 168-169.

Still, all the requisite digging was not greeted warmly at first. According to one Illinoisan, the campaign “amounted to downright slavery.”⁸³ Unaccustomed to the drudgery and backbreaking labor of cutting trenches following each and every slight advance of the line, few in the army initially welcomed the sweat and toil even if they would ultimately benefit from the experience in the long run. As it “dug its way from Shiloh to Corinth,” historian Edward Hagerman argues that Halleck’s army put on “the most extraordinary display of entrenchment under offensive conditions witnessed in the entire war.”⁸⁴ Laborious as it was, most volunteers, still traumatized from Shiloh, eventually warmed to Halleck’s war-by-spade methodology. The respite from pitched combat and the apparent care that Halleck took with their lives converted many in the ranks to advocates of his conservative approach. Even the Zouaves, whose own experience at Pittsburg Landing paled in comparison to the rest of the traumatized regiments of the brigade, took heart in that “Gen. Halleck says he intends to take Corinth without losing a man,” as Captain David Grier, 8th Missouri, noted. “I hope that this will be the case,” he added, “as there has been enough lives sacrificed in this rebellion [already].”⁸⁵

Smith and his Zouaves brought much more with them into the new brigade than combat experience and a winning record. They effectively cross-pollinated the still traumatized men of Stuart’s, Kilby Smith’s, and Rice’s commands with the Zouave-style tactical culture that had

⁸³ John G. Brown, et. al., *Story of the Fifty-fifth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1865* (Clinton: W. J. Coulter, 1887), 144.

⁸⁴ Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 173.

⁸⁵ David Grier [8 MO] to Annie, May 12, 1862, David Perkins Grier Letters, Missouri History Museum; In many ways, this transformation is very akin to that observed among the Army of the Potomac two years later as it transitioned from the intense fighting of the Overland Campaign to the much more conservative approach of siegecraft at Petersburg. Steven E. Sodergren, *The Army of the Potomac in the Overland & Petersburg Campaigns: Union Soldiers and Trench Warfare, 1864-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017).

organically grown up and thrived in Wallace's now disbanded division. To be sure, just as all the regiments of Wallace's command never learned the finer intricacies of Zouave drill, those of Smith's new brigade would not either. Instead, it was the key elements, even the essence, of the Zouave tactical culture that gradually began to transform the fighting style of the regiments assigned to Smith's new brigade. To be sure, the brigade did not represent a tactical *tabula rasa* upon Smith's arrival. All the most basic elements and formations of skirmishing drill were an integral part of *Hardee's* manual, and the importance of staying low while under fire was not by any means news to the veterans of the hardest fighting yet to occur on the North American continent at Pittsburg Landing. Instead, the heart of Smith's Zouave tactical culture lay in emphasis and even preference for the individuality and independence of light infantry skirmish warfare over the more traditional use of close-order formations to push enemy units out of the way with a combination of massed firepower and, if necessary, the bayonet.

The "Suckers" of Stuart's 55th Illinois appreciated Smith's "incisive, clear-headed way of managing things," which "at once earned him the confidence of the men." The impressive display of expert skill in skirmish and bayonet drill on parade and review by his Zouaves made clear to all that the newcomers were no slouches. Perhaps most motivating to the survivors of Pittsburg Landing was the new brigadier's simple tactical philosophy: "Never ... present a line of battle to the enemy if a skirmish line would answer the purpose." This very mantra had kept casualties among his and Wallace's Zouaves remarkably low while also maximizing the effectiveness of his deadly light infantry. He saw no reason why the same tactic could not be applied to the command of volunteers who were not trained as his Zouaves had been.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Brown, *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 140.

Just a week after taking command, Smith had a chance to introduce the brigade to his particular brand of fighting. On May 17, Sherman ordered First Brigade to advance in tandem with the rest of the division in an assault on a strong salient of the Rebel line at Corinth dubbed "Russell's House," which was guarded by an enemy brigade. There were many different ways by which the position could be contested, some entailing a steeper price in sweat and blood than others. In accordance with his Zouave philosophy, Smith chose the most conservative. It also proved to be the most efficient and effective. That afternoon, after the brigade sallied out from its works and moved a short distance down the main road toward the salient, Smith ordered his Zouaves to disperse into their four-man skirmish teams a considerable distance ahead of the rest of the brigade, which he halted well outside the range of the known Rebel position. The scattered Zouave teams swept swiftly forward under Smith's orders to "advance briskly from tree to tree," keeping up a sporadic covering fire for each other as they advanced.⁸⁷ As they neared the structure, Rebel resistance became more obstinate, prompting Smith to deploy multiple companies of Stuart's Illinoisans forward as skirmishers as well in support of the embattled Zouaves. The lack of a massed target confounded the Rebel officers, who were overheard shouting "not [to] run from the damned Yankees." Their defense quickly collapsed when one of the crack-shot Zouaves deprived it of its commander, "shot just as he was emerging from the door of the house, and he fell dead upon the door-step, with his brains scattered over it." Another Rebel lieutenant was shot "through the window of the chamber," killed by a carefully aimed shot from one of Stuart's Suckers. Most of the remaining eleven Rebel dead littering the ground around the house had succumbed to wounds in the head, neck, and chest.⁸⁸ Emphasis on the

⁸⁷ "Report of Col. Morgan L. Smith," May 19, 1862, *OR*, I:10, I, 841.

⁸⁸ "Late from Corinth," *Western Reserve Chronicle*, May 21, 1862, 2; "From Pittsburg Landing," *Cleveland Daily*

independent and open maneuver of skirmishers, each finding cover and taking deliberate aim before engaging his target and "making every shot tell," allowed for individual marksmanship skill to be exploited in ways that a massed close-order bayonet assault would have wastefully frittered away.⁸⁹ "The Fifty-fifth for the first time saw the utility of a well-handled and rapid-moving skirmish line," one of the Illinoisans later remembered, "and felt its comparative economy of bloodshed." Still, the two and a half hour affair was by no means bloodless.⁹⁰ By the time the smoke cleared, Smith tallied a total of 10 killed and 31 wounded in his brigade.⁹¹ This Sherman judged "pretty heavy," but still considered the attack "the prettiest little fight of the war" all the same.⁹² It confirmed his opinion of Smith's tactical skill as he "witnessed with great satisfaction the cool and steady advance of this brigade" dispersed in skirmish teams⁹³ All the while, the intrepid colonel had been among his command, "managing and urging on the skirmishers."⁹⁴

Ten days later, the brigade repeated the performance when again ordered to assault yet another portion of the Rebel line. "With skirmishers well to the front," the main brigade line advanced toward the objective without ever needing to fire a shot, serving primarily as a tactical reserve for the fierce firefight engaged in by the sprinting, crawling, dodging, leaping cloud of

Leader, May 19, 1862, 3; "Report of Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman," May 19, 1862, *OR*, I:10, I, 840.

⁸⁹ "Report of Lieut. Col. James Peckham, Eighth Missouri Infantry," May 17, 1862, *OR*, I:10, I, 843.

⁹⁰ "Report of Lieut. Col. James Peckham, Eighth Missouri Infantry," May 17, 1862, *OR*, I:10, I, 843.

⁹¹ "Report of Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman," May 19, 1862, *OR*, I:10, I, 840.

⁹² "Report of Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman," May 19, 1862, *OR*, I:10, I, 840; *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 140.

⁹³ "Endorsement of Report of Col. Morgan L. Smith," May 19, 1862, *OR*, I:10, I, 842.

⁹⁴ "Report of Lieut. Col. James Peckham, Eighth Missouri Infantry," May 17, 1862, *OR*, I:10, I, 843.

four-man skirmish teams to its front.⁹⁵ This time supported by the twin 20 pounder rifled Parotts of the 1st Illinois Light Artillery, the combined effects of the brigade's adept sharpshooting and judiciously placed rifled shells neutralized the Rebel defense long before the main line ever reached the objective. As far as the Shiloh veterans of Smith's division were concerned, still mourning the loss of so many of their beloved friends and comrades just over a month prior, this was the right way to fight a war.

Even as the brigade came to know Morgan Lewis Smith and his distinctive brand of warfighting, Smith himself was learning from the careful observation of his new command. Ordered by Sherman to immediately entrench in order to consolidate the valuable fruits of the assault and defend against Rebel counterattack, Smith instructed his Zouaves to dig in for the first time ever. Although the detail may have seemed a maximally insipid antithesis to the characteristic aggressiveness and independence of Zouaves, he was pleasantly surprised at the flexibility of his old regiment as they took a cue from their comrades in Stuart's, Kilby Smith's, and Rice's regiments. "The alacrity with which the men relinquished the rifle for the spade" impressed Smith greatly, even more so when a sudden Rebel counterattack prompted them to quickly drop their shovels and repel the assault from their hastily dug fighting positions. This performance, he judged, "promises well for the future."⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Long after the war, Brig. Gen. Arthur Wagner noted how dispersed skirmish lines tended to attract almost all enemy fire, even when close-order battle lines arrayed in their support were visible and within range. He attributed this to the tendency of "soldiers in battle [to] instinctively and invariably fire at those who are shooting at them." Thus, "clouds" of skirmishers like those Smith habitually deployed, when actively engaged with the enemy, could effectively shield the advance of close-order lines, dramatically lowering casualties within them as they seized ground moving forward. Arthur Lockwood Wagner, *Organization and Tactics* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Co., 1906), 65.

⁹⁶ "Report of Col. Morgan L. Smith," June 1, 1862, *OR*, I:10, I, 856.

Smith was renowned across Grant's army for not only his proven tactical acumen, but also his unexampled vulgarity. Despite his middle-class roots, his tendency to fill almost every sentence with a profane expletive, and to habitually neglect any and all refined social conventions, were almost certainly a product of time spent among the lower classes who filled both the enlisted ranks of the Regular Army and the levees and riverboats of the Ohio where he made his living. When asked shortly after the war whether or not the rumors of such profane vulgarity were true, he quickly replied: "That's a damned lie. I swear very little," and further, that "the man who said he was a hard swearer was a damned liar."⁹⁷ The bond Smith cultivated with his Zouaves "could not be credited to any persuasive arts on his part," Lew Wallace observed, as Smith was "in speech the roughest commander I ever met."⁹⁸ In reality, however, it was precisely this unpretentious and irreverent air, along with his "compound of good sense and badinage," that endeared him to those in the ranks.⁹⁹ He was a soldier's general, a commissioned non-commissioned officer, unlike so many of the erstwhile civilian "big bugs" who seemed to "put on airs" just as soon as they buckled on a sword. "Under the free-and-easy and somewhat rough exterior of Morgan L. Smith, was a kind heart and a deep interest in the welfare of his men," one of Stuart's Illinoisans later observed. "He bandied jokes freely with the troops in the ranks, and was not averse to receiving as well as giving rough language." Even Wallace was struck with the natural facility Smith seemed to have with the men. "The faculty of disciplining raw soldiers had

⁹⁷ "The Field of Battle," *Wauwatosia News*, Aug. 9, 1902, 5.

⁹⁸ Lew Wallace, Jim Leeke, ed., *Smoke, Sound & Fury: The Civil War Memoirs of Major-General Lew Wallace, U.S. Volunteers* (Portland: Strawberry Hill Press, 1998), 56.

⁹⁹ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 151.

been in him at birth," he determined.¹⁰⁰ One Zouave put things more succinctly when he observed how Smith "makes us get up and howl I tell you."¹⁰¹

Smith also proved effective at engendering support from the junior officers of his command. Politically, he was considered "a conservative man," which put him in the good graces of the vast majority of officers in Sherman's army, to include "Cump" himself.¹⁰² He also carried the favor of his lieutenants by pushing aggressively up the chain of command for their prompt remuneration during periods when paymasters were scarce.¹⁰³ In return, "they rendered him united support," Wallace later recalled.¹⁰⁴ Above all else, Smith benefited from being regularly under the eye of the army commander. Upon forwarding his recommendation for Smith's promotion following his unparalleled performance at Donelson, Grant admitted that there were almost certainly "others who also may be equally meritorious but I do not happen to no [sic] so well their services." Smith, after all, was an "old soldier," and thus was "in every way qualified for promotion."¹⁰⁵ After being recommended once again for a brigadier's star by Grant in July, Smith finally became a general two weeks later.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Lew Wallace, Jim Leeke, ed., *Smoke, Sound & Fury: The Civil War Memoirs of Major-General Lew Wallace, U.S. Volunteers* (Portland: Strawberry Hill Press, 1998), 58.

¹⁰¹ David Monlux [8 MO] to Parents, Undated 1861, David Monlux Letters, Missouri History Museum.

¹⁰² Davidson Leatherman to Andrew Johnson, Mar. 14, 1866, Paul H. Bergeron, ed., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson, Vol. 10, February-July 1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 255.

¹⁰³ MLS to MG Lew Wallace, Apr. 17, 1862, John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Vol. 5: April 1 – August 31, 1862 [PUSG]* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), 357.

¹⁰⁴ Lew Wallace, Jim Leeke, ed., *Smoke, Sound & Fury: The Civil War Memoirs of Major-General Lew Wallace, U.S. Volunteers* (Portland: Strawberry Hill Press, 1998), 58.

¹⁰⁵ USG to Stanton, Mar. 14, 1862, *PUSG* 4, 356-357.

¹⁰⁶ USG to Henry H. Wilson, Jul. 1, 1862, *PUSG* 5, 184-185.

In the wake of the Rebel evacuation of Corinth, Sherman's division commenced a nearly hundred-mile grueling march westward to Memphis through the intense summer heat. Charged with repairing the railroad en-route, the excruciatingly slow pace and constant supply shortages bred considerable illicit foraging along the way. The independent spirit of Smith's Zouaves that had served the regiment so well on the skirmish line in combat also tended to produce considerable indiscipline on the march. Theft of both Army and Southern private property was regularly attributed to the Zouaves, and even neighboring regiments were not safe. For the most part, Smith turned a blind eye to this behavior, even joking about it in his general orders in a manner that could only encourage more of the same. "I hear also a report concerning some members of the Eighth Missouri, which is too terrible for belief," he announced in early July, "nothing less than an attempt to tarnish the good reputation of their brothers of the Sixth Missouri by borrowing their elegant hats to steal sweet potatoes in."¹⁰⁷ In fact, in many cases, Smith almost seemed proud if not boastful of his original regiment's capacity for liberal foraging. If his pride remained mostly subdued, those in the ranks unabashedly embraced their notorious reputation. Approaching one aggrieved farmer en-route to Memphis, one of the Zouaves shouted from the ranks, "Have you any forage for man or beast?" The man answered no, that "the troops ahead have taken everything except my soul, and I reckon a whole regiment can't squeeze that out of me!" Alas, one Zouave remembered, the comment prompted another to reply: "Don't be so sure of that, this is the 8th Missouri!"¹⁰⁸

At every turn, slaves crowded the roadway to cheer the blue columns, and "gladly hailed the approach of the Union flag." Many fell in behind the ranks and followed the army in hopes of

¹⁰⁷ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 151.

¹⁰⁸ "Spirit of the Contests," *The National Tribune*, June 27, 1901.

arriving somewhere nearer to freedom, assisting the Federal troops in whatever manner they could. While anti-black racism would always remain prominent in the Western ranks, many were already beginning to understand what one veteran described as “the true relation of slavery to the rebellion, while statesmen and generals were groping and gasping in the mazes of impracticable speculation.” That understanding would only grow ever more clear over the coming year.¹⁰⁹

By the time the division reached Memphis, they felt like not only veterans, but “ideal Western soldiers; not conspicuous for handsome uniforms or waving plumes, but the very embodiment of disciplined, self-reliant force,” one of them later recalled. The men were proud of being “dirty, sunburned and ragged [and] bore the impress of their splendid brigade commander.” They were “manifestly journeymen in the art of war.”¹¹⁰ The long march from Corinth had all but destroyed their shoes and uniforms, and the column was “all naked nearly,” one Zouave observed.¹¹¹ Another merely observed, with more than a tinge of pride, “we are hard looking boys.”¹¹²

Spending the fall in garrison at Memphis provided the regiments of Sherman’s division with an invaluable opportunity to pursue a diligent program of professional development and “systematic drill” that acculturated the recently arrived “new” regiments to the division. It also provided for the consolidation of lessons learned by the veteran troops at Shiloh and Corinth. “The men were in some sense the [product of the] survival of the fittest,” one of the 55th Illinois later remembered, the survivors in every company fully appreciating the importance of mastering

¹⁰⁹ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 153.

¹¹⁰ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 153.

¹¹¹ David Monlux [8 MO] to Father, July 26, 1862, David Monlux Letters, Missouri History Museum.

¹¹² David Holmes [55 IL] to Family, July 7, 1862, David Holmes Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

those maneuvers most relevant to survival and effectiveness in combat. “The rudimentary period of ‘left, left, left,’ ‘eyes, right,’ ‘right dress,’ had passed,” he explained, replaced with an insatiable quest for mastery of multi-regiment coordinated maneuver, skirmish drill, and individual bayonet and manual exercises.¹¹³ Both Smith and Sherman monitored the progress of each regiment closely, levying “eccentric and epigrammatic criticisms” to officers of every rank whenever their performance failed to meet a lofty standard.¹¹⁴ Overhearing such rebukes of superiors on dress parade was “entertaining in the extreme” to the subalterns in the ranks, but also set a tone of professionalism and high expectations that pervaded the command.¹¹⁵

Smith's brigade, now veterans of multiple fierce engagements, fully appreciated the pains he took to maximize their effectiveness and survivability in the field. Presenting him with a new brigadier's uniform, sword, saddle, bridle, and spurs upon his promotion the previous summer as tokens of their affection and gratitude, funded by cash donations directly from the ranks, the officers of the 8th Missouri spoke on behalf of the entire brigade when offering their thanks.¹¹⁶ “You found us new levies,” one of them announced, “[and] you made us drilled soldiers.” The ex-drillmaster had found “raw recruits” and “made us equal to veterans.” His Zouaves were a model case for the conversion of citizens into “soldiers from experience,” and they knew it. Smith characteristically demurred. “The manner in which you speak of me in connection with the description of your regiment is entirely too flattering,” he insisted. “You were all willing to

¹¹³ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 156.

¹¹⁴ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 157.

¹¹⁵ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 157.

¹¹⁶ David Monlux [8 MO] to Father, July 26, 1862, David Monlux Letters, Missouri History Museum.

submit to the restraints of your new position, as soon as the necessity for it was explained to you. Hence your efficiency.”¹¹⁷

In early November, the arrival to Memphis of several new regiments of “fresh levies” raised that summer prompted a re-organization of Sherman’s garrison. Among the most important of these administrative changes was the Smith’s ascension to command of a new division made up of a mixture of “old” veteran and “new” regiments, and his brother Giles to command of the division’s First Brigade. The Second Brigade was commanded by Col. David Stuart, originally of the 55th Illinois, an ex-lawyer who had already proven himself as a quick study of the military art by his admirable performance under fire at Shiloh. Stuart took pains to ensure that the levies assigned to his brigade, including the 83rd Indiana, 116th, and 127th Illinois, were trained to the same standards as his veteran regiments.¹¹⁸ On at least one occasion in early December, he ordered each of his "old" regiments to detail eight officers and eight non-commissioned officers each "to drill the new troops in skirmishing & the Loadings & firings," these being by far the most highly valued skills in Morgan Smith's division.¹¹⁹ The opportunity to learn from experienced leaders instead of merely from privately purchased manuals was invaluable for the new regiments. It also lent a spur to the preservation of the division's evolved tactical culture, as all the regiments of the new command strove to meet the same standards in Zouave-style skirmish drill, and learned lessons derived from the same set of past experiences. A brief spring campaign southward into Mississippi to the Tallahatchie River with Grant’s army provided Smith’s division with an opportunity to break-in the stiff brogans of its newest recruits,

¹¹⁷ “Compliment to Brig. General Smith,” *Daily Missouri Democrat*, Jul. 30, 1862, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 170.

¹¹⁹ Unfiled Dispatches, RG 393, 15 AC, 2 DIV, Box 2, NARA.

and by the time Sherman ordered his “best fighting division” back to Memphis in preparation for the downriver expedition, the command had made great strides in fully integrating its “fresh levies.”¹²⁰

The raw material of Smith's division was primarily a product of the "old Northwest," and most especially its politically conservative lower belt. Of its ten infantry regiments, four were from Illinois, two from Ohio, one from Indiana, and three from a mixture of Missouri (primarily St. Louis) and Illinois. Those in the ranks averaged a little over 25 years of age at enlistment, those in the “old” regiments having already spent one birthday in uniform. Six of every ten men in the division identified himself as a farmer or farm laborer when prompted for his occupation. Only 9% considered themselves unskilled laborers, whereas more than 30% worked in a skilled trade prior to enlistment. In fact, the volunteers of Smith’s ten infantry regiments had plied more than 140 unique occupations before taking up arms. On average, each of the regiments contained about eighty men, or nearly a full company, who might be considered to have worked in a technical trade as either blacksmiths, carpenters, engineers, machinists, or mechanics.

Unsurprisingly, predominately urban regiments, like the 8th Missouri (from St. Louis) and new 127th Illinois (from Chicago), comprised a greatest proportion of these men. Their skills had in many cases already proved a boon to their regiments, and would continue to do so. About 70% of Smith’s volunteers were native to the free states, and 10% to the slave South. Of the more than 20% of those born abroad, most were German or Irish. While the proportion of foreigners varied markedly between regiments, in none of the division’s commands did they constitute a majority.

¹²⁰ J. Grecian, *History of the Eighty-Third Regiment, Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (Cincinnati: John F. Uhlhorn, 1865), 15-17; Edwin Cole Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg: Vol. I* (Dayton: Morningside, 1985), 59-94; Steven Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 243-260.

Despite these aggregate statistics, the regiments varied considerably in most of these measurements. Whereas the men in the ranks of the 6th Missouri were 27 years of age on average, those in the 54th Ohio were younger than 24. More than 8 of every 10 recruits in the 116th Illinois came from an agricultural background. By contrast, the majority of Smith's Zouaves considered themselves skilled laborers back in Illinois. Whereas 80% of the 57th Ohio had been born in the free states, only 69% of the 55th Illinois could say the same. Nearly half of the 6th Missouri were born abroad, more than 20% in Ireland alone, but only 2% of the 83rd Indiana were Irish and fewer than 2 of every 10 of the 83rd Indiana were foreign-born.

In most measures, the demographic character of “old” regiments and those recently arrived to Memphis did not differ significantly. Those regiments raised during the summer's call for volunteers averaged slightly more farmers, fewer unskilled laborers, and about the same proportion of skilled tradesmen if modestly higher numbers of those in technical trades. Most were still native to the free states. “New” regiments contained fewer Irishmen but more Germans on average, likely an artifact of the recent perceived shift in the war effort toward emancipation — a dark turn in the eyes of many unskilled Irish laborers concerned about future competition for their jobs. On a whole, the “new” regiments of Smith's division contained only modestly higher proportions of foreign-born recruits than those that enlisted in 1861.¹²¹

Although each regiment hailed from a distinctive sociodemographic background, and had endured a unique set of experiences while in uniform, the division as a whole had developed a coherent tactical culture born of a shared operational heritage and the careful crafting of a skilled commander. As the recently arrived “fresh levies” were indoctrinated into this culture on the

¹²¹ Regimental Descriptive Books, 6th Missouri, 8th Missouri, 54th Ohio, 57th Ohio, 55th Illinois, 113th Illinois, 116th Illinois, 127th Illinois, 83rd Indiana, RG 94, NARA.

parade fields at Memphis, they vicariously imbibed the lessons learned the hard way by the “soldiers from experience” that filled the ranks of Smith's “old” regiments. By the winter of 1862, Sherman's beloved “old Division” had been molded into one of the most impressive combat teams in the Department of the Tennessee. Even so, its Zouave-style skirmish-centric tactical culture was not a panacea for all tactical problems. It also came with its fair share of inherent disadvantages, most especially the kinds of individual independence that fueled the pyromania and illicit foraging during the march to Memphis. Smith's command was undoubtedly Sherman's “best fighting division,” but it came with unique historically-derived baggage, just as any collection of volunteer regiments inevitably did.

III. The Regular

Months of commanding amphibious operations up and down the meandering stretch of the lower Mississippi between Helena and Vicksburg made Brig. Gen. Frederick Steele an invaluable asset to Sherman's expedition. "You having been so long on the Miss. river looking toward Vicksburg are possessed of much information as to the best method of attacking that point that I am not possessed of," Grant wrote him immediately upon receiving Halleck's permission to go ahead with the expedition. "I would be very glad to have your views," he added. He mentioned that he was inclined to send Sherman on the foray, and "would be very glad if you could accompany him." He needed no coaxing.¹²² The black sheep of Helena, Steele openly despised and distrusted by both District of Missouri commander Maj. Gen. Samuel Curtis and Brig. Gen. Willis Gorman, then commanding the garrison. The latter, a Democrat and old Mexican War veteran, was to Steele “an old acquaintance of mine, and I like him socially.”¹²³

¹²² USG to Steele, Dec. 8, 1862, *PUSG* 6, 408.

¹²³ Steele to USG, Dec. 13, 1862, *OR*, I:17, II, 410.

Curtis, though a fellow professional, Steele was convinced would “do everything in his power to injure me because I have denounced his damned rascality.”¹²⁴ Having recently drawn considerable ire nationally due to his supposed backpedaling from Curtis’s politically liberal confiscation policies after having briefly succeeded him in command of the Helena garrison, by the winter of 1862 “Fred” Steele was under fire from multiple directions.

In one particularly notorious instance, Steele had caused Federal troops to assist the wife of a local planter in recovering several young girls whom she claimed as her husband's property then working in a Helena brothel. When this seemingly flagrant violation of Federal policy – which then prohibited the army's involvement in the return of fugitive slaves to their owners – was made public through a scathing exposé written by the abolitionist chaplain of the 3rd Missouri, J. G. Forman, to the *Daily Missouri Democrat*, it drew the attention of the President himself. As Steele was on the short list for promotion to Major General, Lincoln wanted to make sure that such rumors were not true prior to acceding to his advancement. Had he in fact blithely allowed a planter's wife to wrench these young women from their newfound freedom back into the bonds of slavery? "There was no understanding that any of these girls should be delivered up to their masters," Steele explained in a letter to Washington. The brothel represented a threat to the army's health and morale, and thus he had no choice but to promptly shut it down and evict its occupants just as soon as its existence came to his attention. "If they had been white I should have given the same order," he insisted. Likely more persuasive was the name of the woman in question: Mrs. Charles Craig, whom Steele firmly alleged to be a staunch Unionist, and whom Lincoln must have remembered personally signing a pass for authorizing passage through army lines during her recent visit to the White House. In truth, Steele’s consummate professionalism as

¹²⁴ Steele to USG, Dec. 13, 1862, *OR*, I:17, II, 410.

a lifelong American officer likely played a far more powerful role in motivating the incident than did any pro-slavery proclivities he may have harbored.¹²⁵

Although historians still routinely refer to Steele as acting in accordance with a "staunch Democratic background," in reality, most of these assertions of his supposed slaveholder sympathies are groundless.¹²⁶ His formal military education and lifelong professional service in the Army had indoctrinated and acculturated him into a deeply conservative officer corps that prided itself first and foremost on its fundamentally non-partisan approach to carrying out public policy.¹²⁷ Like all of his colleagues, Steele certainly maintained personal opinions on slavery, confiscation, and emancipation, but these private convictions were not what guided his decision-making. His personal and professional constitution would never allow them to do so. Instead, Steele consistently upheld what he believed to be the narrowest possible interpretation of his government's intent on the ground. His public critique of Curtis's remarkably liberal interpretation confirmed this. Curtis "violated both law and orders, and instituted a policy entirely different from that indicated by the President in regard to slaves," he argued. It just so happened that, on the fringes of the re-claimed and rapidly transforming United States, the President's intent was perpetually in flux and often ambiguously expressed. In the divisive political climate of 1862, just as Steele accused the Republican Curtis of allowing "the interests of a political party" to motivate his actions in uniform, his own loyal conservatism was interpreted by many of a more partisan bent as rank disloyalty, or even treason. In reality,

¹²⁵ Earl Hess, "Confiscation and the Northern War Effort: The Army of the Southwest at Helena," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), 68.

¹²⁶ Kristopher A. Teeters, *Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 38.

¹²⁷ Samuel Watson, *Jackson's Sword: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1810-1821* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 282-285.

however, Steele's actions represented merely a course correction in policy that guided Curtis's increasingly radical approach to confiscation back toward that which governed affairs in Grant's army across the Mississippi and throughout a still very politically conservative Union Army.¹²⁸

Steele remained confident that the more politically conservative components of the garrison still thought highly of him. Many locals likewise hoped he would soon return to command of the post after his recent replacement by the Curtis lackey Gorman, but the ringing endorsements and testimonials of slaveholding planters were hardly what he needed. In the meantime, under the far more liberal oversight of Gorman, Union troops had “torn this country all to pieces,” Steele lamented.¹²⁹ He was confident that alongside his fellow conservative professionals and longtime friends Sherman and Grant he would be “properly dealt with,” and thus was elated about the rumor of his imminent re-assignment. In fact, he seemed almost giddy at the opportunity to be free of the frustrations he found himself repeatedly mired within at Helena. His only fear was that Gorman, out of spite, might “refuse to give me as large a force as I desire, as he may well imagine that I shall not come under his command again if I can avoid it.”

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In truth, Curtis himself was a bit put-off at being passed by for a command slot in the expedition. The victor of the battle of Pea Ridge had “been in the advance, and do not think it just right to stand on the bank and present arms to a galley movement,” he lamented. “But I am no grumbler. I despise fault-finding, bickering, whining affairs, and stand ready to lead or follow

¹²⁸ Earl J. Hess, “Confiscation and the Northern War Effort: The Army of the Southwest at Helena,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, 1 (Spring, 1985), 56-75; Kristopher A. Teeters, *Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 38-39.

¹²⁹ Steele to USG, Dec. 13, 1862, *OR*, I:17, II, 410.

¹³⁰ Steele to USG, Dec. 13, 1862, *OR*, I:17, II, 410.

or fall back, just as circumstances seem to require or commanders arrange,” promising to “co-operate cordially.”¹³¹ Accordingly, on December 14, both Steele and Sherman got their wish. Gorman ordered Steele to prepare a division to embark in four days, stripping its baggage down for combat in the meantime. In reality, whether or not Curtis or Gorman were willing to part with Steele or his command was actually of little consequence. Halleck ranked both of them, and Grant quietly informed Sherman that, should there be "any difficulty about getting possession of the forces at Helena," he should be "prepared to act positively if necessary."¹³² In the end, there was no difficulty, and upon arrival of the flotilla at Helena from Memphis, Sherman "in high feather" happily reported back to Grant that both Gorman and Steele had “fulfilled their parts handsomely" in making preparations.¹³³

Approaching his twentieth year in uniform, Steele had by far the most military experience of any field officer in the flotilla. It was the content of this experience, however, that shaped his skills, abilities, and predispositions as a commander. Appointed to the United States Military Academy at West Point in the spring of 1839 at the unusually advanced age of twenty, he had taken quickly to military life. Although “somewhat of a wag” and even prankster in the right company, Steele was mostly reserved by nature, and averaged barely half the number of annual demerits as Grant and a quarter those of his friend Sherman, three years ahead of both. Entering the academy at an older age than most of his peers made him a natural mentor-like figure for younger classmates and friends like Grant.¹³⁴ A remarkable ferocity of loyalty to friends and

¹³¹ Curtis to Sherman, Dec. 19, 1862, *OR*, I:17, 433-434.

¹³² USG to WTS, Dec. 15, 1862, *PUSG* 7, 41.

¹³³ WTS to USG, Dec. 18, 1862, *OR*, I:17, 426.

¹³⁴ Michael J. Forsyth, *The Camden Expedition of 1864 and the Opportunity Lost by the Confederacy to Change the Civil War* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 38.

family likewise made him a valuable friend to have.¹³⁵ After graduating in 1843 ranked nine places behind Grant, Steele was assigned to the infantry and garrisoned in a series of posts prior to the outbreak of the Mexican War. Serving as a breveted (due to a lack of vacancies in the Army) Second Lieutenant in the 2nd U.S. Infantry, he was brevetted again First Lieutenant for "gallant and meritorious conduct" shown at the battles of Contreras and Churubusco. After volunteering to participate in the desperate "forlorn hope" assault party at the battle of Chapultepec, he earned yet another brevet to Captain.

Promotion in the antebellum Regular Army was notoriously infrequent, and thus after the war the brevetted Captain Steele became First Lieutenant Steele once again, assigned in the summer of 1848 to frontier duty first in California and then later in Minnesota, the Dakota Territory, Nebraska, and finally Kansas. Whereas the loneliness and drudgery of frontier assignment broke his academy classmate Grant, who swiftly resigned and returned to civil life, Steele adapted well to the new existence. A "confirmed bachelor" all his life, he allowed the work of soldiering to consume him entirely. Even so, his "fund of stories" and general sociability made him popular among fellow officers, and his "very peculiar ... shrill, sharp" voice, along with his "spare built, wiry, withy, and enduring" features and "grizzly" hair and beard made him a distinctive and memorable character at any post. "He was best liked by those who knew him best," a biographer noted shortly after his death.¹³⁶

Captain Steele was at his post in Fort Leavenworth in the spring of 1861 when word arrived that Fort Sumter had been attacked, and that the seceded states were in open rebellion.

¹³⁵ Michael J. Forsyth, *The Camden Expedition of 1864 and the Opportunity Lost by the Confederacy to Change the Civil War* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 39.

¹³⁶ Maj. John F. Lacey, "Major-General Frederick Steele," *Annals of Iowa: A Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 1897), 424-438.

Just a month later, he was promoted to a Majority in the 11th U.S. Infantry and assigned a small four-company battalion of Regulars attached to his longtime friend and West Point classmate Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon's army, then campaigning across Missouri in an attempt to eradicate the secessionist Missouri State Guard. After leading his modest phalanx under fire for the first time at a minor but stiflingly hot skirmish action at Dug Springs in early August, the real test of Steele's aptitude for battalion command came a week later at the battle of Wilson's Creek. Concerned about the imminent expiration of the three-month term of service agreed to by the majority of the volunteers in his command, Lyon rushed his army into what he hoped would be the decisive engagement of the campaign south of Springfield. Though initially gaining the upper hand, a Rebel counterattack up "Bloody Hill" tipped the scales to favor the Secessionists and left Lyon mortally wounded. Ordered to cover a desperate retreat with only his "gallant little battalion," Steele and his Regulars stood firm through the fire, repelling successive Rebel charges and saving the surviving remnants of the deceased Lyon's army from almost certain disaster. Steele's "gallantry ... from the beginning to the close of the battle," caught the eye of Iowa governor Samuel Kirkwood, at that time hunting for Regular Army officers he might convince to accept volunteer colonelcies at the head of newly formed Iowa regiments. Accordingly, he offered Steele a volunteer commission as Colonel of the 8th Iowa and sent with the regiment to Sedalia, Missouri, where he summarily took command of a full brigade of volunteers. In January, having attracted the attention of not only Kirkwood but President Lincoln, Steele was again promoted to full Brigadier General of Volunteers and appointed to command of the entire Southeastern District of Missouri two months later.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ William Garrett Piston & Richard W. Hatcher III, *Wilson's Creek: The Second Battle of the Civil War and the Men Who Fought It* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); "Report of Maj. S. D. Sturgis, First U.S. Cavalry," Aug. 20, 1861, *OR*, I:3, 70; Maj. John F. Lacey, "Major-General Frederick Steele," *Annals of Iowa: A*

Beyond the continual nagging need for vigilance and small patrols against Rebel partisans marauding the Missouri countryside, command of the district offered little in the way of vigorous field service for the newly minted brigadier. That changed when, on March 1, he received orders from Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck to march his humble command into Arkansas and join Curtis's victorious army fresh from the fields of Pea Ridge, then enroute to Helena. The road from Batesville, Missouri to Helena was long and hard – no less than 150 grueling miles. Most of the route required “living off the land” due to Curtis's decision to cut from his supply lines and make with haste for the river. Across a campaign remarkably similar to that many of its participants would endure with Sherman across Georgia in just over two years time, the army experimented for the very first time with employing liberal foraging as a tactic for punishing Secessionists. While Curtis hoped for the men to distinguish between loyal and Rebel families when pursuing their daily meals, such distinctions quickly broke down in practice. Officers struggled to prevent stragglers from wandering away from the columns to fend for themselves. “I leave nothing for man or brute in the country passed over by my army,” Curtis later reported. It was an invaluable lesson for all, and a preview of much to come.¹³⁸

By the winter of 1862, while Steele had reason to be proud of his proven skill in maneuvering a division-sized command through the manifold trials of the slog to Helena, he had yet to command any more than a battalion in combat. To be sure, his performance in Mexico left no doubt of his personal bravery under fire, his ability to think calmly and act deliberately under stress, or his grasp of war as experienced as a junior company-grade officer. But these skills were

Historical Quarterly, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April, 1897), 424-438.

¹³⁸ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union military policy toward Southern civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 98; Robert G. Schultz, *The March to the River: From the Battle of Pea Ridge to Helena, Spring 1862* (Iowa City: Camp Pope Publishing, 2014).

not all equally applicable to the novel exigencies of division command. In fact, they could even prove hindrances, serving to myopically focus Steele's attention on the minutiae of combat and distracting him from his formal responsibilities as manager of the tactical art of an entire division.

IV. From the “State of Misery” to “Hell-in-Arkansas”

Unlike Smith, Steele had thus far enjoyed very little opportunity to make any meaningful impression on the seventeen infantry regiments and three batteries of his haphazardly constructed division, nor they on him. Also unlike the units of Smith's division, Steele's cohort lacked much of a shared operational heritage, instead representing a tapestry of diverse regimental tactical cultures evolved over the course of disparate experiences across the Western and Trans-Mississippi theaters. Even his highest-ranking subordinates, with the exception of Charles Hovey, were all but complete strangers to Steele and to each other. In many ways, this heterogeneity was a product of the unique exigencies of the Union war effort at the strategic level in the Trans-Mississippi theater. Fighting a seemingly intractable insurgency in Missouri, all the while confronting multiple menacing field armies hovering around Arkansas with relatively minimal available troops necessarily meant that the kinds of concentrated mass field armies found east of the Mississippi were comparatively rare among Union forces in the “far West.” The logistical nightmare that was southeastern Missouri and northern Arkansas would have mitigated against such large hosts even had the strategic situation been more amenable. To cope with the combined challenges of a vast area of operations, abysmal transportation infrastructure, and the need to keep a close eye (and occasionally boot) on entire communities, Union authorities tended to disperse their resources in manpower and materiel, re-consolidating them into impromptu commands when needed for offensive operations. This practice

inadvertently encouraged the development of a highly culturally heterogeneous trans-Mississippi Union Army.

The most extreme example of this tendency toward operational and thus cultural fragmentation was on display in microcosm within most regiments assigned to counter-guerrilla duty in Missouri, including several of Steele's "old" regiments. The "State of Misery," as many out-of-state volunteers sardonically referred to Missouri, was known among those who served there as being "the land of long-haired people and 'butternut clothes' ... [and] long miles."¹³⁹ With only one dependable railroad penetrating just a short distance from St. Louis to Rolla, and a notorious lack of good roads, Missouri was universally estimated by footsore infantrymen as slightly "better than hell," but not by much.¹⁴⁰ Plodding across seemingly endless distances on patrol, the Suckers of the 13th Illinois, the only regiment of Steele's original District of Southeast Missouri still under his command, had begun to refer to an altogether different unit of measurement: "Missouri miles," not to be confused with the much shorter and less painful "United States miles."¹⁴¹ The pitched battles between massive armies they read about in the papers unfolding east of the Mississippi seemed a world away as they traipsed through dense brush in all kinds of weather hunting elusive bushwhackers, interrogating the families and friends of known "Secesh," and laying in ambushes along roads in the dark of night. Guerrilla hunting amounted to "some very hard times," one of the 6th Missouri, assigned to Smith's division after Corinth, observed. Still, the especial hardship of counter-guerrilla duties also

¹³⁹ Committee of the Regiment, *Military History and Reminiscences of the Thirteenth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War in the United States 1861-1865* (Chicago: Women's Temperance Publishing Association, 1892), 27.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

inspired a special pride within the ranks of regiments assigned to them. Volunteers in the major armies "don't know anything about hard times," one Missourian boasted to his parents. "Let them come to this state and they [will] find out that they can't ride in cars and steamboats everywhere," he jeered.¹⁴²

For the most part, counter-guerrilla operations entailed constant patrolling mixed with sporadic longer-range expeditionary forays made by small detachments of usually less than a few hundred men. Few volunteer commands operating in the Missouri brush maneuvered as a regiment anywhere but the parade field. Monitoring and attempting to control multiple counties with limited manpower necessitated the dispersal of companies and even squads into far-flung outposts from which they conducted regular patrols into the countryside. These companies inevitably developed a degree of insularity distinct from those of regiments serving in larger armies east of the Mississippi. As detachments were often required to be self-sufficient in both logistics and operations, and underwent their own unique trials and tribulations distinct from those of their parent regiment as a whole, they frequently evolved a culture of independence that could prove both a blessing and a curse. In the context of counter-guerrilla operations, tactical autonomy at the company-level could be the difference between life and death. In a pitched "conventional" battle, however, regiments whose companies failed to maintain cohesion and coordination as a whole courted disintegration and disaster.

The experience of fighting a "household war" against guerrillas left an indelible mark on those units assigned to such duties.¹⁴³ First and foremost, the men developed a deep distrust of

¹⁴² Thomas Coleman [6 MO] to Parents, Jan. 6, 1862, Coleman Family Correspondence, SHSM Rolla.

¹⁴³ The term "household war" refers to the network of support which Missouri bushwhackers utilized to maintain their insurgency. Joseph M. Beilein, Jr., *Bushwhackers: Guerrilla Warfare, Manhood, and the Household in Civil War Missouri* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2016). See also Andrew F. Lane, "Challenging the Union Citizen-Soldier Ideal," in Brian D. McKnight and Barton Myers, eds., *The Guerrilla Hunters: Irregular Conflicts during the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), on how Federal troops fighting guerrillas

Southern civilians, no matter how benign they might seem at first blush. In one particularly jarring instance, after a brush with bushwhackers the previous fall, one of the 13th Illinois rolled over the body of a dead Rebel only to exclaim, “This is our old pie man!” upon recognizing the face of a man who had only recently been peddling pies in camp as cover for espionage. Such duplicity was by no means exclusively a bushwhacker tactic. Every one of the regiments with a guerrilla hunting past in both Steele's and Smith's command had at one time or another dressed their scouts in civilian clothes so as to avoid detection by the enemy.¹⁴⁴ Fighting a “household war” frequently meant deliberately blurring the line between civilian and soldier — a tactic that came easiest to those Missouri volunteers operating within their own state or even home communities.

Steele's division also included multiple regiments which had mostly avoided assignment to counter-guerrilla duty, having instead participated in the more conventional campaign of Maj. Gen. Samuel Curtis against Sterling Price, Earl Van Dorn, and Ben McCulloch's Rebel army in Arkansas which culminated in the battle of Pea Ridge. Most conspicuous among these were the Germans of the 12th and 17th Missouri regiments now in Hovey's brigade and the 4th and 9th Iowa of Thayer's. Due to their experience with the traumatic sensations of combat, accrued trust in their leaders, and a familiarity with the challenges of maneuver under fire, these four commands would quickly prove invaluable to Steele's new division. In addition to these were two more veteran regiments dispatched to Helena upon the dissolution of Wallace's division of Grant's army – the very same administrative event that had sent Smith and his Zouaves to

struggled with making sense of their unique experiences.

¹⁴⁴ Committee of the Regiment, *Military History and Reminiscences of the Thirteenth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War in the United States 1861-1865* (Chicago: Women's Temperance Publishing Association, 1892), 79.

Sherman. While neither the 58th nor 76th Ohio regiments were Zouaves, both had imbibed the skirmisher-centric logic of the Zouave tactical culture that predominated within Wallace's division. They, along with Brig. Gen. John Thayer, now commanding Steele's Third Brigade, carried with them the indelible impress of lessons learned fighting alongside Wallace's Zouaves at Donelson and Shiloh.¹⁴⁵

Despite each regiment's labyrinthine administrative path to Helena, all had in common the challenge of enduring singularly abysmal conditions upon their arrival. The flood-prone lowland campgrounds at Helena, which the men immediately took to calling "Hell-in-Arkansas," quickly transformed into a cesspool of dysentery, typhoid, and swarms of malarial mosquitoes.¹⁴⁶ Ignorance of how best to diagnose, let alone treat, the manifold intestinal problems arising from the consumption of contaminated water led to a staggering sixth of all reported cases of diarrhea, or "Arkansas flux," in Helena ended in death. These were not the so-called "crowd diseases" that were the scourge of all freshly raised regiments encountering alien pathogens for the first time before developing antibodies. The vast majority of men who fell ill at Helena were veterans. Many units became all but combat ineffective due to the sheer volume of men in their ranks physically incapable of duty.¹⁴⁷ By December, 35% of the garrison was unavailable for duty due to illness. Nearly every volunteer in the garrison was stricken with some form of malaria, and thirteen percent died from it. The sensation of helplessness combined with a lack of rigorous

¹⁴⁵ Frederick Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Volume I* (Des Moines: Dyer Publishing Company, 1908), 498.

¹⁴⁶ Rhonda M. Kohl, "'This Godforsaken Town': Death and Disease at Helena, Arkansas, 1862-63," *Civil War History*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (June 2004), 109-144.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

efforts by post commanders to alleviate their suffering crushed morale in the ranks. “Nobody seems to care whether we live or die,” one of the 13th Illinois lamented.¹⁴⁸

The only escape from these horrific conditions consisted of periodic amphibious forays downriver to the plantations of the lower Mississippi in search of cotton. In an effort to encourage speculation in and shipment of Southern cotton to Northern and European mills still suffering from choked river commerce, the Lincoln Administration ordered Federal troops to provide security for those civilian speculators plying the Mississippi.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the sheer amount of money to be made off the cherished commodity, corruption quickly became rampant. Speculators and traders cut deals with officers of security detachments to confiscate cotton even from erstwhile loyal planters, forging their signatures on bills of sale and sharing the profits quietly with detail commanders. Few were as heavily involved in such shady transactions as Col. Charles E. Hovey, now commanding a brigade of Steele's division.¹⁵⁰ While most volunteers in the Helena garrison applauded the vigor with which the Army engaged in the confiscation of Confederate cotton, they balked at the obvious corruption and profiteering engaged in by the officer corps. Moreover, the banks of the Mississippi were teeming with Secessionist guerrillas who could quickly turn any benign commercially-oriented outing into deadly combat. The loss of comrades while protecting corrupt speculators in the interest of padding the pockets of equally unscrupulous officers eroded morale and trust in the ranks of units assigned to such duties.¹⁵¹ Returning from downriver expeditions to the abysmal living

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 135.

¹⁴⁹ Earl Hess, “Confiscation and the Northern War Effort: The Army of the Southwest at Helena,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), 68.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 72.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 73.

conditions at Helena, many soldiers complained about how the “big bugs” seemed more focused on making a profit than providing for the health of the men.¹⁵² “I know that I but reflect the feeling of every comrade when I say that every life that was lost in those expeditions was a useless and wonton sacrifice,” one Illinoisan wrote angrily.¹⁵³ At the same time, these brief amphibious expeditions offered many regiments in Steele's command, as well as Steele himself, a glimpse of the very ground over which they would soon campaign and fight while serving in Sherman's flotilla. Indeed, it was for this very reason that Grant hoped to procure Steele for the foray.

Just as in Smith's command, half of Steele's division was filled with “fresh levies” raised over the past summer from loyal communities across Missouri and Iowa. The 25th, 26th, 30th, and 31st Iowa Infantry Regiments joined the division without much in the way of any coherent preexisting tactical culture. While Governor Samuel Kirkwood's recruitment policies ensured that at least a fraction of the junior officers enrolled within each of these green regiments came from the non-commissioned officer ranks of veteran Hawkeye regiments, most were still commanded by neophyte field officers. Although most had received rudimentary instruction in the basic formations and maneuvers contained within *Hardee's* or *Casey's Tactics*, only by and through the experience of their forthcoming trials by fire would these new Iowan commands learn the martial trade.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Rhonda M. Kohl, “‘This Godforsaken Town': Death and Disease at Helena, Arkansas, 1862-63,” *Civil War History*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (June 2004), 110.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas R. Baker, *The Sacred Cause of Union: Iowa in the Civil War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 150.

By far the most prominent of the “new” soldiers were Brig. Gen. (and technically still sitting Congressman) Francis (Frank) Preston Blair, Jr. and his four regiments of Missourians who behaved much like a personal armed retinue. Having recruited many of them personally from his constituency back home in St. Louis, Blair had already developed a special kind of bond with the predominately German rank and file of his 29th, 30th, 31st, and 32nd Missouri Infantry Regiments. Exceptionally prominent in both St. Louis and Missouri politics, Blair had long wished for an opportunity to prove his mettle in the field. Although he had played a major part in shaping the political contours of the early war in Missouri, he had yet to take up a sword in actual combat. Staunchly conservative if nominally Republican, he worried about the revolutionary direction the war seemed to be turning, but nevertheless would never accede to the Union his family had long struggled to maintain to be rent in two. The son of Francis Preston Blair, Sr. of Jackson Administration fame, and brother of Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, Frank had long been a major figure in the national spotlight. It remained to be seen, however, whether or not he could translate that notoriety into tactical competence in battle at the helm of equally inexperienced “fresh levies.”¹⁵⁵

Unlike those “new” regiments assigned to Smith's Second Division at Memphis, the majority of Steele's “fresh levies” seem never to have enjoyed an opportunity to train and learn from the “old” veterans prior to embarking on the expedition. The abysmal conditions of the garrison cantonment area in Helena mitigated against much large-scale drill or parade, and thus there were major limitations to opportunities for the few veterans in Steele’s command to transmit their hard won wisdom to the newcomers. While those few veteran officers assigned to

¹⁵⁵ William E. Parrish, *Frank Blair: Lincoln's Conservative* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 146-158.

green Iowan regiments probably did their best to instill the most important distilled lessons from their brief prior service into the junior officers and men of their new assignments, most of Steele's "levies" would necessarily exclusively rely on learning to be "soldiers from experience."

On December 18, as the flotilla pushed off from Helena, a hopeful "Cump" wrote to Grant that the force was ready to "make something to yield and prepare your way."¹⁵⁶ Now, a week later, the column of steamers finally approached the murky waters of the Yazoo on the final leg of their passage. Ever the consummate paranoiac, Sherman had somehow, someway, managed to beat the odds and still remained as good as his word to Grant that he would be at the appointed place at the appointed time with (close) to the appointed number of men. Lacking the luxury of adequate time to deliberate over precisely which troops he ought to bring with him, he had taken "those which are hardiest, and nearest," hoping as he did that these would be "some good men," as he put it. Indeed, many of them had already proven themselves to be such. More than half of the others had yet to enjoy an opportunity to do so in the field or in combat. For the eager, if nervous, fresh levies of the flotilla the forthcoming operation would prove their baptism by fire, just as it would for the two hastily assembled impromptu corps operating as coherent organizations. Their performance would ultimately be the product of a vast array of factors, some subtle and others less so. Among the most important, however, were the capabilities, skills, predispositions, and assumptions that each regiment, brigade, and division carried within its respective tactical culture, borne of lessons learned across its distinctive operational heritage. The raw experiences of campaigns and battles past, represented by the names inscribed upon the regimental standards soon to be again unfurled on the muddy banks of the river, had been

¹⁵⁶ WTS to USG, Dec. 15, 1862, *PUSG* 7, 41.

transformed by officers and men into habitual practices, ways of thinking, and webs of meaning that guided their behavior in uniform both on and off the battlefield. Sherman and his lieutenants ignored this nuance at their great peril.

CHAPTER II: “DISCOURAGED BY SUCH MANAGEMENT”: CHICKASAW BAYOU

“It was complete madness of Sherman to think of such a thing.”

~ Lieutenant Henry Kircher, 12th Missouri¹⁵⁷

Daylight broke upon a sodden shivering mass of blue-coated men huddled together for warmth amid the deserted cotton fields hugging the banks of the Yazoo River. The warmth of the holiday had proven little more than a tease when, throughout the past sleepless night, many who had only recently written home in astonishment over the unseasonably high temperatures were drenched by a frigid downpour. The inescapable wet and cold dangerously exacerbated illnesses that many had developed aboard the cramped transports, deemed insufficient to warrant excusal from the ranks.¹⁵⁸ Having enlisted only months prior into Company A of the 116th Illinois, Private George Jones became sick during the journey southward while crammed aboard the overflowing *Planet*, but still found himself drenched and cold alongside his comrades on the levee that morning. No veterans of storied campaigns, the green Suckers of the 116th had foolishly left all their blankets and ponchos aboard the boat. Over the next several days of fighting in the bottomlands, the health of Jones and many of his brothers in arms deteriorated rapidly amid the unforgiving conditions. In very short time, quite a number found themselves clutching to life on hospital cots aboard the steamers. Jones had been married to eighteen-year-old Sarah for less than a month when he joined the regiment at Camp Macon in Decatur. On New

¹⁵⁷ Henry Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, Jan. 3, 1863, Earl Hess, ed., *A German in the Yankee Fatherland: The Civil War Letters of Henry A. Kircher* (Kent State: Kent State University Press, 1983), 48.

¹⁵⁸ J. Grecian, *History of the Eighty-Third Regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (Cincinnati: John F. Uhlhorn, 1865), 18.

Year's Eve of 1862, she became a widow. "It goes hard to part with Jones," his comrade Henry Bear wrote. "He got tore down comeing down on the boat. So that rainy night chilled him to[o] much."¹⁵⁹

Remaining mostly detached from such personal tragedy in the ranks, Sherman had too much to accomplish in too little time to fret about the weather. He knew full well that in order for the larger plan to come to fruition, his humble expeditionary force had to bag Vicksburg before McClelland could react to the theft of his command and before the private contracts allowing the government's use of his steamer flotilla expired. He also knew he owed it to his superior and friend to be on time, ready, and willing when Grant arrived with his cooperating force from the north. Unfortunately, although historians continue to debate whether or not Sherman yet knew it, Grant and the rest of the Army of the Tennessee were not coming. Rebel cavalry raids had effectively dismantled his line of communication from central Mississippi back to his supply bases in Tennessee and Kentucky. Another struck and destroyed his supply base and prior headquarters at Holly Springs. Cut off from his vital lifelines, Grant and the rest of his Army of the Tennessee were forced to reluctantly retire from Mississippi, leaving "Cump" and his expeditionary force to fend for themselves.¹⁶⁰

Historians have conventionally analyzed the battles of both Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post only as minor early chapters of Grant's legendary campaign to seize Vicksburg. They typically depict Chickasaw Bayou as bereft of much strategic importance, occurring as it did after Rebel raiders had destroyed Grant's supply base at Holly Springs and forced his army

¹⁵⁹ Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, Wayne C. Temple, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Henry C. Bear* (Harrogate: Lincoln Memorial University Press, 1961), 26.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 101-133.

into retreat, condemning Sherman's expedition to inevitable failure. Even had he somehow slipped into Vicksburg, most historians argue that Sherman could never have captured the city and held it for any extended period of time without Grant's assistance. Likewise, while the seizure of Fort Hindman and the subsequent opening of the Arkansas River to Federal arms represented a major blow to the rebellion in the Trans-Mississippi theater, the clash at Arkansas Post has received perhaps the least scholarly attention in proportion to the number of men involved of almost any contest of the war. Not only was Grant unaware of the operation while it was unfolding, but he also strongly disapproved once he finally learned of it, arguing that the foray stole limited resources away from his quest for Vicksburg. Sherman and Porter were later able to convince their chief of the strategic logic, but Grant's continued discounting of the effort forced it to the fringes of the prevailing postwar narrative of the campaign.¹⁶¹

By turning the lens around, examining these battles as not merely component episodes of a single grand strategic narrative, but rather as distinct and poignant lessons in the practical military education of those who participated in them, these erstwhile neglected battles take on an altogether different significance. In the end, the battles of Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post had a far more salient impact on the men of the nascent Fifteenth Corps than they could ever have had on the ultimate defeat of the rebellion. Indeed, many years after he had first trod off the gangplanks of the *Meteor* and into the shin-deep mire of the Yazoo bottoms, one Ohioan still

¹⁶¹ By far the most comprehensive and exhaustive treatment of the long Vicksburg campaign remains Edwin Bearss's masterful three-volume study *The Campaign for Vicksburg* (Dayton: Morningside, 1985). See also: Timothy B. Smith, *The Decision Was Always My Own: Ulysses S. Grant and the Vicksburg Campaign* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018), 42-48; Earl Hess, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 122-125; Michael Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 129-155. The most comprehensive history of the Army of the Tennessee spends no time on Arkansas Post at all, barely mentioning it in passing: Steven Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 285.

recalled how “no engagement in which I was afterward involved impressed me with the nightmarish sensation of this one.”¹⁶²

Sherman's plan to quickly seize Vicksburg envisioned a rapid sweep southeastward of multiple separate division columns from their landing points along the Yazoo up the Rebel-controlled Walnut Hills to the south and east, along which ran the main road south into the city. Commanders were to advance at a steady pace, driving all opposition before them. On the off chance they ran into more than tacit resistance, “a prompt, quick assault will be the most effective and least destructive,” he advised. All were made to understand that speed was of the utmost necessity. While Sherman intended the advance to constitute one fluid and mostly uninhibited movement, circumstances subsequently forced a series of shifts in the army's operating paradigm. On the first full day in the bottomlands, after probing cautiously ahead on their approach march and meeting with relatively little resistance, each of Sherman's divisions arrived at the murky waters of Chickasaw Bayou and encountered the main body of Rebel forces ensconced behind a series of levees that rose above its eastern bank. On the far left, Steele's Fourth Division column met stiff Rebel resistance behind a sharp bend in the levee along which it marched that guarded a narrow causeway across the bayou. In the center, a single modest bridge was discovered in Brig. Gen. George Morgan's front, but it was too narrow to facilitate the swift crossing of a force sufficient to dislodge the Rebels dug-in to the hills to the south. Finally, along Morgan Smith's Second Division front on the right, a narrow sandbar that extended some

¹⁶² Charles Willison [76 OH], *Reminiscences of a boy's service with the 76th Ohio, in the Fifteenth Army Corps* (Menasha: The George Banta Publishing Company, 1908), 35.

distance into the bayou was the only point shallow enough to permit a ford. Just as with the other two crossings, the sandbar was heavily guarded by Rebel infantry and multiple batteries.¹⁶³

That evening, Sherman adapted his approach to these developments, ordering each division commander to begin the process of clearing obstructions to the crossing points and forcing the passage of their commands through the contested defiles. Even before the sun had fully risen on the second full day of operations in the swamps, each division established a base of suppressive fire with both infantry and artillery firing from the cover of thickets along the bayou, engaged in what one of the men referred to as a "sharp-shooting tournament" with Rebels behind the levee, while successive pioneer details armed with axes rushed forward and hacked away at trees and brush felled by Rebel defenders to block access. This proved deadly work. After Rebel fire cut down a series of pioneer details, Steele determined that further efforts would be more costly than they were worth. Upon request, he promptly received permission from Sherman to redeploy his division from the left and instead support Morgan's advance in the center. Cut off from the rest of the army by a wide bayou tributary, Steele's redeployment consumed the rest of the day and part of the next.¹⁶⁴

Along the Second Division front, things were just as frustrating. During a personal reconnaissance of the sandbar, Morgan Smith, the driving force behind the division, was shot in the hip by a Rebel sharpshooter and severely wounded. Command of the division fell temporarily to Col. David Stuart, then briefly to Brig. Gen. A. J. Smith, until finally returning to Stuart. Despite the loss of their beloved commander, the change at division headquarters was not fated to have much of an impact on the character of the fight. Smith had already made an

¹⁶³ "Special Orders No. 36," HQ RW 13 AC, Dec. 26, 1862, *OR*, I:17, I, 621-622; Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 129-135.

¹⁶⁴ Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 135-140; Nourse, *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 193.

indelible impact on the division's tactical culture over the prior months, and thus his impress was on full display in the way in which the command conducted itself under fire along the bayou. Chickasaw Bayou, fortunately, was not a battle in which a division commander could have all that much influence over tactical affairs anyway.¹⁶⁵

That evening, Sherman altered his plans again, personally delivering detailed orders to each division commander providing guidance for a forthcoming attack. Though at considerable cost to the pioneers, access to two of the three crossing points had been more or less secured, and portions of the bayou bed along Morgan's front were deemed fordable on foot. The army would launch a coordinated frontal assault on the Rebels defending the Walnut Hills. Just as with his initial plan, Sherman's new orders anticipated complete success and seemed to contemplate little of the difficulty (one might even say impossibility) of what was expected. On the right, Stuart's division was to simply "cross the bayou" and form in two lines on the opposite bank "in silence and in good order" in order to prevent Rebel units from leaving that sector to reinforce the left, where the main effort would fall. Blair's brigade, detached from Steele's division, would support two of Morgan's brigades in a direct bayonet assault of the main Rebel works atop the hills. "The whole line will move as nearly east as possible as the ground will admit," Sherman instructed, "simultaneously attacking the crest of hills in their front."¹⁶⁶

Without supper, fires, or blankets, exhausted from a meandering approach march, and a sharp skirmish along the bayou earlier that day which took the life of its senior colonel, John Wyman of the 13th Illinois, the men of Blair's brigade found it next to impossible to sleep during the night. They laid awake wondering what awaited them on the morrow. Rumors passed through

¹⁶⁵ Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. I*, 186-187.

¹⁶⁶ "Special Orders No. 37," HQ RW 13AC, Dec. 28, 1862, *OR*, I:17, I, 622.

the ranks of a forthcoming assault, and of the treacherous ground over which it was supposedly to be made. At dawn, Blair pushed out skirmishers to “feel the enemy and observe the ground over which we were directed to charge.” The reconnaissance offered nothing of encouragement. At the edge of the standing timber in which his brigade was formed, an open expanse of saplings, cut and “thrown down among the stumps so as to form a perfect net to entangle the feet of the assaulting party,” stretched nearly 400 yards to the bank of Chickasaw Bayou. At the bottom of a nearly ten foot high levee was a bed of mud 100 yards across with water 3 feet deep and 15 feet wide coursing through it. More felled trees overhung the southern bank, making its ascent doubly challenging for men with shoes filled with bayou water and caked with mud. Just beyond this was a line of abandoned trenches at the edge of a stubble-filled cornfield which stretched across a wide open incline sweeping for hundreds of additional deadly yards up the Walnut Hills, scarred only by a second line of hastily dug trenches filled with Rebel infantry some 200 yards from the crest. Beyond these rude works was a small copse of willows standing amongst the stubble. Should the command survive this long approach, it would reach its main objective, the Vicksburg road, which sported a defensive parapet of its own thrown up on the northern shoulder and studded with several Rebel batteries and yet more infantry. “These formidable works, defended by a strong force of desperate men ... would seem to require almost superhuman efforts to effect their capture,” Blair later confessed.¹⁶⁷

In preparation, Blair arranged his two thousand men in four regiments into an assault formation while hidden by trees from the Rebels. He chose to anchor his right flank with his two oldest commands, the 13th Illinois in front with the 58th Ohio following 150 feet to their rear.

¹⁶⁷ Committee of the Regiment, *Military History and Reminiscences of the Thirteenth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War in the United States* (Chicago: Woman’s Temperance Publishing Association, 1892), 243-244; “Report of Brig. Gen. Frank P. Blair,” Dec. 30, 1862, *OR*, I:17, I, 655.

Though both were long-service commands, only the Germans of the 58th had ever before made an assault. The paltry numbers remaining in the battered regiment's ranks after Donelson and Shiloh illustrated the usual price of such deadly maneuvers. Two green St. Louis regiments formed his left, the 31st leading the 29th Missouri, both rallied to Blair's flag only months prior and received only the most rudimentary of instruction in drill on the parade field.¹⁶⁸

Attempting to make a hurried personal reconnaissance from just beyond the tree line prior to the attack, Colonel Thomas Fletcher, commanding the new 31st Missouri, was stunned at the prospect. Even this brief exposure attracted surprisingly accurate Rebel fire at nearly the maximum range of their weapons, driving him back into the cover of the trees. When Blair approached, Fletcher told him "it was certain destruction to us ... [and] that we could never reach the base of the hill." Angered by such talk, Blair "turned to me and said, 'Can't you take your regiment up there?'" He could "take my regiment anywhere," Fletcher curtly replied, but only because his command of naive recruits "do not know any better than to go." Veterans would have none of it, he insisted. Blair, no combat veteran himself, then scoffed and pointed rearward to Dister's veteran Germans. "See these men?" he asked. "They ... are heroes of many battles," and he was certain they would make the charge. "They might be heroes," Fletcher retorted, but "did not number as many as one of my companies." At a loss, Blair tried to reason with him. "Tom, if we succeed, this will be a grand thing; you will have the glory of leading the assault." Morgan's brigades would do the heavy work and all Fletcher and his men had to do "was to keep right on and 'keep going till you get into Vicksburg.'" Still, after Fletcher gloomily departed, and the reality slowly began to sink in, Blair was later rumored to have "whispered to one of his officers, as he explained the movement with tears in his eyes, 'Thank God the order is not mine,

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

but we will obey if it be in the power of men.” Whether or not it was in fact “in the power of men” depended entirely upon the coordinated delivery of his and Morgan's brigades through heavy rifle and shellfire, and all the manifold artificial and natural obstructions, to fall upon a single point of the Rebel line.¹⁶⁹

After a heavy preliminary softening artillery bombardment lifted and the guns of every battery fired the agreed upon salvo to signal the launch of the assault, the nervous and exhausted brigade leaped from the cover of the treeline and into the open. As soon as the men exited the trees, Rebel artillery and rifles opened upon them from more than 700 yards distance. “The hill in front of them became a volcano, which vomited fire from foot to summit,” a spectator watched in horror. “Long parallel lines of flame indicated the rifle-pits; broad, heavy, concentrated flashes showed where the batteries were hurling their iron.” The pace was quickened. “Guide-right, double-quick, march!” Blair screamed. Maneuvering his mount through and over the branches, he led his brigade from the front while Rebel shells, with their characteristic “sczzzz” and concussive blast, slammed into the mud nearby. Rifle fire from as far away as the second line of trenches cut through the ranks. Still, the formation managed to hold its shape. One Illinoisan remembered looking down the line and noticing how “though the wings traveled a little the fastest, and the line curved a little ... the front was bold and magnificent.”¹⁷⁰

Reaching and descending the steep northern bank of the bayou marked the advent of the formation's rapid dissolution. Thousands of men sliding down the slippery embankment with fixed bayonets while under heavy enemy fire produced more than enough problems before the

¹⁶⁹ T. C. Fletcher [31 MO], Undated, in W. T. Sherman, *Memoirs of W. T. Sherman* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 443-444.

¹⁷⁰ “The Vicksburgh Failure,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 19, 1863; *Thirteenth Illinois*, 246; Abraham J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Dec. 24, 1862, Virginia Sigler and A. J. Sigler, ed., *The Civil War Diary of Col. A. J. Seay* (Virginia A. Sigler and A. J. Sigler, 1968), 15-16.

brigade reached the quicksand of the bed. “The feet of the men commenced sinking the instant they touched it,” one later told a correspondent. Struggling forward through the mire and into the knee-deep water, all formational coherence was destroyed. Color bearers stumbled and fell in the mud, handing off their staffs to any who made it alive to the opposite bank. Nearly every officer’s mount became lodged in the quagmire, threw their riders in the chaos, and even Blair himself was forced to dismount and scramble up the southern bank on foot. Rebel gunners and riflemen plunged their fire directly into the madness. Those who managed to scale the levee found a tangled morass of disoriented, soaked, and mud-caked men. Blair and his lieutenants struggled to regain cohesion. This “took several minutes to put it in order,” an observer remarked, but was eventually achieved.¹⁷¹

As the reformed line reached the first line of empty trenches, the Illinoisans on Blair’s right discovered that the pits were now occupied by Federal troops from Morgan’s brigades huddling there for cover. Paying little attention to them, the Illinoisans and Germans pushed through the fugitives and over the opposite parapet. This once again broke up the brigade’s right wing; this time permanently. As the men spilled into the cornfield’s stubble, the concussion of a shell struck down the 13th’s color bearer, who “dropped insensible” atop of the standard, leaving “no visible rallying point,” one remarked. The regiment’s many months of sweat and diligent drill on the parade field at Rolla, Missouri came to this, a mad dash, “every man for himself,” up the slope. “Men were falling on every side,” Private Wilson Chapel of the 13th remembered.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ “The Battle of Chickasaw Bayou,” *New York Herald*, Jan. 18, 1863; “From Vicksburg,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Jan. 15, 1863; Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 275-277.

¹⁷² *Thirteenth Illinois*, 247-248; Wilson E. Chapel [13 IL] Journals, Northern Illinois University Digital Library, <http://digital.lib.niu.edu>.

As regimental colors disappeared amid the maelstrom, Blair himself became a final rallying point for the survivors still struggling up the incline. “His sword waving over his head, and his hearty voice cheering us on,” Chapel recalled, “we never thought of turning back.” Inspiring as this might have been, by charging forward boldly ahead of the command Blair was, like the fallen Wyman had been the previous day before being struck down by a Rebel sharpshooter, adhering to popular civilian notions of an officer's role in battle, attempting to inspire the men and lead them personally through the fire. In doing so, he neglected the role that tactical doctrine explicitly prescribed to him, the same doctrine he had been so strict to emphasize to the green volunteers of his brigade. Inattention to doctrine, Blair had reminded them while aboard the transports, was “one of the gravest offenses that can be committed.” In a desperate charge like that in which his brigade was engaged, it was the role of regimental officers and sergeants to inspire the men and drive them forward. A brigadier’s was one of management and control amidst chaos. This neglect of duty could have severe consequences. Had Blair been, as his drill books dictated, “about forty paces in rear of the centre” of his command in line of battle, he would have quickly realized that Morgan’s brigades, though intended by Sherman as the main effort, were in fact not advancing on his right. He would have immediately noticed that the fugitives passed over by his right wing, cowering in the trench, were in fact those of Morgan’s lead regiments, refusing to go any further forward. Thus, with little more than a prompt bugle blast, he might have prevented the useless destruction of his brigade. From the front, he could only run, yell, and hope.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Ibid.; “Orders No. 17, HQ ‘Blair’s Brigade,’ Dec. 21, 1862, 30 MO Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA; William Gilham, *Manual of Instruction for the Volunteers and Militia of the United States* (Philadelphia: Charles Desilver, 1861), 39.

As the ragged brigade leaned forward and slogged up the slope through the fire, the intensity of leaden resistance seemed to grow ever increasingly by the step. The successive layers of natural and artificial Rebel defenses acted as a kind of sifter, each barrier excising large numbers from the ranks and scattering the remainder from the inherent confidence of their tight-knit formations. All the while, rifle and shellfire cut down men from each regiment, further eroding their numbers already weakened by days of hard fighting and campaigning in the bottoms. As the survivors of Blair's formation neared the crest, the psychological and physical capabilities of each regiment gave out in turn. The moment at which it did was governed in large part by its particular heritage.

Thus far the neophyte Missourians on Blair's left, undergoing an unforgiving baptism by fire, had managed to retain a "somewhat restored" battle line. Still, comparatively, "we were greatly disordered," Fletcher admitted, leading his recruits through the fire at a run. As the Rebels occupying the second line of trenches poured in their final volley before falling back through the stubble to the main line, one of their rounds cut Fletcher down. His second in command was struck in the head and wounded severely. His third in command was killed outright. This sudden decapitation was more than the green St. Louisans could take, having yet had little opportunity to forge the kinds of deep internal cohesion and mutual trust that could survive the simultaneous loss of every field officer in the regiment while under fire. They summarily wavered, broke, and ran through the confused ranks of the terrified 29th Missouri following closely behind.¹⁷⁴

Reaching the second line of Rebel pits, Blair and his remaining three regiments of the brigade took shelter from the fire. Turning to survey his dissolving brigade through the smoke,

¹⁷⁴ Fletcher [31 MO] in Sherman, *Memoirs*, 444.

he noted “the rapidly-thinning ranks” but also noticed what looked to be the encouraging sight of a column of blue rushing over the first line of pits off to his right. Assuming this to be Morgan’s division finally fulfilling their orders, he urged the survivors — now the main effort by default, to abandon the scant protection of the trench and rush forward across the final 200 yards to the Vicksburg road. The remaining veteran Germans of the 58th Ohio, most especially those who had seen the carnage of Donelson and Shiloh, were wary of this. Sensing the regiment's reluctance, their colonel, Peter Dister, climbed atop the parapet of the works. “Vörwarts!” he screamed to little avail. Failing, he tried leading by example, starting off alone into the open stubble. After only a dozen yards, he was cut down by a Rebel rifleman, his lifeless body rolling back down the slope to the trench. His regiment became the second of Blair’s four to reach its psychological limit of advance. Though by no means routing in confusion as had Fletcher's green levies, the veterans had seen enough. Now, only the last vestiges of the 13th Illinois and 29th Missouri comprised Blair's charge. Realizing at once that these scraps would not be nearly enough to cause a breach in the heavily defended line along the Vicksburg road, and that still no assistance appeared forthcoming, Blair sprinted back through the smoke to attempt to spur Morgan's cowering men forward himself. He was not yet ready to give up.¹⁷⁵

Sherman’s original orders for the assault had not contemplated a role for any other of Steele’s brigades, not knowing when or even if Thayer or Hovey might arrive on the field in time to participate after their redeployment from across the bayou on the left.¹⁷⁶ When Steele himself arrived with Thayer in tow during the preliminary barrage however, Sherman immediately directed him “to render General Morgan any assistance that he might ask for.” Morgan took both

¹⁷⁵ Blair’s Report, *OR*, I:17, I, 656; Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 277.

¹⁷⁶ “Special Orders No. 37,” HQ RW 13 AC, Dec. 28, 1862, *OR*, 622.

Steele and Thayer aside personally to provide abbreviated instructions. “I want you to take those heights,” Thayer remembered him saying, pointing southward.¹⁷⁷ Greatly concerned about the threat of sharpshooters to his front, he also advised that Thayer and the rest of the officers in the column dismount and proceed on foot.¹⁷⁸ This would prove a fateful mistake.

Thayer was by far Steele’s most combat experienced brigadier. Having, like Morgan Smith, led a brigade of Lew Wallace’s division at both Donelson and Shiloh, he was the only one of Steele's lieutenants to have commanded more than a single regiment in battle. Even so, the specifics of his past experience shaped his tactical approach. The impress of Wallace and Smith's Zouave-style tactics at Shiloh was evident in his advice to the new brigade to kneel or lie down whenever possible during the assault and to take advantage of any undulating terrain. This course of action, he was convinced, had saved hundreds of lives and preserved his command through the heaviest fighting at Shiloh.¹⁷⁹

As all along the line, the awkward terrain limited Thayer’s deployment options. A single narrow but undefended bayou crossing necessitated launching the four-regiment brigade into its assault in a column of regiments, each with four-men abreast, with the intention of maneuvering into lines of battle once a wider frontage became available. With the brigade in line, regulation mandated that Thayer, like Blair, plant himself “about forty paces in rear of the centre” of his command, but in column his proper place was at the brigade's front. This negated any possibility of his directly influencing any but the foremost ranks of his lead regiment, the veteran 4th Iowa.

¹⁷⁷ John M. Thayer to 13th Illinois Regimental History Committee, Sept. 18, 1891, *History of the Thirteenth Illinois*, 264-266.; Steele later remembered Morgan providing the Thayer with finer instructions on “the route which his brigade should take and sent a guide to lead him,” but no other reference to a guide is extant.

¹⁷⁸ “Report of Brig. Gen. John M. Thayer,” Dec. 31, 1862, *OR*, I:17, I, 658-659.

¹⁷⁹ “Report of Col. John M. Thayer,” Apr. 10, 1862, *OR*, 1:10, I, 193.

That regiment alone, in a close-packed "column of fours," stretched rearward a distance of at least 160 yards through the trees, rendering the rest of the brigade invisible to him and he to them. Recognizing the dangers inherent in this lack of control, Thayer took two steps. First, he gave strict orders to every regimental commander to "keep close up and follow" the regiment in front of them, and "to obey this order till they received further instructions."¹⁸⁰ Second, he dispersed his staff along the flanks of the brigade column so as to provide guidance to the greener regiments that comprised half the formation.¹⁸¹

When Thayer and Colonel James Williamson's Pea Ridge veterans of the 4th Iowa led the column over the levee on the north bank of the bayou, Rebel batteries immediately caught sight of them and opened fire. Their shells burst along the line, prompting one of Thayer's staff, having imbibed his chief's lessons learned at Shiloh, to order Colonel Charles Abbott's green 30th Iowa, still north of the levee, "to lie down and make ourselves as secure as possible" until the fusillade passed. Once it did, and Abbott arose to order that bayonets be fixed and the column start forward again, he was alarmed to find that the 4th "had got 10 or 12 rods [about sixty yards] in advance." He had wrongfully supposed that the 4th had also gone to ground under the barrage, but in fact the veterans were already in the act of crossing the bayou. "I immediately put my regiment under a double-quick," he reported. But before he could give the command "march," Steele himself mysteriously appeared, shouting the very "further instructions" contemplated in Thayer's original orders. Steele "checked us and ordered me to leave my horse, cross the next bayou in any way we could get across, and take my regiment to the right into the woods and

¹⁸⁰ "Report of Col. Charles H. Abbott" [30 IA], Jan. 12, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 661; Thayer to 13th Illinois, Sep. 18, 1891, *History of the Thirteenth*, 254-256.

¹⁸¹ Abbott's [30 IA] Report, *OR*, 661.

deploy as skirmishers,” Abbott later reported. An inexperienced volunteer, Abbott was not about to question the authority or competence of his division commander — a professional soldier no less — and immediately obeyed. The remaining regiments, apparently along with the rest of Thayer’s staffers, followed diligently, and disastrously, adhering to Thayer’s orders to “keep close up and follow” verbatim.¹⁸²

Formed in a close “column of fours” on the parade field, the roughly 600 effectives of Abbott’s 30th Iowa would have stretched about 200 yards from front rank to rear. Even without accounting for the confusion and reluctance of a column under direct artillery fire, the 50 yard gap between the 4th and 30th regiments at the moment Steele delivered this fateful order would have placed the tail of the 4th more than 250 yards away, through drifting smoke, exploding shells, and thick vegetation, from the Pea Ridge veterans of the 9th Iowa following Abbott. Thus, by the time the head of the 9th reached the point from which Abbott had diverted to the right, there was no way for the Iowans to know that they were no longer following their brigadier.¹⁸³

Unknowingly now at the head of only the 4th Iowa, Thayer and Williamson sprinted across the muddy bed of the bayou, over a roadway running through the same captured trenches filled with Morgan's cowering troops, and over a fence skirting a cornfield, tearing the obstruction down as they advanced. It was at this moment that Frank Blair, looking for any hope of support through the smoke, spotted the Iowans rushing forward and mistook them for Morgan’s men. The Iowans kept well closed up, spilling into the field and maneuvering into line as Rebel bullets zipped through the air and shells slammed into the earth. “Bring your regiment

¹⁸² Abbott’s [30 IA] Report, *OR*, 661.

¹⁸³ Regimental Monthly Returns, 30th Iowa, 4th Iowa, 9th Iowa, December 1862, Iowa Adjutant General’s Records, SHSI Des Moines; Arthur Lockwood Wagner, *Organization and Tactics* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Co., 1906), 500-501.

into line!” Thayer shouted to Williamson over the din, ordering him to “extend them as skirmishers” so as to avoid massing them vulnerably in the open. This, too, showed the impress of his time alongside Wallace's Zouaves at Shiloh. Thayer would "bring the whole force ... into a parallel line,” he screamed to Williamson, and turned back for the first time during the assault to check on the other regiments. “To my dismay and horror,” he later wrote, “I found only the Fourth Iowa Infantry had followed me.” Even through the smoke he could see the entire distance back to the column’s starting point on the north side of the bayou. No brigade, no regiment, no company was visible. Thinking fast, Thayer recalled Morgan's shell-shocked command the Iowans had passed over in the captured trenches during the advance, and decided, like Blair, to go himself to try and move them forward. “Hold your ground, if possible!” he yelled to Williamson, and was gone.¹⁸⁴

The ability of Williamson’s Iowans to effectively reply to the hail of Rebel fire they encountered was extremely limited. Most of the enemy trenches, though less than a hundred yards distant, were probably provided with protective “head-logs,” concealing all but the weapons protruding underneath. Moreover, many of the Louisiana and Tennessee regiments manning them were armed with either Mississippi rifles or brand new British-manufactured Enfield rifle muskets. Firing individually from a supported position at close range, even a novice shooter could hit his mark. Had they been comparably armed, the Iowans might have more effectively suppressed the Rebel works to their front, potentially decreasing their casualties. Sadly, they were not. While the Harper’s Ferry smoothbore muskets they responded with along the line were vast improvements over the Napoleonic era “Potsdam” muskets the gun-starved Iowa state government had originally issued them, they still put the regiment at a major

¹⁸⁴ Thayer to 13th Illinois, Sep. 18, 1891, *Thirteenth Illinois*, 254-255.

disadvantage when firing at such limited targets. The Army's *antebellum* tests comparing rifles with muskets suggested that an experienced shooter with a musket could only expect to hit a six-foot square target at a hundred yards with about every other shot taken in the calm conditions of a firing range. In the chaos of battle, with the enemy shrouded by smoke and presenting no more than a square foot of himself as a target, the Iowans were hard pressed to hit anything at all.¹⁸⁵

Very quickly Hawkeye blood began to run freely. A corporal had his overcoat "Shot from his shoulders," a ball snapped through the knee of a private, and a young lieutenant was struck by a shell fragment that sliced through his leg and severed a main artery.¹⁸⁶ Rebel bullets and shell fragments hit seventeen Iowans in their legs, five in their feet, six in their shoulders, and five more in the side. Two were struck in the stomach, five in the chest, and three in the hip. No less than eighteen more were hit in the hand or wrist, while fifteen suffered wounds to the head or face.¹⁸⁷ Sergeants along the line struggled to triage and stabilize these casualties to the best of their ability, but quickly found themselves outnumbered. When a Rebel ball careened through eighteen year old private William Arnett's arm and lodged itself in his chest, his orderly sergeant and close friend, John Miller found he could do little for the boy under the circumstances but place his blanket under his head and make him "as comfortable as possible." As orderly, it was

¹⁸⁵ 28th/29th Louisiana Infantry Ordnance Reports, Col. Allen Thomas, C.S., Combined Service Record, RG 94, NARA; Col. Joseph Octave Landry, C.S., Combined Service Record, RG 94, NARA; "Address by General G. M. Dodge," *Proceedings of Crocker's Iowa Brigade at the Ninth Biennial Reunion* (Cedar Rapids: The Record Printing Company, 1902), 266; Iowa Adjutant General, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Iowa to the Governor, for the Year Ending December 31, 1861* (Des Moines: F. W. Palmer, 1861), 10; Richard E. Kerr, "Wall of Fire: The Rifle and Civil War Infantry Tactics," Thesis, Command and General Staff College (Fort Leavenworth: 1990), 26; *Reports of Experiments with Small Arms for the Military Services, by Officers of the Ordnance, U.S. Army* (Washington: A.O.P. Nicholson, 1856).

¹⁸⁶ Unknown [4 IA], Feb. 14, 1863, Private Seller, <http://www.railsplitter.com/sale12/grant.html>. Accessed Feb 26, 2018. Copy in Author's Files.

¹⁸⁷ Guy E. Logan, *Roster and Record of Iowa Troops in the Rebellion, Vol. 1* (Des Moines: E. H. English, 1908), 525-672.

Miller's duty to report any losses to the company commander. "Coming up he Said that Wm Arnett was mortally wounded," Captain Randolph Sry remembered. It was the last time they spoke. Moments later Miller was struck by a Rebel shell directly "in the side of his face," decapitating him instantly. Knowing that the wounded private was "warm friends" with the sergeant, Sry made a point of informing Arnett of Miller's death as the boy himself lay dying. "What a pitty [sic]," he replied, "and shed tears with deep Emotion." Indeed, it was a terrible pity. With four confirmed dead and more than a hundred seriously wounded after less than twenty minutes in action, the regiment had been decimated nearly twice over. The determination of the command to hold its ground despite the obvious futility of the situation was a testament to a cohesion borne amid the bloody crucible at Pea Ridge. Before half an hour had transpired, that cohesion began to flag, and Williamson promptly ordered the retreat. Those officers and sergeants still standing struggled to get "all the Boys started off," Sry later recalled, even as two more Iowans were hit in the back.¹⁸⁸ "We was in the Slaughter pen," another officer bluntly remarked.¹⁸⁹

The debacle was a tragedy of doctrinal structures, erroneous suppositions, and nightmarish terrain. Thayer and Abbott both behaved as products of the rigid tactical system they had striven so ardently to master over the previous months as amateurs on the parade ground. To this instruction Thayer added the influence of his prior experience fighting under Wallace. Had he not been at the head of his column, as doctrine prescribed, he might have been made aware of Abbott's deviation in time to halt the advance. If Abbott had insisted upon clarification from

¹⁸⁸ Randolph Sry [4 IA] to Mrs. Miller, Jan. 4, 1863, John A. Miller Widow's Pension Application, RG 15, Department of Veterans Affairs, NARA.

¹⁸⁹ Henry Ankeny [4 IA] to Wife, Dec. 31, 1862, Henry Giese Ankeny Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

Thayer prior to blindly following Steele's orders, the crisis might likewise have been averted. The fact that neither acted so prudently was due in large part to the doctrinal structures within which they operated. The drill manuals all made clear that the proper place of a brigadier in an advancing column was at its head. Army Regulations also made equally clear, on their very first line no less, that all subordinates were "required to obey strictly, and to execute with alacrity and good faith, the lawful orders of the superiors appointed over them." No note of special clarification existed for situations like that confronted by Abbott, and thus, as Thayer himself later observed, "knowing Steele to be my superior officer, [he] obeyed the order."¹⁹⁰

The problems arising from this rigid adherence to doctrine were exacerbated by a series of erroneous suppositions resulting from a total breakdown of command and control once Thayer's brigade came under fire. The first of these was the fault of Morgan. Receiving a desperate call for reinforcements from a Kentucky regiment on his far right just as the assault was underway, Morgan spent no effort investigating its legitimacy. Instead, wrongfully supposing it to be authentic, he promptly asked Steele "to turn part of the troops a little farther to the right." Instead of asking for clarification, Steele halted Abbott and ordered the 30th "a little to the right, supposing the object of this was to facilitate the crossing of the troops over the bayou by preventing them from all huddling into the same place." This supposition, of course, was also incorrect. Meanwhile, Thayer urged his column on from its head until ordering Williamson to deploy the 4th as skirmishers while he brought the rest of his brigade into line. Only then turning around for the first time, his heart sunk. "I had supposed that five regiments were following me," he later wrote, admitting his own disastrously mistaken supposition.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ *Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1861* (Philadelphia: J. G. L. Brown, 1861), 9; Thayer to 13th Illinois, Sep. 18, 1891, *Thirteenth Illinois*, 255.

¹⁹¹ "Report of Brig. Gen. Frederick Steele," Jan. 3, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 652; Thayer to 13th Illinois, Sep. 18, 1891,

Rushing through the corn stubble as sheets of bullets and canister tore through their battered ranks, the forward edges of what was left of Blair's swarm eventually made it to the slight cover of the shattered copse of willows. Doing their best to keep up, a handful of surviving Missourians joined those from the 13th Illinois, but not before three successive color bearers were shot down before reaching the cover of the trees. Finally, the Missourian flag was abandoned. "Utterly exhausted," a correspondent watching from the batteries observed, "they halted for the supporting columns. None came." When an exhausted Blair finally returned from his unsuccessful attempt to find support, he was forced to accept the fact that "there was no hope of support from any quarter," and ordered the survivors to fall back. "This we did in the same manner we advanced," one Illinoisan recalled, "every man for himself." Hoping to cover their retreat, Federal batteries opened in an effort to silence the Rebel guns, but several of their shells fell short. "They were thus literally hemmed in by a wall of fire, which consumed them as the flames consume the dry grass of the prairies," a horrified journalist lamented. Instead of risking the deadly passage back to the bayou, many of the survivors surrendered to counterattacking Rebels. Finally following appropriately behind his shattered brigade, Blair was one of the last off the field, his uniform caked from head to toe in mud with "a corn-husk clinging to his saber." Immediately calling for a horse, "with a countenance luminous with despair," he mounted and rode off to find Steele. "Who is that officer?" someone asked. "That is Blair," a reply came. "The last man to leave the hill."¹⁹²

Thirteenth Illinois, 257.

¹⁹² "The Vicksburg Failure," *New York Times*, Jan. 19, 1863; "The Battle of Chickasaw Bayou," *New York Herald*, Jan. 18, 1863; Wilson E. Chapel [13 IL] Journals, Northern Illinois University Digital Library, <http://digital.lib.niu.edu>; "From Vicksburg," *Chicago Times*, Dec. 30, 1862.

Before the war, most military theorists prophesied that the increased range and accuracy of rifled muskets and artillery would render massed frontal assaults all but completely suicidal. Any mass of men boldly charging across open ground would inevitably be destroyed in detail and eroded by the long-range fire of a defender long before even approaching their objective, professionals argued. This tactic, leveraging the distinct technological advantages of modern rifled weaponry, constituted an attritional defense.¹⁹³ If a defender could dissolve an attacking force with a combination of obstacles and fire as it approached, he could rob it of its vital mass and render it harmless upon its final arrival at the point of attack. The bloody failures of Blair's and Thayer's brigades seemed to bear this out.

The key to any frontal bayonet charge was to deliver an overwhelming mass of men onto a weak portion of an enemy line, so as to physically punch a hole through the defenders. Brigades usually made such an attack arrayed in at least two rows of regimental battle lines known as an "assault column." The formation anticipated a breach caused by the front-rank regiments which could be promptly exploited by those following behind. Additional units held in reserve could likewise be fed "into the breach" in order to further capitalize on any breakthrough. The key to success in making an assault against an opponent relying upon an attritional defense was ensuring maximal speed of forward momentum (so as to reduce time under fire) and maintaining coordination with adjacent formations as they endured the inevitable storm of lead cutting across "no man's land." Whereas vicious terrain had robbed both Blair and Thayer of the first of these prerequisites, slowing their advance and giving Rebel gunners and infantry more

¹⁹³ Brent Nosworthy, *The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 40-60; Brett Gibbons, *The Destroying Angel: The Rifle-Musket as the First Modern Infantry Weapon* (Brett A. Gibbons, 2019); It was this very defense that *avant-garde* Zouave tactics were intended to overcome.

time to erode their assaulting lines, their own inexperience and individual predispositions had undermined the second. Only speed and coordination could ensure that an attacking force fell upon its objective with a force superior to that defending it.¹⁹⁴ Otherwise, attackers would inevitably be destroyed in detail, just as the *antebellum* prophesies had foretold.

In any case, the greater the aggregate numbers within an assault column the better. Losses sustained while enroute to an objective were damaging to an extent proportionate to the respective size and condition of the assaulting and defending forces. Circumstance and recent experience had significantly undermined both brigades in these regards. While Blair's and Thayer's new regiments had originally boasted some of the highest numbers present for duty in Sherman's army, a week-long passage aboard cramped disease-infested steamers, days of campaigning unprotected through the frigid rain and dropping temperatures in the Yazoo bottoms, and the fierce "sharp-shooting tournament" that raged along the bayou rapidly robbed the men of their stamina, health, and morale. By the time both brigadiers received their orders from Sherman's headquarters to prepare for the main assault, their commands were in the worst condition they had yet reached since disembarking onto the Mississippi mud. Indeed, Sherman's disregard for these human factors when planning the assault was perhaps the most damning evidence of his lack of attention to nuance within his new corps.

Beyond a small working detail drawn by Stuart from the 116th Illinois to clear obstructions barring access to the sandbar on Sherman's right the night prior to the assault, Giles Smith's brigade had remained in reserve throughout the three previous days of operations. From their position in the division column behind Stuart's line, much of the battle thus far had only

¹⁹⁴ Nosworthy, *The Bloody Crucible of Courage*, 599-607; Arthur Lockwood Wagner, *Organization and Tactics* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Co., 1906), 63.

revealed itself to them in the form of artillery teams rushing by on their way to the front and the sound of rattling musketry filtering back. Henry Bear of the 116th Illinois intuited that the division was “feeling for his [the enemy's flank]” after the first day's approach march, and assumed the brigade would “go for them in the morning.” Bear and his comrades could “hear the cannon roar very heavy” to their front and left. The Rebels were evidently “on a larg[e] hill this side of the town [Vicksburg] with rifle pits and heavy fortifications [sic] scattered ev[e]ry where.” As more rumors filtered back to the regiment, the situation at hand seemed more and more daunting. “They have a heavy force here,” Bear noted in his running commentary, adding that: “They will be hard to whip here.”¹⁹⁵ More rumors came to the brigade that night, including one that startled Smith's Regulars, suggesting Rebel cavalry was sallying across a bridge to their front and riding down upon the unprepared line in the darkness. Dawn, of course, would prove that there was no Rebel cavalry. It would also prove, far more vividly, that there was no bridge.¹⁹⁶

By the morning of Sherman's planned main assault, even privates like Bear had come to the conclusion that “Gen Grant is not here yet and may not get here.” The sound of artillery and rifle fire to the front had increased markedly in intensity and the anxious Suckers “feel the time has come for a great battle” into which they “may be called in any moment.”¹⁹⁷ When their severely wounded and deeply beloved division commander was carried past on the evacuation route to the boats, the seriousness of the situation was underlined further. Though having known him for but a short time, the green Illinoisans sensed the passion their brother regiments

¹⁹⁵ Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, Wayne C. Temple, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Henry C. Bear* (Harrogate: Lincoln Memorial University Press, 1961), 23.

¹⁹⁶ “General Sherman and His Old Regiment,” *The Soldier's Casket*, Vol. 1, 10, October 1865, 631.

¹⁹⁷ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 23.

maintained for Morgan Smith. His wounding “threw a damper on the whole army,” Bear noted.¹⁹⁸

At some point during the division's “sharp-shooting tournament” Giles Smith, no doubt significantly shaken by his brother's plight, joined Lt. Col. James Blood of the 6th Missouri in a personal reconnaissance of the ground he anticipated moving the brigade onto once inevitably ordered to relieve Stuart at the sandbar. What he saw was not inspiring. “I found, with the exception of some fallen timber close down to the bank, a comparatively dry and unobstructed crossing until the opposite bank was gained,” he noted, “which was found to be from 20 to 25 feet high and very steep.” Provided a force could conceivably make it across and over the levee, they would be forced to contend with an enemy of unknown size and character, as the Rebels opposite the division were “so securely posted that their existence there in force was not known,” he later reported. Although a heavy skirmish fire had been kept up over the entire course of the day, none could be absolutely certain that the force confronting them was comparable in size to their own. Regardless, however, as Smith noted, the sandbar itself “was from 60 to 80 yards in length and only wide enough for a regiment to march by the flank,” meaning that numbers in such a scenario would be of little tactical value.¹⁹⁹

Nevertheless, early on the morning of December 29, after digesting Sherman's assault orders for the entire army the previous evening, temporary acting division commander Brig. Gen. A. J. Smith ordered Giles Smith's fresh brigade forward to relieve Stuart, and prepare “to cross the bayou and gain the hills on the opposite side.”²⁰⁰ Accordingly, Smith deployed his brigade in

¹⁹⁸ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 24.

¹⁹⁹ “Report of Giles A. Smith,” Jan. 5, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 633.

²⁰⁰ Smith's *OR* Report, 633.

line of battle from right to left: 6th Missouri, 8th Missouri (“American Zouaves”), 116th Illinois, and 13th U.S. Regulars, and moved forward to relieve Stuart, who left the relatively fresh veterans of the 57th Ohio scattered behind cover along the bayou to continue their sharpshooting during the assault.²⁰¹ Along with these Buckeyes, Smith deployed his yet raw Regular recruits to add their own sharpshooting to the brigade's base of suppressive fire. Anxious to take on live Rebels for the first time, the 13th U.S. rushed quickly into position in their four-man skirmish teams. Major Daniel Chase, a long-service professional soldier then commanding the Regulars, “instead of saying '*Go* in boys,' and making himself general file-closer to his men,” one Regular remembered, “always used to say '*Come* on, boys; follow me,” and they did, deploying “close down to the bank” behind what cover they could find, and joining the Ohioans in skimming the top of the levee at will whenever Rebel heads showed themselves.²⁰² Bear and the 116th Illinois, along with Smith's beloved Zouaves, were deployed in column down the road – Bear referred to it as “in a string” – in preparation to exploit any breach.²⁰³

In plotting his attack, Smith showed the unmistakable influence of his brother's conservative Zouave-style tactical philosophy, as well as the many lessons learned at Donelson, Shiloh, and Corinth that had each engendered an especial concern for strictly and efficiently limiting the number of troops placed into harm's way. Instead of boldly rushing a massed column over the bar and carrying the levee with cold steel in popular pictorial fashion, he opted to open the assault by sending only a single company of Blood's Missourians, along with “a working party of 20 men” to “cross and try to construct a road up the [opposite] bank.” Once the men had

²⁰¹ Smith's *OR* Report, 633.

²⁰² “General Sherman and His Old Regiment,” *The Soldier's Casket*, Vol. 1, 10, October 1865, 631.

²⁰³ Giles Smith *OR* Report, 631.; Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 23-24.

rushed across the sandbar to the relative safety of the opposite bank under the covering fire of their comrades dispersed as skirmishers, they would begin to undermine the levee so as to collapse part of it into the bayou and create a rude ramp which the remainder of the regiment – and then brigade – could use to rush over the steep embankment in the manner of a breach. After Blood had hurried his Missourians over the bar and through the breach, the veteran Zouaves would follow, followed by the green 116th Illinois and the equally green Regulars. All of this would unfold in sequence at Sherman's prescribed signal for the army's main assault: “heavy firing from General Morgan's division,” Smith later reported.²⁰⁴

Unlike with Frank Blair's and John Thayer's massed frontal assaults on Sherman's left, effecting these dispositions and setting the attack in motion marked the real limits of Smith's ability to directly impact the engagement via his personal leadership. Presumably, if Blood's spearhead was successful in creating a breach, he planned to lead the brigade across the sandbar and over the levee in person, but for now all he could do was anxiously observe the prosecution of his plans through a looking glass from cover along the bayou bank. To be sure, his ability to provide for eventualities by adaptation was far greater than that of a division or army commander. Ordering additional weight onto the point of attack could be accomplished fairly simply, but in the absence of a breach such a deployment could be disastrous. Ultimately, any quick adjustments to the tip of his spear, any micromanagement of the elements of his command in contact with the enemy, remained mostly out of his grasp.

Even from his position, Bear could see clearly how the few obstructions still blocking the route to the sandbar extended to within 60 yards of the Rebel riflemen, who were ensconced behind the levee along the opposite bank, and that after clearing these “there was [still] a

²⁰⁴ Giles Smith *OR* Report, 631.

distance of [another] Sixty yards open space before we could get to their bre[a]st works which was nothing more than the levee.” The single narrow approach would mean that “their whole fire could be centered [on the attackers], and we had to file through just as if we war [sic] going through a gate.” Even with most of the brigade attempting “to pick them off as they stuck their heads up to shoot as our men crossed the Bayou,” the maneuver would be “a hazardous undertaking sure.”²⁰⁵

In many ways the 6th Missouri was a natural choice to lead the attack. Smith had assigned the regiment to the far right flank of the brigade line, placing it in the lead of any column stepping off with the customary “by the right flank” – an order running counter to best practice in the *antebellum* Army but straight-forward enough that volunteers could easily understand it. Precisely why Smith had chosen to anchor his right with the Missourians is unclear. As with every regiment in Sherman's command, Blood's cohort was markedly understrength due to the long-term attritional effects of 19 months spent in uniform, mostly hunting guerillas, combined with the miserable conditions recently faced, first packed aboard the transports, then sopping wet and freezing in the swamps. Though unfortunately the regimental morning reports from December 29 do not survive, fragments of several company-level reports are extant, their extrapolated average suggesting that the regiment probably had a fighting strength of about 500 men that day. This made them the largest “old” regiment in the brigade of probably somewhere near 2,000 men in total. From front to rear, the regiment in column, if tightly dressed, would have stretched over 150 yards – exceeding the width of the bayou by more than a hundred yards. If launched splashing across the water before a clear breach was affected, the narrow band of cover provided by the levee on the south bank would force the regiment to

²⁰⁵ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 23.

spread out further, necessitating at least 250 yards of muddy bayou silt in which to crowd for survival. Ideally, the work detail would be able to dig through the levee and effect a gap wide enough to exploit with an assault. At minimum, it needed to erode or undermine the bank, which was estimated at about 12 feet high, before there was any hope of an attacking column preventing itself from being trapped under fire at the steep levee's base like an attacking Medieval army caught in the *meurtrière* of a castle gateway.²⁰⁶

Though now less than half its original strength, the 6th remained a distinctive component of Smith's brigade. Nearly half of its original enlistees were born abroad, most in Ireland. This made the regiment by far the most proportionately Irish command in the division. While probably playing little part in Smith's decision to assign the regiment to the most labor-intensive portion of the attack, the association of thankless, dangerous, and backbreaking work with the kinds of lower-class Irish immigrants that filled Blood's ranks was widespread in mid-century American society. The command did not enjoy a disproportionate number of recruits from peacetime technical trades like engineering, but in fact its original enlistees hailed from an array of different non-agricultural occupations second only in scope and diversity to the Zouaves. Granted, little in the way of technical skill would be required in the feverish spadework ahead.²⁰⁷

When the guns first became audible on the left, the Missourian spearhead detail set out on its deadly mission. Regulars and Ohioans redoubled their fire on the top of the levee as the men debouched from the cover of the trees onto the open sandbar and rushed for their lives to the cover of the opposite bank. Rebel balls immediately filled the crisp air. Despite the protective blanket of fire, several never made it. Those who did immediately began to dig away at the levee.

²⁰⁶ 6th Missouri Company Morning Reports (Fragments), 6th Missouri Regimental Books, RG 94, NARA.

²⁰⁷ 6th Missouri Descriptive Rolls, 6th Missouri Regimental Books, RG 94, NARA.

Enemy rounds, several fired blindly over the levee parapet, wildly overshot their mark and sped balls into the brush near Bear and the anxiously waiting 116th Illinois. “We all fell to our bellies,” he remembered.²⁰⁸

Watching the working party struggle against the odds to erode the levee before being discovered and eradicated by the Rebels immediately above them behind the parapet, Smith “discovered a narrow, winding path up the opposite bank about 100 yards to the left and sufficiently wide for 2 men to march abreast.” This would do in a pinch. “I immediately ordered the Sixth to cross,” he reported, and so they did.²⁰⁹ At its head, Blood led his loyal guerrilla hunters in a rush across the bar to the relative cover of the levee embankment, halting while struggling to find the path identified by their brigadier. “The balls played fine Music around our ears,” John Mains of the regiment later wrote. “They Had breastworks and we Had none [but] we gave them the Best we know how.”²¹⁰ As Blood searched for the path, the working party continued to dig feverishly, knowing that the Rebels now knew full well what was happening. When a spent ball from a Rebel musket slapped into Blood's chest and injured him “considerably,” the officer required the assistance of two other Missourians to so much as remain on his feet, but refused to leave his regiment.²¹¹ Worse yet, when word finally made it across the Rebel line that an entire Yankee regiment was trapped under the levee embankment, all hell broke loose. Mains was close enough to hear the Rebels screaming about “the damned yankee sons of bitches” as several held their rifles vertically over the top of the levee and fired blindly

²⁰⁸ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 274; Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 23-24.

²⁰⁹ Smith's *OR* Report, 634.

²¹⁰ John B. Mains [6 MO], Jan. 20, 1863, John Mains Letters, SHSM Rolla.

²¹¹ Smith's *OR* Report, 634.

downward into the throng to deadly effect. Others tossed cornbread to mock the attackers dying below.²¹²

Unable to respond in kind, members of the working party tried to slap at the enemy muzzles with their spades while others attempted to “shoot the end of their guns off[f],” but the slaughter continued unabated.²¹³ After having poured in a rapid fire of shell with uncut fuze “for fear of endangering the infantry in front” for an hour as the working party mined the levee, Captain Peter Woods's supporting Illinoisan battery silenced so as to prevent committing fratricide.²¹⁴ This left it to small arms alone to suppress the Rebel defenses, which very quickly brought their own erstwhile silent artillery batteries back into action. Unfortunately, attempting to skim the parapet with rifle balls without striking their cowering comrades left a narrow band of only several feet above the heads of the Missourians into which suppressive fire could safely be aimed. Inevitably, probably most especially from the muzzles of the inexperienced Regulars, many shots fell short, wounding and even killing their brothers in arms. “We could hear them exclaim for to 'shoot higher, for God's sake – shoot higher!’” one Ohioan on the north bank vividly remembered. Hearing these desperate cries, Rebel voices from behind the levee sardonically screamed to instead “Shute Low[er]!”²¹⁵ Watching the desperate episode unfold in front of them, within 80 yards but unable to fire “for fear of hitting our men,” Bear could only

²¹² Mains [6 MO], Jan. 20, 1863; Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 24.

²¹³ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 24.

²¹⁴ “Report of Capt. Peter P. Wood,” Jan. 16, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 628.

²¹⁵ George Browning [54 OH] to Wife, Jan. 2, 1863, George W. Browning Papers, John L. Nau Civil War Collection, Houston, Texas.

lament that it “was hard to see the brave boys of the Sixth Missouri die,” taking solace in the fact that “those that are dead are out of their misery.”²¹⁶

From Giles Smith's position on the north bank, he could tell the Rebels “were now being heavily re-enforced,” and a “battery of four guns was placed not over 40 yards from where we were digging through the levee.” To send any further regiments across would clearly have only contributed to the slaughter. “To attempt a charge up such a defended position in two ranks I considered utterly impracticable,” he later reported, and thus at that moment his actions focused not on forcing a breach, but on effecting the withdrawal of Blood's embattled Missourians before they were wholly exterminated. His ability to identify the contingency, and take immediate action to address it stood in sharp contrast to Blair's and Thayer's impetuosity on Sherman's left. Instead of frantically wandering the battlefield in search of support, he calmly ordered the Zouaves into the brush alongside the Regulars and Ohioans as sharpshooters to contribute further weight to the covering suppressive fire.²¹⁷ The Illinoisans he left on their bellies. “I wish you folks at home could have seen the 116th hug the ground for more than half a day,” Bear later commented. “It would make you laugh sure but there was no fun in it. We did not dare stick our heads up.”²¹⁸ Overshot enemy rounds landed everywhere nearby. “Wonder full [sic] to relate the balls did not kill any of us,” he wrote. “I cant tell how it came for they [s]truck all around, right in front of my head and over our backs into the trees and bushes.” One spent buckshot from a Rebel shotgun “hit me on the leg but did not hurt me,” he explained. Another cut through a

²¹⁶ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 24.

²¹⁷ Smith's *OR* Report, 634; Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 274-275.

²¹⁸ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 4, 1863, 26.

comrade's overcoat “just missing a fellows head.” While it was technically the rear, Bear found it “a hot place sure.”²¹⁹

As the afternoon turned to evening and the sounds of battle on the left died down, it began to rain.²²⁰ The added weight and accurate fire of the Zouaves to the base of fire temporarily muted much of the Rebel willingness to harass the traumatized Missourians at the base of the levee, but extraction was still out of the question even in the fading daylight. Sending an order across to Blood to return under cover of darkness, Smith ordered the entire line to redouble its fire again at dusk in order to enable the recrossing once the sun dipped below the trees. With the Zouaves “firing as hard as they could,” Bear wrote, the survivors eventually made their way back across the sandbar in small squads, Blood along with them supported by two of his men.²²¹ The regiment had lost 14 killed and 43 wounded, including two officers, one dead and another, Blood, wounded.²²² Providing covering fire had not been without its dangers. The Regulars sustained their first combat death along with twelve men wounded as they fired on the levee, while the Zouaves, despite their brief tenure on the line, suffered three wounds. Even Bear's 116th, though mostly superficial, sustained five men lightly wounded. In total, Smith's brigade had sustained 78 casualties during the assault – 15 of whom were dead. The brigade withdrew from the woods guarding the crossing and moved back about a hundred yards through a driving rain in the dark to join the rest of the division. They were exhausted, demoralized, and

²¹⁹ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 3, 1863, 24.

²²⁰ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 4, 1863, 24.

²²¹ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 3, 1863, 24.

²²² “Return of Casualties in the Union forces,” Jan. 3, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 625.

soaked. “We stuck our guns, our bayonets, in the ground,” Bear remembered, “and sat down against trees till morning.”²²³

That evening and well into the next day a frigid rain mercilessly pelted the survivors as they huddled still shelterless around small fires authorized only if lit well to the rear of the picket lines. While individual efforts to retrieve dead or wounded comrades continued all evening and into the morning hours, mutual suspicion on both sides prevented any formal ceasefire for another two days. In the meantime, Sherman and Admiral David D. Porter handcrafted a daring and covert maneuver whereby Steele's half-battered division alongside Giles Smith's brigade would silently disengage from the front, embark aboard transports in the darkness of New Year's Eve, and be deposited immediately under the heavy Rebel guns a short distance up the Yazoo at Drumgould's Bluffs to seize the same at bayonet-point. If successful, the operation would have significantly threatened Vicksburg's northern defenses and finally given the expedition access to the desperately sought-after Vicksburg road. Perhaps fortunately, thick fog in the early morning hours of New Year's Day forced a cancellation of the plan before the flotilla could even get completely underway. Knowing full well that the army would find itself adrift in a veritable lake instead of merely mired in muddy bottomlands if rain continued, Sherman finally conceded defeat and the army withdrew and reembarked upon the transports.²²⁴

As supplies were hauled hurriedly back onto the steamers, Sherman and his staff received word from Porter that an irate Maj. Gen. John McClelland had just arrived from Memphis with a personal note from President Lincoln guaranteeing him command of the entire expedition.

²²³ “Return of Casualties,” *OR*, I:17, I, 625; Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 24.

²²⁴ Seay [32 MO] Diary, Dec. 30, 1862, 16; S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 4, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City; *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 196; Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 281-283.

Though irritated, Sherman was willing to concede the point and handed authority over to the political general. The two agreed that the army should withdraw from the Yazoo and regroup nearby in preparation for and contemplation of the next move to reopen the river to Northern commerce. Clearly, continued frontal assaults against the Walnut Hills were not promising. When word arrived that the *Silver Wave*, a Federal mail packet, had been captured by Rebel forces up-river and hauled to Fort Hindman near Arkansas Post on the Arkansas River, both men saw an opportunity. Both recognized that a victory, however minor, was badly needed following the demoralizing repulse the army had just suffered. The vast numerical advantage they would enjoy in attacking the fort's reportedly meager garrison would make such a victory quick and easy by comparison to the struggle through which the army had just passed. While the specifics of which officer ultimately hatched the plan remain contested, the flotilla departed enroute to Fort Hindman on January 3. Now in command of all four of Sherman's divisions, but still in ignorance of Grant's recent order formally reorganizing the army, McClelland dubbed the force the Army of the Mississippi, and divided it into two *corps d'armee* of two divisions apiece. In accordance with his wishes, Sherman was given command of his "old" Second Division and Steele's Fourth, now renamed the Second and First divisions respectively of Sherman's new Second Corps. The two remaining divisions comprised the First Corps under Morgan.²²⁵

Sherman turned his otherwise embarrassing replacement by a rank amateur into an opportunity to lay the groundwork for a formal army-level narrative of events even before sitting down to craft his official report of the battle for Grant. Issuing a statement through general orders, read to every exhausted company by orderly sergeants at roll call aboard the boats, he

²²⁵ Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 145-147; Stephen Ambrose, *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 111-112; Christopher C. Meyers, *Union General John A. McClelland and the Politics of Command* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010).

attempted to assist the myopic rank-and-file in making sense of what had just transpired while simultaneously trying to maintain some vestige of control over the conclusions they might reach amongst themselves. “We failed in accomplishing one great purpose of our movement — the capture of Vicksburg,” he explained, “but we were but a part of a whole. Ours was but one part of a combined movement, in which others were to assist.” He and they had been “on time,” but “unforeseen contingencies must have delayed the others.”²²⁶ One Illinoisan could not be sure “who the others were but I presume he means Grant,” he correctly surmised.²²⁷ The order explained Sherman's forceful pushing of the assault “as far as prudence would justify.” Many in formation must have scoffed aloud at this between coughing fits. Finding the Rebel defenses “too strong for our single column, we have drawn off in good order and in good spirits, ready for any new move.” McClernand had been chosen by President Lincoln, Sherman announced, in an awkward bid to lend his new superior legitimacy in the eyes of the dejected command. He felt the need to remind them, and probably himself, that the President “has the undoubted right to select his own agents,” and trusted “that all good officers and soldiers will give him the same hearty support and cheerful obedience they have hitherto given me.”²²⁸

Sherman's official explanation of events fell upon the freezing ears of soldiers who had, for the most part, already made up their minds as to what had happened, why, and who was at fault. Even so, these conclusions and the historical narratives they were embedded within tended to vary dramatically between regiments based on each unit's unique experiences during the week-long battle and tenure serving under Sherman's command – what historian John Keegan

²²⁶ G.O. #12, HQ RW 13 AC, Jan. 4, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 535.

²²⁷ Schuyler Coe [1 IL LA] to Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hicker, Jan. 29, 1863, Taylor's Battery, <http://taylors-battery.com>.

²²⁸ G.O. #12, HQ RW 13 AC, Jan. 4, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 535.

has called their “personal angle of vision.” The tangled terrain of the Yazoo bottomlands had not only mitigated against operational and tactical coordination, but also effectively carved the corps's experience of the contest into several distinctive “faces of battle,” each with its own narrative trajectory and moral.²²⁹

Dejection and defeatism, though widespread, were not by any means the exclusive themes of these narratives. Several, most especially junior officers, were already showing signs of a veteran’s aptitude for stoically absorbing reversals. Scribbling a quick note home as the fleet prowled northward, Colonel Kilby Smith was struck by laughter emanating from a group of officers playing cards nearby. It seemed remarkable to him that men, “whose lives, twenty-four hours ago, were not worth a rush, who have been in the imminent and deadly breach, [and] who have lost comrades and soldiers from their companies,” could so soon thereafter seem “entirely oblivious of the fact.”²³⁰ Of course they were not oblivious, but were learning that camaraderie could often prove a powerful salve for depression. Firm resolve could serve a similar purpose. “Wouldn’t it be nice to be there in our nice quiet home with you and the children, in place of here in the wet and noise and confusion,” Lieutenant Jacob Ritner, 25th Iowa, considered after narrating his recent experiences to his wife, adding that “yet I would rather stay here another six months than go back without taking Vicksburg.” Several of his company had fallen during the second day's fighting, and the moral value of Vicksburg’s capture to him thereby increased. “I hope we will never leave here till we take it,” he wrote.²³¹ He was not blind to the blatant

²²⁹ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 128; Nosworthy, *The Bloody Crucible of Courage*, 247.

²³⁰ T. Kilby Smith to Wife, Jan. 3, 1863, Walter George Smith, ed., *Life and Letters of Thomas Kilby Smith* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1898), 251-253.

²³¹ Jacob Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Jan. 3, 1863, Charles Larimer, ed., *Love and Valor* (Western Springs: Sigourney Press, 2000), 95.

mismanagement of operations at higher echelons, and admitted being “tired of the way we are treated and of the conduct of our leading men.” Even so, he was certain he “would have been a great deal more dissatisfied if I had remained at home.”²³²

Despite these bold assertions of resilience issuing from some, the vast majority of men in both divisions had had their fill. “I dont want to get in any hotter [place],” Henry Bear, 116th Illinois, admitted. “At least I want if I do to have a chance to Shoot too.”²³³ James Maxwell of the 127th Illinois agreed. “I hope I will never see another battle for I want the war to end as quick as possible,” he wrote to his sister. “I don’t care how they end it, only so it ends.” Maxwell grew increasingly jealous of his brother back home still working the fields. “Tell Benjamin I would like to be there a thrashing [threshing] with him,” he admitted. “I think I like thrashing better than soldiering and I’m not afraid to say so.” Both Bear and Maxwell insisted that while civilians may have thought they had some idea of a soldier’s life, they “don’t know anything about soldiering until they try it.” In truth, no outsider “can tell how much soldiers suffers on and near a battle field,” Bear explained. “You folk at home cant begin to tell what it is to be in such a place. I know I never thought it would be so.”²³⁴ For Maxwell’s part, “I advise never to enlist.”²³⁵

In Steele's division, unsurprisingly the most indignant were the survivors of Blair's battered brigade, who wasted no time in loudly proclaiming their outrage. Even as wounded and traumatized men still limped away from the shattered cornfield immediately after the repulse, a nearby *Chicago Tribune* correspondent overheard several "giving vent to extravagant charges of

²³² Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Jan. 7, 1863, *Love and Valor*; 98.

²³³ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1863, 24.

²³⁴ Bear [116 IL] to Parents, Jan. 3, 1863, 25-26.

²³⁵ James Maxwell [127 IL] to Sister, Jan. 5, 1863, Past Voices, <http://www.pastvoices.com/usa/max6.shtml>.

treason, jealousy, madness and folly in high places." Despite the confusion reigning amidst the assault it was painfully clear to all survivors that the effort had failed principally due to a gross deficiency of coordination. "The day was full of misfortunes," one later observed, adding plainly that "the divisions moved without concert of action." Despite grievous losses, his 13th Illinois had acquitted itself well for having undergone its baptism by fire under such trying circumstances. Of the 600 in the Illinoisan ranks that left the protection of the tree line at the beginning of the assault, only 423 remained in bivouac that night. "Participants at Pea Ridge and Shiloh say that no Regiment there was exposed to such an awful fire as we here," one young Sucker proudly wrote home.²³⁶

The debilitated spirits of the Pea Ridge veterans that filled the ranks of the mangled 4th Iowa could not be mended with such encomiums of unexampled valor. "We as yet have accomplished nothing," one infuriated Hawkeye lieutenant fumed after preparing the bodies of two of his company for burial. "What makes this so deplorable is that it was a useless sacrifice of life," he added, "and to tell the truth I am much discouraged & disheartened [that] our Gen[era]ls do not understand their business & do not appear to care for the loss of life no more than were we so many brutes." Gazing up for a moment at the miserable sodden boys littered around him in the mud he quickly added that indeed, "that we are." The sheer scale of the tragedy weighed heavily on the 4th Iowa. Prior to landing in the bottomlands, each company had lost an average of 32 of its original enlistees over the course of its service. Many of these had fallen dead or wounded in the fighting at Pea Ridge, where the regiment sustained even heavier casualties than at Chickasaw. Despite the reception of more than a hundred replacements at Helena, the unit still mustered less than half of its authorized strength. Most had departed with

²³⁶ Wilson E. Chapel [13 IL] Journals, Northern Illinois University Digital Library, <http://digital.lib.niu.edu>.

medical discharges due to disease or disability. While potentially debilitating, these administrative losses were far more palatable to leaders who cared deeply for their men. “I would rather loose [sic] five men by discharge than one by death,” one wrote.²³⁷

Thayer, their brigade commander, blamed Steele for the disaster due to his failure to inform him of his fateful impromptu order and Morgan for failing to drive his command out of the safety of the captured rifle pits.²³⁸ Supported properly, “he [Thayer] felt certain that he could have taken possession of the rebel batteries and held them until the other divisions of the army could come to his assistance,” one correspondent wrote. Steele blamed Morgan. Morgan blamed Sherman. Sherman blamed Morgan. Round and round the fingers were pointed both officially and unofficially for the rest of each officer’s lifetime and beyond. The only command relationship that was improved by the debacle was the bond formed between Thayer and Williamson. “The conduct of Colonel Williamson, his officers, and men through this trying ordeal is worthy of the highest praise,” Thayer noted in his report. Likewise, Williamson’s account took the opportunity to offer “the general commanding the brigade our earnest, heartfelt thanks, both for the part he took in the charge ... and for the manner in which he spoke of the action of the regiment in the field.” The two were spotted commiserating with each other and “crying like children over the result of their costly efforts” immediately after the repulse. When approached by a journalist looking for an interview, Thayer was too overcome with emotion to oblige. “Tears stood in his eyes, and his mingled grief and indignation so overcame him that he found it difficult to speak,” the reporter wrote. Mirroring the laments of his officers, Williamson

²³⁷ Henry Ankeny [4 IA] to Wife, Dec. 31, 1862, Henry Giese Ankeny Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

²³⁸ In fact, Morgan did not even accompany his single assaulting brigade across the bayou, instead remaining behind.

could only report that the heavy loss in his regiment was “doubly painful, as no advantage commensurate with the loss was obtained.”²³⁹

Outside of the 4th Iowa, the experience of Chickasaw Bayou was dramatically different for the remaining regiments of Thayer’s brigade. Though all of the command mourned the loss of their fellow Iowans, their bloody example caused many in the remaining units to quietly celebrate their accidental salvation. “We give God the praise, for he has preserved us amidst all dangers, and I feel like trusting him more in the future,” one member of the 9th Iowa remarked, while still admitting that “the present prospects before us are not so flattering.” Indeed, though spared any more than some light skirmishing during the assault following their disastrous diversion, the veterans of the regiment were not immune from the collective disparagement that infected the whole army. “The boys think there is much bad mismanagement, in the Commanding officers” the Iowan noted. The men had no choice but to “look to our superiors for examples, and in many cases, what do we see[?] ... Drunkenness, Profanity, and evil of all sorts,” he observed. Such men were unsuited to command, and the recent disaster was but additional evidence of the fact. “It was po[o]rly planned,” another Hawkeye succinctly noted.²⁴⁰

Even those of Hovey's brigade spared from the ill-fated assault fumed with anger against Sherman. “Gen. Sherman brought this army here a healthy determined lot of men who had every confidence that they could open this river before turning their faces north again,” Sewall Farwell, 31st Iowa, raged. Finding “an abrupt bluff” protected by “an almost impassable slough,” Sherman had foolishly opted to send “regiments there entirely unsupported by heavy guns or

²³⁹ “The Battle of Chickasaw Bayou,” *New York Herald*, Jan. 18, 1863; Thayer’s *OR* Report, 659; Sherman, *Memoirs*, 315; “Report of Col. James A. Williamson,” Dec. 30, 1862, *OR*, I:17, I, 660.

²⁴⁰ William T. Seaward [9 IA] Diary, Jan. 1, 1863, William Seaward Papers, SHSI Des Moines; Enos Whitacre [30 IA] to Sister, Jan. 26, 1863, Enos Whitacre Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

other regiments until the whole army became discouraged and old regiments refused to obey orders.” Then, as if that were not enough, “he beat a retreat without trying any other point.” Was it any surprise, Farwell wondered, that the army was now “discouraged by such management?” For his part, “if we are to meet with failure and reverses such as these given over to blind leaders and false,” he would far prefer “peace upon any terms” over “utter destruction.”²⁴¹

Those like Farwell, who had luckily avoided the costly assault of Blair's brigade heard only the hazy details of the attack from their friends in the brutalized 4th Iowa or from rumors accumulated elsewhere. Farwell knew only that the 4th had been “ordered up and made the attempt to take the batteries by a charge and were repulsed with heavy loss.” The 13th Illinois, as he understood it, had “also made the attempt and met with the same fate.” Vague allusions to “an Ohio Reg” — probably the 58th — having been captured almost to the last man frequented the grapevine.²⁴² Rumors freely circulated that the army had failed at Chickasaw because “our Generals didn't want to take it,” that particularly bad news had been received confidentially “by our Generals which is kept from the army,” that the Rebels had agreed to a ninety day armistice, or even that “we were taken from active operations so as to witness the effect of the Presidents [Emancipation] procla[ma]tion.”²⁴³ Others quickly realized the groundlessness of most news that reached the ranks. The men “have had no reliable news from the North or the East since we left Helena,” one Iowan remarked. “Here rumor succeeds rumor and no man can believe anything he hears.” Even as he penned these words he overheard talk that a Rebel column was approaching Nashville and that the flotilla was almost certainly headed that direction to relieve the city. “I

²⁴¹ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 4, 1863.

²⁴² Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 4, 1863.

²⁴³ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 4, 1863.

expect our next move will be to Detroit or some other point to prevent an invasion from Canada,” he added with some sarcasm.²⁴⁴

For the most part, members of regiments had only each other to probe for news or anecdotal reports of recent events. Most requisitioned civilian steamers in the flotilla were only large enough to hold a single infantry regiment with its panoply of supplies, thus, individual units found themselves isolated from one another after re-embarkation. On the rare occasion that soldiers from different brigades found themselves in a position to swap stories and cross-pollinate their internal regimental sensemaking processes, powerful transformations could result. Iowan friends and family in Thayer’s and Hovey’s brigades, occupying proximate positions along the line the evening following the bloody repulse at Chickasaw, wandered amongst one another through the frigid downpour searching for missing comrades and sharing stories as sporadic Rebel shells lit up the night sky. Survivors from nearby regiments “came around and told us how near they had come to being almost annihilated during the day and had barely escaped,” Farwell wrote. It was their understanding that the fortunate spared portions of Thayer’s brigade were to attempt another desperate assault in the morning, with Hovey’s regiments in support.²⁴⁵ This prospect was made all the more gut-wrenching when fugitives from other battered commands stumbled into the Iowan bivouac looking for their regiments, “telling how dreadfully they had been cut up in the fight & pronounced it impossible to take the heights in the way that had been tried,” Farwell recalled.²⁴⁶ Combined with the terrifying sights of that afternoon, these tales were altogether too much for the Hawkeyes. “We wondered why it was we

²⁴⁴ “From the Reserves,” R.P.S. [31 IA] to *Cedar Falls Gazette*, Jan. 5, 1863, published Jan. 23, 1863.

²⁴⁵ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

²⁴⁶ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 4, 1863.

were given over to such destruction as this,” Farwell remembered, “Why it was that wisdom had departed from our counsels, that our Generals were only competent to lead single regiments into ambuscades and between cross fires of artillery thereby destroying the army and accomplishing nothing.” Though having been miraculously spared from certain destruction, the men of Hovey’s brigade were not insulated from the despondency of the rest of the army. The lessons they derived from their experience in the Yazoo bottoms were colored by those of less fortunate units whose traumatic accounts deeply influenced the way in which they made sense of the event. Chief among these lessons was that “our Generals” were tactically incompetent, and not to be trusted in the future.²⁴⁷

The effects of these lessons on the regiments of Hovey’s command first became evident just prior to the aborted New Year’s Eve assault on the heavily fortified Drumgould’s Bluffs. Silently withdrawn from the bottoms and stealthily reembarked upon transports without so much as an inkling as to their destination, Farwell remembered how “all felt a sense of relief when they found the point of attack was to be changed.” This solace was immediately reconverted into pangs of anxiety when regimental commanders returned from a conference with Hovey and relayed his instructions to their lieutenants. The flotilla, with gunboat escort, would proceed up the Yazoo until coming under fire by the heavy Rebel batteries atop the bluffs. At that point, Steele’s division would land and “with unloaded guns and fixed bayonets [we] were to form ... into column of companies and as fast as formed, we were to charge at double quick upon the batteries,” Farwell remembered. “If any faltered or showed signs of running, those behind were to bayonet them on the spot.” Given the brigade’s total lack of trust in “our Generals” following the recent repulse, these orders were interpreted as veritable death sentences. “Many officers

²⁴⁷ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

quailed before such a prospect,” Farwell wrote, “men fainted away, pilots refused to guide the boats and were placed in the pilot house under guard and orders given that they be shot if they attempted to run from the post.” Privates were “instructed that the danger was as great in the rear as from the front, and that the heights must be taken if every man should fall.” One Iowan remembered how “every man whose bowels did not overcome his bravery, supposed that he had said his last prayer.” Even the veteran German officers of the 12th Missouri “brooded about what was going to become of us” while they “braced themselves up with whisky and steadied ‘file closers’ by the same means.” Another remembered only that the “prevalent feeling was that this was a ‘forlorn hope.’” While, fortunately, such a desperate affair was narrowly avoided due to prohibitively dense fog, the lack of efficacy in nearly every command of Steele's division had been put clearly on display. It was in large part the dispelling of such an insidious lack of confidence that motivated the army's bid to reverse its collective sense of success by overwhelming the threadbare Rebel garrison at Fort Hindman.²⁴⁸

Just as regiments which had experienced empirically distinctive versions of the battle crafted unique narratives of events and drew highly particular lessons from the same, Sherman and his staff came to their own conclusions, retrospectively evaluating the performance of the new corps and gauging the relative efficacy of ordering it to conduct similar maneuvers in the future. As far as Sherman was concerned the only “real fighting” had been the main assault, not the deadly “sharpshooting tournament” which had robbed the command of so many officers and men. Still, despite their valiant and bloody efforts, the amateurish performance of Blair's and

²⁴⁸ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863; “From the Reserves,” *Cedar Falls Gazette*, Jan. 23, 1863; Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, Jan. 3, 1863, *Yankee Fatherland*, 50; Willison [76 OH], *Reminiscences*, 39; Charles Dana Miller [76 OH], Stewart Bennet and Barbara Tillery, ed., *The Struggle for the Life of the Republic* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2004), 71.

Thayer's brigades disappointed him. "I am satisfied," he confided to Admiral Porter the day following the repulse, "had our troops been a little more experienced" the attack would have succeeded.²⁴⁹ Thus, even as most of those in the ranks of the flotilla independently determined that mismanagement in the upper echelons of the army, indeed by Sherman himself, was chiefly responsible for the painful defeat, he concluded that the amateur nature of his force was the real culprit. While eventually he appropriately accepted public blame for the disaster, privately "Cump" never ceased in his quest for scapegoats.

As the boats plowed northward toward Fort Hindman, orderly sergeants in each company took stock of their losses and obediently submitted casualty reports and strength returns up the chain of command. These eventually made their way to Sherman's headquarters aboard the *Forest Queen* in aggregated and much abbreviated form, providing him with a glance of the corps's strength and capabilities as it approached its next major challenge. Of the 1,776 casualties suffered by the army, half were sustained by Steele's and Stuart's divisions. Of these, 139 were killed, 569 wounded, and 183 captured. Losses were by no means distributed equally across the corps. More than three of every ten killed, wounded, and captured were from Blair's brigade. The four regiments accompanying him on the ill-fated assault each reembarked on the steamers having suffered the equivalent of two companies lost. At the same time, Blair's two remaining "new" regiments, both held out of the attack in reserve, suffered only two men wounded. The butcher's bill was even more inequitable within Thayer's brigade, where the traumatized 4th Iowa sustained a total of 112 casualties compared to the remaining total of 12 wounded across the rest of the brigade's four other infantry regiments. The disparity between Steele's and Stuart's divisions in terms of casualties was just as evident, with Steele's bloodied command accounting

²⁴⁹ WTS to Porter, Dec. 30, 1862, *OR*, I:17, II, 879

for 85% of the corps's losses at Chickasaw. Still, despite the pall of depression that hung over those regiments which had suffered the worst, the corps had only sacrificed slightly more than a single full regiment in the bottoms. Though present for duty numbers plummeted by the day as tired, exhausted, and miserable men finally succumbed to colds and more serious illnesses contracted under the cold rain, aggregated reports suggested that Sherman still retained most of the flesh and blood he had brought with him to the banks of the Yazoo.²⁵⁰

Just as his own quantitative-centric analysis of the command's capabilities prior to debarking from Memphis and Helena had dangerously ignored the nuanced cultural characteristics of his regiments, the morning reports that reached his floating headquarters in the aftermath of the Chickasaw disaster likewise failed to represent the invisible changes that the traumatic experience had wrought within his corps. Chickasaw represented the first lesson in the new corps's practical military education, as well as the foundation of its operational heritage and tactical culture. Though most of Sherman's veteran regiments carried with them the impress of prior campaigns into the mud of the Yazoo bottoms, the battle represented the first time all the many subordinate units of the corps had operated together under his direction. Both divisions had behaved well in accordance with the tactical cultures their commanding officers and regiments had evolved across their relatively brief histories under arms. Steele's only recently cobbled together brigades suffered predictably from a grievous lack of coordination only exacerbated by the nightmarish terrain of the bottoms and a tendency of their mostly inexperienced officers to fight in accordance with the "popular pictorial idea" of war. The severely wounded Smith's division, on the other hand, avoided such destruction (even if it failed in its primary objectives) through its customary conservative skirmish-centric approach to warfighting. While neither

²⁵⁰ "Return of Casualties in the Union forces," Jan. 3, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 625.

division could control what objectives it was assigned or what tactical situations it found itself confronting, their respective commanding officers and regiments applied their historically-derived tactical philosophies and unit cultures to the problems at hand with, given their distinctive histories, mostly unsurprising results. In the end, as Sherman succinctly put it in his somber report to Halleck, the army had “landed, assaulted, and failed.” Though he remained mostly aloof of the fact, the majority of those in the ranks of his new corps remained convinced that the incompetence of himself and his highest ranking lieutenants was the root cause of that failure. This lack of confidence in “our Generals” carried grave implications for the future. Although both Sherman and McClellan intended what they considered to be the all but inevitable forthcoming capture of Fort Hindman to bolster the command's sagging morale and confidence, if the outnumbered Rebels chose to put up a fight instead of promptly capitulating, their regiments would have to earn their psychological redemption with sweat and blood. Moreover, just as past experiences and lessons learned in previous campaigns had informed the operational behavior of the veteran half of the corps at Chickasaw, so too would the command's nightmarish experiences in the bottomlands inevitably affect its behavior upon future fields.²⁵¹

²⁵¹ WTS to Halleck, Jan. 5, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 613.

CHAPTER III: “NO TROOPS THAT CAN BE MADE TO ASSAULT”: ARKANSAS POST

“I have yet seen no troops that can be made to assault.”

~ Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman, Jan. 16, 1863²⁵²

As each man of Steele's division blindly staggered forward at close intervals so as not to lose track of the shadowy form groping through the darkness in front of them, the eerie swamp was periodically lit up with flashes of light as the heavy guns of Porter's boats hammered away at the fort.²⁵³ Feeling through the chilly January darkness without direction in a “wet, low swamp, & thick timber” was a miserable undertaking. “Every two or three minutes” the column was forced to halt while the lead elements adjusted their trajectory, with only glimpses of the North Star through the canopy to guide them.²⁵⁴ “We were tired, our feet were wet, some of us hungry,” Sewall Farwell remembered. The 3rd Missouri, leading the division through the night, had to corduroy portions of the route in order for even infantry to pass. For some distance, the brigade's howitzers “had to be carried through on the shoulders of the men.” At one point, part of the column became detached from the rest of the division after mistakenly detouring to the right and had to backtrack.²⁵⁵ At another, the lead elements erroneously thought they had stumbled into

²⁵² WTS to Ellen Sherman, Jan. 16, 1863, *SCW*, 359.

²⁵³ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863, S. S. Farwell Papers, SHSI Iowa City; William T. Seaward Diary (1863) [9 IA], Jan. 10, 1863, William Seaward Papers, SHSI Des Moines, 13-14; Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, Jan. 10, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

²⁵⁴ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863; “Report of Brig. Gen. Charles E. Hovey,” *OR*, I:17, I, 765-766.

²⁵⁵ “Report of Brig. Gen. Charles E. Hovey,” *OR*, I:17, I, 765-766.

enemy pickets, more likely those from Second Division, countermarched back through the mud, and took a separate route further north. “So we went back & forth all night & no rest,” William Seaward, 9th Iowa, remarked. “Oh! Such roads, & such a night as we spent wandering about I hope I will never see again,” he added. “So tired & worn out, & many fell out & could not stand it.”²⁵⁶ For more than eight hours, Steele's division meandered through a “labyrinth of roads,” all of which Major Charles Miller, 76th Ohio, described as narrow and pockmarked with large pools of standing water. “The heavy artillery and transportation wagons made a perfect mortar bed of it,” he recalled, adding that the march “will ever be remembered by the weary supperless soldier.”²⁵⁷ The men exhausted from carrying the guns and the regimental and battery wagons mired in the muddy darkness, both Hovey and Thayer finally opted to abandon their trains and artillery, continuing through the night with footsore infantry only and leaving the battery commanders and wagoners to make their own inimitable way through the quagmire.²⁵⁸

Finally, at around two o'clock in the morning, the 3rd Missouri and 25th Iowa of Hovey's brigade emerged from the swampy woods onto comparatively dry ground filled with log cabins that marked the deserted winter quarters of Fort Hindman's Rebel garrison.²⁵⁹ The men were utterly drained. “My feet were wet and I was as near given out as I ever was,” Jacob Ritner, 25th Iowa, wrote home. “My back was so lame I could hardly walk.”²⁶⁰ Another Hawkeye considered

²⁵⁶ William T. Seaward [9 IA] Diary, Jan. 10, 1863, William Seaward Papers, SHSI Des Moines, 14-15.

²⁵⁷ W. R. Oake [26 IA], Stacy Dale Allen ed., *On the Skirmish Line Behind a Friendly Tree: The Civil War Memoirs of William Royal Oake* (Helena: Farcountry Press, 2006), 68; Miler [76 OH], *Struggle for the Life of the Republic*, 76.

²⁵⁸ Hovey's OR Report, 766; “Report of Brig. Gen. John M. Thayer,” *OR*, I:17, I, 769-770.

²⁵⁹ Hovey's OR Report, 765-766.

²⁶⁰ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, *Love and Valor*, Jan. 13, 1863, 101.

the march “one of the most tiresome, and disagreeable nights that I experienced in helping to put down the rebellion.”²⁶¹ A swift search of the abandoned cabins suggested that their intended occupants had only recently fled. Fresh meat, cornbread, “cooking and camp utensils of every kind were left scattered in every direction,” one Iowan observed.²⁶² Sewall Farwell, 31st Iowa, was struck by the “strange contrast” the comfortable Rebel cabins presented when compared to the living quarters his Hawkeyes had endured over the previous month aboard the crowded transports.²⁶³

Steele's aides dispersed and advised each regiment “to make ourselves as comfortable as we could without fires.”²⁶⁴ This prohibition of fires, as it had at Chickasaw, came hard to the exhausted freezing division, which had for the most part left their blankets and overcoats aboard the transports per Sherman's explicit orders. A few had learned from the misery at Chickasaw and ignored this order. Several Iowans of Farwell's company shared their contraband blankets with him, allowing for a little fitful sleep in the cold.²⁶⁵ Having no such luck, Ritner “got no sleep that night” as the bitter cold kept him awake despite his exhaustion. It did not help “not knowing but the rebels were in the brush close at hand,” he scribbled to his wife.²⁶⁶ There were only a few hours before daylight anyway “left the weary soldier to snatch a little sleep,” Miller of

²⁶¹ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 68.

²⁶² “Nelson” [25 IA] to *Burlington Weekly Hawk-Eye*, Jan. 31, 1863.

²⁶³ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

²⁶⁴ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

²⁶⁵ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

²⁶⁶ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Jan. 13, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 101.

the 76th Ohio recalled.²⁶⁷ Much of Thayer's brigade never made it to the Rebel cabins, halting instead to collapse in brush piles on the sides of the roadway.²⁶⁸

The Rebel garrison of Fort Hindman numbered less than 5,000 men to McClernand's nearly 32,000. Anticipating swift and easy victory, he had, upon the arrival of the flotilla at a landing some distance east of the bastion, ordered the army to disembark and move to surround the beleaguered fort by way of a circuitous route known to local slaves recruited as guides. Looking at his map, he envisioned in this sweeping envelopment the means by which "the enemy will be equally cut off from re-enforcements and escape, and must, together with his works and all his munitions of war, become a capture to our arms." If worse came to worse, however, the fort would be carried by the combined brute force of Porter's gunboats and an army-wide frontal assault.²⁶⁹

After disembarking on the morning of January 10, Sherman's two divisions had begun their approach march. With Steele in the lead, the corps stepped off from the landing area shortly before noon. At a crossroads just west of the landing, Steele's column turned northward on a country road presumed to meander through the swampy woods before debouching somewhere west of the enemy's first line of trenches. Stuart's division, on the other hand, maintained a northwestward bearing down the levee directly toward the impromptu Rebel works straddling the road, skirmishing with enemy pickets along the way. Giles Smith's Zouaves, leading the van as always though numbering only 290 effectives, swept forward in their customary manner "from

²⁶⁷ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle for the Life of the Republic*, 76.

²⁶⁸ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 68-69.

²⁶⁹ Michael B. Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign that Opened the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 149-150; "Reports of Maj. Gen. John A. McClernand," Jan. 11, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 702.

tree to tree,” driving Rebel pickets through the trees and beyond.²⁷⁰ “Steadily up the hill, sometimes crawling, again gliding behind trees and logs, went the Zouaves,” a correspondent observed.²⁷¹ The capture of these trenches was uneventful. Their Rebel occupants had long since fallen back to reinforce the fort's garrison. It did, however, eliminate any need for Steele to continue on his roundabout course, which was especially convenient given that the slave guides proved not in fact to know where they were going. Upon discovery of this, and after countermarching back through a dense swamp to the landing, Steele's tired and annoyed troops had only just started to prepare their rations for the night when orders arrived once again from Sherman to "take a northwesterly course" through the swamp in order to reach jumping off positions for an assault on the fort in the morning. Thus, the torture had begun.²⁷²

By dawn, though many in Steele's exhausted division were barely upright, McClelland's two corps and four divisions was finally in position for a massed assault. While Steele's command had been groping through the dark, Stuart's regiments shivered in their positions along the line while the Rebels used sharpened fence boards to cut a long trench complete with head-logs and a dense protective *abatis* extending westward from the fort to the woods that skirted a shallow creek, effectively preventing complete envelopment of the bastion. These new trenches would have to be taken from the Secessionists occupying them, along with the multiple batteries arrayed in support to their rear if the fort was to be surrounded as per McClelland's plan. As the sun began to rise on the horizon, the challenge confronted by both divisions was obvious at a

²⁷⁰ “Report of Col. Giles A. Smith,” Jan. 12, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 775-776; “THE VICTORY OF ARKANSAS POST,” Correspondent to *Daily Missouri Republican*, Jan. 12, 1863, Published Jan. 23, 1863.

²⁷¹ “THE VICTORY OF ARKANSAS POST,” Correspondent to *Daily Missouri Republican*, Jan. 12, 1863, Published Jan. 23, 1863.

²⁷² Hovey's *OR* Report, 766.

glance. Rebel flags studded the line, each representing one of eight regiments. Far from the bloodless coup he and McClelland had originally intended, Sherman's corps would once again have to launch a direct frontal assault in order to achieve its tactical objectives.²⁷³

The plan for overcoming this resistance was uninspiring to say the least. Relying on sheer mass and cold steel alone, McClelland intended to assault the fort and western pits simultaneously with the weight of no less than thirty-three infantry regiments and all the artillery he could bring to bear, supported from the river by the heavy guns of Porter's boats. After a punishing two-hour preliminary bombardment of the fort and outlying pits, the entire blue line would surge forward as one, striking the Rebel works at the same moment all along the line in order to neutralize the enemy's advantage of interior lines. While sound on paper, McClelland's plan dramatically underestimated the challenges of coordinating such a massive host and the inevitable deep contingency of battle, just as Sherman's at Chickasaw had before him. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it produced much the same outcome.²⁷⁴

While Blair's and Thayer's brigades had confronted attritional defensive tactics at Chickasaw that leveraged the increased range and accuracy of modern rifled weaponry to erode their attacking columns long before they reached the Rebel positions, exhaustive surveys of extant field reports conducted by historians Paddy Griffith, Brent Nosworthy, and Earl Hess instead suggest that, in the vast majority of assaults made during the war, defending infantry usually held their fire until an attacking formation came within about a hundred yards. While opening an engagement at close range gave up any potential advantages provided by the

²⁷³ Thomas W. Cutrer, *Theater of a Separate War: The Civil War West of the Mississippi River 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 162.

²⁷⁴ Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 151.

increased effective range of rifles, this tactic ensured both maximum accuracy and, most importantly, shock as a defender's volley slammed into a winded assault column. If well-timed, such a volley could so disorient and stun an attacker that his line might spontaneously reel and disintegrate, routing through supporting units to the rear and producing general pandemonium. Potentially decisive, a shock-reliant defense also entailed grave risk. Should the initial volley fail to produce sufficient shock to blunt an attacker's forward momentum, relatively little time remained to try again. Conversely, in order for any attack to succeed, an assaulting line had to absorb a defender's initial volley and continue forward at maximum speed, spilling over and into the enemy's works like a tidal wave. The secret, Griffith explains, "was the deliberate acceptance of a higher risk in order to achieve a more decisive result." It required "an unnatural response to fear."²⁷⁵

Every layer of an infantry regiment was instrumental during a charge. Commanders provided inspiration and guided their formations, company officers strove to repeat commands to the men above the din, sergeants maintained discipline from behind the ranks, and privates relied upon confidence in their leaders, each other, and their perceived probabilities of survival. Above all else, a regiment's members collectively needed to believe that they could successfully make and survive an attack in order to maximize their likelihood of doing so. This degree of shared self-confidence in a regiment's ability to succeed represented the unit's collective efficacy, and it was of greatest importance once the terrifying effects of enemy fire began to challenge the supposition. If a regiment could maintain its sense of efficacy and forward momentum through the crucible of an initial shock volley, the odds of a defender abandoning his position were

²⁷⁵ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 143; Nosworthy, *Bloody Crucible of Courage*, 599-601; Earl Hess, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat: Reality and Myth* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008).

relatively high. Attacking columns were almost never physically destroyed by a single ragged volley, no matter how short the range. Instead, it was the psychological effect of a shock volley that blunted forward momentum. In the same vein, rarely would hand-to-hand fighting ensue should an attacker successfully reach a defender's parapet. Bayonet charges functioned more as psychological weapons than as tools of physical coercion, frightening the enemy out of his position. Contrary to popular belief, they frequently proved effective.²⁷⁶

There came a time in every engagement, but most especially during frontal assaults, that historian Brent Nosworthy has termed the “penultimate moment,” when combatants on both sides experienced “the beginning of a thought or emotional process, such as panic or even more reasoned thoughts, such as the need to retire.” At this critical juncture, officers were well aware that “every incentive that can influence the actions of man” was necessary to sustain efficacy “even for a few moments longer [in order to] win the day.” The reception of a defender’s initial volley represented just such a moment for a winded charging regiment, and it was at this “penultimate moment” that a unit’s collective efficacy, shaped in large part by its particular history, could make all the difference.

The members of each regiment collectively encountered and experienced an engagement and its attendant penultimate moment within the specific context of their unit’s unique operational heritage. For those in the ranks, every engagement was but an episode in a wartime narrative all their own, shared among all their comrades within the unit but distinct from those of even adjacent regiments. Every regimental banner on a Civil War battlefield represented a distinctive story, a cohort with an individual personality, character, and culture borne of all the distinctive trials that had led it to that particular place in time and space, and in that form. While

²⁷⁶ Nosworthy, *Bloody Crucible of Courage*, 277.

individual soldiers likewise inevitably forged their own personal narratives of service that allowed them to make sense of their experiences, the nature of contemporary tactics and communal military life led to high degrees of near consensus among members of a single regiment as they made sense of events.

As Federal regiments endured successive traumatic episodes, the survivors inscribed the names of engagements upon the stripes of the unit's national flag, borne into battle alongside its regimental and state colors. This commemorative tradition represented more than a mere bid to inspire *esprit de corps*. When the men glanced upward at the ragged and torn standard of their regiment, they reflected upon a history of beloved friends lost, terror and carnage overcome, and learned strategies for mental resilience, physical survival, and tactical success. The place names themselves, though often replicated upon many banners throughout the army, represented very different things and invoked very different memories for each command, their semiotic character and value contingent entirely upon each unit's "personal angle of vision" and corresponding "face of battle" during each past engagement. Thus, as the regiments Sherman's brigades prepared themselves to meet this, their forthcoming trial by fire, they did so within the context of their own respective regimental narratives — a phenomenon that would play a powerful role in shaping both the manner in which they behaved in the crucial penultimate moment, and the ways in which the survivors made sense of the experience in its aftermath.²⁷⁷

For this reason, the careful and thoughtful arrangement of regiments within assaulting formations by commanders was of enormous importance. Some showed far more attention to detail than others. While officers could not possibly anticipate what precisely would befall a regiment or brigade once it headed into the fray, they could "stack the deck" in their favor if they

²⁷⁷ Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 128; Nosworthy, *Bloody Crucible of Courage*, 247.

played their cards right. Since success in all combat operations, most especially frontal assaults, was so heavily contingent upon psychological dynamics, it was of enormous importance that generals become aware of the diverse historical narratives that thrived within the regiments of their respective commands.

Still, even given exhaustive planning grounded in all but omniscient foresight, achieving the coordinated arrival of multiple attacking formations at their respective points of attack along a defensive line was far easier said than done. Sherman knew better than most that, “we cannot do as well on the ground as we can figure on paper.” While the terrain confronting the corps at Arkansas Post as it prepared for its assault appeared, at least in most cases, far more conducive to the maneuver than had the nightmarish amphitheater of carnage that was Chickasaw Bayou, the terrain and prospects arrayed before each of the three brigades chosen to spearhead the attack were markedly different, threatening to mercilessly dismantle the cohesion of the corps from the outset, just as it had along the Yazoo.²⁷⁸

At about noon on January 11, as a lengthy preliminary bombardment lifted and Sherman's batteries fell silent, Hovey's and Thayer's regiments of Steele's division came to their feet. “The enemy had ceased firing at us,” Farwell of the 31st Iowa later wrote, “but as soon as we raised, the shots were again sent whirring at us.” Although sporadic incoming Rebel artillery fire “created considerable excitement,” among the green levies, initially the Iowans had “no difficulty in keeping order in the ranks.”²⁷⁹ As the 500 veterans of the 76th Ohio rose up, Colonel Charles Woods and his staff took one last glance at the obstacles ahead. “The Rebel line of works could plainly be seen,” Adjutant Charles Miller remembered. “The ground was

²⁷⁸ WTS to Blair, Feb. 3, 1863, *OR*, I:17, II, 589.

²⁷⁹ John T. Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 23-24.

comparatively level and partly covered with timber to our right, but in our front there was little covering save some underbrush and deadened timber.”²⁸⁰ Though estimating that the regiment would have to pass over nearly 600 yards of open ground before reaching the enemy works, Woods finally decided it would be most prudent to dismount along with his staff, “and go into the charge on foot.”²⁸¹ Accordingly, he ordered his Ohioans to fix bayonets, and to “make the charge without firing a shot.” Emphasis had to be placed on maintaining forward momentum, and any halt to aim and fire would necessarily slow the velocity of the attack. “The prospect looked anything but inspiring and all felt that of necessity there must be fearful slaughter in our lines,” Miller remembered. While the regiment, along with the remainder of Hovey's brigade, had been spared the bloodshed at Chickasaw, Woods's veterans of Donelson and Shiloh knew well what was likely forthcoming. “Captain Strong came to me and said, 'Charlie, our chances for life in this affair are slim and anything we have on our persons that we don't wish to fall into the hands of the Rebels we better leave back with the knapsacks,’” he added. The regiment had already stacked their knapsacks to the rear of the battle line.²⁸² Strong also suggested the officers “leave our swords behind,” Miller recalled, “and, on first impulse, I was disposed to do so, but a second thought convinced me that it would be unsoldierly. So I told him that if we fell we ought to have our swords in our hands.”²⁸³

One of Steele's aides rode directly to Colonel Milo Smith's green 26th Iowa, at the front of Thayer's brigade, with orders to advance and “move upon the enemy's works,” William Oake

²⁸⁰ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle for the Life of the Republic*, 77.

²⁸¹ “Report of Col. Charles R. Woods,” Jan. 12, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 768; Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 77.

²⁸² Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 77.

²⁸³ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 77.

recalled. Smith “immediately placed himself at the head of the regiment, and gave the orders aloud.”²⁸⁴ From where Smith's regiment formed “the enemy's line of rifle pits ... were plainly visible,” Oake wrote. “The timber that had formerly covered the intervening space having been about all cut down by the enemy, thus giving them a good view of the column coming over that comparatively level stretch of ground.”²⁸⁵ Though level, the “thick underbrush” to the front of Thayer's brigade, as well as “the want of space for a front of the brigade,” necessitated that the brigadier advance his regiments initially in column. After the traumatic debacle at Chickasaw Bayou, such a necessity must have been difficult to swallow. Just as at Chickasaw, once through the worst of the nightmarish terrain, Thayer planned to deploy each of the regiments into line “as fast as we could get a front.”²⁸⁶ Having detached the bloodied veteran 4th and 9th Iowa to Blair's reserve out of mercy given their recent experience at Chickasaw (even though the latter had seen only light skirmishing), Thayer's brigade was led by two entirely green regiments: Smith's 26th and Lieutenant Colonel W. M. G. Torrence's 30th Iowa. “I gave direction [to the regiment] to follow up close by the right flank of the first battalion,” Torrence explained, “to form line of battle on its left, at a designated point if practicable, and, if not, to form line of battle in its rear, and advance as it advanced and halt as it halted, and in every move to act in conjunction with it.”²⁸⁷ He knew his rank and file remained almost entirely green, having been spared total destruction by Steele's error two weeks prior. If the chaotic and terrifying experience through which they were about to pass could be broken into smaller, more manageable tasks, they were

²⁸⁴ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 69.

²⁸⁵ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 69.

²⁸⁶ Thayer's *OR* Report, 769-770.

²⁸⁷ “Report of Lieut. Col. W. M. G. Torrence,” Jan. 13, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 770-771.

more likely to retain their forward momentum. That is, of course, provided that Smith's Iowans – themselves just as green – stayed on course.

“At a given signal,” Col. Francis Hassendeubel's 17th Missouri leading Hovey's brigade, comprised principally of German gymnasts from *Turnverein* across the Northern states, were ordered to spearhead the assault on Steele's right by advancing further south “through the woods along the bayou.” The Turners prided themselves on athleticism and marksmanship, both of which Hovey and Steele had been quick to perceive during the “sharp-shooting tournament” along the bayou at Chickasaw. Accordingly, the regiment quickly became the division's dedicated light infantry force, routinely used to screen its movements from the front and flanks and earning it the informal title of "Hassendeubel's sharpshooters." The Germans had likewise accumulated the most impressive record of achievement thus far during the war of any regiment in Hovey's new brigade. With their brother Germans of the 12th Missouri now detached to guard the brigade's supplies at the transports, the Turners were the only unit on the field in Hovey's command that had ever conducted a charge, having successfully assaulted the wavering Secessionist line on the second day at Pea Ridge. More recently, a brush by several companies with a contingent of Texas Rangers during the march to Helena had left several dead and the regiment fiercely embittered when word spread that most of the casualties had been slaughtered in cold blood after surrender and while begging for mercy.²⁸⁸

Behind the Turners, Hovey deployed Colonel Isaac Shepard's 3rd Missouri. Though also composed mostly of Germans, Shepard's command represented a much more ethnically diverse collection of men who did not always see eye to eye. The Irish and "American" contingent

²⁸⁸ Hovey's *OR* Report, 766-767; Robert G. Schultz, *The March to the River: From the Battle of Pea Ridge to Helena, Spring 1862* (Iowa City: Camp Pope Publishing, 2014), 216-217.

occasionally poked fun at the abysmal English of the regiment's Teutonic officers, sometimes even to the point of insubordination on the parade ground. Shepard himself had never personally seen combat. A Harvard man, Massachusetts native, and radical Republican, he had acquired some limited experience in drill during his brief antebellum command of the Boston militia. The experience netted him a position as Nathaniel Lyon's aide-de-camp at the battle of Wilson's Creek, but a kick from the general's horse had incapacitated him just prior to the dramatic contest that took Lyon's life. Since then, while a handful of the regiment's older members had been around long enough to remember a bloodless advance of three companies against fleeing Rebel cavalry at the battle of Carthage, most had never experienced combat. To be sure, they had conducted their fair share of long marches and chased bushwhackers from countless hideouts in the brush, but the ultimate crucible of battle had thus far evaded them.²⁸⁹

Fortunately, the protection of the veteran Turners to their front would shield Shepard's unblooded command from the impending storm of Rebel fire. They, in turn, would shield the even greener "fresh levies" of William Smyth's 31st Iowa following behind in support. A portly Irish lawyer, Smyth and his cohort represented the fruits of Lincoln's most recent call for volunteers. Under arms for less than six months, with the exception of a handful of veterans from older commands -- many of whom had spontaneously reported as "ill" and remained in the rear -- the regiment was barely more than a crowd of civilians with elementary instruction in drill. Even Smyth himself still had trouble remembering the proper commands on the parade field, occasionally having to rely on a low-toned inquiry to his only slightly more experienced adjutant: "Lieutenant, what shall I say?" He and his Hawkeyes looked upon the band of long-

²⁸⁹ Michael B. Ballard, *Grant at Vicksburg: The General and the Siege* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 70; Buegel [3 MO] Diary, 5, 15, 18-19.

service men formed to their front as hardened *grogards* by comparison, and focusing on following their lead would ease the terror of forthcoming events while providing opportunities to learn from observation. In the interest of everyone's safety, Hovey ordered Smyth's greenhorns not to fix bayonets or affix percussion caps to their loaded rifles, but rather to follow closely behind Shepard's line quietly until further orders. As the brigade moved forward, Smyth and his Iowans were not only participants in the drama, they were also carefully taking notes.²⁹⁰

Almost immediately after setting off through the woods on their approach, the foremost German skirmish teams “became hotly engaged.” Hassendeubel's command found itself “attacked on the flank” from the opposite bank of the bayou “much more violently than was anticipated,” prompting them to strengthen their skirmish line with the full weight of the whole German regiment. Spying a handful of Texan cavalry, their arch enemies, through the trees, the Turners quickly changed front to address the new threat and, in doing so, removed the protective coverage of their veteran experience from the brigade’s assault. Piling into a ravine for cover, the Turners began to ply their trade across the bayou. The remainder of the formation continued rushing forward through the trees. The adjustment to Hovey's front spontaneously made the inexperienced 3rd Missouri the lead element in his assault.²⁹¹

All across the line, the men of Steele's division screamed at the top of their lungs – yells “which were to be the signal for the gunboats to cease firing,” Farwell explained.²⁹² Shells slammed into the Arkansas mud as enemy batteries redoubled their efforts, but the Rebel infantry

²⁹⁰ Addison A. Stuart, *Iowa Colonels and Regiments: Being a History of Iowa Regiments in the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines: Mill & Company, 1865), 474; Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

²⁹¹ Hovey's *OR* Report, 766-767.

²⁹² Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

occupying the trenches to the front ominously held their fire.²⁹³ In the comparative open on Hovey's left, "with alacrity and with wild yells," Woods's 76th Ohio launched into a double quick toward the works, with Colonel George Stone's 25th Iowa following closely behind. Almost from the beginning "a tempest of canister and grape from the rebel batteries" tore through the brush and into the line. Very quickly, the still unabated exhaustion from the previous night's forced march through the swamp told on the strength of both regiments – most especially so with those who had become ill during or immediately after the hardships of Chickasaw and were now desperately trying to keep up with their brothers in arms. Adrenaline alone proved insufficient. "I was very week [sic] and they double quicked it about half [a] mile & I could not Keep up," Hawkeye Lieutenant Adoniram Withrow admitted.²⁹⁴ Another "started with the rest but the brush were [sic] so thick and I was so weak that I was soon left behind."²⁹⁵ Others who were not quite so physically ill also straggled. Oake, making the assault with the 26th Iowa, noticed "an old fashioned rail corncrib" that stood in the middle of the division's line of attack, behind which accumulated "skulkers from the different commands that had been ordered into battle." The terrified men "could not be shamed out of their place of supposed safety," he recalled.²⁹⁶

The major differences in terrain confronted by each of Steele's assault columns quickly dismantled the cohesion of his attack and carved the two brigades into three separate, if proximate, attacking pairs of regiments. As Thayer's column on the left moved through the heavy

²⁹³ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 69.

²⁹⁴ A. J. Withrow [25 IA] to Lib, A. J. Withrow Papers, UNC-SHC, Jan. 12, 1863.

²⁹⁵ Elisha Coon [25 IA] to Family, Jan. 13, 1863, Elisha Coon Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

²⁹⁶ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 69.

brush to their front attempting to find an opening wide enough for more than a single regiment to deploy into line, the 3rd Missouri and 31st Iowa on Hovey's far right struggled through the timber skirting the bayou at a snail's pace. At the same time, Woods's Ohioans and Stone's Iowans in between them, constituting Hovey's left, outpaced both wings due to the comparatively open terrain to their front.²⁹⁷ Thus the division inevitably fell upon the Rebel works in piecemeal fashion with disastrous results.

I. "So hot as to make it impossible"

Bolting unknowingly ahead of the remainder of the division, Woods's Ohioans suddenly became the tip of Steele's spear by default. It also meant that, as the foremost prong of the attack, they drew the concentrated fire of the enemy batteries and came into the range of Rebel infantry sooner than those on the division's wings.²⁹⁸ Though most of the 600 yards covered at the double-quick was over open fields, a thin belt of trees stood roughly 75 yards from the Rebel works.²⁹⁹ Just before and beyond the tree line, the enemy had constructed rude *abatis* out of "brush and fallen timber" in an effort to make the final approach to the only available cover exceptionally dangerous to any attacker.³⁰⁰ This combination of obstructions "considerably impeded the movements of the regiment," Woods noted. As the winded and now disheveled Ohioan formation reached the *abatis*, at about 250 yards the Rebel works finally awoke with a shock volley of small arms, grapeshot, and canister.³⁰¹ While not fired at sufficient range to

²⁹⁷ Hovey's *OR* Report, 766-767.

²⁹⁸ Hovey's *OR* Report, 766-767.

²⁹⁹ Wood's *OR* Report, 768.

³⁰⁰ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Jan. 13, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 102.

³⁰¹ Wood's *OR* Report, 768; Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 77-78.

constitute part of an attritional defense, the volley was also fired too early to produce ample “shock,” most especially because most of the poorly aimed Rebel rounds whizzed over the attacker's heads. Opening at such distance, however, allowed for a second try. After the Secessionists reloaded quickly, the next “fell plump into our lines,” Adjutant Miller lamented, “and made considerable havoc.”³⁰² More than a dozen Ohioans immediately fell dead and another 57 were wounded by the single fusillade – nearly 15% of the regiment's combat strength, “but the men kept straight on” Miller remembered.³⁰³ The veterans of many such ragged Rebel volleys at Donelson and Shiloh had learned that such an encounter was in fact survivable, and Woods's command safely endured its “penultimate moment.”

Conversely, twenty paces behind, the Hawkeyes of the 25th immediately dropped to the ground when the shooting began. One Iowan noticed how the men instinctively sought the “slight protection afforded by the stumps and brush,” and several of them nervously “commenced firing” at targets of opportunity against all orders, threatening the Ohioans still to their front.³⁰⁴ Noticing immediately that their supports had gone to ground in terror, the veterans were outraged that Stone's levies had “left us exposed to the concentrated fire of the Rebel regiments.” As the 76th now represented the lone regiment of the division still standing and visible along the forward edge of Steele's advance, they immediately attracted all Rebel fire within range. “About three regiments strong,” Woods reported, “opened a destructive fire of

³⁰² Wood's *OR* Report, 768; Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 77-78.

³⁰³ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 77-78.

³⁰⁴ “Nelson” [25 IA] to *Burlington Weekly Hawk-Eye*, Jan. 31, 1863.

musketry upon us from the front and right and left, extending on the left to the full extent of the range of their muskets [rifles].”³⁰⁵

Although an attacking regiment's success against a shock-reliant defense was principally contingent upon its resilient response to the impact of a defender's initial volley, the arrival of but a single lone regiment to an enemy parapet was itself of little real tactical value. A defender's line had to be confronted with attackers along the entirety of its frontage simultaneously. If columns arrived piecemeal, their foremost regiments would face not only the shock of a volley from the enemy to their immediate front, but also from enemy troops on both flanks for a distance of potentially hundreds of yards in either direction, pouring in a devastating enfilade fire. It was through this enfilading fire that the increased range of rifled muskets could make the greatest difference. Defenders finding themselves unchallenged to the front could contribute their fire to an attacker far distant with much greater accuracy when armed with rifles than with muskets. Should this bloody contingency occur, an attacker would find himself, as did Woods's Ohioans, confronted with both a (short-range) shock-reliant and (long-range) attritional defense simultaneously.

While much of the fire concentrated on Woods's beleaguered regiment was still mercilessly “too high,” enough of it found its mark to finally stall the forward momentum of the veterans. Recognizing that he had outpaced both Thayer to the left and the Missourians on his right, Woods still did his best to drive his Ohioans through the tree line and across the final 75 yards despite the heavy fire incoming from three sides. They would have none of it. As soon as the line reached the relative safety of the trees “the fire became so hot that the regiment faltered, but held its ground,” Woods recalled. Knowing full well they were unsupported, the men

³⁰⁵ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 77-78.

instinctively “all dropped on their faces,” Miller recalled.³⁰⁶ Woods still did his best to urge them on, to keep them moving forward. “Finding it impossible to push the regiment over the open ground,” he tried ordering them to fire “to give them confidence,” he explained. He was immediately struck by the result. “After the regiment opened fire not a man flinched.” The Buckeyes each fired multiple rounds from the prone behind the scant cover of the broken treeline, when Woods again tried to drive them forward, “but as soon as the men raised to move forward the fire was so hot as to make it impossible,” he reported.³⁰⁷

Finally accepting that the regiment was immovable, Woods's shifted his priorities from carrying the trenches to providing suppressive fire from the trees that might keep Rebel heads down long enough to allow adjacent units to drive home their own assaults. Though the head logs running along the tops of the Rebel pits covered the forms of the enemy infantry and made them a difficult target for prone riflemen even at close range, the Rebel batteries and their horses were clearly visible just beyond the trenches. Here was an opportunity. Woods "ordered the men to clear and silence the guns of the enemy in our front,” he reported, and the Buckeyes made short work of it.³⁰⁸ “Not a single shot was fired from their two Parrott guns in our immediate front,” Woods remarked, the rifle fire making the guns too dangerous to man and the killing of their horses rendering the heavy pieces immovable.³⁰⁹ An additional enemy gun “some distance to our left” observed actively engaging Thayer's or even Second Division's lines also drew Woods's attention, and thus a hand-picked squad of the regiment's “best marksmen were ordered

³⁰⁶ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 78; Woods's *OR* Report, 768-769.

³⁰⁷ Woods's *OR* Report, 768.

³⁰⁸ Woods's *OR* Report, 768.

³⁰⁹ Woods's *OR* Report, 768.

a little in advance,” Miller remembered, “and, while protecting themselves as best they could behind trees, picked off the gunners of the battery which they completely silenced.”³¹⁰ The remainder of the regiment continued “skimming the enemy's parapets with musket balls,” suppressing the Rebel infantry within and creating an opportunity for Stone's terrified Iowans to finally arise from their temporary cover at the abatis and rush forward to join their veteran comrades along the treeline where they laid down once more.³¹¹ From there, they joined in the target practice. “Some got where they could see something to Shoot at and Kept popping away,” one lieutenant remarked after the fight, “Others could not get a Sight & didnt Shoot.”³¹² A few particularly zealous Hawkeyes “fired forty or fifty Shots,” expending almost all of their ammunition.³¹³ All along the line junior officers were “yelling themselves hoarse, men Shouting” and “an incessant popping” added to the battle ambiance.³¹⁴

Leaders in both regiments did far more than yell. Stone made a point to “at all times” be visible “at the head of his regiment,” one of the command wrote. The Colonel even “made several good shots with a rifle borrowed from one of the men, who was not so good a marksman,” he added. Stone's executive officer “was as cool and collected during the fight as if he had been at home,” and further strove to rally the more anxious and encourage them “by his example.”³¹⁵ The Ohioan command team behaved similarly. Woods “exposed himself in the

³¹⁰ Woods's *OR Report*, 768; Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 78.

³¹¹ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 78.

³¹² Withrow [25 IA] to Lib, Jan. 12, 1863.

³¹³ Withrow [25 IA] to Lib, Jan. 12, 1863.

³¹⁴ Withrow [25 IA] to Lib, Jan. 12, 1863.

³¹⁵ “Nelson” [25 IA] to *Burlington Weekly Hawk-Eye*, Jan. 31, 1863.

thickest of the fight,” Miller recalled. “His large form was a conspicuous mark, but he was perfectly cool and walked about, twisting his mustache and breaking sticks as was his habit, with an eye on all that was transpiring.”³¹⁶ Even Stone's Iowans later commented on Woods's coolness under fire.³¹⁷ His brother, the regiment's executive officer, “would not lie down, but walked up and down the lines encouraging the men and exposing himself,” Miller noted. “A bullet struck his revolver with such force as to bend the barrel, but it saved his life as otherwise it must have shattered his thigh fatally.”³¹⁸

Beyond the lack of further enemy artillery fire, however, the smoke and debris filling no man's land made it difficult for any shooter to judge the real effectiveness of his fire. “Quite a number of men were seen to drop as if killed or wounded, but to what extent the enemy suffered from our fire I cannot tell,” Woods later admitted. For many, the only viable targets were the arms and weapons of Rebels who “did not dare to show their heads,” but instead “just put their arms over and fired at random,” Miller wrote.³¹⁹ Though un-aimed, such fire was still dangerous. “One man lying near me received a ball on the point of his chin which coursed down his neck,” Miller recalled. “He threw up his arms and called to me that he was badly wounded and moaned terribly.” The Adjutant “reached over and passed my finger down the bloody mark on his neck and found that the bullet had not entered.” He “tied up his neck with a handkerchief and assured him that there was no danger,” which calmed the grazed volunteer. Woods and Stone's regiments

³¹⁶ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 81.

³¹⁷ “Nelson” [25 IA] to *Burlington Weekly Hawk-Eye*, Jan. 31, 1863.

³¹⁸ “Nelson” [25 IA] to *Burlington Weekly Hawk-Eye*, Jan. 31, 1863.

³¹⁹ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 78.

remained “advanced as far as there was cover for our men” for the next several hours, laying down a heavy suppressive fire from cover and triaging their casualties.³²⁰

II. “It was terrible”

The dense woods and thickets that hampered the advance of the 3rd Missouri and 31st Iowa stopped abruptly before the enemy trench, where Rebel infantry had “felled all the big trees and thrown them helter skelter in front of their rifle pits,” John Buegel, the 3rd Missouri color bearer later observed.³²¹ Sewall Farwell also remembered how, in this no man's land between the trees and the enemy trenches, though the ground was “tolerably level,” the Rebels “had cut the thick grass in such a way as to impede our march all that was possible.”³²² Prior to the assault, one of Hovey’s aides instructed the column to “advance as close as it was practicable to be before the charge was made,” using the woods to shroud their movements while the skirmishers held the harassing Rebels on the opposite bank of the bayou at bay.³²³

As elsewhere along the line, the nasty terrain made it difficult for any regiment to maintain its formational cohesion. Following behind the Missourians, Iowan officers and sergeants worked at “preserving as good a line as was possible under the circumstances,” Farwell recalled. The column had not moved very far, however, when Rebel gunners sensed its approach and began blindly shelling the trees. As shells whirred and cracked through the limbs, the two regiments quickly halted and laid down. After the rounds detonated, the line arose again and

³²⁰ Woods's *OR* Report, 769.

³²¹ Buegel [3 MO] Diary [Memoirs], SHSM Columbia, 23-24.

³²² Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

³²³ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

rushed forward until the guns again were heard.³²⁴ “We lay down on the ground and continued to advanced and drop down when they would shell us until [sic] we got within a short distance of their works,” one of the Hawkeyes explained.³²⁵ Looking around during one of these tactical pauses, Farwell “noticed trees and stumps were much sought for and those who had been in service before and honored for their bravery were among the first to seek them.”³²⁶ The inexperienced were happy to follow the lead of the few scattered veterans among them.

When the Missourians finally debouched from the trees into the open, the column charged at the double quick “with loud cheers and the usual war cries,” Farwell wrote.³²⁷ As along Woods's front, the protected Rebels held their fire as they approached. Maneuvering the line through the rude *abatis* proved challenging, but a single “large open gap” beckoned to the Missourians.³²⁸ Carrying the regimental colors as a marker of the column's forward progress, Buegel entered this gap. Watching as the flag neared the parapet, Hovey “confidently expected they would enter the works,” he later admitted.³²⁹ At that moment, however, within about “one hundred paces,” Buegel recalled, the Rebels opened fire. “The blue beans [bullets] flew into our ranks, bringing death and destruction,” he wrote.³³⁰ The Missourians were cut down not only by fire from the Arkansans in the trenches to their front, but also from the right – “a quarter

³²⁴ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

³²⁵ E. Burke Wylie [31 IA] to Mother, Jan. 13, 1863, E. Burke Wylie Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

³²⁶ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

³²⁷ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

³²⁸ Buegel [3 MO] Diary [Memoirs], SHSM Columbia, 23-24.

³²⁹ Hovey's *OR* Report, 766-767.

³³⁰ John T. Buegel [3 MO] Diary [Memoirs], SHSM Columbia, 24.

unexpected and therefore not guarded,” Hovey lamented.³³¹ As they struggled to climb over the obstacles and force themselves through the gap, the 3rd Missouri disintegrated under fire. “It was impossible to get over the barricade,” Buegel remembered. “We were all crowded into a trap, and our boys fell like flies. It was terrible.”³³² Behind them, the neophyte Iowans watched in horror as the “old” soldiers they counted on to steel them fell apart. Farwell watched as the Missourians “staggered and fell to the ground ... when someone in their line cried that the order was to retreat.” Accordingly, the regiment “sprang to their feet and with the rapidity of lightning dashed back upon us.”³³³ The result was chaos. “Whoever was still able to walk, ran back but most of them were killed or wounded,” Buegel observed.³³⁴

Their veteran anchor now in full rout, the Iowans acted instinctively. “Someone in the rear called out to retreat,” Farwell remembered, unsure as to the identity of the voice. “I saw that the right wing of the regiment was retreating and I also gave the order which the men were not slow to execute,” he shamefully added.³³⁵ In a desperate attempt to stem the flight of his new regiment, Smyth personally “dashed forward and called the men to rally.” Farwell, realizing at once that the order to retreat had not originated with the regiment's commander, set himself to aiding the Colonel in salvaging the shattered unit. As one Iowan color bearer had been struck down by canister, and another cowered behind a nearby tree, the regiment lacked an obvious rallying point amid the smoky chaos. To solve this, Smyth and his adjutant seized the colors

³³¹ Hovey's *OR* Report, 766-767.

³³² John T. Buegel [3 MO] Diary [Memoirs], SHSM Columbia, 24.

³³³ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

³³⁴ John T. Buegel [3 MO] Diary [Memoirs], SHSM, 24.

³³⁵ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

themselves. Farwell cried for his company to form on the standards and “almost alone, to her honor,” it began to do so.³³⁶

“As soon as we rallied we commenced firing,” Farwell wrote, “and it seemed to have excellent effect upon the spirits of the men.” As along Woods's front, the green Iowans quickly learned the psychological empowerment inherent in returning fire. “I felt afraid until I fired my gun the first time and after that I felt no fear at all,” E. Burke Wylie remembered.³³⁷ “All became cool and went to work in earnest,” Farwell explained. “The balls whirred by us but no one seemed to mind them very much.” Still, a few of the junior officers “were unable to hide their trepidation,” Farwell remarked in disgust, “and two had to be severely reprovved for setting a bad example before their men, or rather behind them.” Pushed back toward the tree line but still in the open, the men used what scant cover they could find. Even Smyth and his adjutant “were posted behind a tree when a ball came and struck the tree about fifteen feet above their heads,” Farwell observed, “letting heavy chunks fall on and around them.” Such destruction of cover could have even more dangerous effects. Farwell watched one private be “seriously lamed from a limb which was cut off by a ball.” While a few of the Hawkeye casualties were helped from the field by their comrades against orders, many self-evacuated. “William Gardner received a ball shot through the arm,” Farwell noted, “but went from the field without taking anyone with him.” Another man “limped from the field with a buckshot in his leg.”³³⁸

As casualties mounted, with at least a fragment of the regiment now under relative control and the other half beginning to rally in the safety of a small ravine a short distance to the

³³⁶ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

³³⁷ E. Burke Wylie [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

³³⁸ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

rear, Smyth tried to reconsolidate his command. “An order finally came that we should retreat to [the ravine] and reform the regiment,” Farwell wrote. “This was done in good order, the stragglers from most of the companies falling into their places.”³³⁹ A short distance away the shattered 3rd Missouri also collected itself and caught its breath. Finding a bleeding and exhausted Buegel, the executive officer “congratulated me, [and] gave me a good sip from his canteen,” he remembered, “and I was again all right.”³⁴⁰ The 3rd Missouri had suffered a tremendous blow. Over the course of a single day, the Missourians had taken 75 casualties, 14 of whom were laying dead on the field. The rapid retreat of half of Smyth's Iowans preserved them from a similar fate. Only 14 Hawkeyes were wounded in the attack, none killed.³⁴¹

III. “We distinctly heard the word 'Fire'”

On Steele's left, trailing behind Woods's Ohioans as the column of regiments meandered through the dense underbrush and fallen trees at something approaching the double-quick, Smith's 26th and Torrence's 30th Iowa led the equally green 34th Iowa in the assault. Lacking the tree cover that sheltered the approach of Hovey's right wing, the men did their best to move swiftly while “shot and shell flew thick,” William Oake recalled. The Hawkeyes were also in the unique position of acting as the tip of Thayer's spear though neither unit had any prior combat experience whatsoever. Unlike Shepard's Missourians on Hovey's right, both had only been under arms for a little over three months time. While many of the junior officers in both regiments had previously served in other units, the vast proportion of the rank-and-file were entirely raw, lacking the critical collective efficacy to successfully endure a jarring shock volley.

³³⁹ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

³⁴⁰ Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 24.

³⁴¹ “Return of Casualties in the Union forces engaged at Arkansas Post,” Jan. 11, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 717-718.

Withholding the battered 4th and 9th Iowa from the fight was an act of humanity, yet Thayer's merciful decision came at great cost.³⁴²

The Rebels patiently held their fire as the Iowans approached, allowing the gunners to their rear to hammer away at the moving target. As shell and canister cut through the brush, Torrence, rushing forward in column alongside Smith's command, continued to hunt desperately for an opening wide enough to deploy into line beside them to prevent the entire Rebel front from concentrating its fire on the 26th Iowa alone. He had no luck. The cut-up terrain was frustratingly uncooperative. "I very soon found it impossible to form either on its left or rear," he lamented, and accordingly "halted my command and allowed the first battalion [26th Iowa] to file by." Thayer's already undermanned attack now became a mere file of regiments streaming through the brush piecemeal to attack one of the strongest portions of the enemy line.³⁴³

Approaching within a few hundred yards of the Rebel works, Iowans looking anxiously ahead could clearly make out "a glistening array of steel protruding over the breastwork [and] under the headlog, while through the embrasures of the work could be seen the double shotted guns awaiting our closer approach," Oake remembered.³⁴⁴ Finally, within about 150 to 175 yards from the works, the brush dissipated into an open plain.³⁴⁵ As soon as practicable, Torrence "instantly formed line of battle" and began to shift into position to support Smith.³⁴⁶ At a distance of 75 yards from the works, though, the Iowans almost ceased to exist. "We distinctly

³⁴² W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 69.

³⁴³ Torrence [30 IA] *OR Report*, 770.

³⁴⁴ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 69-70.

³⁴⁵ Torrence [30 IA] *OR Report*, 770.

³⁴⁶ Torrence [30 IA] *OR Report*, 770.

heard the word 'Fire' given,” Oake reflected. “To describe that moment requires an abler pen than mine.”³⁴⁷ As Rebel lead slammed into the line, the Iowan colors fell, rose, and then fell again.³⁴⁸ Torrence's Hawkeyes were likewise stopped cold by the volley, and he instinctively screamed orders to “fire, lie down and load, and fire lying down” through the smoke and din.³⁴⁹ The few surviving officers of Smith's command also screamed: “Lay down and protect yourselves, and give it to them the best you can,” Oake vividly recalled.³⁵⁰ Both regiments fell to the mud so quickly that Rebel officers later remarked how the Federal “ranks seemed actually to wither under our fire.”³⁵¹ The cost in life among the Hawkeyes of the 26th rapidly mounted. Smith himself was badly wounded and carried rearward along with his adjutant who had suffered “part of his jaw ... carried away.”³⁵² Those still alive did their best to return the heavy fire from the prone.

As elsewhere along the line, the most immediately inviting targets still visible while laying low were Rebel batteries to the rear of the pits. “The moment that an artillery man showed himself at the embrasures fifty shots would be fired at him,” Oake recalled. Meanwhile, one section of Missouriian howitzers had been manhandled through the brush to within supporting range of the Iowans and “did splendid execution making the rebels think the Dutch had taken Holland,” Oake cheered. The suppressive fire of the German guns of Clement Landgraeber's

³⁴⁷ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 70.

³⁴⁸ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 70.

³⁴⁹ Torrence [30 IA] *OR* Report, 770.

³⁵⁰ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 70.

³⁵¹ “Report of Col. James Deshler, C. S. Army,” Mar. 25, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 795.

³⁵² W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 70.

battery likely saved many Iowan lives over the course of the next several hours. Oake himself was fortunate enough to discover a slight depression where he and two non-commissioned officers huddled out of the enemy fire. “It seemed to us as though it were raining lead,” he later wrote, “but still we were untouched.”³⁵³ Perhaps fortunately, as the full attention of each and every Hawkeye was focused on remaining as close to the ground as possible and scanning for targets, there was little time to contemplate the utter human destruction in their midst. Almost a third of the regiment now lay either killed or wounded before the Rebel works.³⁵⁴

The stalemated firefight continued for nearly three hours. At one point, unhappy with his regiment's position, and under the covering fire of both Landgraber's guns and the survivors of Smith's command, Torrence was able to shift his 30th Iowa by the flank a short distance to the right in order to secure “a more strong hold of the enemy's left,” he later reported. Even so, he admitted that his neophyte command ultimately “did but little more than silence and keep silent some small artillery pieces ... together with the musketry in the hands of the enemy in the rifle-pits.”³⁵⁵

IV. "A Series of Rushes"

Although Morgan L. Smith lay prostrate and expected to die as doctors evacuated him northward for surgery in Memphis, the legacy his Zouave-style tactical philosophy was on full display in his Second Division of Sherman's corps as it pursued its assault objectives. From his vantage point that morning, Stuart could see across what he described as a “large open field, where the enemy had their cavalry barracks” beyond which was a line of rude earthworks clearly

³⁵³ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 70-71.

³⁵⁴ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 71.

³⁵⁵ Torrence [30 IA] *OR Report*, 770.

manned by Rebel infantry.³⁵⁶ Sherman ordered him to “advance one brigade and deploy it in line of battle across the field” in preparation for assault. Accordingly, Stuart ordered Giles Smith's brigade into line, flanked on the left and right by his Illinoisan light batteries.³⁵⁷ Kilby Smith and his brigade were “held at hand (out of sight of the enemy)” on the division's left in reserve.³⁵⁸

Gazing over the plain, Smith estimated the distance from the point at which he formed his brigade into line to the enemy works at about 1,000 yards.³⁵⁹ Unlike Steele's legions, Stuart's division enjoyed the benefit of being under the watchful eye of their corps commander who lingered a short distance to its rear. Always anxious for recognition in spite of his obscure surname, Kilby Smith reveled in the idea that “my command was under the immediate eye of the generals.” To his front he saw nothing but “a beautiful level plain, a little ascending to the fort and spacious enough to admit of three regiments in line” stretching over a thousand yards before the Rebel works. “The day [was] as bright and beautiful as ever gladdened the heart of man,” he later recalled, and as the division maneuvered into line “with ten brave banners fluttering in the breeze and gilded by the sun,” his acute sense of martial grandeur was nearly overwhelming.³⁶⁰

After coming into line, the division laid down to rest while awaiting the lift of the softening barrage.³⁶¹ Stuart's understanding of Sherman's orders was that the division was “to advance at the expiration of three minutes after the fire from the batteries had ceased.” While this

³⁵⁶ “Report of Brig. Gen. David Stuart,” Jan. 14, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 772.

³⁵⁷ Stuart's *OR* Report, 772.

³⁵⁸ Stuart's *OR* Report, 772.

³⁵⁹ “Report of Col. Giles A. Smith,” Jan. 12, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 775.

³⁶⁰ T. Kilby Smith to Wife, Jan. 14, 1863, *Life and Letters*, 260.

³⁶¹ Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Family, Jan. 13, 1863, *Bear Letters*, 29.

interpretation was not entirely incorrect, Stuart apparently assumed that this meant the gunboats too would fall silent for three minutes. Actually, the silence of only the army's batteries marked the agreed upon signal for the assault. Thus, when the army's guns ceased firing after about half an hour of bombardment, but the gunboats continued their barrage, Stuart evidently thought little of it.³⁶² Suddenly though, he was startled to observe, through the lingering smoke of the guns, Thayer's brigade on his right beginning to surge forward at the double-quick. Immediately anxious, he urgently appealed to Sherman for advice, who was fortuitously nearby. "He commanded the advance at once," Stuart reported, and thus Second Division began its attack.³⁶³

As bugles rang out, Smith's brigade immediately stepped off at the double-quick toward the enemy trenches across the plain, with Kilby Smith's following them up 150 yards to the rear in support.³⁶⁴ Just as along Steele's front, the Rebel infantry patiently held their fire. Not until Smith's front ranks had reached within 150 yards of the enemy works did the trenches finally erupt.³⁶⁵ With this, all forward momentum immediately stopped, but unlike with the nervous levies of Steele's brigades, Smith's seemed to drop as if on queue. The entire division promptly laid down and began to "seek the best shelter the place afforded."³⁶⁶ Having arrived far ahead of Thayer's column on his right and even the elements of First Corps assigned to attack on his left, Smith, like Woods far off to his right, quickly realized the brigade was receiving the concentrated fire of every Rebel in the vicinity. Three Rebel cannon also contributed their might in grapeshot

³⁶² G. A. Smith's *OR* Report; Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Family, Jan. 13, 1863. Smith judged the duration of the barrage at "about half an hour" and Private Henry Bear of the 116th IL had the same sense.

³⁶³ Stuart's *OR* Report, 772.

³⁶⁴ Stuart's *OR* Report, 772-773.

³⁶⁵ Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Family, Jan. 13, 1863, *Bear Letters*, 29.

³⁶⁶ Stuart's *OR* Report, 773.

and canister.³⁶⁷ The ground fronting the enemy works was almost entirely open with the exception of “logs, stumps and torn down chimneys” scattered about irregularly.³⁶⁸

Sending back a messenger to Stuart to report these developments, Smith decided, also like Woods, that the first order of business was to silence the enemy artillery. Most of his brigade having found limited cover either behind logs or nestled in slight depressions, and still hoping that either of the supporting columns would arrive on his left or right and allow for a coordinated final assault, he would spend the intervening time picking off enemy gunners.³⁶⁹ He had just the command for the job. “I now deployed the Eighth Missouri on the right,” he later reported, pulling his brother's American Zouaves out of reserve. Together with the veteran 6th Missouri, the two broke into their customary four-man skirmish teams and scattered behind the scant cover ahead as they formed the division's trademark “cloud of skirmishers.”³⁷⁰ To further facilitate this maneuver, Stuart ordered Kilby Smith to donate the veteran 57th Ohio from his brigade in reserve to plug the hole left by the deployment of the 6th Missouri as skirmishers, retaining a veteran presence on the brigade's right flank.³⁷¹ While the “cloud of skirmishers” worked to silence the enemy batteries, Smith's green levies, now safely behind cover, could still fire on the works and guns to their immediate front from the prone.³⁷² Altogether, though failing in the division's explicit orders, it was an impressive display of coordination under fire.

³⁶⁷ Stuart's *OR* Report, 773; G. A. Smith's *OR* Report, 776.

³⁶⁸ Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Family, Jan. 13, 1863, *Bear Letters*, 29.

³⁶⁹ G. A. Smith's *OR* Report, 776; Nourse, *Story of the Fifty-Fifth*, 202.

³⁷⁰ Hovey's *OR* Report, 766-767.

³⁷¹ Stuart's *OR* Report., 773.

³⁷² Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Family, Jan. 13, 1863, *Bear Letters*, 29; Stuart's *OR* Report, 773.

Once the Rebel pits were sufficiently suppressed by the close-range rifle fire of the Zouaves, Stuart's command had the opportunity to fully apply its Zouave-style tactics. Smith promptly ordered "a series of rushes" intended to restore the division's forward momentum. It worked. "The ground gained from time to time under the hot fire was occupied by skirmishers, when the main line advanced accordingly and lay down," an Illinoisan explained. The entire division moved forward "spasmodically," covered by a screen of skirmishers dispersed behind what cover they could find.³⁷³ As the Zouaves and skirmishers moved carefully from cover to cover, firing at opportunity, they eventually silenced all Rebel guns in range, "not only picking off every gunner who showed himself above the works, but killing every horse belonging to the battery," Smith later proudly reported.³⁷⁴ Still, the Zouaves paid a heavy price. Four of the veteran riflemen were killed and 25 wounded. Their acting commander, Lt. Col. David Coleman, was himself struck slightly, a lieutenant shot through the face, and another company commander "wounded in [the] arm at an early moment, refused to retire, and fearlessly led his men through the action," a correspondent reported.³⁷⁵ Meanwhile, Henry Bear of the green 116th Illinois in the brigade's center, experiencing his first direct enemy fire, "shot 32 rounds" at Rebel targets behind the headlog. "The Balls came close to my head but did not hit me," he later wrote.³⁷⁶ Exposing oneself for long enough to acquire a visible target and pull the trigger without receiving an enemy ball in return was no simple task given the circumstances. "Protected by their earth-works, and possessing a great advantage over us, they fully appreciated it," one

³⁷³ Nourse, *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 201-202.

³⁷⁴ G. A. Smith's *OR* Report, 776; Stuart's *OR* Report, 773.

³⁷⁵ "The Victory of Arkansas Post," Correspondent to the *Daily Missouri Republican*, Jan. 23, 1863.

³⁷⁶ Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Family, Jan. 13, 1863, *Bear Letters*, 29.

correspondent observed from nearby, “and no portion of flesh belonging to the Confederacy was needlessly exposed.”³⁷⁷ All along the Rebel lines, only “rows of dodging heads” could be seen.³⁷⁸

Even given the effectiveness of the Zouave-style tactics, without proper coordination with the remainder of the corps and army, both Smith and Stuart knew well that no final assault could be successful. The firefight continued for hours with no visible support arriving on either flank.³⁷⁹ Finally, in the interest of adding extra firepower to the line, Stuart ordered Kilby Smith to deploy his brigade on Giles Smith's left, effectively making up for the lack of any adjacent command in that direction.³⁸⁰ Amidst what Kilby Smith described as “a perfect hurricane of shot and shell,” Second Brigade pushed into the dense smoke. “Remember your State, forward!” cried Colonel Benjamin Spooner at the head of his yet raw 83rd Indiana. Tying into the 113th Illinois on First Brigade's left flank, Kilby Smith's command promptly found cover and began to add to the din. “Had it not been for the protection of lying down and an occasional depression in the ground, the casualties would have been serious,” remarked one of the 55th Illinois.³⁸¹ As it was, though the “fighting was quite severe & although the bullets flew around like bees swarming,” another of the 127th Illinois remarked, “not a man of our Co. was wounded.” After one enemy bullet “passed through Capt. Riley's hat and through a blanket that Newby carried,” however, it

³⁷⁷ “The Victory of Arkansas Post,” Correspondent to *Daily Missouri Republican*, Jan. 23, 1863.

³⁷⁸ “The Victory of Arkansas Post,” Correspondent to *Daily Missouri Republican*, Jan. 23, 1863.

³⁷⁹ Stuart's *OR* Report, 773; G. A. Smith's *OR* Report, 776.

³⁸⁰ Stuart's *OR* Report, 773.

³⁸¹ Nourse, *Story of the Fifth-fifth*, 202.

was clear to all that the Rebels absolutely meant business.³⁸² In all Second Division would suffer 24 killed and 154 wounded during the assault.³⁸³

Though the corps had been stopped cold before the works, and thus had failed to achieve its orders to overwhelm the Rebel defenders and break through their line, the sheer weight and effectiveness of its fire had major effects on the ability of the enemy garrison to react. Colonel James Deshler, the Rebel officer commanding the mix of Texans and Arkansans to the corps's front later reported how, while his riflemen's shock volleys had easily stopped each and every blue column short of overtaking his works, "they kept up a very heavy and unremitting fire with long-range rifles upon us" which all but eliminated his ability to make tactical adjustments designed to shore up gaps in his line. At one point, in an attempt to fill a hole on his left flank with reinforcements from the right, the volume and effectiveness of the incoming fire from Stuart's division forced all of the Rebel reinforcements "to crawl on all fours in our shallow trench the whole distance."³⁸⁴ Deshler also commented on the impact of Smith's skirmisher "cloud" and First Division's efforts to silence Rebel artillery. "The enemy concealed in the timber along the front of the line kept up such an unremitting and intensely hot skirmishing fire," he reported, "that it was almost impossible for a man to show himself without being struck." Of the battery horses attached to the four guns assigned to his support, "only one or two escaped being either killed or wounded." Along the adjacent Rebel commander's front, extending partially across Stuart's line of attack, "fire of artillery and small-arms was so intensely hot that

³⁸² Hiram McClintock [127 IL] to Sarah North, Jan. 19, 1863, Hiram McClintock Letters, Flagg Creek Heritage Society.

³⁸³ "Return of Casualties in the Union forces engaged at Arkansas Post," Jan. 11, 1863, *OR*, I:17, I, 717-718.

³⁸⁴ Deshler [CSA] *OR* Report, 793.

no one could have passed from the general's position to mine without being struck.”³⁸⁵ Thus, despite unquestionable failure to achieve their primary objective, by about 4 p.m., Sherman's corps had effectively brought all but local Rebel command and control to a halt, achieved total suppression of enemy artillery, and neutralized vast stretches of the Rebel trenches with “very heavy and unremitting” fire at medium and close range from behind cover. Of course, such accomplishments could not last indefinitely. The ammunition supplies available to each regiment would eventually be exhausted unless Sherman or McClellan could take swift advantage of the tactical situation produced by their subordinates.

As both generals gradually became aware of the stalemate along the front and accordingly began to plan one final collective surge to seize the fort and trench by force, a white flag of surrender suddenly arose over Fort Hindman. Rebel command and control having broken down completely, with communications between the outlying rifle pits and the fort all but severed by rifle and shellfire, the bastion’s commander, Brig. Gen. Thomas J. Churchill saw the writing on the wall. No reinforcements appeared immediately forthcoming, and despite the tactical success of his infantry guarding the flank against Sherman’s assault, the beleaguered Secessionists in the fort itself could not hope to hold out much longer. Wholly unaware of the flag, many of the Rebel regiments in the pits continued to fight on until panicked word finally made it to the incredulous powder-begrimed men in the trenches that the battle was over. Equally incredulous as to how the obviously blunted assault had somehow achieved victory, Steele's and Stuart's regiments were slow in getting to their feet and cautious to advance. Finally mustering up the courage to tread out into the open and through the abatis, the Second Corps claimed all the

³⁸⁵ “Report of Col. Robert R. Garland, Sixth Texas Infantry,” *OR*, I:17, I, 785.

surviving and still confused Arkansans and Texans as prisoners. The battle of Arkansas Post was over.³⁸⁶

That evening and the next day were taken up with the long process of counting and burying the dead, accounting for captured men and supplies, dismantling the captured fort and works, and finally stealing some much-needed rest. Across the past month, the unique character of long-term amphibious operations had proven both a blessing and a curse. The army's operations never extended far enough from the boats to require wagon trains, and both Sherman's and McClelland's emphases on maintaining a swift operational tempo ensured that all but absolute combat necessities had remained aboard while operating on land. Limited amounts of rations, ammunition, and medical supplies necessary to prolong the endurance of the divisions beyond what they carried in their stripped-down columns were off-loaded along the levees skirting landings, with one regiment from each brigade detached to guard them.

For those in the ranks, the absence of a supply train somewhere to the rear made little difference. Far more poignant was the continuation of Sherman's orders prohibiting knapsacks, overcoats, blankets, rubber ponchos, or any other supposedly expendable luxury defense against the elements, all of which were to be left on the transports so as to ensure maximum speed and mobility.³⁸⁷ Most went for long stretches “without any pretense of shelter,” and with clothes that “were completely wet and stayed that way on the boat.”³⁸⁸ Even the comparatively dry steamers had become “perfect pest houses” and miserable cesspools of all types of insidious pathogens that rapidly eroded numbers at roll call and on the battlefield. Companies quartered on the

³⁸⁶ Edwin Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. 1* (Dayton: Morningside, 1985), 402-405.

³⁸⁷ E. Burke Wylie [31 IA] to Tappan, Jan. 3, 1863, E. Burke Wylie Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

³⁸⁸ Nourse, *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 196; Buegel [3 MO] Diary, 22.; Seaward [9 IA] Diary, Jan. 1, 1863.

unprotected hurricane decks "taking storm and sun" directly had it the worst. "It is worse than Prisson [sic]," one Iowan complained.³⁸⁹ Lower decks echoed with "the groans and coughs of our sick men all around," an officer remarked.³⁹⁰ Even those who managed to remain in the ranks suffered terrible colds. After laying in the open with no cover under the frigid rain at Chickasaw Bayou, Private James Maxwell found he coughed so painfully at night "that it almost kills me."³⁹¹ The constant drain of effective manpower from every regiment severely depleted combat power, to include the vital mass necessary for each regiment to successfully carry out frontal assaults, while simultaneously overburdening outnumbered medical staffs.

The tactical lessons of Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post came at an extraordinary cost. Sherman's new corps paid a steep price for the myopic obsession of its commander with maximizing speed of maneuver. The consolidated morning reports filed by orderly sergeants across the two divisions showed an aggregate of about 18,000 men present for duty when the flotilla set off southward from Helena on December 15.³⁹² In just over a week that number had plummeted by more than 30% to 12,500 effectives. Fewer than 1 of every 5 of these losses were attributable to the fighting at Chickasaw Bayou.³⁹³ By February, after suffering another 600 combat casualties at Arkansas Post and enduring a brutal steamer passage through the snow back toward Vicksburg, only 11,750 would fall in for roll call. This amounted to a loss of nearly 200 effectives from the ranks of the corps every day, or nearly one per regiment every three hours.

³⁸⁹ Robert W. Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Feb. 1, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

³⁹⁰ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Jan. 1, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 17.

³⁹¹ James Maxwell [127 IL] to Sister, Jan. 5, 1863, James Maxwell Letters, <http://www.pastvoices.com>.

³⁹² Steele's Division boasted 12,510 present for duty across four brigades on Dec. 21, whereas Smith's Division of only two brigades reported a mere 5,570 effectives on Dec. 16, *OR*, I: 17, I, 602, 604, 614-615.

³⁹³ "Return of Casualties," *OR*, I:17, I, 625.

Hardship did not spare even Sherman's headquarters. By the time the expedition was reembarked following its victory at Arkansas Post, nearly every member of the corps staff was either suffering from illness or incapacitated and bedridden.³⁹⁴

The rapid deterioration of effective manpower over the course of the winter was most starkly evident at the regimental level. Whereas Steele's and Smith's regiments averaged about 645 effectives when the flotilla departed Helena, by January 1 they averaged only 400 — a manpower loss that cost each regiment more than 80 yards from the average unit's frontage. By the arrival of the fleet at Arkansas Post that number had dropped even further, with many regiments fielding only a few hundred effectives. Several newer regiments, disastrously undergoing their customary “seasoning” period while simultaneously enduring intense hardship, were devastated by illness. The 116th Illinois, for example, boarded the Steamer *Planet* on December 19 having reported more than 680 men present for duty just four days prior. By January 15, after suffering 5 killed and 13 wounded during the previous month's fighting, the regiment's effective strength had been halved. Only 280 privates answered roll call, whereas the staggering and still growing sick rolls showed an increase of nearly 300% from just a month before.³⁹⁵ Other new commands fared similarly. The 31st and 25th Iowa regiments, both undergoing their baptisms by fire that winter, suffered between 30 and 40% losses in present for duty strength between December 15 and January 15 despite relatively minimal combat casualties. In fact, although the 25th sustained 11 killed, 51 wounded, and 3 captured, mostly during its assault at Arkansas Post, the regiment suffered fewer total losses to its effective strength that winter than did the 31st, which reported only 14 wounded across both battles but a

³⁹⁴ Capt. Lewis Dayton to Ellen Sherman, Jan. 14, 1863, Sherman Papers, LOC.

³⁹⁵ 116th Illinois Infantry Regimental Books, Consolidated Morning Report, RG 94, NARA.

nearly 40% reduction in turnout at roll call.³⁹⁶ Over just one month the length of the battle lines of all three regiments had shrunk by nearly a hundred yards.

Despite these dramatic losses, however, the most significant changes were invisible. The brutal repulses suffered by almost every regiment of the corps at one point or another between the winter's two major engagements inspired the beginnings of an aversion to frontal assaults that took the insidious form of a markedly lower degree of collective confidence, or efficacy, in each unit when the men contemplated an order to assault enemy works. As all experienced junior officers well knew, such widespread self-doubt represented the gravest of all possible threats in the penultimate moment of a bayonet charge. Worse yet, most of the rank and file still attributed the worst of their suffering aboard the transports and under fire that winter to "mismanagement" by "our Generals." Few had yet completely lost their trust in and hope for the Republic's ultimate survival, but most agreed that unless the Army's highest ranking officers tried a different approach to subduing the rebellion, the best blood of the Western states would be poured out into Southern mud in vain.

As the corps re-boarded the transports underneath a deluge of frigid sleet that gradually transformed into a blinding snowstorm, the survivors of each regiment discussed their recent experiences together and the winter's second phase of sense-making unfolded. Just as in the aftermath of the Chickasaw repulse, the context in which sense-making took place played a major role in shaping the character of its byproducts. "The men have wet feet, wet blankets and overcoats and no place to dry them," Sewall Farwell complained. "They are cold and though the cabin is open to them, not one in twenty can get around the fire." Regiment by regiment

³⁹⁶ 25th Iowa Infantry Consolidated Morning Report Book, RG 101, SHSI Des Moines; 31st Iowa Infantry Consolidated Morning Report Book, RG 101, SHSI Des Moines.

sidestepped carefully down the slippery levee through the freezing rain to climb back aboard the boats. Many slid down the embankment and “carried portions of the soil of Arkansas Post for months afterwards.”³⁹⁷ Officers confiscated any and all contraband loot from the fort that several soldiers attempted to smuggle on board. “There is strict orders about taking any secesh property,” Private William Seaward grumbled. “Some did not like to give up some things.”³⁹⁸ Seaward’s 9th Iowa became lost in the jumbled mass of men and animals after having spent the previous night laying on the riverbank in the rain without any protection whatsoever.³⁹⁹ The exhausted regiment “had our patience tried well, for we knew not which boat we were going on and moved around in the dark.” The Hawkeyes were drenched and freezing by the time they finally climbed aboard the *Hiawatha*. Once aboard, the sounds of coughing and wheezing filled the decks of every steamer as soaked, freezing men huddled together and shivered, or tried to get what little rest was possible “on our Wet Blankets.”⁴⁰⁰ Most had enjoyed no opportunity to bathe in weeks, and many were tormented by lice acquired aboard the transports.⁴⁰¹ “You can imagine what a state of things we are in at present,” Farwell lamented.⁴⁰² “The boys felt it was bad management,” another understated.⁴⁰³ Despite the victorious seizure of the fort, Capt. Jacob Ritner had “never felt so bad in my life” as he did the day his Iowans climbed back aboard their transport. “To see the men huddled on the boat, crouching and shivering without being able to get to the fire”

³⁹⁷ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 81.

³⁹⁸ William T. Seaward [9 IA], Jan. 14, 1863, William Seaward Papers, SHSI Des Moines, 23.

³⁹⁹ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, Jan. 14, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

⁴⁰⁰ William T. Seaward [9 IA], Jan. 14, 1863, William Seaward Papers, SHSI Des Moines, 23

⁴⁰¹ William T. Seaward [9 IA] Diary, Jan. 13, 1863, William Seaward Papers, SHSI Des Moines, 22-23.

⁴⁰² S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

⁴⁰³ William T. Seaward [9 IA] Diary, Jan. 13, 1863, William Seaward Papers, SHSI Des Moines, 22-23.

crushed his spirits. Not even the horrifying sight of the mangled dead strewn across the Arkansas Post battlefield had fallen with such force upon him. “When I saw the men today exposed to the storm and could do nothing for them I had to go to my room and ‘take a cry,’” he confided.⁴⁰⁴

Historians, who have been preoccupied with reconstructing the epic grand narrative of the Union Army's long campaign for Vicksburg, have traditionally identified the victory at Arkansas Post as a badly needed boost in the erstwhile debilitated state of morale in Sherman and McClelland's expeditionary force following its repulse at Chickasaw Bayou. Capt. Farwell, shivering aboard his transport, anticipated this somewhat disingenuous conclusion. “Generals will be applauded for things which should subject them to the severest censure,” he explained home. “The army will be represented to be in a condition and to possess a feeling entirely false from the real facts of the case.” To be sure, most were pleased at the fortuitous victory, and while conditions might have temporarily dampened their enthusiasm, the corps was most certainly in better spirits than it had been during the departure from the Yazoo. Even so, the experience of the battle left a much more complicated mark on the command.⁴⁰⁵

Given the marked similarities between the “faces of battle” all along Sherman's corps line, the experience of Arkansas Post imparted a set of widely shared lessons that became part of the practical military education and emergent tactical culture of the corps as a whole. Though for the veterans of the command the curriculum mostly consisted of review, the many greenhorns that filled Sherman's legions had been introduced to lessons that would remain with them for the remainder of the war. By far the most salient lesson learned by those in the ranks underscored one first taught amid the deadly “sharp-shooting tournament” at Chickasaw Bayou. When under

⁴⁰⁴ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Jan. 15, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 103-104.

⁴⁰⁵ Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 154-155; Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

enemy fire, one was most likely to survive if fighting from the prone. Throughout Sherman's corps, men spoke and wrote about the salvation a low profile had provided. "If we had stood up nearly every Ball would have cut a road through our ranks," one Iowan reflected.⁴⁰⁶

To be sure, the inclination to lie down immediately upon the receipt of hostile fire did not have to be trained. The human body naturally reacted to danger in this manner. Still, for all its practical common sense advantages, going prone under fire represented a blatant repudiation of the contemporary prevailing cultural discourse of battle. The lithographs adorning the covers of popular periodicals like *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* and *Harper's Weekly*, where the majority of the "fresh levies" comprising half of Sherman's corps had obtained most of their preconceived notions of combat, rarely if ever depicted men fighting from the prone. Instead, tightly dressed battle lines stood manfully under the heaviest of enemy fire, as if boldly daring the Rebels to cut them down. To reduce one's profile by cowering or sheepishly taking cover was evidence of indiscipline or even shameful cowardice.⁴⁰⁷ Almost to a man, the experience of real combat had shorn the neophyte volunteers of these early visions of upright fighting "man fashion." Greenhorns took comfort in observing how veterans "that have been in service since the war commenced are just as afraid of balls as those who have never been under fire," and were often just as quick – if not quicker – to lay down and seek cover. In this transformation they were helped along by the junior officers of both divisions, few of whom apparently saw any practical virtue in standing manfully, and suicidally, before almost certain destruction. Ever increasingly, the close-order formations of the parade field were interpreted by those in Sherman's corps as

⁴⁰⁶ E. Burke Wylie [31 IA] to Mother, Jan. 13, 1863, E. Burke Wylie Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁴⁰⁷ Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 21; Earl Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 1-4.

being more tools of maneuver than of actual combat, serving to deliver more or less concentrated units to the point of enemy contact, but were rarely maintained under fire. The actual exchange of gunfire most frequently took place from either the prone, individually “firing at will,” or while behind cover, and usually dispersed in four-man skirmish teams.⁴⁰⁸

Skirmishing placed a premium on the leadership of non-commissioned officers. As only three commissioned officers served in each company (usually fewer actually present for duty), when companies dispersed into their four-man skirmish teams their control and coordination was principally the duty of non-coms.⁴⁰⁹ As the tactical culture of Sherman's corps drifted toward an emphasis on skirmishing, these enlisted leaders found themselves ever more central to the combat performance of their respective companies and regiments. In several cases, companies found themselves commanded by non-commissioned officers when the combined trials of steamer passage and campaigning robbed them of all their officers. As the hardship of amphibious life aboard the transports cut wide swaths of men from the “present for duty” formations, significantly reducing the mass of every command, the appeal of open order skirmishing tactics only increased. Lacking sufficient recruit replacements, most veteran long-service regiments were fast transforming into what Sherman would soon refer to as “skeleton regiments,” lacking any appreciable mass to hurl at the enemy anyway. A preference for skirmishing over close-order, mass-based assault tactics was not merely convenient for these rapidly shrinking commands, it was obligatory.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁸ Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863; Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 152.

⁴⁰⁹ Arthur Lockwood Wagner, *Organization and Tactics* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Co., 1906), 68.

⁴¹⁰ WTS to John Sherman, Apr. 23, 1863, *SCW*, 458.

While the combined traumatic experiences of Chickasaw and Arkansas Post purged the popular pictorial image of brazen bayonet charges by close-ordered masses from the minds of most in the ranks of Steele's and Stuart's divisions, the fortuitous, if brief, euphoria of unanticipated success inspired problematic conclusions. Although both divisions had failed miserably in their primary tactical objective to seize the Rebel pits by force, the surprising surrender of Rebel forces produced the illusion that it had been the close-range firefight itself that had prompted the garrison's capitulation. As one Hawkeye in the 31st Iowa put it, the Rebel garrison must have surrendered precisely because “their artillery horses were killed . . . and all their guns on the Fort silenced” by the combined fire of infantry, artillery, and Porter's boats. What other choice did they have but to capitulate? Under the circumstances, even regiments like Farwell's 31st Iowa, which had been temporarily routed after being broken by the fleeing survivors of the 3rd Missouri, could feel that “our regiment behaved very well all things considered.” After all, the Hawkeyes had eventually rallied, gone to ground, and returned fire until the surrender. As far as they were concerned, their honor remained intact. “Had we broke and run as that regiment [3rd Missouri] did, we would have been disgraced,” he observed, “but I find old regiments can do with impunity what would brand new ones with cowardice.”⁴¹¹

The beginnings of an altogether new tactical discourse or formula emerged within the ranks of most regiments within Sherman's corps. Certainly, they assumed, “our Generals” had learned, just as they had, that close-order frontal assaults were nothing but sheer suicidal madness. “I think experience has taught them that it is better to be a month taking it [Vicksburg], without loosing fifty men, than take it in an hour with a loss of five thousand,” one Iowan considered. Sewall Farwell hoped desperately that “what has been learned” over the past two

⁴¹¹ Wylie [31 IA] to Mother, Jan. 13, 1863; Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

bloody contests would inspire “good management” among the high command, lest “the same fate” would await if the corps was again ordered to charge. Still, should better minds not prevail, the experience of survival and fortuitous success at “the Post” taught most of Sherman's volunteers that, if ordered again to carry enemy works by frontal assault, the best way to survive with one's honor intact was to manfully endure the storm of Rebel artillery during the deadly rush forward until reaching the artificial cover of the *abatis*, go swiftly to ground when the shooting started, and continue a close-range exchange of gunfire which eventually, if the lesson of “the Post” could be trusted, could result in Rebel capitulation. This formula for success was far more likely to ensure the survival of the rank and file than the bloody-minded tactical discourse enshrined within the popular pictorial idea of battle wherein a charging regiment would carry its assault to full fruition utilizing exclusively raw patriotism and cold steel. As this alternate discourse gradually emerged as one of the first widely shared artifacts of the corps's emergent tactical culture, and was summarily combined with the widespread distrust of the martial competence of “our Generals,” Sherman's command found itself organically evolving into a poorly designed tool for frontal assaults.⁴¹²

From their limited perspective, Sherman's official “military family” likewise engaged in sense-making based upon the experience of the battle. They placed the battle within the context of their past experience as the old Fifth Division headquarters. “The result of this affair is no doubt quite important,” aide-de-camp Captain Lewis Dayton observed in a missive to his chief's wife after the battle, “[but] the fighting compared with Shiloh was not a good quail hunt.”⁴¹³ The army had landed and “floundered around in the mud looking for roads,” before finally launching

⁴¹² Withrow [25 IA] to Lib, Jan. 22, 1863; Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Jan. 13, 1863.

⁴¹³ Capt. Lewis Dayton to EES, Jan. 14, 1863, Sherman Letters, LOC.

its decisive assault the next morning. The Rebels proved “very stubborn, fighting well,” he admitted, but with Porter's heavy guns combining with those of the army, victory was inevitable. Dayton shared Sherman's favoritism of Second Division, as well as his tunnel vision, noting proudly that “our old Division did what fighting there was” and that “if there is any credit attached to it (and I am sure there is) it belongs wholly to Genl Sherman's council, planning and execution.”⁴¹⁴

By Sherman's own estimation, the assault on the fort, despite the nearly 600 casualties in his corps, “was not a Battle but a clean little 'affaire' success perfect.” Like Dayton's, this judgment was based upon his past experience. Losses had been “comparatively light,” and he officially reported “far less straggling than I have noticed in former battles and engagements.” Privately, though, he had serious misgivings. “I have yet seen no troops that can be made to assault,” he complained to Ellen. “We did not do it at the Post. We merely went through the motions.”⁴¹⁵ Professional U.S. officers like Sherman, having received their military education at the United States Military Academy, had long stubbornly embraced what historian Michael Bonura has termed the “French combat method,” which deeply informed the entirety of the West Point curriculum, Army regulations, and all officially prescribed drill manuals during the war.⁴¹⁶ This cultural framework emphasized the absolute centrality of offensive tactical operations ultimately resulting in the *sine qua non* of battle: the bayonet assault and “physical penetration of the enemy line.” Such a penetration represented “the culmination of all battlefield operations,”

⁴¹⁴ Capt. Lewis Dayton to EES, Jan. 14, 1863, Sherman Letters, LOC.

⁴¹⁵ WTS to Ellen Sherman, Jan. 12, 1863, *SCW*, 353.

⁴¹⁶ Michael A. Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon: French Influence on the American Way of Warfare from the War of 1812 to the Outbreak of WWII* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 36-39; Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). 5.

and thus French tactical culture “encouraged the offensive in every conceivable operation, at every level of war, [and] in every decision on the battlefield,” Bonura explains. In fact, even when charged with fundamentally defensive objectives, French military thinkers urged officers to do so “only until they could launch another [counter]attack.”⁴¹⁷ A culminating tactical stalemate like that experienced by his corps due apparently to its failure to continue advancing through the heavy Rebel fire represented the antithesis of military effectiveness by this measure. Due to the limitations of Sherman’s capacity to conceive of alternative offensive tactical paradigms that emphasized anything other than the bayonet, the event hardly even seemed a real “battle” by his estimation.

Sherman’s concerns were shared among other staffers, gradually emerging as a consensus at corps headquarters. Adjutant Hammond was particularly unimpressed by the behavior of Steele’s division in the fight. The assault columns attacked far too gradually, “Men & Officers very backward,” he noted with frustration in his diary.⁴¹⁸ He shared his chief’s disappointment with the seeming unwillingness of either division to drive home their assault. Both proved amply courageous in advancing under heavy shellfire to the protection of an abatis, but then promptly went stubbornly to ground as soon as Rebel infantry opened upon them. Most of this he attributed to shoddy leadership by inexperienced junior officers. “I could easily have stormed the work if there had been good company officers,” he insisted.⁴¹⁹

In truth, the failure of Sherman’s corps to carry the Rebel pits, defended by a meager force not half their size, had far more to do with a lack of inter-brigade coordination resulting

⁴¹⁷ Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon*, 37.

⁴¹⁸ J. H. Hammond Diary, Jan. 11, 1863, J. H. Hammond Papers, Filson Historical Society.

⁴¹⁹ J. H. Hammond Diary, Jan. 11, 1863, J. H. Hammond Papers, Filson Historical Society.

from the particularities of the terrain fronting the Rebel works, than it did with the raw inexperience of half the command. Even the most combat experienced regiments of the corps conducted themselves under fire in much the same manner as the greenhorns once they realized they had no protection on their flanks. The veterans knew well that any breach in the enemy line unsupported from the rear could be just as disastrous for an attacker as it was for the attacked. Regardless of the cause, the combined repulses at Chickasaw and “the Post” left an indelible mark on the adolescent command as its commander and those in the ranks simultaneously came to divergent conclusions as to what had happened and why. Perhaps most importantly, the combined failures significantly lessened the confidence of Sherman and his staff in their new corps’s ability to carry Rebel positions head-on at the point of the bayonet. Sadly, it did not yet completely rule out the idea in their minds.⁴²⁰

⁴²⁰ Hsieh, *West Pointers and the Civil War*, 9.

CHAPTER IV: “EXPERIENCE WHICH WOULD SERVE US”: YOUNG'S POINT, STEELE'S BAYOU, AND DEER CREEK

“I think with the policy now being carried [out] that we are crushing the rebellion and will continue to crush it though we be repulsed from every stronghold for months to come.”

~ Capt. Sewall Farwell, 31st Iowa, April 22, 1863⁴²¹

As the flotilla crawled southward from Fort Hindman toward Napoleon, Arkansas through a blinding snowstorm, Sherman's despondent regiments shivered aboard their cramped transports. One Hawkeye worried that the “cold and exposeyer” suffered by those riding aboard the open decks would “kill more than we lost in battle.” Another was convinced that if “we do much more steam boating we will all play out.”⁴²² Overhearing alarming conversations among his coughing Missourians, Lt. Col. A. J. Seay, 32nd Missouri, began to smell “signs of mutiny” in his rapidly deteriorating regiment. The brief morale boost following victory at “the Post” was proving wholly insufficient to steel the men against the unrelenting hardship of prolonged life aboard the boats.⁴²³

Just after noon on January 15, 1863, from his perch upon the deck of the *Forest Queen*, Sherman noticed several steamers headed downstream toward the flotilla. He knew they did not belong to the fleet, but nevertheless hoped they might contain the most recent newspapers, and thus dispatched an aide to check. “You can imagine my surprise when he soon returned with Hugh [Ewing] looking as fine as possible as a Brigadier with his morning Report in hand and

⁴²¹ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Apr. 22, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁴²² James Giauque [30 IA] to Family, Jan. 23, 1863, Giauque Family Papers, University of Iowa.

⁴²³ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Jan. 20, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 18-19.

orders to report to me,” he exclaimed in a letter home to Ellen.⁴²⁴ After months of politicking by Cump, the brigade of Brig. Gen. Hugh Ewing, Sherman's own foster brother, had finally been assigned by the War Department to his new corps. Joining Sherman's beloved “old Division” as Stuart's third brigade, both divisions now boasted their full complement of three brigades apiece. Containing the 30th, 37th, and 47th Ohio regiments alongside the 4th West Virginia, Ewing's brigade came directly from duty in the Eastern theater, and thus hailed from an altogether unique operational heritage from that enjoyed by the rest of the corps. Ewing's Buckeyes had not suffered through either of the brutal repulses at Chickasaw Bayou or “the Post.” For the most part, they had spent their time in uniform chasing guerrillas up and down the rugged mountains of western Virginia in operations not greatly dissimilar to those many of Sherman's “old” regiments had conducted in Missouri. The 30th Ohio, Ewing's own original command, came with one notable distinction in that it was now the only regiment in Grant's Army of the Tennessee to have also served in the somewhat notorious Army of the Potomac. After enduring especially bloody fighting at the battles of South Mountain and Antietam, the men of the 30th had proven themselves capable of standing up to severe punishment under Rebel fire. The Ohioans were unquestionably veterans, but it remained to be seen whether or not the specific content of their combat experience in the Eastern theater had prepared them for the novel challenges they would confront in the West. Either way, “Cump” was elated to have them and Ewing on board.⁴²⁵

Arriving at Napoleon long before the rest of the army and laying over on the evening of January 16, Sherman found the small nondescript and mostly abandoned river town “a hard-

⁴²⁴ WTS to EES, Jan. 16, 1863, *SCW*, 358.

⁴²⁵ “Report of Col. Hugh Ewing,” Sept. 14, 1862, *OR*, I:13, I, 469; “Report of Maj. George H. Hildt,” Sept. 20, 1862, *OR*, I:14, I, 469.

looking place,” and at first glance saw nowhere he might form even a brigade for drill, let alone lay out an encampment.⁴²⁶ Reporting the same back to McClelland, he prepared the flotilla to move further southward the next day but allowed the men off the boats and into town while awaiting further instructions. Regiments were ordered to “go on shore and make ourselves as comfortable as possible in the vacant houses around town,” leaving their supplies on the boats.⁴²⁷ While most took the opportunity to get warm by a stove, cook their rations for the first time in weeks, or comb through abandoned pantries for food, the more disheartened members of the command instead took the chance to abscond from duty altogether. In Lt. Col. Seay's mutinous regiment twenty men deserted, only six of whom could be retrieved by squads dispatched to arrest them. These fugitives were summarily “stretched by their wrists on the deck till their hands went black” as a warning to others who might attempt a similar maneuver.⁴²⁸

As it turned out, desertion was the least of the mischief that most disenchanting members of the corps would commit at Napoleon. That afternoon an anxious courier bearing an urgent message from McClelland found Sherman aboard the *Forest Queen*, temporarily distracted by other pressing business. “Take measures immediately to extinguish the flames which are consuming Napoleon,” it read, “and find if possible the incendiaries and punish them.”⁴²⁹ Leaping into action immediately upon recognizing the smoke issuing from the town center, Sherman went in person to staunch the blaze. Gathering any and all men nearby, he found it impossible to extinguish the fire. By destroying buildings to create a fire break they were able to

⁴²⁶ WTS to McClelland, Jan. 16, 1863, *OR*, I:17, II, 568.

⁴²⁷ *Thirteenth Illinois*, 294.

⁴²⁸ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Jan. 21, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 18.

⁴²⁹ McClelland to WTS, Jan. 17, 1863, *OR*, I:17, II, 571.

corral its spread.⁴³⁰ Relieved that total disaster had been evaded, Cump remained incensed. Identifying the guilty party quickly proved an impossible errand. Instead vowing to “assess the damages upon the whole army, officers included,” he proclaimed that “we all deserve to be killed unless we can produce a state of discipline when such disgraceful acts cannot be committed unpunished.”⁴³¹ Though long an advocate of waging “hard war” against unrepentant Secessionists, even to the extent of ordering the destruction of entire towns that harbored Rebel guerrillas, Sherman insisted that such acts of destruction and arson be held on an extremely tight leash. Incidents like the burning of Napoleon caused him to worry intensely that the leash was gradually slipping from his grasp.

Over the course of the late winter and early spring of 1863, the regiments of Sherman's corps found themselves assigned a very different set of operational objectives from those they had pursued during the recent downriver amphibious campaign. As Grant's army labored to gain access to the Rebel “Gibraltar” at Vicksburg, the Lincoln administration sought to deliver its most direct blow yet to Southern slavery, having now unequivocally identified the “peculiar institution” as a critical Rebel center of gravity. Although most in Sherman's corps had long been aware of the President's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, in January the edict officially took effect, ordering the emancipation of all slaves in those states still in open rebellion against the national government by U.S. armies in the field. Farther South than almost any other U.S. field army, the Army of the Tennessee became the natural spearhead for the government's new policy of “war in earnest.” Grant wedded the administration's new tactic of deliberate and proactive emancipation to his ongoing quest to pry open the “Father of Waters.” As he plotted a

⁴³⁰ WTS to McClernand, Jan. 17, 1863, *OR*, I:17, II, 572.

⁴³¹ WTS to McClernand, Jan. 17, 1863, *OR*, I:17, II, 572.

series of ill-fated attempts to bypass Vicksburg entirely or reach the high ground to its north and east, his army also waged extractive warfare amid the bountiful plantations of the Deer Creek valley to its north which sustained the Rebel garrison.

Across the four-month period, Sherman's two divisions were assigned missions associated with all three of these operational objectives. Each of them required an adaptive response by the Fifteenth Corps as its officers and men strove to conduct ad-hoc engineering projects and aggressive resource extraction across wide swaths of difficult and dangerous terrain. The experiences the men of the corps had while engaged in these non-combat operations gave rise to an emergent "soldiers' culture" within the corps. Still reeling from the hardship and loss that defined Sherman's winter downriver expedition, bloodily repulsed from each and every Rebel position they had attempted to assault, those in the ranks of the corps were ripe for an altogether new "way of war" promising greater odds of both survival and success. While their Western cultural roots prevented most from ever fully embracing the revolutionary social implications of the government's new emancipation policy, the practical military qualities of both abolition and area denial quickly proved attractive. Sherman's volunteers were eager for the opportunity to punish the prodigiously wealthy Southern planters who inhabited the magnificent plantations of the southernmost portions of the Mississippi Valley. In the eyes of those in the ranks, these wealthy slave-owners were those they held most responsible for the war, and thus ultimately for the recent deaths of their comrades. Deeply frustrated with their inability to strike a powerful blow at the enemy on the battlefield, in their opinion due principally to the incapacity of "our Generals" to coordinate their attacks, the chance to do at least as much damage to the Secessionist rebellion without so much as firing a shot proved immensely cathartic.

I. "The Point"

Arriving along the levee at Young's Point, Louisiana in mid-January with the rest of his army to take command of the entire force, Grant wasted no time in getting to work. The bloody results of Sherman's direct assault on Vicksburg left little doubt as to the relative efficacy of repeating such an attack. Instead, Grant hoped to bypass the "Gibraltar of the Mississippi" altogether. Restarting an abandoned project begun the previous summer by black laborers overseen by troops under Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler, Grant planned to cut a wide canal across De Soto Point directly across from Vicksburg which would redirect the path of the mighty river and render the city strategically insignificant. By allowing riverine traffic to pass freely beyond the range of Rebel artillery atop the Vicksburg bluffs, the plan would effectively convert the city into an inland town.⁴³²

Grant chose the new corps of his most trusted subordinate to lead the way in this endeavor. Disembarking from their transports onto the overcrowded levee, Sherman's miserable corps finally landed at Young's Point on January 23 and established camps along the trace of the abandoned canal ditch and upon the levee extending below it along the bend in the river. The canal, or rather its beginnings, ran a little over a mile across De Soto Point, with the spoil piled up on its eastern bank to protect laborers from the Rebel batteries at Vicksburg. The ditch itself, when Sherman initially surveyed it, measured roughly ten feet wide and six feet deep, still filled with innumerable stumps. His corps was initially charged with widening the ditch by nine feet. Additional detachments would labor to put the few roads to and from the canal into functional condition. Employed immediately after their disembarkation from the misery of the steamers, the men did not initially appreciate the opportunity for exercise. Sherman took note of the

⁴³² Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 157-159.

resentment and considerable disaffection in the details. “I have never seen men work more grudgingly,” he frustratedly remarked.⁴³³

From the very beginning, the canal effort was beset with challenges. As water several feet deep already stood in the bottom of the ditch, widening the canal could only extend to a depth of about four feet before the standing water flooded the work area. A dredge was badly needed to drain the water prior to digging, but none was available. Moreover, the lax current flowing through the trench was never strong enough to erode the banks on its own. Instead, Grant and his chief engineer, Captain Frederick Prime, opted to cut a new entrance that could take advantage of the Mississippi's mighty current and, with a little coaxing, more or less dig itself. Plugging the entrance and exit of the ditch with sandbags and digging drainage ditches eventually removed most the water from the trench long enough to deepen the cut as the new entrance was dug. Heavy intermittent rains plagued the project, raising the river level until it threatened to surmount the levee in early February, but the new plan gradually showed promise. When word arrived that multiple dredges had been secured for the army at St. Louis later that month, Grant and Prime became increasingly optimistic.⁴³⁴

The technical exigencies of canal construction prompted Sherman's corps to make its first substantive adjustment to force structure. Desperately short of trained engineers, Grant issued a special field order in early December prompting all divisions of the army to organize a “Pioneer Corps” of mechanically-inclined men detailed from the ranks. As Sherman's two divisions were then absent from the army, it was not until Grant rejoined the command in late January that the

⁴³³ WTS to McClernand, Jan. 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 10.

⁴³⁴ Bearss, *Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. I*, 421-450; By far the most comprehensive treatment of the ill-fated canal project is David F. Bastian, *Grant's Canal: The Union's Attempt to Bypass Vicksburg* (Shippensburg: Burd Street Press, 1995).

corps's pioneers were officially organized. While whole regiments detailed to fatigue duty, along with ever increasing numbers of freedmen, could provide raw muscle and sweat, most volunteers lacked the technical expertise to fashion trustworthy bridges, reliably repair levees, or dig viable canals. These tasks required men with “mechanical skill and fitness” who could “superintend Mechanical & Engineer work.” Brigade commanders were ordered to root out such soldiers from within the ranks of their regiments. Each brigadier was responsible for detailing fifty men as pioneers, further divided into two detachments, each under the command of an officer or sergeant. This armed each division with six such detachments, all under the command of a first lieutenant. As soon as the detachments had been formed, they were assigned supervisory duty at the canal.⁴³⁵

The Western regiments that comprised Sherman's corps were rarely hard pressed to find such “mechanical skill and fitness” within their ranks. Men who had worked as blacksmiths, carpenters, engineers, machinists, or mechanics comprised just under 10% of all enlistments into the average regiment in Stuart's division which led the way in the canal project. The Zouaves of the 8th Missouri boasted nearly a company and a half worth of men with a technical background. By late January, it is likely that the division's camps contained more than 1,000 men with relevant mechanical skills, and thus brigadiers could afford to be picky in their selection of fifty from their regiments while still leaving the majority in the ranks to assist in carrying out more technical assignments.⁴³⁶ To orchestrate the unskilled labor provided by the regiments themselves, Sherman divided the canal into 150 foot segments and assigned each to a separate

⁴³⁵ S.O. #12, HQ 2 DIV 15 AC, Jan. 31, 1863, 83 IN Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA.

⁴³⁶ These statistics are derived from a comprehensive tabulation of the professions provided by recruits upon enlistment and recorded upon the descriptive rolls of every volunteer regiment in Second Division. Most of these rolls are available within RG 94, NARA, though several were also accessed within state repositories (see bibliography for full citations).

regiment. First and Second Divisions alternated daily in providing 500-man work details, reporting each morning to the corps Chief of Engineers, Captain W. L. B. Jenney.⁴³⁷ Twelve-hour work days were broken into two-hour shifts in the mud. Sherman strictly required officers to be present with each and every detail. "This rule is invariable," he warned.⁴³⁸

Along with a steam pump and the promised dredges came 1,000 black laborers from Memphis in late February and early March to assist with the project. These men joined other freedmen from the immediate environs already toiling in the canal at the direction of the Pioneer Corps. There is unfortunately little evidence that the two races worked amicably together. For the most part, details remained separated with the exception of white Pioneer officers charged with overseeing the black laborers. "The darkies would be busily engaged in wheeling dirt from the canal singing their Negro melodies," one Hawkeye observed. Occasionally, when Rebel gunners sent a shell screaming over the river, he and his comrades erupted in laughter at the sight of "the darkies, wheelbarrows and all[,] roll into the mud, and water[,] and after crawling out skin [run] for some of the large cypress stumps." Chasing after them, white officers screamed "Come back you black curs and go to work!"⁴³⁹ Frustration brewed between the soldiers and laborers. David Holmes, 55th Illinois, thought he sensed that the "colored gents" were already "getting tired of working for Uncle Sam," having overheard a few "say they would rather be with Massa."⁴⁴⁰ "The Negroes that are found on these plantations are unfit for free men and useless appendages to the Army," Major Abraham J. Seay, 32nd Missouri, remarked. "We have utterly failed in

⁴³⁷ S.O. #36, 15 AC, Feb. 8, 1863, *OR*, I:25, III, 40.

⁴³⁸ G.O. #7, HQ 15 AC, Jan. 26, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 16.

⁴³⁹ Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 94.

⁴⁴⁰ David Holmes [55 IL] to Parents, Feb. 14, 1863, Holmes Letters, ALPL.

almost every instant to render them useful to us."⁴⁴¹ Most were not quite so pessimistic, but still had reservations. "They are good for such purposes as throwing up breastworks and digging canals," one Illinoisan officer confided to his diary, "but I cannot think they are a class that should be armed."⁴⁴²

The Rebels across the river ensured that canal details never became too complacent. River batteries frequently sent over "intermittent dashes of poetic spice in the shape of explosive shells."⁴⁴³ On one day in March a total of fifteen rounds careened over the river.⁴⁴⁴ Though usually falling harmlessly nearby, occasionally they plunged dangerously into the canal. On a few occasions they were even greeted with cheers, when "not infrequently they would strike right at the base of a huge stump and raise it out by the roots and blow it bodily, or in fragments, completely out of the canal," saving hours of grueling labor.⁴⁴⁵ Meanwhile, pickets along the levee put to use a lesson learned during the winter's battles. The flash of the guns on the far bank gave ample time to prepare for the arrival of Rebel shells. "All you have to do is lay flat down where you see them a coming and they will not be apt to hit a fellow," one observed. "You better believe they make a noise that is not very agreeable to hear, but I had rather hear them than the bullets of the Rebels," he added.⁴⁴⁶ Armed with his knowledge, one Hoosier veteran of Arkansas Post boasted in his diary about how the Rebels "try to shell us out of the trench but we don't shell

⁴⁴¹ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Feb. 1, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 22.

⁴⁴² Thaddeus Capron [55 IL] Diary, Feb. 10, 1863, "War Diary of Thaddeus H. Capron, 1861-1865," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 12 (Oct. 1919): 358.

⁴⁴³ *Thirteenth Regiment*, 298.

⁴⁴⁴ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Mar. 4, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 28.

⁴⁴⁵ *Thirteenth Regiment*, 298.

⁴⁴⁶ Maxwell [127 IL] to Sibling, Feb. 15, 1863.

out worth a cent.”⁴⁴⁷ Another of his comrades was far less stoic when one "screaming monster" burst overhead and sprayed the levee with shrapnel. "They come as if Satans messengers from the other world," Private Hiram McClintock wrote in awe. "Pandemonium. No matter where they go they invariably seem to be coming right for you."⁴⁴⁸

By March 5, optimism for the imminent success of the canal was at its height at Grant's headquarters. The ebullient commander confidently wired Washington to report his anticipation that the ditch would be ready for steamer transit in only a few more days. The very next day, however, disaster struck. When the precarious sandbag closure of the canal's entrance suddenly gave way during the night, the closure blocking the exit failed to follow suit, flooding not only the canal but nearly all of the southern half of De Soto Point including much of the Fifteenth Corps's cantonment. Soaked engineers rushed to detonate explosives at the lower sandbag enclosure to drain the water, but Sherman's corps was forced to relocate further north away from the flooded peninsula. The only available ground high enough to avoid the surging floodwaters was the levee itself, and thus the entire corps found itself in cramped camps atop the narrow berm. Although Grant would attempt to continue the effort once the floodwaters had partially receded, for all practical purposes the disaster marked the unsuccessful termination of the ill-fated operation. By mid-March, Rebel batteries had perfected the range from the Vicksburg bluffs to the canal (a little under half a mile from the most proximate positions), and rendered any additional labor efforts too precarious to contemplate. As the Secessionist gunners grew into

⁴⁴⁷ Stephen M. Bassett [83 IN] Diary, Mar. 4, 1863, "Union Soldier's Diary," <http://historical.ha.com>. Copy in Author's Possession.

⁴⁴⁸ McClintock [127 IL] to Sarah North, Mar. 4, 1863.

expert marksmen, any force detailed to work on the canal found the assignment “much like going into battle with nothing to shoot with but shovels loaded with mud.”⁴⁴⁹

While Grant and his staff had hoped against long odds, the enlisted men who labored on the canal understood the terrible odds working against them. Around the campfire, most “prophesied that the wayward current could not be coaxed to enter the channel being laboriously prepared for it,” recalled one Illinoisan⁴⁵⁰ This discussion inevitably led to “not much heart [being] put into the work.”⁴⁵¹ Each and every setback to the effort came as little shock. “Every private soldier knew it was [a failure] from the beginning,” Private Robert Henry, 26th Iowa, remarked.⁴⁵² Even so, with the trauma of Chickasaw and “the Post” still lingering in their minds, many were content with the change of pace. “It is pret[t]y hard work but I would sooner dig than fight if it will accomplish any thing,” one still shaken Illinoisan remarked.⁴⁵³ The survivors of Shepard's roughly handled 3rd Missouri agreed. “Shoveling mud was, after all, only another way of taking Vicksburg, or at least a means of getting past it,” Sergeant-Major Edward Reichhelm remembered, “and preferable to another Chickasaw Bayou experiment.”⁴⁵⁴

While ultimately a failure, the canal project offered the Fifteenth Corps opportunities to develop important skills and prompted a series of adaptations that would prove valuable in the near future. By far the most significant of these was the creation of each division's permanent

⁴⁴⁹ Edward P. Reichhelm [3 MO], “The Taking of Vicksburg,” *The Bayonne Herald*, Jan. 4, 1902, 3.

⁴⁵⁰ *Story of the Fifty-Fifth*, 211.

⁴⁵¹ *Story of the Fifty-Fifth*, 211.

⁴⁵² Robert W. Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Mar. 13, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁴⁵³ Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Wife, Jan. 26, 1863, *Bear Letters*, 33.

⁴⁵⁴ Edward P. Reichhelm [3 MO], “The Taking of Vicksburg,” *The Bayonne Herald*, Jan. 4, 1902, 3.

Pioneer Corps. Whereas previously the brigades of Sherman's corps had lacked any formal mechanism by which to harness the expertise of their more mechanically-inclined members when tasked with constructing corduroy roads, erecting battery positions, or bridging streams and creeks, the command had now consolidated the most capable of these men into pioneer detachments that could supervise not only the labor of unskilled white volunteers, but also that of the growing numbers of freedmen attached to the army. In an army lacking many professional military engineers, the creation of these detachments represented a major step forward.

The project also accustomed the regiments of the corps to operating as collections of small detachments, each commanded by a junior officer or senior sergeant and assigned a small part of the larger effort. These smaller work details provided plentiful opportunities for junior leaders to gain experience in taking initiative while laboring alongside their subordinates in the dismal muck. There was nothing glamorous about the mission, and the willingness of leaders to assist their charges in the labor decreased the perceived power distance within most commands. Sergeant-Major Edward P. Reichhelm, 3rd Missouri, called his personal style of leadership “easy bossing.” By applying “a judicious mixture of persuasion and firm insistence” along with direct personal involvement in the unglamorous toil, Reichhelm discovered he could best maximize the productivity of his men not by driving them as a veritable slave master, but rather by consistently acting as an “easy boss.”⁴⁵⁵ Others who opted for a more domineering style found leadership an uphill battle. Given command of a thirty-man detail charged with laying a corduroy road to the canal under a driving rain, Lt. Henry Kircher, 12th Missouri, complained of his struggles in a letter home. Although Kircher finally “succeeded in keeping my men pretty much in the swing,” he had been forced to rely on “‘God damns’ and dirty looks” in order to urge the work along.

⁴⁵⁵ Edward P. Reichhelm [3 MO], “The Taking of Vicksburg,” *The Bayonne Herald*, Jan. 4, 1902, 3.

“Such tasks are always very unpleasant because one can't teach the men that a soldier occasionally has to work,” he explained.⁴⁵⁶

Peacetime neighborhood projects had given white Westerners and their black “contraband” counterparts a significant advantage in this work. The vast majority of Western volunteers had considerable experience at working in similar capacities while participating in community logging bees, barn raising bees, and corn husking parties back home. Perhaps most similar were the time-sensitive exigencies of the wheat harvest. Laboring feverishly within a tight window to gather a crop prior to the loss of seeds, most Western farmers sought considerable help in expediting the process prior to the invention of time-saving machinery. As one group cut, another bundled the wheat, while a third followed behind stacking the shocks. Group labor was also routinely employed in ditching for drainage, a task remarkably similar to that engaged in by the corps while digging Grant's ill-fated canal.⁴⁵⁷

The abysmal conditions associated with laboring in the mud and mosquitoes of the canal, however, greatly deteriorated the already sunken morale of the corps. To make the experience slightly more tolerable, U.S. Army Regulations authorized the issuance of one gill of whiskey to soldiers working in conditions of “excessive fatigue and exposure,” which certainly described the work on De Soto Point.⁴⁵⁸ Suffering intensely in the miserable circumstances, regiments often became fiercely defensive over their authorized whiskey ration. When, on occasion, the vexing logistics of the camps at Young's Point delayed its issuance, formal complaints filed at

⁴⁵⁶ Kircher [12 MO] to Father, Jan. 26, 1863, *Yankee Fatherland*, 60.

⁴⁵⁷ Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham: Ivan R. Dee, 2011); David E. Schob, *Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 67-69.

⁴⁵⁸ War Department, United States, *Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1861* (Philadelphia: War Department, 1861), 244.

higher headquarters were not infrequent.⁴⁵⁹ Still, although some of those officers and orderly sergeants of Stuart's division were reported for covertly issuing excessive amounts to a few “Whiskey bloats” and “degraded sponges,” most officers and sergeants managed to keep their volunteers to a minimum sobriety.⁴⁶⁰ The same could not always be said for their commanders. Steele was known by those on Sherman's staff to occasionally “get tight on champagne” in private, but usually managed to maintain his stoic demeanor in front of the command.⁴⁶¹ Blair likewise became “tight, very” on occasion.⁴⁶² Frequently he shared his spirits and dinner with Sherman's chief of staff, Maj. John H. Hammond who occasionally remained at the brigadier's headquarters overnight after many a “jolly evening.”⁴⁶³ Accepting an invitation to play a game of whist on the evening of March 30, Lt. Col. Seay, 32nd Missouri discovered the regiment's commander “tight and asleep” instead.⁴⁶⁴ Upon discovery of Hugh Ewing's descent into the same behavior, Sherman, probably feeling a brotherly obligation, promptly “took Steps that have proven effectual” to nip it in the bud without ever recording just what such steps entailed.⁴⁶⁵

For those outside of high command there was little jollity in life at “the Point.” Many felt the corps cantonment represented “the most desolate Camp on earth.”⁴⁶⁶ The sodden ground

⁴⁵⁹ Lt. Samuel Ashmead to 15 AC HQ, 2 DIV, January 1863, 15 AC Unfiled Papers, RG 393, NARA.

⁴⁶⁰ G. O. #4, 2 DIV 15 AC, Feb. 27, 1863, 2nd Division, 15th A.C. General Orders, RG 393, NARA.

⁴⁶¹ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Mar. 30, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 32.

⁴⁶² J. H. H. Hammond Diary, Feb. 20, 1863, Hammond Diary, Filson.

⁴⁶³ J. H. H. Hammond Diary, Feb. 20, 1863, Hammond Diary, Filson; J. H. H. Hammond Diary, Feb. 24, 1863, Feb. 27, 1863, Mar. 5, 1863, Mar. 11, 1863, Mar. 14, 1863, Hammond Diary, Filson.

⁴⁶⁴ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Mar. 30, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 32.

⁴⁶⁵ WTS to EES, Apr. 10, 1863, *SCW*, 445.

⁴⁶⁶ Browning [54 OH] to Wife, Feb. 16, 1863.

everywhere seemed on the imminent verge of sinking into a veritable sea of river water. In many places mud was ankle deep.⁴⁶⁷ George Browning, 54th Ohio, found he and his messmates “had to Build a Bridge in front of our tent to keep from drowning.”⁴⁶⁸ A shovel sunk a mere half foot into the campground of the 32nd Missouri uncovered an “abundance of water.”⁴⁶⁹ One Illinoisan observed how, if a soldier was to “put his foot squarely down anywhere, it was questionable, when he raised it again, if the shoe would not stay behind.”⁴⁷⁰ Water was omnipresent and inescapable. “Men stand in water[,] sleep and eat in water,” Robert Henry, 26th Iowa observed. “It is hard for one that never had [such an] experience to imagine.”⁴⁷¹

By late January, nighttime temperatures plummeted far enough to freeze the water in regimental wash basins.⁴⁷² Even sunny days were paired with a “cold piercing wind” that exacted a heavy toll from those already ill from the long steamer passage southward.⁴⁷³ Not until late February did daytime temperatures rise sufficiently to make bathing again possible.⁴⁷⁴ The deadly combination of harsh weather, flooding, “unseasoned” troops, hard labor, and in later months the hatching of malarial mosquito populations, quickly transformed “the Point” into a veritable hell on Earth.

⁴⁶⁷ Robert W. Henry [26 IA] to Friends, Mar. 29, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁴⁶⁸ Browning [54 OH] to Wife, Feb. 16, 1863.

⁴⁶⁹ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Feb. 12, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 24.

⁴⁷⁰ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 212.

⁴⁷¹ Robert W. Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Feb. 18, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁴⁷² J. H. H. Hammond Diary, Jan. 28, 1863, Hammond Diary, Filson.

⁴⁷³ J. H. H. Hammond Diary, Jan. 28, 1863, Hammond Diary, Filson.

⁴⁷⁴ J. H. H. Hammond Diary, Feb. 20, 1863, Hammond Diary, Filson.

In his effort to cobble together an expeditionary force of sufficient size to take on the Rebels atop the Walnut Hills, Sherman had thought very little about the character of the troops and regiments assigned to his new command. Recent experience had illustrated the cost of such willful ignorance on the battlefield as the disparate histories of each unit played a powerful role in shaping their performance under fire. But the important qualitative differences between regiments extended beyond their various levels of tactical competency. In filling half of his new corps with freshly raised regiments, Sherman well knew that its impressive size was unlikely to last. Professional soldiers had long been accustomed to armies of fresh recruits requiring a customary “seasoning” period prior to full readiness for their first campaign. Ignorant of germ theory, officers and physicians presumed that the grievous losses newly raised regiments routinely suffered from “infantile diseases” like measles and mumps were inevitable. While we now know that the predominately rural volunteers comprising the bulk of Civil War armies suffered from a lack of critical antibodies, Sherman and his peers remained convinced that the staggering rates of disease in regiments of “fresh levies” was due to a critical lack of discipline and experience with military life. New regiments “dont know how to take care of themselves and suffer unnecessarily in health,” Cump explained to his brother. “They cant know how to make their camps, how to march, how to cook, how to shelter themselves so that in three months they fall away to mere skeletons.”⁴⁷⁵

Far more frustrating to Sherman than either of his recent repulses at Chickasaw or “the Post” were the repeated repulses he suffered as he personally rushed the ramparts of the Lincoln administration's flawed mobilization policy. The President remained staunchly in favor of raising

⁴⁷⁵ Andrew McIlwaine Bell, *Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 25; WTS to JS, Mar. 14, 1863, *SCW*, 419-420.

new regiments of volunteers instead of sending individual recruits to fill gaps in reduced veteran “skeleton regiments,” as Cump referred to them. This policy provided plentiful opportunities to award loyal Democrats with officer commissions which signaled bipartisanship to a still divided Northern public. Sherman bemoaned Lincoln's reasoning as “false economy.” He had watched firsthand as regiment after regiment of “fresh levies” shrunk from near 1000 men to fewer than 300 for duty in a matter of a few months. “This same number of men, distributed to old organizations [would] learn quickly from association,” he argued, “and escape in a measure the consequent sickness and death.”⁴⁷⁶ Older regiments had “by a process of elimination weeded out the worthless and inefficient officers & non commissioned officers,” thus rendering the remainder the best possible teachers for newcomers.⁴⁷⁷

With the Lincoln government apparently deaf to Sherman's entreaties, he and his lieutenants did their best to mitigate the anticipated losses associated with “new” regiments undergoing their “seasoning” periods while in such abysmal conditions. As soon as the corps started its disembarkation at Young's Point, regimental commanders of both “old” and “new” regiments labored to ensure their units took advantage of dry land to attend to the lagging sanitation endemic aboard the transports. Col. George Stone promptly ordered the officers of his 25th Iowa to ensure the men washed and mended their remaining clothing, and that they bathed at least once a week.⁴⁷⁸ No member of the unit would be issued his daily rations “Unless he shall have washed his face and hands and combed his hair,” Stone asserted.⁴⁷⁹ His lieutenants shared

⁴⁷⁶ WTS to JS, Mar. 14, 1863, *SCW*, 420.

⁴⁷⁷ WTS to JS, Feb. 12, 1863, *SCW*, 397.

⁴⁷⁸ G.O. #19, HQ 25 IA, Jan. 23, 1863, 25th IA Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA.

⁴⁷⁹ G.O. #19 1/4, HQ 25 IA, Jan. 23, 1863, 25th IA Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA.

these concerns. “If the men will take care of themselves & Keep clean, half the sickness would be avoided,” one of Stone's junior officers remarked, “but as it is, there are some who do not wash once in a week, and no wonder they get sick and die.” Fortunately, many were “beginning to learn Some sense, & the officers & men are taking the matter in hands.”⁴⁸⁰

At the same time, suspicious that many complaining of illness might in fact be shirking, Stone also ordered that all reporting sick, presumably having lost their appetites, were to be issued only half rations. The remaining surplus was divided up between those still on duty. If the “sick” were in fact “playing off” or ‘shirking,’ the punishment will be a meritorious one,” he reasoned.⁴⁸¹ Stone’s quest to purge his Iowans of “play-offs” was not limited to the enlisted ranks. Officers complaining of sickness who proved incapable of procuring a certificate of disability were expected to remain on duty. “It looks very suspicious to see officers reported sick who can play Whisky Poker all day and nearly all night,” Stone added sharply in his general orders.⁴⁸² Two days later, when it came to his attention that many of his exhausted men were relieving their bowels in closer proximity to the regiment's cantonment area than the authorized latrines, he opted for an even more draconian measure. “Any soldier committing a nuisance any where else near camp [than the latrine] shall be liable to have his nose rubbed therein,” he boldly ordered.⁴⁸³ No record of whether or not the punishment was ever enacted survives.

Many correctly ascertained that the lack of much nutritional diversity contributed to the lengthy lines at sick call. Beyond the meager Army ration, extra protein was far easier to come

⁴⁸⁰ Withrow [25 IA] to Lib, Feb. 2, 1863, SHC-UNC.

⁴⁸¹ G.O. #19 1/4, HQ 25 IA, Jan. 23, 1863, 25th IA Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA.

⁴⁸² G.O. #17, HQ 25 IA, Jan. 25, 1863, 25th IA Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA.

⁴⁸³ G. O. #19, HQ 25 IA, Jan. 27, 1863, 25th IA Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA.

by at Young's Point than it had been aboard the transports. The murky water of the canal proved a likely venue for crawfish hunting, and work details frequently caught and ate the crustaceans as if they were a delicacy.⁴⁸⁴ After the levee broke and most the low ground flooded, "we can catch fish most any where," one pleased Hawkeye remarked.⁴⁸⁵ Vegetables, on the other hand, were rare. The men of the 26th Iowa received but one onion apiece on February 17, "all we have had in the vegetable line this winter," one complained.⁴⁸⁶ The shortage contributed to widespread scurvy in the ranks. "The Gov has furnished us with but little of vegitables [sic] and the Scurvy prevails to a great extent," Hawkeye Private Robert Henry observed. One of Henry's comrades was "very sick with it [and] he is as large as two men it is horrible to look upon."⁴⁸⁷ Splurging limited personal funds on non-military food from sutlers amounted to a survival strategy for many. "I have spent the last available thing for such things as I considered necessary such as dried fruit cheese & light bread," Henry wrote, "for if there is any thing I detest or loathe it is [Army issued] hard bread." As civilian sutlers recognized the opportunity, prices skyrocketed, "but I am certain I owe my good health to the use of them," he explained.⁴⁸⁸

For great numbers of the still "new" recruits that filled Sherman's army however, regular bathing and dietary supplementation would never be sufficient. From the moment the corps landed at Young's Point, its newest units began to show alarming signs of "every conceivable variety of lice and small-pox, measles and mumps, and other diseases incident to women and

⁴⁸⁴ Robert W. Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Feb. 18, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁴⁸⁵ Giauque [30 IA] to Brother, Mar. 15, 1863.

⁴⁸⁶ Robert W. Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Feb. 18, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁴⁸⁷ Robert W. Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Mar. 26, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁴⁸⁸ Robert W. Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Feb. 20, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

children,” Kilby Smith reported.⁴⁸⁹ “It appears like one could not get well when once sick in the army,” one Illinoisan observed.⁴⁹⁰ His regiment, the 116th Illinois, was by no means unique among the “new” regiments of the corps in its loss of nearly 200 men from resignation, desertion, discharge, and death during its four month stay at Young's Point. Hasty funerals for the dead were marked by the somber drone of the “Dead March” and rifles fired in salute over the grave. By February, these sounds became nearly omnipresent. In March, when extensive flooding confined the corps's camps to the narrow levee itself, the men were forced to share their cantonment with the dead, and the levee was lined with shallow graves no further than a stone's throw from the shelters of the living. Those few who were still well found themselves picking up the slack by undertaking additional duties. “The men reported fit for duty rarely had a day of rest,” Sergeant Major Reichhelm remembered, but were constantly hard at work, generally knee-deep in mud and water.”⁴⁹¹ The combination of exhaustion and abysmal conditions eventually disabled many of even the most physically robust specimens in every regiment.

Between January and April 1863, the Fifteenth Corps lost a staggering 3,500 men from its rolls. When its regiments finally stepped off southward on the famed Vicksburg campaign, they left behind more than 1,600 of their own in shallow graves along the levee or in crude coffins headed northward to grieving families across the West. At least another thousand had been discharged for disability, many of whom would perish at home in a matter of weeks or months from the same ailments which had mercilessly taken the lives of their comrades. More than 500 men deserted from Fifteenth Corps regiments during the late winter and spring, some for

⁴⁸⁹ T. Kilby Smith to Mother, Feb. 4, 1863, *Life and Letters*, 270.

⁴⁹⁰ Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Wife, Feb. 14, 1863, *Bear Letters*, 35.

⁴⁹¹ Reichhelm, “The Taking of Vicksburg,” Jan. 4, 1902, 4.

political reasons as the perceived meaning of the war gradually shifted, but many undoubtedly in a bid to save themselves from the omnipresent disease and death that defined life at “the Point.” The frequent departure of steamers northward from the camps offered easy opportunities for those so inclined to anonymously slip away from their comrades with few to no questions asked. Finally, at least 160 officers of all grades within the corps resigned their commissions between the day Sherman's transports landed along the banks of the levee and the day the blue columns departed southward for Grand Gulf.⁴⁹²

Losses were by no means evenly distributed across the 41 infantry regiments and six batteries that now comprised the corps. The starkest difference was between “old” and “new” previously “unseasoned” regiments. On average, “old” longer service regiments each suffered a loss of 25 dead, 34 discharged for disability, 17 desertions, and 4 officer resignations over the four-month period. By dramatic contrast, the “new” fresh levies of Sherman's corps, comprising almost half the command, lost on average more than 100 to death, issued at least 50 discharges for disability, lost nearly 20 men to desertion, and reported an average of nine resignations. Thus, while on average “old” regiments suffered a loss of 80 men to all causes, “new” regiments lost nearly 200 – more than two full-strength companies. This disparity had the effect of converting all of Sherman's large “new” units of fresh levies into the same “skeleton regiments” that comprised his command prior to their arrival.

⁴⁹² The figures in this paragraph are derived from a careful tabulation of figures reported throughout a number of different sources. Many regiments submitted detailed monthly returns concerning numbers present and lost over a given period, and when available these have been consulted at their respective state archives in Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, or Missouri. The data on other regiments is only extant within their respective regimental records within RG 94, NARA. Others, by far the most painstaking of all, required careful hand tabulation of losses reported between January and April 1863 listed within each state's *Adjutant General's Report* compiled at the end of the war or immediately thereafter.

All told, the total loss to the corps between January and April amounted to more than twice the number lost to all causes during the recent intense fighting in the Yazoo bottoms and at Arkansas Post. More than seven times those who had fallen to Rebel lead and steel that winter now lay silently along the levee as victims of disease, abysmal sanitation, and appalling conditions. The sheer scale of human tragedy entailed by such loss is difficult to comprehend, but the cost to the corps's operational capabilities (and, by extension, to those of Grant's army) are easier to calculate. At a point in the corps's history when most of its regiments averaged about 350 men for duty on a daily basis, the loss of almost 3,500 men was the equivalent of nearly 10 regiments, or an entire division. In fact, when the corps set off on its long march to Vicksburg, neither of its two divisions could muster anywhere close to 3,500 men present for duty. These young volunteers had not been lost to enemy action. Their patriotism, youthful vigor, and potential operational contributions had been lost. Sherman, his lieutenants, and all those in the ranks of the corps would now have to do more with far less.

II. "Experience which would serve us"

Once it had become painfully evident that the canal was almost certainly a failure, Grant turned his attention elsewhere. By cutting a levee a considerable distance upriver to the north, the Army flooded backwaters leading into the Yazoo hinterland east of the Mississippi. This increased flow, Grant hoped, would allow for a modest expeditionary force, along with an escort of Navy gunboats, to meander through the Yazoo watershed until it could reach the high ground north of Vicksburg and establish a lodgment to exploit with follow-on deployments. While the tortuous course of the vegetation-choked waterways proved challenging enough to the hard luck

combined arms force, the expedition was stopped cold in its tracks by a meager but stalwart Rebel defense of a sand and dirt bastion dubbed “Fort Pemberton.”⁴⁹³

In part to distract Rebel attention from the logjam at Fort Pemberton, as well as to try one final roundabout approach to the heights north of Vicksburg, Grant ordered Sherman to accompany Admiral David D. Porter in launching a second foray into the dark swamps of the Yazoo on March 14. This time, a joint force of five of Porter’s City-class ironclads, four tugs towing mortar rafts, and one division of Sherman’s corps riding aboard steamers and in towed coal barges would ascend the Yazoo and make a left turn northward into Steele’s Bayou just prior to coming into view of the Rebel batteries atop Haynes’s Bluff. Porter’s smoke-belching flotilla would plow the brown waters of Steele’s Bayou before turning into the vine-choked gauntlet of Black Bayou to gain the slightly wider channel of Deer Creek. From there, the boats would resume their northward trajectory until making a right turn into Rolling Fork, then south again after entering the Sunflower River. Finally, at the conclusion of this labyrinthine journey, the expedition would re-enter the Yazoo north of both Haynes’s and Drumgould’s Bluffs, disembarking Sherman’s one division upon dry ground after having flanked all Rebel defenses along the Yazoo River. Provided the route could be both secured and maintained, additional troops would then be dispatched through the winding bayous to the newly secured landing. At the very least Rebel forces would be drawn off from either Fort Pemberton or Vicksburg itself to confront the new Yankee threat, growing the menu of strategic options available to Grant.⁴⁹⁴

It was a desperate plan, but the importance of bagging Vicksburg amid a flagging Northern war effort seemed to warrant pulling out all the stops. It was also extremely risky.

⁴⁹³ Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 167, 171, 174-183, 188-190.

⁴⁹⁴ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 308-309.

Grant, Porter, and Sherman all recognized the terrifying possibility that, even barring any enemy resistance, the gambit could cost the Navy many or even all of its gunboats, and thus its only hope of ever seizing the city at all. Should a single vessel hit a snag, puncture its hull on any of the many submerged hazards, or suffer a debilitating attack by Rebel partisans, all the craft north of it would immediately be trapped. If it sunk in a narrow portion of any of the winding bayou channels it could spell disaster for the entire campaign.

Sherman selected his beloved “old division” for the perilous undertaking, its primary mission at the canal having been nullified by the recent flooding. The multifaceted Zouaves would once again spearhead Sherman's effort. Understanding that many of the 8th Missouri had been recruited from the St. Louis waterfront, Grant presumed that several had considerable experience with river work. Thus, when casting about for a command to “clean out the channel” of Steele's Bayou and clear a route for the expedition by cutting away overhanging trees and vines, the Zouaves seemed a perfect fit. Along with two detachments from the Second Division's new Pioneer Corps, the regiment embarked aboard the *Diligent* on March 15 and set out on their clearance mission.⁴⁹⁵ With them they brought more than 300 axes “and a keg of spikes, so as to make rafts on which the men are to stand whilst cutting away the tree tops” along with a coil of rope, with which “to heave away the chopped trees and limbs.” Once the mission was complete, the Zouaves were to make their way northward to Black Bayou where they would rendezvous with Sherman.⁴⁹⁶

In an effort to shorten the distance that the rest of Stuart's regiments had to be hauled through the most challenging southern portions of Steele's Bayou, Grant thought it best to

⁴⁹⁵ “Report of Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman,” Mar. 21, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 432.

⁴⁹⁶ WTS to Coleman [8 MO], Mar. 16, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 114.

disembark the division at Eagle Bend along the eastern bank of the Mississippi and march it down a levee hugging the northern bank of Muddy Bayou until reaching transports waiting in Steele's Bayou. Accordingly, early on the morning of March 16, Stuart's twelve regiments boarded steamers at Milliken's Bend with five days rations, all available ammunition on hand, and every axe that could be found.⁴⁹⁷ After landing at Eagle Bend, Stuart took one look at the levee running along Muddy Bayou and determined that it was utterly "impassable for the troops without the construction of rafts and bridges."⁴⁹⁸ First, a lengthy "floating bridge" was necessary to even reach the high ground of the levee, the fields between the river and levee having been utterly inundated with floodwaters.⁴⁹⁹ Moreover, two massive crevasses had been rent in the levee by floodwaters which would likewise require bridging before the division could safely reach its objective. The bayou itself was so densely overgrown with trees and vines that considerable effort was also necessary to clear it of obstructions before it could be used as a supply viaduct. Conscious of the need for speed, he immediately ordered the men to disassemble the slave cabins and cotton gin of a nearby plantation and use the lumber to bridge the two crevasses.⁵⁰⁰ With this, he returned to report to Grant at Young's Point, leaving the details to the newly arrived Brig. Gen. Hugh Ewing.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁷ The 55th IL was at that time absent on detached foraging duty. "Report of Brig. Gen. David Stuart," Mar. 29, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 437.

⁴⁹⁸ Stuart's *OR* Report, Mar. 29, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 437.

⁴⁹⁹ "Galway," "Operations on the Mississippi," *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 1863.

⁵⁰⁰ Stuart's *OR* Report, Mar. 29, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 437.

⁵⁰¹ Stuart's *OR* Report, Mar. 29, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 437; "Report of Brig. Gen. Hugh Ewing," Mar. 29, 1863, *OR* I:24, I, 449-450.

Ewing broke apart the regiments of his brigade and assigned each of them a separate task. It would prove the beginning of a pattern for the Fifteenth Corps while operating in the bayous. As the expedition gradually progressed toward its objective, its component brigades were routinely fragmented into individually-tasked regiments, which often subsequently fragmented into separately tasked companies and even smaller detachments. Each of these subsequent divisions created an opportunity for junior officers and even sergeants to take initiative within some small part of the larger plan, growing their skills as leaders in the process. When security became a concern, these fragments would quickly re-consolidate in order to repel Rebel attacks.

The division of labor in Ewing's brigade as it approached its mission began with his assignment of Col. Augustus Parry's 47th Ohio to erect two viable bridges over the gaping crevasses. As Parry's Buckeyes tore apart the nearby slave cabins for wood, just as Stuart had prescribed, Ewing set Col. Joseph Lightburn's 4th West Virginia to clearing obstructions from Muddy Bayou. Filing into the frigid brown water of the narrow channel with axes in hand, the men started in to the dirty work. Meanwhile, the division's Pioneer Corps applied its expertise in supervising the construction of Parry's bridges. Freedmen assigned to the Pioneers assisted in the heavy labor of cutting additional lumber and hauling it into place. By noon of March 19 both bridges were in place, allowing for Giles and Kilby Smith's brigades to march east to the transports awaiting them in Steele's Bayou. As the other two brigades embarked, Ewing received orders to remain with his regiments at Muddy Bayou, continuing to clear the channel and finishing an artillery wagon road that would facilitate the movement of supplies and ammunition forward from Young's Point should it become necessary.⁵⁰²

⁵⁰² "Report of Hugh Ewing," Mar. 29, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 449-450; Average water temperature likely hovered around 50 degrees Fahrenheit, A. A. Hirsch, "Mississippi River Water Temperatures at New Orleans," *Monthly Weather Review* 67, 11 (1939): 415.

After chugging northward through the winding bends of Steele's Bayou to the mouth of Black Bayou, the lead regiments of Giles Smith's brigade transferred to flatboats and coal barges which ferried them through the vine-choked stream to the relatively dry ground of "Reality Plantation." Discovering the property nearly abandoned, and its outhouses veritable "chicken-abounding oases," the tired infantrymen took in their new temporary home "with amazing equanimity," one embedded journalist noted.⁵⁰³ A slave on the plantation explained how the overseer, who had long referred to the Deer Creek valley as "the Confederate snuff-box, that the Yankees could not open," had ingloriously fled.⁵⁰⁴ To protect against attack, the men hauled cotton bales from the gins and stacked them up into impromptu breastworks.⁵⁰⁵ The steamers meanwhile returned to Muddy Bayou to ferry the rest of the division northward in three trips spread across the next three days. By the morning of March 23, all of Stuart's division would be encamped at "Reality."⁵⁰⁶

Set on reconnoitering the expedition's objectives well ahead of his corps, Sherman had long before ascended Steele's Bayou to "Reality" alone in a private tug and was waiting with the Zouaves when Giles Smith arrived with the 6th Missouri and 116th Illinois. Upon his arrival days before, one look at the condition of Black Bayou and Deer Creek had been enough to convince Sherman that, as was so often the case, what looked good on a map and what was actually operationally feasible were two very different things. The route painstakingly plowed by Porter's ironclads, then slashing away at trees and vines and smashing "the wooden boats all to

⁵⁰³ "Galway," "Operations on the Mississippi," *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 1863.

⁵⁰⁴ "The Recent Expedition of Gen. Sherman," *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 4, 1863, 1.

⁵⁰⁵ "Galway," "Operations on the Mississippi," *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 1863.

⁵⁰⁶ Stuart's OR Report, Mar. 29, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 438.

pieces” as they attempted to ram half-submerged obstructions somewhere north of “Reality” on narrow Deer Creek, was not practicable for any sizable assault force. “I don't think we can make a lodgment on high land by this route,” he reported back to Grant.⁵⁰⁷ While the optimistic Porter remained confident in his ability to continue on course to Rolling Fork, he advised Sherman to stay with his landsmen at “Reality” and await developments. Cump was more than happy to comply, given that it seemed a fool's errand to try and follow up the admiral on land with any more than a token force given the flooded terrain.⁵⁰⁸

The first signs of trouble appeared in a brief dispatch from Porter up Deer Creek back to Sherman at “Reality” the day after Smith's brigade had arrived. The admiral and his ironclads were still in Deer Creek, but his forward momentum was being stalled by felled trees tossed into and across the creek by slaves apparently driven by Rebels. “Hurry up to co-operate,” he urged Sherman, who was incapable of doing so given that most of Stuart's regiments would still require at least another day to arrive at “Reality.” Not wanting to cut off all contact with the units which had not yet arrived, he opted instead to send Smith's demi-brigade alone in advance. Before first light on the 21st, Sherman dispatched Smith with his 800 men up the east bank of Deer Creek on foot with orders to proceed twenty miles in search of Porter's boats and provide whatever help he needed.⁵⁰⁹ Sherman did not anticipate much fighting, and took it “for granted [that] the five iron-clad gunboats can fight anything that can be brought against them, and land forces are only

⁵⁰⁷ Sherman's Report, Mar. 16, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 431.

⁵⁰⁸ Sherman's Report, Mar. 16, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 431.

⁵⁰⁹ “Report of Brig. Gen. Giles A. Smith,” Mar. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 439.

needed to cover the ground, to enable them to clean out obstructions” without being hampered by harassing Rebel marksmen on the banks.⁵¹⁰

As soon as the sun rose, Smith's detachment was in motion behind a “negro guide” provided by Sherman, who allegedly knew the way to Porter's most recent position.⁵¹¹ Only a short distance up the creek it became clear that “the enemy had been very busy felling trees to obstruct the creek,” Smith later reported. Slaves encountered along the route explained to him how all “had been notified to be ready at nightfall to continue the work.” Though lacking any formal authority to seize “property” on his mission, Smith recognized that all the slaves he encountered had been made free by the President's recent proclamation. Thus, he took the obvious step, and “ordered all able-bodied negroes to be taken along,” warning their aggrieved masters “that they would be held responsible for any more obstructions being placed across the creek.”⁵¹² Falling in behind the speeding column, the freedmen joined in the van, and in the process partially converted the character of the mission from that exclusively of tactical reinforcement and relief to one also of emancipation.

As the sounds of Porter's guns grew louder, the column sped forward. By late afternoon, the southernmost embattled boats were in sight and the lead elements of Smith's force took sporadic fire from across the river. Deploying his men in the usual Second Division fashion, dispersed in four-man skirmish teams, the Missourians and their Illinoisan supports entered the fray. “Every tree and stump covered a sharpshooter,” Smith reported. Rushing toward the outhouses of a nearby plantation for cover, the advance guard was ambushed and one Missourian

⁵¹⁰ Sherman's Report, Mar. 21, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 433.

⁵¹¹ Giles Smith's OR Report, Mar. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 439.

⁵¹² Giles Smith's *OR* Report, Mar. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 439.

cut down before the rest of the company could storm the buildings.⁵¹³ Meanwhile, Smith worked to make contact with Porter, who was overcome with emotion upon seeing blue uniforms. At the Admiral's behest, Smith took command of all the marines on hand along with his infantry. As his three regiments were actually only the size of a single full strength regiment, he broke their small companies up into independent tactical units and gave them each separate tactical objectives, just as Ewing had done with his command at Muddy Bayou. This breaking up of his concentrated command, though outnumbered by the Rebel enemy, actually had the effect of making the small force more difficult to drive from the field. Most companies were charged with skirmishing to gain a tactical edge over the Rebels hidden in the woods to their front. Others were ordered to disperse for several miles down the creek to the south “to prevent any more obstructions being placed in it.”⁵¹⁴ Each detachment, after departing, effectively left Smith's control, and relied on itself and its junior leaders in the sharp fight along the creek. Several of these detachments lacked a single officer. As the sun went down, they operated completely “on their own hook.”

The next day, as Smith's adept skirmishers fought from behind dispersed cover, slowly gaining an edge in the exchange with the remaining Rebel sharpshooters, Porter's boats began the painstaking process of backing down the river in retreat. As they did so, the detachments charged with guarding their withdrawal worked to pull obstructing trees from the water. It is likely that the many freedmen now accompanying the column assisted. It was a laboriously time-consuming process, and even more so under sporadic enemy sniper fire. Suddenly, along a wood line in the distance, Smith noticed “a long line of the enemy filing along the edge of the woods and taking position on the creek.” Accompanying slaves had warned him of these reinforcements. The

⁵¹³ Matthew Egan [6 MO], Widow's Pension File, RG 94, NARA.

⁵¹⁴ Giles Smith's *OR* Report, Mar. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 439.

oncoming Rebels opened a heavy fire on Porter's retreating boats, which responded in kind but with little effect, their guns incapable of firing over the tall levees. Whether or not Smith could repel this new foe with just his outnumbered and dispersed skirmishing detachments was questionable. To make matters worse, sounds of heavy musketry filtered up from the south. Concerned that two of his most distant detachments might be cut off by another Rebel force in the rear, Smith speedily organized a relief party of skirmishers to rescue the beleaguered contingents. After the rescuers climbed aboard one of the ironclads, the craft plowed its way through obstructions southward toward the endangered outpost. As soon as it arrived, however, it came upon a welcome surprise: Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman and the rest of Second Division.

Just prior to Smith's arrival the previous day, Porter's optimism had run out. Blocked to the rear by obstructions and surrounded on all sides by Rebel snipers and light artillery, the ability of the flotilla to extricate itself from the hopeless situation was proving impossible barring relief from land. He had asked Sherman for support, but none seemed immediately forthcoming. Had his pleading dispatches made it through? Barring a miracle arrival of blue-coated help, he prepared himself for the unspeakable possibility of having to scuttle all his vessels so as to prevent their capture by the Rebels. With this in mind, he made one last effort to reach Cump, scribbling an urgent message on tissue paper, wrapping it in a piece of tobacco, and handing it to "a darky who called himself a telegraph" with instructions to make haste to "Reality" plantation in exchange for fifty cents.⁵¹⁵

Upon receipt of the desperate message of his close friend, Cump sprung immediately into action. With his chief of staff, assistant adjutant-general, and multiple aides then on leave,

⁵¹⁵ W. H. Michael, "Mississippi Flotilla," *The National Tribune*, Jun. 28, 1888, 1.

Sherman had to take the coordinative helm himself.⁵¹⁶ Unlike at any time during the previous six months, he transformed under the immense stress of the campaign's first existential crisis into the leader the moment required. "I was almost alone at Hill's," he later remembered, awaiting the arrival of the rest of Stuart's command. With no time to waste, he found a canoe and paddled down the still heavily obstructed Black Bayou alone until he found a steamer loaded with the rest of Smith's brigade. There was no way for the large craft to make the passage through the still tree-choked bayou, so the men were quickly transferred to an empty coal barge and towed with a smaller tug up the meandering channel. Crashing through debris with abandon, with fallen limbs "carrying away the pilot-house, smoke-stack, and everything above-deck," nothing was spared in Cump's fever for rescuing the ironclads.

By the time the tug made it to the landing nearest "Reality" the night was "absolutely black." Disembarking the barge and leading its occupants on foot, Sherman piloted the column through the pitch black swamps to "Reality." For illumination, the men lit candles and stuck them in the sockets of their bayonets. After just a few hours' rest and the arrival of Kilby Smith's brigade (absent Smith himself), the command was up and moving forward at first light. The distant thunder of Porter's guns and growing crackle of musketry hastened the march.⁵¹⁷ Sherman remained at the front and on foot, wading hip-deep through swamp water in places where the road dipped. "Being on foot myself, no man could complain," he later remembered. "The soldiers generally were glad to have their general and field officers afoot," he laughed, "but we gave them a fair specimen of marching." The speeding column made twenty-one miles in five hours, or about four miles an hour – breakneck pace for an infantry column over such difficult

⁵¹⁶ J. H. Hammond Diary, March 15, 1863, Hammond Diaries, Filson.

⁵¹⁷ Sherman's Report, Mar. 29, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 434-435.

terrain. Nearing the sounds of the guns, Sherman spotted Smith's southernmost detachments fighting as skirmishers from atop an Indian mound in the bend of the creek. Having successfully delivered the column to its objective, the winded general "sat down on the doorsill of a [nearby] cabin to rest" for a moment while his subordinates took over.⁵¹⁸

Although both Stuart and Kilby Smith were absent orchestrating other facets of the operation at Muddy and Black Bayous, Giles Smith was cut off with his demi-brigade to the north, and his brother Morgan still lay at Memphis convalescing from his Chickasaw wound, Second Division applied itself to the immediate tactical problem just as its evolved operational heritage and culture would have suggested. Deploying a line of skirmish teams directly from the column and well to the front to push the scattered Rebel forces back, the engagement before the Indian mounds quickly became exclusively a battle of skirmishers. Led independently by junior officers and senior sergeants, the "cloud of skirmishers" from a total of only seven companies from three regiments swept from tree to tree and cover to cover in a loosely coordinated wave, fighting skillfully as they advanced. Meanwhile, the massed body of remaining regiments followed safely in column a considerable distance to the rear, contributing additional companies to the skirmish line as needed. Just as at Corinth, Chickasaw, and Arkansas Post, the division's tactical approach capitalized on the individual skills of its riflemen and junior leaders while taking maximum advantage of terrain and vegetation. Its massed main body functioned primarily as a reserve for the forward deployed skirmish teams and a potential defensive bulwark should the skirmishers have to withdraw. This tactic also maximized economy of force and minimized casualties. While no wave of skirmishers could successfully assault Rebel works, against an enemy caught in the open these methods were far more efficient than any massed line of battle or

⁵¹⁸ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 333.

frontal assault could ever hope to be. For the first time in the campaign, Second Division's operational culture was ideally calibrated for the tactical problem at hand. Thus, very quickly, the division's skirmishers gained the upper hand. Once the remaining Rebel sharpshooters had been driven from the field, Sherman re-consolidated the scattered elements of his relief column to ensure the continued safety of Porter's ironclads as they continued to limp southward “at a snail's pace” back toward “Reality.”⁵¹⁹ Jubilant over their swift and relatively easy victory, the cocky soldiers jibed the sailors: “Better let bushwhacking out to 'Old Tecump's' boys!” they shouted.⁵²⁰

The next day, rain fell in torrents, turning the Deer Creek road to “mud, at times almost up to our knees.”⁵²¹ Hoping to make something of the erstwhile fruitless venture, and struck by the obvious wealth of the valley Porter called the “granary of the world,” Sherman chose to make the most of the slow withdrawal. Supposed to be inaccessible to the Yankee invader, most of the Deer Creek properties had been planted with corn, and “their gardens well stocked with vegetables, which were growing most temptingly,” one observer noted.⁵²² The slaves encountered by Smith on his initial trip northward had confirmed that most, if not all, of the plantations abutting the creek had provided “hands” to assist in obstructing the creek and capturing Porter's flotilla. All were thus deemed culpable for retaliation, and now they would pay. First, all properties were searched for serviceable horses to mount the officers of the command. Entire spans of mules were seized and led by the halter while other hungry

⁵¹⁹ “Report of Lt. Col. Cyrus Fisher” [54 OH], *OR*, I:24, I, 448.

⁵²⁰ W. H. Michael, “Mississippi Flotilla,” *The National Tribune*, Jun. 28, 1888, 1.

⁵²¹ J. Grecian, *History of the Eighty-third Indiana* (Cincinnati: John F. Uhlhorn, 1865), 27-28.

⁵²² “The Recent Expedition of Gen. Sherman,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 4, 1863, 1.

infantrymen combed through corn cribs, chicken coops, and smokehouses in search of eatables. Having brought only two days' rations along on the trip, Smith's brigade was famished. The painstakingly slow pace of the withdrawal provided ample opportunities for practice at foraging liberally off the countryside. Famished volunteers pried open smokehouses across the valley and seized tens of thousands of pounds of cured bacon. "Chickens, eggs, mutton, veal and other delicacies ... turkeys, geese, calves, and sheep without number" were piled into confiscated wagons and hauled along for the journey back to "Reality." Hundreds of mules, horses, and cattle were confiscated. Cotton bales, many of them stamped "C.S.A." in preparation for sale to the Confederacy, were tumbled into the creek to float downstream for others to retrieve. Others were burned in place, frequently along with the outhouses in which they were discovered.⁵²³

Customarily restrained in his approach to private property, Sherman now freely vented his anger and frustration as his beloved "old Division" tried its hand for the first time at authorized and deliberate "war in earnest." In total, one correspondent estimated, Stuart's division destroyed "at least 2,000 bales of cotton, 50,000 bushels of corn, and the gins and houses of the plantations whose owners had obstructed our progress and joined in the warfare." In so doing, he confidently assumed, "we crippled the enemy so far."⁵²⁴

By far the most valuable "property" seized from the "granary of the world" were a large number of enslaved men and women who fell in behind the column and followed along.⁵²⁵

Nearly 8,000 slaves were held within the county in 1860, and while many of the able-bodied

⁵²³ "Galway," "Operations on the Mississippi," *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 1863; Among the planters who unsuccessfully applied for compensation through the Southern Claims Commission after the war for losses to Stuart's division were Benjamin B. Fore, Lewis C. Watson, R. L. Wright, and Robert J. Turnbull, Issaquena County, Mississippi, Barred and Disallowed Case Files of the Southern Claims Commission, 1871-1880, M1407, NARA.

⁵²⁴ "The Recent Expedition of Gen. Sherman," *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 4, 1863, 1.

⁵²⁵ "Galway," "Operations on the Mississippi," *New York Times*, Apr. 6, 1863.

men had been removed by nervous planters prior to the arrival of the Federal army, large numbers still remained.⁵²⁶ “Reality” alone was home to 127 men and women.⁵²⁷ Even a staunchly conservative journalist embedded with the division had to admit that in “every instance, everywhere, they were our friends ... doing everything and anything in their power to assist us.” Black men had carried all the crucial dispatches, guided all the critical movements, labored alongside white regiments constructing bridges and roads, alerted Federal forces to approaching Rebels, and even assisted in hastening fellow slaves toward the withdrawing “Linkum army.”⁵²⁸ Though undertaken exclusively in the interest of securing their freedom and that of their families, their operational contributions to the corps's efforts had proven utterly indispensable.

While sharp skirmishing had been necessary to drive the Rebel host from the field, the mere arrival of the reinforcing blue columns, at a place and time the onrushing Rebels had assumed to be all but impossible, secured the closest approximation to success the expedition would enjoy. While falling well short of the expedition's original objectives, through the careful coordination of pioneering efforts, hard work, inspiring leadership, brutally hard marching, and the vital assistance of slaves, Stuart's division saved Porter's flotilla. The entire expedition had been “used in labor – constant and severe.” Embedded reporters admired how the “officers and men worked with equal alacrity, whether in building bridges or making forced marches, both by day and in the night.”⁵²⁹ Sherman's own observation that the timing of his relief column's arrival

⁵²⁶ Issaquena County, Mississippi, 1860 U.S. Federal Census Slave Schedule.

⁵²⁷ “The Recent Expedition of Gen. Sherman,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 4, 1863, 1.

⁵²⁸ “The Blasted Nigger,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 6, 1863, 2.

⁵²⁹ “The Recent Expedition of Gen. Sherman,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 4, 1863, 1.

had been “very opportune” was a profound understatement. Had the division hit any snag in its forward momentum, had any relatively minute part of the division's larger system failed to fulfill its assigned duties, and the relief column reached Porter's beleaguered craft even an hour later, it is quite possible that the boats would have already been abandoned and scuttled, and with them the campaign for Vicksburg.⁵³⁰ Though the strategic significance of the near disaster was mostly lost on the men in the ranks, their success marked perhaps their most significant contribution yet to the preservation of the Union.

Crafting intelligible narratives that made sense of their unit's participation in the expedition proved exasperating for every officer charged with filing a formal report afterward. The night after returning to Young's Point, Maj. Dudley Chase, commanding the Regulars who spearheaded the relief column, came to chief engineer Jenney's cabin, quietly shut the door, and “looked around to see that we were alone,” Jenney remembered. “I command a battalion of regulars,” Chase whispered, “I have been on an expedition, – I must write a report, – I want you to tell me where I have been, how I went there, what I did, and if I came back the same way I went, or if not, how I did get back.” Still laughing about Chase's confusion years hence, Jenney observed that the incident “serves to illustrate how little even battalion commanders knew of what was being done at this time.”⁵³¹ Even so, if the larger strategic picture remained obscure to most of those in Sherman's corps, the expedition instilled a number of valuable skills and lessons to the soldiers in each regiment involved. Even Porter acknowledged that the mission had

⁵³⁰ “The Recent Expedition of Gen. Sherman,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 4, 1863, 1.

⁵³¹ William L. B. Jenney, “Personal Recollections of Vicksburg,” *Military Essays and Recollections: Papers Read Before the Commandery of the State of Illinois, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, Vol. III* (Chicago: The Dial Press, 1899), 256.

provided “a lot of experience which would serve us in the future.” Although in reference to his sailors, the remark was just as applicable to Sherman's footsore landmen.⁵³²

Nothing about the expedition had neatly fallen into the lap of the corps. It had been forced to fashion its own luck out of whole cloth from beginning to end. As its component units worked their way through nearly impassable terrain, each and every regiment contributed in some material fashion to the completion of the corps's ultimate objectives. Fragmenting into smaller units, re-consolidating when needed, and then fragmenting again to address unforeseen challenges became almost second nature as junior leaders took on more responsibility more frequently than at any prior time. Even during the heaviest of the fighting at the Indian mounds, all combat operations were controlled by junior officers and sergeants moving among their dispersed skirmish teams, guiding their advance and withdrawal, and taking care to keep in touch with friendly skirmish teams on their flanks.

The unique problems of engineering, swift maneuver, and resource extraction had also proved fundamentally easier to solve than those of the battlefield. Grit, firm resolve, and sweat proved capable of accomplishing meaningful results in ways that valor and trust in fate and God had proven incapable of winning under fire. Moreover, the quite visible personal leadership of every senior officer from regimental commanders to Sherman himself, sweating alongside their commands and often half submerged in the same muddy water as the privates, forged a bond of familiarity that had been palpably lacking in the command before. In all, the expedition taught Second Division, and Sherman, that they had more in the way of tactical capabilities up their sleeves than they had previously imagined.

⁵³² David Dixon Porter, *Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1886), 171.

III. "I want to take every thing away from the Damned Secesh"

Stymied first at Yazoo Pass and now at Steele's Bayou, Grant began to explore an even more daring strategy to reach the high ground east of Vicksburg. On the evening of April 16, Grant and Porter sent seven gunboats and three empty transports through the dark of night down the river and directly past the Rebel batteries guarding Vicksburg's bluffs in a desperate attempt to "run the batteries." Suddenly alerted to the opportunity, the Secessionist gunners fired upon the barely visible flotilla with incredible ferocity, but most of the vessels still miraculously managed to make it through the maelstrom. Grant planned to use these vessels to ferry his army across the Mississippi some distance to the south, marching it northeastward toward the high ground east of Vicksburg in a bid to cut off the enemy garrison from any and all supply.⁵³³

In preparation for the forthcoming campaign, he sought both to secure his lengthy riverine supply line and strike a blow at the breadbasket of the city's garrison which lay to the north along the Deer Creek valley. The town of Greenville, Mississippi, several miles north of Vicksburg, had long been a source of harassing gunfire for passing supply steamers headed to and from Grant's army. Amid one of the richest portions of the lower Mississippi Valley, the plantations south and east of Greenville produced prodigious amounts of cotton and, of greater military value, foodstuffs that the Vicksburg garrison regularly tapped as they awaited Grant's next move. The region also contained the greatest density of able-bodied male slaves within easy reach of the army. Grant well knew that their labor had greatly benefited Pemberton's garrison, and he meant to convert those efforts to his own aims instead, offering freedom in exchange. Once again, he turned to his most trusted subordinate for the job.⁵³⁴

⁵³³ Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 198-203.

⁵³⁴ Grimsley, *Hard Hand of War*, 151-152.

After meeting with Grant and learning his expectations, Sherman promptly turned to Steele's fresh division to conduct the operation. As the command would be wholly unsupported, speed was of the utmost necessity. The column was to take only rations that could be carried by the men on their persons or upon pack mules. Barring any unforeseen contingency in the form of Rebel resistance, Steele was to march his division southward from Greenville down the Deer Creek valley for two or three days, "clearing the country as you go of guerrillas and Confederate soldiers." If the inhabitants of the region remained at home "and behave themselves," the column was to "molest them as little as possible." On the other hand, should the division discover abandoned properties, "you may infer they [their owners] are hostile, and can take their cattle, hogs, corn, or anything you need."

These instructions left a great deal of latitude to both Steele and his lieutenants in determining the extent and character of extraction and destruction to be levied. Few clear red lines existed. Cotton "which is clearly private property" was not to be touched, but all marked "C.S.A." was to be promptly "brought away or burned." Finally, and perhaps most importantly, any and "all provisions which are needed by us or might be used by the [Rebel] army in Vicksburg, unless needed by the peaceful inhabitants" were to be consumed, seized, or destroyed. Above all else, Steele was to ensure that the wealthy inhabitants of the valley "see and feel that they will be held accountable for the acts of guerrillas and Confederate soldiers who sojourn in their country." Beyond the denial of the nutritional and financial bounty of the valley to the rebellion, Steele was to execute a psychological operation. "Let all the people understand that we claim the unmolested navigation of the Mississippi, and will have it," Sherman ordered, "if all the country within reach has to be laid waste."⁵³⁵ Embarking his command on April 2,

⁵³⁵ WTS to Steele, Mar. 31, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 158.

Steele's flotilla steamed northward in search of a viable landing. After several false starts at landings that eventually proved inaccessible to the rest of the region, the column was finally on its way south into the Deer Creek valley from Greenville on April 5.⁵³⁶

In many ways, Steele was perhaps the least likely choice for waging such a “war in earnest.” His attractiveness to both Grant and Sherman had always been in part due to his apparent lack of radicalism. The same could not be said of his division. Unlike Stuart's command operating along the southernmost reaches of Deer Creek during the Steele's Bayou expedition, many “old” regiments in Steele's division had considerable experience at employing emancipation as a deliberate tactic. Long before almost any other Western commander, Maj. Gen. Samuel Curtis had adopted the practice of issuing “free papers” to slaves along the route of his army's long march across Arkansas to Helena in the summer of 1862. Similar to Giles Smith's recent experience, Curtis had noticed that Rebel cavalry were pressing local slaves into hard labor, forcing them to cut trees to obstruct the Federal route. Offers of “free papers” issued to any and all slaves encountered along the road quickly eliminated the problem. “They are now throwing down their axes and rushing in,” Curtis observed, and by the time his column reached Helena it contained several thousand freedmen and women trailing in the van.⁵³⁷ Continuing his abolition strategy after establishing the garrison at Helena, ironically the liberal policy was quickly halted after the arrival of the far more conservative Steele. But time had changed the old man, and Steele, ever mindful of his duty, had his orders.

⁵³⁶ Edwin Cole Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. II* (Dayton: Morningside, 1986), 108-110.

⁵³⁷ Robert G. Schultz, *The March to the River: From the Battle of Pea Ridge to Helena, Spring 1862* (Iowa City: Camp Pope Publishing, 2014); Grimsley, *Hard Hand of War*, 98-99; Krisotpher A. Teters, *Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2018), 37.

The march was hard, occasionally pushing nearly twenty miles a day. While Steele's "old" regiments stood it relatively well, for many of the "new" units the expedition represented the first hard marching they had done since enlistment. "The men stumble slowly towards night," Seay observed of his "fresh levy" Missourians, "and complain of sore feet."⁵³⁸ Captain Jacob Ritner, 25th Iowa, though a long-service veteran now in command of "fresh levy" Hawkeyes, completely "gave out" on the first and second day's marches. By the third, he found he "stood it first-rate" and "believe[d] I could march a month now."⁵³⁹ A full third of his regiment, the largest in the division, failed to keep up, "gave out and lagged behind."⁵⁴⁰ In short time the pain of the march was eliminated for many, and in several regiments at least half the privates found themselves mounted upon "jayhawked mules."⁵⁴¹ By the time the column returned to Greenville, nearly every officer of every grade was mounted.⁵⁴² Those in the ranks were stunned at the sheer beauty and bounty of the valley. "It is the real 'South' just as we have all read about," one Hawkeye officer wrote in awe.⁵⁴³

Although formal reports like those required after combat engagements were never filed by the regiments of the division in the aftermath of the expedition, a reconstruction of the "primary" tactics of area denial and emancipation as conducted by Steele's division is possible through the triangulation of a variety of sources. Among the many plantations nestled along the

⁵³⁸ A. J. Seay [32 MO], Diary, Apr. 6, 1863, 34.

⁵³⁹ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, April 12, 1863, 151.

⁵⁴⁰ John Gay [25 IA] Diary, Apr. 6, 1863, John Gay Diary, SHSI Iowa City.

⁵⁴¹ John Gay [25 IA] Diary, Apr. 9, 1863, John Gay Diary, SHSI Iowa City.; S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Apr. 17, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁵⁴² S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Sister, Apr. 12, 1863, S. S. Farwell, SHSI Iowa City.

⁵⁴³ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, April 12, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 150.

usually quiet banks of Deer Creek lay the picturesque “Mount Pleasant” of the late Rhode Islander Henry Tillinghast Ireys. After Henry died in 1846, leaving his properties in a trust for his young sons, the surviving Ireys family remained absentee planters like many of those who owned the palatial properties near Greenville. Finding Rhode Island still all too proximate to the war, the family had long since decamped even further away from Mississippi, instead riding the war out in Scotland.⁵⁴⁴ In order to maintain what meager profits were still possible despite the blockade, and also to watch over the many acres and at least 50 slaves they owned, the Ireyses employed Anderson Copeland and his wife to live on the property as their overseer.⁵⁴⁵ Well aware that Yankees were lurking in the area that warm April afternoon, Copeland was already on edge. He had taken precautions with the property he was employed to protect. Earlier that morning he ordered several slaves away from the grounds with eight mules, two full wagon loads of fresh meat, and orders to remain hidden deep in the woods until sent for. Later that afternoon, as he dutifully watched from the shade of the porch and the slaves hoed and drove mule teams plowing the dark Mississippi mud in preparation for spring planting, he noticed a group of riders in blue approaching from the Deer Creek road and his heart began to pound. “I was so frightened that I kept at a distance and yet in full view,” he later sheepishly recounted to a claims commission agent.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁴ John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta After the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 5-8; William McCain and Charlotte Capers, eds., *Memoirs of Henry Tillinghast Ireys: Papers of the Washington County Historical Society, 1910-1915* (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History and Mississippi Historical Society, 1954).

⁵⁴⁵ “Henry T. Irish,” 1850 U.S. Federal Census Slave Schedule, Washington County, Mississippi, p. 92.

⁵⁴⁶ “Examination of Anderson Copeland, Feb. 11, 1874,” Henry T. Irish File, Washington County, Mississippi, Barred and Disallowed Case Files of the Southern Claims Commission, 1871-1880, M1407, NARA.

If they too noticed Copeland, the soldiers initially showed no interest in him. Instead, they rode directly into the fields and approached the slaves themselves. Their foreman, slave John Lewis, looked up from his work as they approached. "Boys, put down your hoes & stop plowing," one of the riders called out. "You are all free." As Lewis and the others allowed the bluntly delivered pronouncement to set in, the mounted officer wasted no time in giving further orders to the soldiers with him. "I want to take every thing away from the Damned Secesh," another slave, Alexander Colbert, heard him say. The officer then promptly ordered the mules immediately unhitched from their plows. Turning to Lewis, he explained that he and the other slaves were "to go with us," and again insisted that they hurriedly "take out your mules!" As the slaves complied, the officer, Colonel Isaac Shepard, 3rd Missouri, and his entourage spurred their mounts toward the Copeland home. Having apparently fled the premises upon the realization of what in fact was happening, the overseer had left his wife alone at the house to meet the Federals. Announcing their intentions, Shepard received what by then the Missourians had grown accustomed to hearing from Southern women: spite. Afterward, she proudly repored to her shy husband how she had defiantly "asked them If they knew they were taking the property of Northern Men," referencing the New England Ireyses. "So much the worse for Northern Men owning property in the South," Shepard bluntly replied, and departed.⁵⁴⁷

The Missourians had proven to be merely the advanced guard of Steele's division, and a long column of blue now completely filled the roadway in either direction as Lewis and the others mounted the unhitched mules bareback and fell into line. For at least two hours the road was filled with dusty Yankees as others rifled through the property looking for anything that

⁵⁴⁷ Henry T. Irish File, Washington County, Mississippi, Barred and Disallowed Case Files of the Southern Claims Commission, 1871-1880, M1407, NARA.

might be deemed of greater use to Uncle Sam than the Rebel garrison at Vicksburg. They “were just passing through the country gathering up things – mules & negroes,” Colbert observed. The Ireyses later reported 35 mules, 100 head of cattle, and a valuable mare seized without any receipt or voucher provided. In all, they estimated the value of property lost at nearly \$10,000, not including an unknown number of their most valuable “possessions” – human beings like John Lewis and Alexander Colbert.⁵⁴⁸

Not all of the Ireys's slaves chose to join the column. Watching from across the vast fields, slave Isaac McLean observed the dramatic proceedings from start to finish, but ultimately “did not follow them.” When freedom suddenly appeared, a very personal calculus had to be made by each bondsman and woman, and swiftly. Lewis and Colbert decided that immediate departure was their best strategy. McLean apparently felt otherwise. On the other hand, as soon as word reached the slaves charged with guarding the hidden wagon loads of meat that the Yankees had arrived, the bondsmen blithely ignored Copeland's instructions and made directly for Steele's column with eight more mules and two wagon loads full of fresh provisions.⁵⁴⁹

As the division wound its way down the valley, similar scenes played out all along the banks of Deer Creek. At another plantation, the Missouriians spotted a gang of slaves likewise preparing for planting under the much closer supervision of an overseer who sat on horseback nearby with whip in hand. At first sight of the column, the toiling slaves froze, “gazing at us as if paralyzed,” Sergeant-Major Reichhelm remembered. In an instant, “they all dropped their tools and with a great shout flinging their arms into the air they came bounding over the fields towards

⁵⁴⁸ Henry T. Irish File, Washington County, Mississippi, Barred and Disallowed Case Files of the Southern Claims Commission, 1871-1880, M1407, NARA.

⁵⁴⁹ Henry T. Irish File, Washington County, Mississippi, Barred and Disallowed Case Files of the Southern Claims Commission, 1871-1880, M1407, NARA.

the roadside.” Their “joyful cries” were so exultant that their exact words were hard to discern. Even so, the German Reichhelm had no trouble making out “Oh, Lord,” “Yankees,” and “freedom.” Halting the regiment for a moment while the officers took stock of the available forage on the property, the liberated men and women shouted and danced in the roadway “like a lot of children greeting a Santa Claus.” One elderly man walked straight to the national colors at the head of the column, knelt down, and between sobs thanked God “that Thou has pleased to let us see the glory of this day.” Unlike many of the more conservative Western regiments in Steele’s division, the Germans who filled Shepard’s regiment felt it “was an indescribable scene and we felt its tremendous significance.” Still acting as the principal interlocutor between the Army and the local white population, their colonel beckoned to the white overseer “who had stood there scowling and undecided what to do,” Reichhelm observed. “His occupation was gone,” Shepard called out to him. For now, he should “consider himself a prisoner for the present” while the men searched the grounds.⁵⁵⁰

Approaching the main house, Reichhelm and a few others noticed a tall flagpole bearing the French national colors by which stood a middle-aged “genteel looking man.” Seeing the soldiers approaching, he excitedly pointed to the flag. “I claim the protection of that flag; I am a Frenchman, and this is French property and you must not interfere with this property,” he cried out in a thick accent. Shepard approached and spoke with the man, doubting the validity of his claims but placing a guard over the house until he could ascertain the truth. The home and its denizens would be safe, he promised, but any provisions and willing slaves would be seized. Hearing this, those slaves nearby rushed to their quarters, rapidly gathered their few earthly belongings, and fell into line behind the regiment. As the division column swept by the indignant

⁵⁵⁰ Edward P. Reichhelm [3 MO], “The Taking of Vicksburg,” *The Bayonne Herald*, Jan. 4, 1902, 3.

Frenchman's home, subsequent details from other regiments searched for anything the Missourians may have missed. Upon discovery of several chickens, a few of the 9th Iowa were chased around the grounds by the outraged Frenchman, now with flag in hand, as they grabbed them up for supper. "It looked like mockery to me," the Hawkeye officer in charge of the detail remarked. "Let him hoist the Stars and Stripes if he wants protection."⁵⁵¹

While Steele's "old" regiments led the way in liberating the valley's human "chattel," the more recently raised half of his division remained far more interested in the emancipation of livestock and poultry than of human beings. By contrast with Shepard's proactive abolition efforts, officers in the 25th Iowa made sure that there "was no effort made to bring them along" even though inevitably "they would come." Even so, by the end of the expedition one Hawkeye company commander counted a ratio of two "contraband" to every man in his company.⁵⁵² After watching men and women along the eastern bank fashioning rafts out of rails to cross the waters to freedom, the Hawkeyes were not about to turn them away.⁵⁵³ That said, they were not always inclined to assist in their bid for liberty either. The sight of a lone slave woman attempting to pilot a flimsy handmade raft up the creek toward the column only to drift further and further away downstream elicited no pity but considerable laughter from the ranks. For all but the most radical of Steele's command, emancipation was still merely a pragmatic tactic.

Shepard's direct personal involvement in his regiment's search and seizure operations during the expedition were somewhat unique. For the most part, the vast majority of the division's extractive efforts were conducted by small detachments of men commanded by junior

⁵⁵¹ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, Apr. 7, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

⁵⁵² John Bell [25 IA] Diary, Apr. 9, 1863, Edwin C. Bearss, "Diary of Captain John N. Bell of Co. E, 25th Iowa Infantry, at Vicksburg," *Iowa Journal of History* 59, no. 2 (April 1961): 188.

⁵⁵³ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 12, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 151.

officers or senior non-commissioned officers. These detachments were usually ordered to set off on foot or on captured mounts to scour distant properties known only to maps or slave informants. While away from the main column, these detachments operated “on their own hook,” with almost all their actions determined by their assigned leader or even the men themselves.

Private William Royal Oake was assigned to just such a six-man detail from the 26th Iowa commanded by a lieutenant, ordered to cross Deer Creek and search a plantation assumed to be about a mile distant on the eastern bank. As most planters in the valley owned property on both sides of the creek, many had intentionally moved all their most valuable property (including slaves) to the eastern side of the creek and summarily destroyed or burned all the bridges.⁵⁵⁴ This did not stop the Hawkeyes. Procuring a modest craft nearby, the squad paddled across the creek and walked about a mile to their objective. The estate proved a goldmine. Turkeys, chickens, hams, and plenty of apple-jack whiskey were uncovered while rifling through the abandoned plantation, all of which was packed onto confiscated mules and horses found on the property. Much of the whiskey was consumed by the men on the spot, after which they each rode a captured mule heavily laden with forage back to the creek. Precisely how to get such volume of provender back across the water on such a meager craft took some thinking. Eventually, the squad hatched a plan whereby one would stand in the rear of the boat while the others coaxed their mounts and livestock into the water.

Once across, the Iowans calculated that, given the duration of their errand and the probable speed of the division column, the regiment would be about three hours down the road. Steele’s path was easy to trace, clearly marked by the still smoldering cotton, gins, corn, and forage on both sides of the dirt route leading southward. Sure enough, later that afternoon the

⁵⁵⁴ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, April 12, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 150.

men straggled back into their regiment's bivouac. Their colonel remained suspicious of the detail's prolonged absence until "we took over to him a fine young turkey," Oake recalled. The bribe worked, and "a smile lit up his face as he kindly thanked us."⁵⁵⁵

Much of the intelligence upon which such distant forays were based came from bondspeople who were eager to assist in the army's mission. Slaves were not always immediately forthcoming with information, fearful of the wrath of their masters or the roving gangs of Rebel partisans that shadowed the Federal column. "A negro generally keeps dark," one Illinoisan noted. More often than not, though, they eventually "shed much light as to where we were to look to find wagons ready loaded with supplies, and hid in the woods to be hauled away in emergency, and many other things too good to be left."⁵⁵⁶ Foraging detachments discovered provisions hidden in the woods, in canebrakes, in locked buildings, and even "nicely boxed up & hid under the rails by the roadside."⁵⁵⁷ Each discovery marked a lesson learned that could be applied by the men in the search for provisions at the next plantation.

In many cases, detachments from Steele's "old" regiments directly encouraged slaves to join the column. Foragers derived great satisfaction from breaking into smokehouses and corn cribs, and "throwing out ... a lot of meat to the begging and half starved darkies."⁵⁵⁸ At almost every property, slaves lining the roadway "seemed to think that we were their friends and appeared to think they must tell us all they knew and do every thing they were told to do."⁵⁵⁹ In

⁵⁵⁵ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *Skirmish Line*, 99-101.

⁵⁵⁶ *Thirteenth Regiment*, 302.

⁵⁵⁷ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, Apr. 9, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

⁵⁵⁸ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, Apr. 7, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

⁵⁵⁹ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Wife, Apr. 12, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

other instances, their intelligence proved somewhat fantastical. Slaves who were interrogated by the 25th Iowa alleged Rebel cavalry to be between 12 and 24 miles away, numbering anywhere “from twelve hundred to twelve hundred thousand.”⁵⁶⁰

The path to freedom was not always a one-way street. Colonel A. J. Seay's "body servant," Allen, was retrieved by his local master during the expedition. Seay had no trouble finding two others to take his place.⁵⁶¹ Seizing freedom by assisting the Yankees could also entail grave dangers. One particularly unfortunate man approached a group of soldiers one night he assumed to be of Steele's band to share intelligence on the location of a nearby Rebel camp. Sadly, the pickets were Rebels themselves. As the blue column swept by a plantation the next day nearly every man noted his body, hanging from a tree in the yard as a warning to all other slaves in the neighborhood to keep quiet.⁵⁶² Such scenes enraged the more liberal portions of Steele's command, and seemed to increase the amount of wanton destruction meted out on the rest of the valley. By the time the column counter-marched back to Greenville, every cotton gin within sight of the creek was a smoldering ruin and enormous piles of cotton and corn still belched flames and smoke into the sky. While there is no record of a single private residence being harmed in any way, in the case of almost every other useful structure, “the work of burning [went] magnificently on,” one Hawkeye proudly observed.⁵⁶³

Two brief brushes with a small Rebel cavalry contingent amounted to all the direct enemy contact during the expedition. In both cases, although the infantry immediately on hand formed

⁵⁶⁰ John Bell [25 IA] Diary, Apr. 6, 1863, Bearss, “Diary of Captain John N. Bell,” 186.

⁵⁶¹ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Apr. 10, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 35.

⁵⁶² S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Wife, Apr. 12, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁵⁶³ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, Apr. 9, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

in battle line and rushed forward supported by the division's artillery, the Secessionists dispersed under the punishment of the heavy guns long before Steele's infantry could make contact. This manner of confronting the minimal Rebel threat contrasted sharply with the economical skirmishing preferences of Stuart's division, but it seemed to work all the same.⁵⁶⁴ "They always run before we got close enough to hurt anyone," Captain Jacob Ritner observed.⁵⁶⁵

After returning from the fiery foray back to his base at Greenville on April 10, Steele continued to send occasional patrols from Greenville into the Deer Creek environs for the next several weeks. One, a joint effort by the 27th and 32nd Missouri, walked several miles and waded through deep water to "pillage a house, taking everything they wanted." In the process, several imbibed a considerable amount of the alcohol discovered in the house and were summarily punished by their commander, Lt. Col. Seay as a result.⁵⁶⁶ Seay was sent on yet another patrol on April 19, this time requiring the portage of 120 men of the 3rd and 32nd Missouri by steamers a full twenty five miles north. The detail deliberately hunted the landing area for slaves, chickens, and "property useful to us" as it crawled through dense canebrake while keeping an eye open for Rebel partisans. When it became clear that the owner of one property had "his slaves 'hid out,'" the men scoured a half mile radius before finding them "hid in a canebrake, guarded by a white man with a double barreled shot-gun." The sentinel was no match for the patrol, which accordingly "took all" and moved on to the next property in search of more of the same.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁴ John Bell [25 IA] Diary, Apr. 7, 1863, Bearss, "Diary of Captain John N. Bell," 186; Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 12, 1863, *Love and Valor*; 150-151.

⁵⁶⁵ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 12, 1863, *Love and Valor*; 150.

⁵⁶⁶ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Apr. 18, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 37.

⁵⁶⁷ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, Apr. 20, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 37.

Try as he might, Steele struggled to contain the libertine spirit that his extractive mission naturally inspired. "Steele cannot control the men as he wishes," Seay observed during the march, even as the division commander occasionally "use[d] his sword and revolver" to curb the worst excesses and acts of indiscipline.⁵⁶⁸ Upon the column's return to Greenville, Steele was appalled to learn that so many private carriages, buggies, and farming implements had been arbitrarily seized by various regiments against his orders. He promptly returned the items to aggrieved families upon their pleas for mercy, reporting this decision back to Sherman. Always the conservative, Cump shared Steele's disgust. "Our men will become absolutely lawless unless this can be checked," he warned. "War is at best barbarism, but to involve all – children, women, old and helpless – is more than can be justified." While the seizure or destruction of provender represented "a well-established law of war," the Federal government had no right to destroy "the stores necessary for a family." Worst of all, such unbridled destruction "injures our men to allow them to plunder indiscriminately." Even so, the brief reports issuing from Greenville were sufficient to convince both he and Grant that "Deer Creek has been sufficiently chastised never again to desire a Yankee visitation," and thus the expedition had succeeded in its primary mission.⁵⁶⁹ On April 22, Steele and First Division were ordered back to Young's Point to "prepare for a new move."⁵⁷⁰

The Deer Creek expedition had been both an illustration of preexisting skills and predispositions that remained a major component of the division's deep operational heritage and culture, as well as an indoctrination for Steele's "new" regiments into the tactical practice of "war

⁵⁶⁸ A. J. Seay [32 MO], Diary, Apr. 9, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 35.

⁵⁶⁹ WTS to Steele, Apr. 19, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 209.

⁵⁷⁰ S.O. #92, HQ 15 AC, Apr. 22, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 221.

in earnest.” Even for veterans of Curtis's long trek through Arkansas, the expedition had imparted valuable lessons. At the most basic level, the men gained considerable experience in the rudiments of extractive warfare. They encountered a variety of schemes hatched by crafty overseers, planters, and even slaves bent on securing or hiding foodstuffs and valuables. They learned to anticipate where various items of use were usually stored on Mississippi plantations, and developed methods by which they could swiftly be procured and transported. They now also better understood the intrinsic operational value of human intelligence provided by slaves and “contraband,” who had assisted materially in the success of the expedition, just as they had further south with Sherman's column. Perhaps most importantly, they recognized the anxiety, fury, and anguish on the faces of the erstwhile proud and unrepentant planters and overseers from whom they confiscated. While their actual political stances were often far more complex than Steele's volunteers were apt to recognize, the men tended to categorize them all as the rankest of “Secesh,” and making them pay for rebellion felt quite good. The Schadenfreude felt even better when those in the ranks reflected upon how glad they were that “the ravages of war are not visited upon Iowa.”⁵⁷¹ In all, the men of First Division returned to Greenville “in good spirits and believe they are now in a fair way to put down the rebellion,” for the first time since leaving Helena months earlier.⁵⁷²

IV. “A white mans war”

While Steele's command awaited orders at Greenville, Colonel Shepard, always at the forefront of emancipation, took the opportunity to begin drilling seventy of the black men liberated during the recent expedition. Observers fashioned Shepard's impromptu cohort the

⁵⁷¹ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Wife, Apr. 12, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁵⁷² S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Sister, Apr. 12, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

“Black Brigade.”⁵⁷³ Members of the 25th Iowa watching the proceedings thought the freedmen promised to “make good soldiers,” especially because they seemed “willing to learn and [were] prompt in obeying orders.”⁵⁷⁴ By April 17, the Federal camp at Greenville had accumulated nearly six hundred previously enslaved men and women, “and more coming in every day.”⁵⁷⁵ Less than a week later, the number had risen to nearly 2,000. “It is not necessary to march through the country to get Negroes,” one Iowan realized, “they come in by scores, as fast as we can provide for them.”⁵⁷⁶ Steele quartered the refugees in the quarters of abandoned plantations, issued them rations from the bounty of seized provisions, and awaited orders advising him of the next proper step to take.⁵⁷⁷ In the meantime, two steam mills were put to work grinding captured corn “and providing for all that come.”⁵⁷⁸

The dramatic influx of African American refugees into the corps's camps coincided with an auspicious visit from the U.S. Army's Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas. Sent on a special mission directly from Washington by Secretary of State Edwin Stanton, Thomas had orders to make a circuit throughout Army camps across the country, making speeches emphasizing the vital importance of all U.S. officers and soldiers embracing the Lincoln Administration's decision to enlist and arm black regiments. “It was a full-scale public relations campaign,” historian

⁵⁷³ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Wife, Apr. 12, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁵⁷⁴ John Bell [25 IA] Diary, Apr. 16, 1863, Bearss, “Diary of Captain John N. Bell,” 190-191; Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 17, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 154.

⁵⁷⁵ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 17, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 154.

⁵⁷⁶ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 22, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 157.

⁵⁷⁷ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 17, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 154.

⁵⁷⁸ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 22, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 157.

Kristopher Teters observes, but among predominately conservative Westerners it promised to be an up-hill battle from the start.⁵⁷⁹

Sherman was unenthusiastic about Thomas's visit. Shortly after receiving word that the Adjutant General would be addressing his corps "about nigger Regiments," he privately shared his true thoughts with Ellen. Such an obviously political mission seemed beyond the proper purview of Thomas's responsibilities, he thought. "I'll hold my tongue," he promised, but "if he says nigger to me, Ill show him my morning Reports, ask him to inspect my Brigades or Batteries, or ask him to Sing the Star Spangled Banner and go back whence he comes." Despite recent experience, Cump continued to "prefer to have this a white mans war, & provide for the negro after the Storm had passed." Given his "experience, yea prejudice I cannot trust them yet," especially not with arms. Even so, he admitted that "Time may change this," and understood well that "we are in a Revolution and I must not pretend to judge."⁵⁸⁰ Accordingly, he bit his lip while Thomas spoke to the men of Second Division. "I followed & Know the men look to me, more than anybody on Earth," he later wrote. Mounting the cracker box podium, he explained to his beloved "old Division" precisely what he had told them several times before. They knew well his ambivalence to abolition, but "we are likened to a Sheriff," he dutifully explained, and thus "must execute the Writ of the Court & not go into an inquiry into the merits of the case." He admitted his earnest hope that armed blacks would never "be brigaded with our white men," but rather assigned "some side purpose" in the rear. After all, his experience with even the many black cooks and teamsters attached to his regiments had soured his opinion of their military

⁵⁷⁹ Kristopher Teters, *Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 76-77.

⁵⁸⁰ WTS to EES, Apr. 17, 1863, *SCW*, 451.

potential. "They desert the moment danger threatens," he confided to John after the speech. In the end, however, though he "wont trust niggers to fight yet," like most of those in the ranks, he did not "object to the Government taking them from the Enemy, & making such use of them as experience may suggest."⁵⁸¹

As Steele's division was absent at Greenville during Thomas's visit, the consummate professional and dutiful conservative had to relay the news to his command personally. On the morning of April 23, he ordered the division arrayed in hollow square in the center of which he stood alongside his senior lieutenants. First Division listened intently to what he had to say. Much to their surprise, the erstwhile ardent conservative "came out heartily and boldly in favor of the policy of the administration in freeing and arming the Negroes." Steele argued that "all slaves should be encouraged to come within our lines and be well treated and provided for." He also warned that "every soldier or officer who refused to obey the orders of the president in this matter would be promptly punished." He knew well that many in the ranks, perhaps even most, had long been of the opinion that he was "rather too pro slavery, and too much disposed to protect rebel property," but he meant to dispel such rumors once and for all. "We [have] treated them [Rebels] as erring brethren long enough," he proclaimed, and "the time had come to throw away the gloves and use every means in our power to crush the 'infernal rebellion.'" While Steele, like Sherman, remained fiercely opposed to any indiscriminate plundering of Southern property, he was strictly a man of duty, and his orders made crystal clear that the slaves were to be freed. Just as he had always done before, Steele did not allow any of his personal political convictions to color his interpretation of these orders. He was a soldier's soldier to the last. Those officers who followed him in sharing their comments, including nearly every brigade and

⁵⁸¹ WTS to JS, Apr. 26, 1863, *SCW*, 461.

regimental commander in the division, echoed his sentiments exactly. While many expressed having long felt that emancipation was the correct strategy, others flatly admitted that “a year or more ago they would have opposed it, but now supported it heartily.” Listening closely as their commanders and leaders made a bid to shape the cultural outlook of the division, the men issued “not the least murmur of disapprobation,” and instead greeted the “most radical sentiments . . . [with] the loudest cheers.”⁵⁸²

The one of a kind presentation had an electrifying effect on Steele's command.⁵⁸³ “The army is now all right,” Jacob Ritner wrote, “there is no mistake about that.” Listening closely to the conversations about camp after the gathering had been dismissed, he heard none express opposition.⁵⁸⁴ That was not because no opposition existed. One Buckeye of the 76th Ohio “didn't like quite all they said.” Most especially grating to him were expressions by several officers that “they would as leave stand by the side of a negro to fight as by a white man.” This he assumed to be a lie.⁵⁸⁵ Hearing Colonel Charles Woods, his own regimental commander, and “no nigger man,” express such beliefs seemed spurious and even duplicitous.⁵⁸⁶ While few if any were now willing to express such sentiments aloud, Steele's entreaties had by no means purged them from the ranks.

On April 18, Sherman's order to begin accepting applications for commissions in new “colored” regiments reached Steele's camps at Greenville. Accordingly, a board of three

⁵⁸² Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 29, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 159.

⁵⁸³ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, Apr. 23, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

⁵⁸⁴ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 29, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 159; John Bell [25 IA] Diary, Apr. 23, 1863, Bearss, “Diary of Captain John N. Bell,” 193.

⁵⁸⁵ Joseph F. Orr [76 OH] to Parents, Apr. 24, 1863, Reluctant Yanks, <http://www.orrbroletters.wordpress.com>.

⁵⁸⁶ Joseph F. Orr [76 OH] to Parents, Apr. 24, 1863, Reluctant Yanks, <http://www.orrbroletters.wordpress.com>.

examining officers was formed to consider applications, chaired by Colonel Woods, 76th Ohio, arguably the most well versed regimental officer in the division on military matters.⁵⁸⁷ Steele encouraged all men who had interest in positions as orderly sergeants in black regiments to apply as well. The response was explosive. Nearly a full company applied from the 25th Iowa alone. Woods was not about to let things get out of hand, however, and maintained a reputation for being “very strict” in his selections. “They will have none but the best of officers,” Ritner understood. Still, the opportunity for the most motivated of his volunteers to depart his command concerned him. “If they all get their places I will lose some of my best men,” he worried.⁵⁸⁸ The initial enthusiasm for appointments into the new black regiments arose most often from motives separate from political enthusiasm for emancipation and social revolution. Several noted how the most eager volunteers were frequently “the strongest democrats in the army.”⁵⁸⁹ Many of the same political stripe still could not bring themselves to apply regardless of promises of higher pay and authority. “I have a prejudice against the color which I cannot overcome,” one Buckeye admitted.⁵⁹⁰ A few officers who had not applied for positions were offered them anyway, most of whom turned them down. “I did not accept because I knew there would be a great trouble connected with them [black troops],” Robert Stitt, an officer in the 4th Iowa explained to his wife.⁵⁹¹ Regardless of their motivations, however, the departure of many of Sherman's highest

⁵⁸⁷ John Bell [25 IA] Diary, Apr. 18, 1863, “Diary of Captain John N. Bell,” 191; Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 22, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 157.

⁵⁸⁸ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 22, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 157.

⁵⁸⁹ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Wife, Apr. 21, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City; S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Apr. 22, 1863; John Metzgar [76 OH] to Carrie, Apr. 23, 1863, John J. Metzgar Papers, SHC-UNC.

⁵⁹⁰ John J. Metzgar [76 OH] to Carrie, Apr. 23, 1863, John J. Metzgar Papers, SHC-UNC.

⁵⁹¹ Robert Stitt [4 IA] to Wife, Apr. 23, 1863, Robert Stitt Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

performing enlisted men to serve in black regiments did reduce the number of experienced senior non-commissioned officers in the corps. At the same time, it also cleared the way for junior enlisted men to receive promotions into the higher echelons of their companies and regiments, thus refreshing the leadership of many units, most especially “new” regiments, with volunteers who enjoyed considerable experience serving in the ranks as privates.

For most of the still shaken survivors of Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post in both divisions, the tack toward a strategy of emancipation and “war in earnest” was well received. Not only were expeditions like Steele's Bayou and Deer Creek comparatively enjoyable affairs, but they also seemed a viable alternative for defeating the Secessionist rebellion that did not entail desperate, costly, and often futile frontal assaults against entrenched Rebels. While many still balked at the notion of arming black men, many others came to the conclusion that “the sooner the slaves are taken away from the rebels, the sooner the war will be over and the sooner they will get to go home.”⁵⁹² The volunteers knew that Secessionists could not possibly defend the entirety of their vast domain, try as they might. Their plantations and highly prized human chattel were extremely vulnerable assets. Now that the Lincoln administration proved willing to embrace the direct targeting of this erstwhile carefully avoided Rebel center of gravity, many in the ranks rejoiced. “The taking of the negroes[,] arming the men and putting women and the old and young at work on the plantations will surely have a good effect,” Capt. Sewall Farwell, 31st Iowa, wrote. His regiment having suffered among the worst of those roughly handled over the past winter's operations, Farwell and his comrades thought the recent expedition was promising for the future. “I think with the policy now being carried [out] that we are crushing the rebellion and will continue to crush it though we be repulsed from every stronghold for months to come,”

⁵⁹² Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 22, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 157.

he prophesied.⁵⁹³ Jacob Ritner noticed how the “soldiers have all got to be in favor of setting the Negroes free, and arming them too.” This change was not due to any particular moral enlightenment. “There is just as much prejudice against them as there ever was,” he cautioned, adding that there was nearly always “someone trying to abuse, insult, and impose upon them.” Instead, the shift in what he called “the universal sentiment” concerning the liberation and arming of slaves occurred because his comrades could now clearly see how “this is the quickest way to end the war, and that is what they all want.”⁵⁹⁴

The experiences of the late winter and early spring imparted new lessons, skills, and beliefs to the men of Sherman's corps. Novel non-combat tasks had required adaptation in everything from force structure and tactical doctrine to political ideologies and even cultural outlooks. As the strength of every unit in the command shrunk dramatically, the corps's “skeleton regiments” became increasingly tight-knit cohorts. Those still on duty found themselves with a much greater share of work assigned to them. This meant a disproportionate amount of fatigue and hardship, but also greater opportunities to grow with experience. There were far fewer chances to “shirk” hard work than had existed in the past, even after the infusion of hundreds of freedmen to assist in the backbreaking labor that defined the corps's pursuit of its objectives. This infusion increased the amount of interaction and cooperation many in the corps engaged in with blacks, and gradually converted the command into an increasingly bi-racial organization. To be sure, still only white men bore weapons, stood guard, and faced the immediate prospect of combat, but freedmen increasingly took over many of the critical if unglamorous tasks that allowed the corps to operate in and maneuver through the bayous. In a corps that had proven

⁵⁹³ S. S. Farwell to Brother, Apr. 22, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁵⁹⁴ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Apr. 17, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 154.

itself, on two still painfully recent occasions, to be less than maximally effective in an offensive capacity, the ability to navigate and maneuver effectively, thereby positioning itself on ground that abrogated any need for an assault, such labor as that conducted by the freedmen increasingly proved of far greater operational value than anything they may have been doing toting rifles in the ranks.

Sherman's new corps continued to evolve into a tool not of attack, but of swift maneuver and area denial. Its rapid movement and mere presence within valuable enemy breadbaskets was proving of far greater potency than the physical damage it could do directly to enemy military forces on the battlefield. While the corps was by no means combat ineffective, its recent experience had vividly illustrated a crippling lack of coordination in combat which threatened to hobble any future assault on Rebel defenses. The failures resulting from this lack of coordination had bred a debilitating lack of confidence within nearly every regiment of the corps when ordered to launch an attack against works. The experiences of the bayou expeditions suggested a possible workaround to the men for their corps's tactical shortcomings. The now proven capacity of its divisions to move great distances through almost impenetrable terrain, convert their regiments and companies into collections of widespread detachments led by junior officers and sergeants, and quickly complete ad-hoc engineering tasks while providing for their own security began to suggest the emergence of a different corps-level "way of war." Their sense of mostly bloodless success suggested to those in the ranks an alternative recipe for victory, giving rise to an emergent "soldier's culture."

In his typology of the many varieties of "military culture," Wayne Lee describes "soldiers' culture" as shared beliefs, patterns of behavior, and assumptions that organically arise "from the shared experience of a non-elite soldiery, which often is in defiance of their elite

masters but which they [see] as essential to their survival.”⁵⁹⁵ The prevailing interpretation of “war in earnest” in the ranks of Sherman's corps not merely as another tactic in their arsenal, but as a viable alternative to direct action against entrenched Rebels, was a key by-product of the emergent Fifteenth Corps “soldiers' culture,” promising the men increased odds of survival. In this way it closely resembled the formula many had adopted under fire at Arkansas Post when going to ground near the enemy works and sharpshooting from cover. The men in the ranks of Sherman's corps made it ever increasingly clear through their actions that they sought first and foremost to survive the war. Their patriotic motivations to preserve the Union and defend republican government had not waned, but they could not achieve either if dead.

As this emergent soldiers' culture did not yet extend to Sherman's headquarters, it can not be said to have represented a coherent “corps culture.” The process of frustrating trial and error by which Grant had attempted to avoid a costly frontal assault on Vicksburg seemed little more than tedious to Cump. He did not blame his friend, but such forays were “bordering on the impossible, and to take Vicksburg without the deadly & costly assault is impossible,” he remarked to his brother. In his opinion, “we should fight on all occasions even if we do get worsted.” After all, with its bounty of available manpower, the United States could “stand it longest.” His incomplete grasp of the culture in the ranks of his corps was still on clear display as late as early April. Writing to his brother John, Cump assured him that “all my soldiers are attached to me,” and that every “officer of whatever Rank who arrives applies for my Corps, because they know I am truthful and will not slaughter them to build up a little personal fame.” While it was true that Sherman remained uninterested in bolstering his ego or reputation with the

⁵⁹⁵ Wayne Lee, “Warfare and Culture,” in Wayne Lee, ed., *Warfare and Culture in World History* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 7.

Northern public, plenty of those in the ranks of his corps had every good reason to presume that he would take no especial pains to avoid ordering them to slaughter. It was for that very reason that many would continue to refer to him with names like “the Stormer” or “bloodhound,” presumably when well out of earshot.⁵⁹⁶

Even so, Sherman was not so intransigent in his thinking as to escape the late winter unaffected by experience. “We are doing good,” he admitted, even considering the repeated failures of the bayou expeditions. Insubordinate pyromania and unauthorized foraging by “skulkers” aside, the performance of his command in conducting deliberate area denial and resource extraction operations was promising. “We have Consumed much, and destroyed more,” he wrote proudly, but remained awestruck by the sheer volume of provender his two divisions had discovered hidden in the isolated Deer Creek valley. “I tell you tis all nonsense about the South being exhausted,” he observed. “Northern papers talk about Starvation in Vicksburg,” but his columns “saw every where cattle, hogs, sheep, poultry and vast cribs of corn.” If the rebellion was ever to be brought to its knees, it would take much more of these kinds of operations on a much grander scale. “The war in Earnest,” he decided, “has yet to be fought.”⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹⁶ WTS to JS, Apr. 3, 1863, *SCW*, 437.

⁵⁹⁷ WTS to JS, Apr. 3, 1863, *SCW*, 439.

CHAPTER V: “THE MEN CANNOT BE MADE TO DO IT”: THE VICKSBURG CAMPAIGN, APRIL – MAY 1863

“It was Sherman's order and that bloodhound and madman is responsible for a thousand more lives vainly and foolishly sacrificed.”

~ Sgt. Maj. Edward P. Reichhelm, 3rd Missouri⁵⁹⁸

The operational assignments and therefore experiences of the Fifteenth Corps throughout the fabled campaign for Vicksburg were heavily influenced by the close personal relationship maintained between Sherman and Grant. Their steadfast, mutual trust meant that Sherman's corps was more often than not hand-picked to operate independently of the others of Grant's army. Frequently, this resulted in assignment to less glamorous missions, but usually also to considerably less fighting than was the case for McPherson's and McClelland's embattled commands. The corps did not take substantive part in any of the bloody contests that marked the route to Vicksburg: Port Gibson, Raymond, or Champion Hill. Even so, Grant trusted “Cump” more than the somewhat less experienced McPherson, and maintained very little faith in McClelland's leadership, prompting him to remain nearby whenever they might run into trouble. He also felt the need to remain with the main body of his army, nearest to its fighting edge, which meant that he required a reliable lieutenant to take care of things elsewhere. Sherman, and his corps, fit the bill perfectly.

While there is little direct evidence that Grant carefully considered such nuanced factors, nearly all of the assignments he handed to Sherman's corps during the long circuitous march to

⁵⁹⁸ Edward P. Reichhelm [3 MO] Diary, May 22, 1863 in “The Taking of Vicksburg: A Story of Facts and Personal Experience,” *The Bayonne Herald*, Jan. 18, 1902, 4.

Jackson and eventual investiture of the “Gibraltar of the Mississippi” seemed almost perfectly tailored to the unique strengths and evolved tactical culture of its regiments. This happy marriage of the right corps with the right objectives dramatically ended upon the army's arrival at the gates of Vicksburg, when both Grant and Sherman once again behaved as if wholly unaware, or at least willfully ignorant, of the prevailing tactical culture that thrived amongst those in the ranks of the corps's regiments, including their deep aversion to and lack of confidence in the assault of entrenched Rebels, and the corps's interminable coordination struggles while under fire.

Prior to the onset of the campaign, the corps experienced its first major command shake-up. Following his promotion to Major General in mid-March, in no small part due to his courageous performance at Chickasaw Bayou (and a bit of back-room political dealing), Frank Blair needed a position more prestigious than that of a Brigadier. For better or for worse, just such a position opened up when news reached the Young's Point camps that Congress had denied David Stuart's own promotion. The target of considerable ire and lingering ill-repute regarding involvement in a famous *antebellum* divorce case, Second Division's commander had hoped that an illustrious military career as a volunteer officer would somehow convert his reputation in the public eye. Unfortunately, though having performed admirably on every field from Shiloh to Arkansas Post, this was apparently not to be the case. Promptly resigning upon reception of the bad news, Stuart left his beloved Second Division with a note of thanks for its loyal service since his impromptu taking of command in the swamps of Chickasaw Bayou. “I cannot refrain from expressing in orders the strong sentiment of interest & attachment which I cherish for you,” he wrote, “& the sincere regret with which I part from you.” Ultimately, however, it did not “become you, nor me, to debate or discuss [the] wisdom, or [the] justice” of Congress's decision. Moreover, his great pride at having had the opportunity to lead the division helped in some small

degree to make up for the “indignity of my official retirement.” Nevertheless, he pledged, his “sympathy, & concernment [sic] for you, my absence will not abate.” Grant promptly handed the empty slot to Blair, by far the highest ranking brigadier in Sherman's corps.⁵⁹⁹

In addition to the change of command in Second Division, the Fifteenth Corps temporarily gained a Third Division under the command of Brigadier General James Tuttle, attached by Grant in order to equalize the corps's combat power with those of McPherson and McClelland. Tuttle's three brigades were not destined to spend more than a single campaign with the command, and struggled to integrate themselves fully with the other two divisions which had already endured significant trials alongside one another. Nevertheless, the operational contributions of the division to the corps's pursuit of its assigned objectives during the forthcoming campaign were significant if somewhat subsidiary.⁶⁰⁰

Although initially planning to move his entire army southward as one toward Grand Gulf on April 20, the abysmal condition of the roads through the Louisiana swamps forced Grant to hold Sherman back until the route could be improved by the pioneers of McClelland's and McPherson's corps. Eagerly awaiting orders to follow, Cump received a note from Grant on April 28 informing him of the plan to assault Grand Gulf directly with a combined force of infantry and gunboats in order to secure a landing for the army on the east bank of the river. Grant requested that one division of Sherman's corps make a diversionary movement toward Haynes's Bluffs to distract the Rebel garrison. Cump was to take special care to ensure that those in the ranks understood that the maneuver was no more than a feint, as Grant wanted to avoid the damaging presumption that the corps was once again headed into the meat grinder of the Yazoo

⁵⁹⁹ G.O. #6, HQ 2 DIV 15 AC, Apr. 3, 1863, RG 393, NARA.

⁶⁰⁰ Dyer, *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Vol. I*, 500-501.

bottoms. While trusting that “the army could distinguish a feint from a real attack,” Sherman still prudently opted to assign his more confident “old Division” to the mission, embarking it upon ten steamboats on the morning of April 29 and proceeding directly to the mouth of the Yazoo.⁶⁰¹

Crawling northward toward the Rebel batteries atop the fortified bluffs, the boats passed the hallowed battlefield of Chickasaw Bayou and continued northward until in “easy range” of the enemy batteries a short distance north. Accompanying gunboats opened on all enemy batteries within reach as Blair's division disembarked “in full view of the enemy,” taking care to “seemingly prepare to assault.” In truth, the foray had more than a tinge of absurdity. Both Sherman and the Rebel defenders “knew full well that there was no road across the submerged field that lay between the river and the bluff,” rendering any such assault impossible. Even so, ever faithful to Grant's wishes, the division kept up appearances until dark, when it re-embarked and started back across the river to Young's Point. Shortly after his return, a courier reached Sherman with another note from Grant. “Hurry forward,” it urged. Having failed to secure Rebel-fortified Grand Gulf, Grant had instead moved the army further south and crossed at Bruinsburg, where the army found the eastern banks of the river all but uncontested. Accordingly, Cump immediately started Steele's and Tuttle's divisions, then idling in camp, southward. On the morning of May 2, the Fifteenth Corps was finally on the road to Vicksburg. Blair's division remained behind to rest after the diversionary foray alongside another of the 17th Corps guarding the camps at Young's Point until called for by Sherman.⁶⁰²

⁶⁰¹ WTS Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 751-752.

⁶⁰² WTS Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 752.

After four days of hard marching, Steele's and Tuttle's commands made the 63 miles to Hard Times, Louisiana, four miles north of the recently secured crossing at Grand Gulf.⁶⁰³ Steamers ferried the two divisions across to the east bank at Grand Gulf on May 7, and the next day they marched 18 additional miles northeast to Hankinson's Ferry on the Big Black River. By May 10, they had rendezvoused with the main body of Grant's army, then tarrying east of Port Gibson as its chief determined the most prudent next step. After much careful deliberation, he chose to head northeastward, aiming for Edward's Station and an opportunity to cut the vital Vicksburg and Jackson Railroad, isolating the Rebel garrison from outside support. The whole army would sweep northeast with all three corps utilizing more or less separate routes, spread across a nearly twenty-mile front and using the Big Black River to protect their vulnerable left flank. McClelland's 13th Corps would take the left, McPherson's 17th the right, and Sherman's 15th the center, slightly behind the others. In two days' time, the three disparate elements would converge upon Fourteen Mile Creek, a short distance south of their objective at Edward's Station.

Keeping his titanic host fed and supplied was Grant's greatest concern. After making the long journey by boat from the depots at Memphis to Milliken's Bend and Young's Point, the army's supplies had to be hauled down the same long winding route by which Sherman's corps had just made its way to the main body. While the tactical pause outside Port Gibson had allowed time for the army's quartermasters to replenish supplies thus far expended, in the future such an extended lifeline would be challenging, if not impossible, to maintain. Supplies would continue to flow from Memphis and Grand Gulf throughout the campaign, but it was already clear to Grant that in the future it would be necessary to "make the country furnish the balance." While this bold decision to cut from his base of supply has traditionally been celebrated as a feat of

⁶⁰³ WTS Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 752.

military genius, it came at a great cost in hardship for those of Sherman's corps habitually in the extreme rear of the army, left only scraps for forage after the passage of McClernand's and McPherson's corps. Those in the columns of Sherman's divisions fully recognized the precariousness of their logistical situation. In fact, Sherman had made sure they did, announcing in his general orders how “the officers and men of the whole army should be impressed with the real difficulty of supplying so large an army of men and horses by such a road.” “Rations are hard to get and should disaster occur we will be in a bad fix,” Iowan Sewall Farwell worried. “It seems to me we must be successful or be destroyed as an army we are so far from a base of supply.” Most regiments found themselves restricted to two hardtack crackers per day, “with a fair prospect of less quantity soon,” another Hawkeye fretted.⁶⁰⁴

Arriving at the banks of Fourteen Mile Creek on May 12, Steele's division quickly secured a bridgehead. Taking personal tactical command of the head of his corps column, Sherman ordered a battery of Steele's howitzers to shell the bushes on the opposite bank with canister while Col. Charles Woods's (originally Hovey's) brigade forded the creek and the vaunted Turner skirmish teams of the 17th Missouri – Steele's premiere light infantry unit – traded sporadic shots with Rebel cavalry. Once the enemy had abandoned the east bank, Steele's pioneers set to work fashioning a crossing “in lieu of the burned bridge.” Though requiring only three hours labor, the delay was long enough for the remaining Secessionist cavalry to escape Sherman's grasp.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁴ G.O. 29, 15 AC, May 2, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 264; S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, May 6, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City; John Bell [25 IA] Diary, May 15, 1863, 203.

⁶⁰⁵ WTS Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 753; Charles Woods Report, May 25, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 250.

Meanwhile, McPherson's corps on the right stumbled into a fierce and bloody fight at Raymond, convincing Grant that at least two Rebel contingents were operating against him, but had yet to combine. While McClernand's divisions on the left discovered the advanced elements of what had originally been the Vicksburg garrison south of Edward's Station, McPherson's encounter to the east suggested that another Rebel contingent was probably guarding the state capital at Jackson. Sensing an opportunity, Grant now took action to attempt the piecemeal destruction of both. While McPherson's and McClernand's corps moved north in a feint to distract the westernmost of the two Rebel elements prior to driving east to Jackson, Grant ordered Sherman's corps northeast to approach the state capital directly from the south, this time with Tuttle's comparatively fresh division in the lead.⁶⁰⁶

The road to Jackson passed through “a continual succession of hills and valleys” formed of yellow clay. Dust in the roadbed was at least four inches deep in many places. “Innumerable buffalo gnats” mercilessly tormented man and beast alike. “They fly in your face and bite,” one Missourian recorded in his diary while shewing them away. Fresh water was scarce, and the perpetual delays caused by balking teams and gun crews stalled in the ascent of each hill became “irksome” in the extreme. Yellow dust filled lungs and the dry heat made breathing a chore and sweat omnipresent. Finally, on the 13th, the dry spell was dramatically broken when the heavens opened and “it rained harder than I ever saw in my life,” one wrote in awe, adding, with some exaggeration, that “the men almost drowned in the rain, mud, and water.” The route deteriorated under the downpour, delays became even more frequent, and the men often found themselves standing in the rain for long stints. In some places road cuts transformed into veritable sloughs, and the column was forced to wade through water nearly up to their waists. After making little

⁶⁰⁶ WTS Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 753.

progress due to the weather, the miserable men “lay on the soaked ground drenched to the skin, hungry and exhausted.”⁶⁰⁷

II. “A perfect rabble”

Arriving within about 3 miles of Jackson at 10 o'clock on May 14, Tuttle's advance guard could clearly make out the thunder of McPherson's guns operating further north. Leading the van, it fell to the newly attached Third Division to spearhead Sherman's attack on the capital. After using his artillery to brush away a few lingering Rebel batteries watching over the Lynch Creek bridge southwest of the city, Tuttle advanced the division into a field on the east bank and maneuvered his brigades into line of battle, immediately charging Rebel skirmishers visible in a tree line beyond. The enemy having no works from which to repel Tuttle's assault, little blood was shed, and the Secessionists promptly scurried back into their carefully prepared trenches outside Jackson. This changed the game. Tuttle now confronted a tactical problem all but identical to that faced by the other two divisions of Sherman's corps at Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post. “As far to the left as we could see, appeared a line of intrenchments,” Sherman noted. For the first time during the long campaign, he showed signs of pause. Not wanting a repeat of the stalemate at “the Post,” he ordered a staffer to take one of Tuttle's regiments “and make a detour to the right to see what was there,” hoping to find an undefended flank. Steele's brigades would follow. In ordering this reconnaissance, Sherman repeated the same tactic he had ordered at Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post, feeling for the Rebel flank prior to reluctantly accepting the necessity of a frontal assault. A short time later, the aide returned with wonderful

⁶⁰⁷ John Bell [25 IA] Diary, May 11, 1863; A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, May 4, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 38-39; John Bell [25 IA] Diary, May 13, 1863; A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, *Civil War Diary*, May 13, 1863, 43; John Bell [25 IA] Diary, May 14, 1863; A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, May 13, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 43; Reichhelm [3 MO], “The Taking of Vicksburg.”

news. The rebel works on the far right were completely abandoned, and the city was Grant's for the taking.⁶⁰⁸

Although as many as 6,000 Rebels had only recently garrisoned the capital, their commander Gen. Joseph E. Johnston had hastily evacuated the city in anticipation of Grant's arrival. While the foremost elements of McPherson's corps and Tuttle's division had run into the Secessionist rear guard, Steele's flanking division found only a wary band of state militia disinclined to put up a fight. Soon, even those to Tuttle's front had withdrawn. By nightfall, the Fifteenth Corps indisputably held Jackson, and its arrival marked a major turning point in the morale of the rank and file, significantly boosting their trust in the army's leadership. "For once the rebels had been out generaleed," one Iowan officer crowed. "We marched in with wet clothes, tired limbs blistered feet and empty stomachs but no one heeded these things." After hard marching, considerable fatigue and hardship, but fortunately very little fighting, the corps now found itself unopposed in the streets of the Mississippi capital. Much in the same spirit as in the aftermath of the successful bayou expeditions, the men again took note of what could be accomplished without any bloodshed when "our Generals" put their minds to it. Indeed, many in the ranks quietly "thanked our stars that our exhausted vitality had not been put to a severer test." As the haggard looking regiments of Steele's and Tuttle's divisions re-consolidated themselves after the long march and companies stacked arms, "a race to town took place and a wild hunt for something to eat" became impossible to prevent. For the fleetest of foot, nourishment was more or less readily available, and "immediate starvation, at least, was staved off."⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁸ WTS Report, *OR*, I:24, I, 753-754; Edwin Cole Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. II: Grant Strikes a Fatal Blow* (Dayton: Morningside, 1986), 535-542.

⁶⁰⁹ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, May 15, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City; Reichhelm [3 MO], "The Taking of Vicksburg"; Reichhelm [3 MO], "The Taking of Vicksburg."

Hoping to catch the westernmost of the dual Rebel forces off balance, including most of the Vicksburg garrison sallied forth from its defenses, Grant eagerly pushed McClelland's and McPherson's corps westward the following morning. Once again, he charged Sherman's corps with another independent assignment. Cump's command was to remain in Jackson and “destroy effectually the railroad tracks ... and all the property belonging to the enemy” with an eye toward preventing the capital's reoccupation by the Rebel forces under Johnston still lingering nearby. Yet again, Grant leaned on his trusted lieutenant's command to carry out fiery area denial operations while the remainder of his army pursued direct action with the enemy. Ever obedient, Sherman wasted no time in assigning the regiments of Steele's division, the most experienced command in his corps when it came to practicing “war in earnest,” to the thorough destruction of the railroad, the bridge over the Pearl River, and all Rebel government “property to the south and east” of the city. Meanwhile, Tuttle's division would seize or destroy all Rebel property of military value to the north and west. Destruction of the tracks was to “be extended out as far as possible, and must be complete,” but above all else, “dispatch [was] of the utmost importance,” Sherman emphasized. The sooner the corps could complete its work, the sooner it could rejoin the rest of the army and maximize Grant's strategic options. By destroying the vital strategic rail junction east of Vicksburg, Sherman's corps would prevent any Rebel relief army from threatening Grant's rear as he moved west to bag the prize.⁶¹⁰

Employing the same tactics as during the recent bayou expeditions, the two divisions fragmented into smaller fatigue details and work parties, each assigned a separate mission under the command of a junior or non-commissioned officer. Details pried up rails and ties, stacked them, set the ties ablaze, and warmed the rails over the fire before warping them around trees “so

⁶¹⁰ WTS Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 754; S.O. #105, HQ 15 AC, May 14, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 312.

[as to] render them unfit for use.” Starting five miles out and working their way back toward the main depot in the center of town, the corps worked with determination. Sweaty details had effectively dismantled the railroad in all directions by the following morning, with some laboring all night long to meet the deadline. Their work was exceedingly thorough, and the tracks would not be operational again for months. Other groups spread out to search and destroy “everything public not needed by us.” The Pearl River bridge was doused with twenty barrels of tar and set ablaze. Afterward, even the abutments “were battered down” with artillery. Several other minor bridges were destroyed in similar fashion. Ammunition beyond that which could be carried along with the army was summarily thrown into the Pearl River. Other targets included the city's arsenal buildings, a cannon and ammunition foundry, printing presses, sundry manufacturing facilities, storehouses, flouring mills, cotton sheds, warehouses, the railroad depot, rope factory, saltpeter works, and even part of the Mississippi state penitentiary which had been converted into a cotton and munitions factory. Rebel tents were collected, stacked behind the State House, and set afire. “The quantity destroyed is beyond calculation,” one Hawkeye put bluntly.⁶¹¹

There were in fact significant limits on the destruction. The Governor's mansion and State House were preserved. Even so, as seemed to occur so often, the destruction far exceeded Sherman's wishes. When it came to his knowledge that both a Catholic church and the local “Confederate Hotel,” along with several other unauthorized structures and even a few private

⁶¹¹ WTS to Mower, May 15, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 315; S.O. #105, HQ 15 AC, May 14, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 312; Charles Woods [76 OH] Report, May 25, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 251; Bearss, *Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. II*, 550; Charles Woods [76 OH] Report, May 25, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 251; Warren E. Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days: A Geographer's View of the Vicksburg Campaign* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 257; Willison [76 OH] *Reminiscences*, 53; “Report of Col. Charles R. Woods,” May 25, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 251; Stephen Nathaniel Dossman, “Long March to Vicksburg: Soldier and Civilian Interaction in the Vicksburg Campaign,” Thesis, 2006, Texas Christian University, 81; “The Yankee Occupation of the City of Jackson – Terrible Destruction of Property,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 1, 1863, 4; A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, May 15, 1863, 45; Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, May 15, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines; Bearss, *Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. II*, 550; WTS to Mower, May 15, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 314-315; John Bell [25 IA] Diary, May 16, 1863, 205.

homes were in flames, he became enraged. While the church and homes were likely an accident, the others were clearly acts of malice “not justified by the rules of war,” he complained. As at Napoleon, he and his lieutenants found it impossible to either staunch the flames or discover the “mischievous soldiers” responsible. Mischief was by no means restricted to arson, either. Despite the appointment of Brig. Gen. Mower's brigade to serve as temporary provost of the city, rumor inevitably made it to corps headquarters that several guards were freely “giving license to soldiers to take the contents of stores, taking things not necessary or useful.” If true, Sherman warned, this was absolutely indefensible. “Only such articles should be taken as are necessary to the subsistence of troops, and the private rights of citizens should be respected,” he insisted. Even so, what specifically was “necessary to the subsistence of the troops” proved a profoundly subjective question.⁶¹²

In a few cases, the necessity of articles seized was obvious on its face. Food, boots, and shoes were among the most highly prized commodities. In other cases, the definition of military necessity blurred. The 25th Iowa scored “fine clothes of every kind, tobacco, sugar, cigars, horses, buggies, fine coaches, in fact everything imaginable,” Captain John Bell exclaimed. As the city's businesses were turned upside down by looting foragers, “the niggers and workers had a rich harvest and booty” as they joined in the chaos. The offices of the local paper were “broken open, the type thrown in the street and the presses and furniture broken up,” and the post office “rifled of its contents.” The Governor's palatial estate, while spared the torch, was likewise “broken open and pianos and furniture destroyed.” Many private residences “were entered ... trunks broken open, fine dresses torn to pieces, and the jewelry, silver ware and provisions taken,” according to one stunned Mississippian. Medical instruments were taken from the local

⁶¹² Dossman, 88; WTS Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 754; Bearss, *Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. II*, 551.

dentist, books and bindery seized from the local bookseller, medicine stolen from the pharmacy, and of course no shortage of tobacco and provisions liberated from the local grocery, which assessed its losses at no less than \$200,000. “Intelligent gentlemen” assessed the total loss of property in the city and environs, all incurred in less than 36 hours' time, at \$5,000,000.

Mississippi Governor John Pettus doubled that figure in his own retrospective assessment.⁶¹³

Disgust at the behavior of many in the command was not restricted to those at Sherman's headquarters. Lt. Henry Kircher, 12th Missouri, thought that even “war in earnest” ought to be “carried on in a decent [sic] way, and not any one allowed to destroy as suits his notion. We are not rob[b]ers.” Lt. Col. A. J. Seay, 32nd Missouri, was likewise disgusted at the behavior of many in the corps. They had behaved like “a perfect rabble for 4 or 5 hours,” he complained. No doubt fueled by confiscated alcohol, the fugitives had destroyed many unauthorized buildings, “but I am proud to say no private houses have been burned,” at least not deliberately. The seizure of goods apparently bothered him far less than the pyromania. His Missourians managed to procure “an immense quantity of tobacco, some rum, whiskey, wines, etc., some clothing and some provisions,” all of which Seay deemed a welcome treat. Most disappointing of all to the starving and exhausted men in the ranks, there seemed to be “more shrubbery than vegetables” about the town. Many still lingering on the very verge of starvation, they mourned the sight of “the sugar warehouses with their tiers upon tiers of sugar hogsheads, going up in fire and smoke.”⁶¹⁴

⁶¹³ WTS to Mower, May 15, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 315; Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, May 14, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines; Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 28; “The Yankee Occupation of the City of Jackson – Terrible Destruction of Property,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 1, 1863; Dossman, 80; Ben Wynne, *Mississippi's Civil War* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2006), 111.

⁶¹⁴ Earl Hess, *A German in the Yankee Fatherland* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1983), 97; A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, May 15, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 44-45; Willison [76 OH] *Reminiscences*, 54.

The next morning, Sherman received a message from Grant ordering the ash-covered corps in motion westward once again, this time with Steele in the lead. The command was on the road by 10 o'clock. Both sides of the route quickly became strewn with illicitly captured goods and commodities too cumbersome to carry along. As the column rushed westward away from the now much disheveled capital, Seay glanced over his shoulder as Rebel cavalymen shadowing the army returned to its streets. "I saw them shoot and bayonet several drunk, straggling Yankees and Negroes," he coldly reported to his diary that night without remorse. "Good for the stragglers."⁶¹⁵

The corps column made twenty miles to Bolton Station on the 16th and reached Bridgeport on the Big Black River the following day. Waiting there for Cump was Frank Blair with Second Division, having been left behind to await relief by forces enroute from Memphis while the rest of the corps marched south from Young's Point. Blair's division had marked time establishing and improving the infrastructure of Grant's tenuous supply route west of the river before receiving orders from Sherman on May 7 to rejoin the main body. After a long and difficult march south, Blair managed to procure transportation independently and cross two brigades to Grand Gulf in the evening of May 11, setting out for Jackson in the morning. Ewing's Third Brigade remained on the west side of the river completing a road from Young's Point to Warrenton until being relieved and marching to Grand Gulf on May 15. The brigade would rejoin Blair's division at Vicksburg on the 18th.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁵ WTS Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 755.; Willison [76 OH] *Reminiscences*, 54.; A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, May 17, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 46.

⁶¹⁶ "Report of Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman," May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 755; "Report of Brig. Gen. Hugh Ewing," May 27, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 281.

Blair's primary assignment was the security of Grant's lengthy 200-wagon train on its way to link up with the main army. The painstaking movement of this train greatly slowed the division's forward rate of speed, requiring three days to reach Raymond. Arriving in the midst of the rapid movement to bag Pemberton's force at Champion Hill, the command was temporarily attached to McClelland's corps with orders to support its attack. With the exception of a few Rebel shells which fell too close for comfort, and a little light skirmishing, the division was mostly a spectator to the main event. Even so, when called upon to advance to the support of other troops in contact to their front, the men conducted themselves in close accordance with their division's evolved tactical culture, despite the recent change of division command. Leading the column, Giles Smith's brigade deployed one company from each of its regiments ahead as skirmishers "with orders to advance and push the enemy vigorously." Meanwhile, the main body remained in the rear at its customary "close supporting distance," collecting no fewer than 300 prisoners as it swept across the shattered forests of the battlefield. As usual, Second Division burnt its powder almost exclusively on the skirmish line.⁶¹⁷

Ordered north by Grant to rejoin its parent corps, the "old Division" was finally reunited with Sherman as the corps prepared to cross the Big Black River at Bridgeport. After brushing a few lingering enemy sharpshooters from a rifle pit on the western bank with artillery, the way was clear for the now re-consolidated corps to continue its march on Vicksburg. That night, the already once again famished regiments crawled over a flimsy pontoon bridge illuminated by bonfires on both banks. The passage made for "a weird and impressive scene," one observed.

⁶¹⁷ "Report of Brig. Gen. Giles A. Smith," May 26, 1863, *OR*, I:24, 263.

While far too dark for photography, struck by the dramatic image an accompanying journalist sketched what he saw.⁶¹⁸

After defeating and nearly routing Pemberton's force at the battle of Champion Hill with McPherson's and McClernand's corps, Grant swiftly pursued his weary prey to the west as it limped back toward Vicksburg. By 10 o'clock on May 18, the lead elements of Blair's division at the head of the Fifteenth Corps had interposed themselves between Vicksburg and the long sought after Rebel forts atop Haynes's and Drumgould's Bluffs. After nearly six months and immeasurable hardship, Grant's army was finally on the high ground in Vicksburg's rear. Pausing at a fork in the road to deploy Smith's Zouaves and Regulars as skirmishers to scout in both directions, Sherman awaited Grant's instructions on how to proceed. Upon his arrival shortly thereafter, the army commander ordered Cump to continue westward toward the northern defenses, while McPherson and McClernand headed south to approach the center and southern defenses respectively. Accordingly, Sherman moved Blair's division immediately forward directly toward the works, left Tuttle's in support, and ordered Steele to extend further west down the road in search of the banks of the Mississippi and, even more importantly, the corps's elusive primary objective from that December: the only road running north out of the city.⁶¹⁹

By then, the hunger pangs were almost insufferable. Exhausted men routinely stumbled out of line into the woods flanking the road in search of almost anything to satiate their stomachs. "Hungry near to the starvation point, we ate weeds, roots, leaves or anything we could get a hold of," one Missourian recalled. An officer in the 113th Illinois overheard someone in his

⁶¹⁸ "Report of Brig. Gen. Francis P. Blair, Jr.," May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 254-256; Smith's *OR* Report, May 26, 1863, *OR*, I:24, 263; WTS *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 755; Reichhelm [3 MO], "The Taking of Vicksburg."

⁶¹⁹ WTS *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 755.

company joking about how he planned to subsist “by chewing newspaper advertisements of provisions” cut from Rebel papers he had found in Jackson. Another in the 76th Ohio offered one of his privates a half dollar for a piece of hardtack. Abandoned Rebel rifle pits discovered along the way offered a handful of the most advanced skirmishers a highly coveted prize. “The rebels retreating in great haste had left us their breakfast in camp kettles filled with corn meal mush, and also bacon and corn bread and other delicacies,” Reichhelm remembered. These were “ravenously devoured.” Even bags of raw corn intended for horse feed were slashed open and their contents pocketed by famished men, meant to “stave off starvation until relief should come from the fleet.” For most in the column, though, only “filling up with water” could provide enough respite for sleep at night.⁶²⁰

By dawn on the 19th, the army had finally reached its objective. Despite tremendous hardship, risk, and no shortage of painful blisters, the Army of the Tennessee had successfully outmaneuvered, and in multiple cases outfought, two Rebel armies converging to prevent it from reaching the gates of Vicksburg. “We had compassed the enemy to the north of Vicksburg, our right resting on the Mississippi River, with a plain view of our fleets at the mouth of the Yazoo and Young's Point,” Sherman proclaimed in his report, “Vicksburg in plain sight, and nothing separated us from the enemy but a space of about 400 yards of very difficult ground.” It was to prove “very difficult” indeed.⁶²¹

⁶²⁰ Reichhelm [3 MO], “The Taking of Vicksburg,” *The Bayonne Herald*, Jan. 11, 1902, 4; J. J. Kellogg [113 IL], *War Experiences and the Story of the Vicksburg Campaign from 'Milliken's Bend' to July 4, 1863* (J. J. Kellogg, 1913), 34; R.W. Burt [76 OH] Diary, May 17, 1863, 76th Ohio File, Vicksburg National Military Park; Reichhelm [3 MO], “The Taking of Vicksburg.”

⁶²¹ WTS OR Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, I, 755.

III. “Unsupported on the left or right”

Little in the way of substantive attempts to address the corps's coordinative shortcomings or lack of confidence in frontal assaults had been attempted by Sherman or his lieutenants since the corps's spectacular failures at Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post. This was mostly due to a lingering divergence of explanations for these failures prevailing at headquarters and in the ranks. Sherman and his chief lieutenants remained convinced that failure had been principally due to a lack of experience, discipline, and spirit within attacking regiments, most especially among their junior officers. Little to no consideration was apparently given to their own coordinative failures as a command team. The men, on the other hand, most especially those of Steele's hard luck division, were of the opinion that orders for frontal assaults against works were themselves evidence of a grave incompetency in the higher echelons of command. “Our Generals” seemed to suffer from a severe lack of creativity, and for that reason repeatedly ordered what amounted to suicide missions. Lacking confidence in their ability to succeed, most of those in the ranks had instead devised practical strategies to survive such futile assignments without sacrificing their personal or regimental honor, by obediently advancing to an enemy's abatis or into his initial shock volley, and subsequently going to ground to “sharpshoot.”

The long campaign of rapid maneuver to Jackson and now Vicksburg gave hope to many that “our Generals” might have perhaps finally learned their lesson, and a germ of renewed confidence began to spread as the army again found itself in view of the mighty Mississippi. That confidence was perhaps highest in the ranks of Sherman's corps, having been spared much fighting during the long circuitous march, unlike the other corps of Grant's army. Even so, on the morning of May 19, it was once again the Fifteenth Corps's turn to bleed. Grant was confident that Pemberton's army was still reeling from its defeat at Champion Hill, and thus would crumble under minimal pressure. Accordingly, he planned to use the entire army to assault the Rebel

works in hopes of collapsing what little fighting spirit the garrison still retained and seizing the city without having to resort to a lengthy siege. After all, with Johnston's force still hovering near Jackson, there was no telling how long he had to bag the “Gibraltar” before having to fight in both front and rear.

The mostly slave-prepared Rebel defenses of Vicksburg extended for a distance of more than eight miles, encompassing the northern, eastern, and southern portions of the city completely. Scarring a succession of hills that ringed Vicksburg, the somewhat irregular and jagged line of works appeared “exceedingly tortuous” to the casual observer, but this gave it additional strength, allowing for a crossfire of rifle, musket, and artillery fire at almost every point. To the immediate front of Blair's division on the northeastern shoulder of these defenses, blocking the route of what locals called the “old grave yard road,” were the looming ramparts of “Fort Beauregard,” known today as “Stockade Redan.” As the slopes of the region's hills were so steep, and the intervening valleys so filled with tangled thickets and dense underbrush, relatively few viable avenues of approach existed for attacking the imposing salient. In fact, along Sherman's front only one immediately presented itself: the “Graveyard Road.” Visible from Rebel defenses for several hundred yards in either direction, assaulting columns would almost certainly remain under a deadly fire for their entire journey down the road toward their objective. Whether or not any body of troops could endure such a fusillade while still maintaining ample force to penetrate the fort's parapet upon arrival was an open question. Hoping to avoid a lengthy siege given the potential for Rebel attacks to his rear, Grant meant to find out.⁶²²

⁶²² Terrence J. Winschel, *Triumph & Defeat: The Vicksburg Campaign* (Mason City: Savas Publishing Company, 1999), 118; Henry R. Brinkerhoff, *History of the Thirtieth Regiment Ohio Infantry* (Columbus: James W. Osgood, 1863), 68-69; Edwin Cole Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. III* (Dayton: Morningside, 1986), 761; Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days*, 355-358.

Although Grant issued orders on the evening of the 18th for all three corps to “push forward rapidly, and gain as close positions as possible to the enemy's works” in preparation for an army-wide assault at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, by that time Sherman's was still the only of Grant's corps in position to push the long march to its victorious fruition. Moreover, of his three divisions, Blair's was the only command naturally positioned to assault the Stockade Redan complex, and thus Cump charged the freshly-minted division commander with the mission. All three of Blair's brigades would participate in the division's assault arrayed in line of battle, forming behind a hill to shroud their preparations from prying Rebel eyes. On the left, Blair ordered Kilby Smith's regiments to aim directly for the Stockade Redan, attacking along the Graveyard Road but split into two wings by its raised embankment. The right wing of the brigade, including the 83rd Indiana and 127th Illinois, Smith placed in the independent command of Col. Benjamin Spooner, “in whose ability and dauntless courage I repose[d] fullest confidence.” Spooner was to drive his pair of regiments “forward as rapidly as possible” in the customary Second Division fashion – not worrying so much about well-dressed formations, but rather surging forward “in such order as he could best get over the ground.”⁶²³

In Blair's center, Giles Smith's brigade would assault down a steep slope and directly through the Mint Spring ravine, aiming at the Rebel line running between a prominent lunette to the east and Stockade Redan. On his right, Ewing's brigade, having yet to participate in an assault with the corps, would likewise attack through the ravine, doing its best to cut through the entangling abatis while aiming directly for the lunette. Having never before experienced a frontal assault against Rebel works, but assuming that the army's recent victories at Raymond and Champion Hill indicated that it was truly “irresistible,” Ewing's Buckeyes “expected another

⁶²³ “Report of Col. Thomas Kilby Smith,” May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 267.

complete victory.” The advance would constitute “a short job,” Ewing proclaimed to the assembled command. “We would be inside of the works, in less than ten minutes after receiving the order to move,” he promised. Finally, in cooperation with Blair's brigades, Sherman ordered Steele to advance Thayer's Iowa brigade in an attack on the Rebel works to the west of Second Division to prevent enfilading enemy fire on Ewing's regiments from that sector.⁶²⁴

In hopes of keeping Rebel heads down behind the parapet during the assault, Blair ordered the division's Zouave skirmishers advanced as far forward as possible “with a view of obtaining a closer position and of reconnoitering the ground” prior to the attack. In this, he displayed a basic grasp of the division's habitual skirmisher-centric approach to frontal assaults, despite having only recently taken command. The guns of Battery A, 1st Illinois Light Artillery registered five rounds on the parapet to find their range, shouting their findings aloud to the gun teams in a manner that nearby skirmish teams must have heard, adjusting their own sights accordingly.⁶²⁵ At 9 o'clock, Sherman ordered the customary general preliminary bombardment in hopes of easing the job of the assaulting force, and thus all available guns along Blair's line opened on their assigned targets. The bombardment continued unabated for five full hours, extending throughout the morning hours and into the early afternoon. Almost no return fire was received from Rebel batteries behind the works.

At precisely two o'clock, the Illinoisan batteries fired three salvos in quick succession to signal the assault, and Blair's division “dashed forward” into the deadly valley. The dispersed Zouave skirmish teams poured a heavy fire from behind cover onto the top of the Rebel parapet in an attempt to suppress the enemy. While the effectiveness of their fire was, as always, difficult

⁶²⁴ Brinkerhoff, *History of the Thirtieth Regiment Ohio*, 68-69.

⁶²⁵ Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257; T. K. Smith's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 267.

to judge, the small numbers of effectives still in the regiment, as well as the necessity of firing upward toward the crest of the steep slope from the ravine bottom, likely limited their ability to suppress the enemy. The defense of Stockade Redan proved far more akin to that confronted by Blair's brigade at Chickasaw Bayou than it did the shock-reliant tactics confronted at Arkansas Post. As at Chickasaw, near impenetrable terrain, dense abatis, and enemy fire dismantled the assault long before it reached the base of the parapet. As the mass of each brigade “dashed over stumps and tangled limbs of fallen trees, struggled through deep gullies bristling with brush and cane, and climbed the steep slopes,” one Illinoisan observed how “men dropped by tens [from enemy fire], stopped behind some sheltering log or bank, [or] slackened speed for sheer want of breath” until finally “all the momentum of the start had worn itself out; and a thin line of panting, staggering humanity pressed on.”⁶²⁶

Trees felled with their tops toward the attacker, their branches sharpened and entangled with telegraph wire, presented a formidable abatis. Rebel slaves had dug deep pits covered with dry grass designed to swallow whole portions of assaulting lines unaware of their presence or danger. In several spots, these obstructions proved “an almost impenetrable mass,” forcing men to cut narrow pathways through the trees and wire that quickly drew “a murderous cross fire” as they tried to surge through the tight defiles. In other places, most notably along the right flank of Ewing's brigade, whole regiments discovered that passage through the abatis was utterly impossible, and they were forced to halt, go to cover, and add their fire to the suppression of the works with the Zouaves instead.⁶²⁷

⁶²⁶ Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257; Smith's *OR* Report, May 26, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 264; *Fifty-fifth*, 235.

⁶²⁷ Winschel, *Trumph & Defeat*, 119; “On the Graveyard Road,” *The Tennessean*, Mar. 6, 1904.

Even for those who managed to cut their way through the obstructions, maintaining alignment proved impossible, shattering the concentrated mass needed for the assault to succeed. “A line of battle could no longer be preserved,” one lieutenant with the Regulars remembered, “but the flag steadily advanced, and each man earnestly strove to keep within its shadow.” Recognizing this, the captain of the color company called to the ensign to keep the banner well ahead of the battalion, as “we shall not be able to preserve much of a line.” Col. Hamilton Eldridge, leading his 127th Illinois alongside Spooner's Hoosiers, also noted the tendency of terrain and Rebel fire to scatter the men “to a considerable extent,” with only the regimental and national colors serving as rallying points for those making their way forward independently. Even Kilby Smith was forced to admit that it “was almost vain to essay a line.” As at Chickasaw Bayou, the visibility of bright regimental colors through the smoke proved crucial to maintaining any vestige of unit cohesion in the chaos of a charge.⁶²⁸

After making upwards of four hundred yards across the ravine, the surviving members of both brigades paused under the defiladed cover of the southern slope “where they were comparatively sheltered from the small-arms of the enemy,” Kilby Smith reported. An additional deadly 75 yards of almost vertical embankment still separated the command from its objective, but Smith quickly recognized that the men around him “were thoroughly exhausted” and his brigade was “alone, [and] unsupported on the left or right, save by a portion of the Thirteenth Regulars.” Even most of Giles Smith's adjacent command was impossible to see from the southern side of the road. Rising from his prone position along the slope to gaze southward, he was disheartened to find “not a soldier to be seen” and absolutely no evidence “that we had

⁶²⁸ T. K. Smith's *OR Report*, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 268; *Thirteenth regiment*, 237; “Report of Col. H. N. Eldridge,” May 28, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 274.; T. K. Smith's *OR Report*, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 268.

friends near us outside of our division.” Something must have gone awry, he assumed, and sent a runner to find Blair and ascertain the facts. While they waited, many scrambled to find cover from which to ply their skills as marksmen – just as they had from the abatis at Arkansas Post. Quickly spotting a group of Rebel skirmishers “picking off our officers with devilish skill,” several crack shots worked to silence the enemy riflemen as they awaited further orders.⁶²⁹

Though invisible to Kilby Smith, First Brigade was in fact making some progress, none of its regiments more so than the small indomitable band of Regulars. Their national standard was by then “yards in advance of anyone,” making it a natural target for every Rebel in the immediate vicinity. A special kind of madness fired the enthusiasm of the men to keep the flag aloft. Despite a withering fire that cut officers and five successive color bearers down as they ran, much of the yelling blue swarm nearly made it to the foot of the parapet, but at a tremendous cost in blood.⁶³⁰ The survivors huddled behind cover only 25 yards from the redan, doing their best to return fire and praying for the darkness of night so they might retire. By the time it finally came, more than half of the Regular officers were dead or wounded, their commander Captain Edward Washington, grand-nephew of the nation's first president, mortally. A comparable proportion of those in the ranks had also fallen before the redan. Morning roll call at first light on May 20 showed a loss of more than 43% in the battalion. For all practical purposes, after only three major engagements, it ceased to be a combat force, and would spend the rest of its service guarding Sherman's headquarters. The shaken survivors inscribed the regiment's colors, riddled with more than 55 bullet holes but somehow successfully evacuated from the field, with the

⁶²⁹ T. K. Smith's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 268.

⁶³⁰ *History of the Thirteenth Regiment United States Infantry*, 237.

phrase: “First at Vicksburg” – a motto still enshrined in the modern 13th U.S. Infantry's battalion crest today.⁶³¹

When his exhausted aide completed the perilous journey from the rear back to Kilby Smith, between breaths he parroted instructions not from Blair, but directly from Sherman. Smith was “to get my men as close to the parapet as possible and be ready to jump in when they began to yield.” The rest of the army would soon attack in support, Cump assured him. Accordingly, Smith cried out for the men to cease firing, fix bayonets, and await the command to charge. Even so, every time he glanced up at the steep slope, ever deepening doubts stirred within him as to whether or not the command could even make it up the embankment at all without ladders. It might be possible to fashion an impromptu ladder by driving bayonets into the parapet, he considered, but any isolated individual or small group that hazarded such an ascent would have been immediately captured or cut down at the summit.

Now beginning to dread Sherman's order to drive his brigade's assault to its bloody fruition, Smith instead chose mostly to ignore it, and instead continue employing his brigade's firepower as effectually as he could from its current position. After all, perhaps his current position already represented “as close to the parapet as possible.” Having failed to reach the enemy parapet in an assault unique in its operational heritage, Smith's brigade quickly shifted to what it knew it could do well. After dispatching runners to the rear for ammunition, “the most accurate marksmen were thrown forward, with *carte-blanche* to select the best cover.” Individual companies from each regiment pushed a short distance forward to skirmish at closer range until their ammunition was exhausted or guns fouled beyond their ability to reload, when they were summarily replaced by others. Once again, just as at Arkansas Post, the brigade managed to

⁶³¹ *History of the Thirteenth Regiment United States Infantry*, 238; Bearss, *Vicksburg, Vol. III*, 763.

achieve almost complete fire superiority at close range, “and none of the enemy ventured his head above the wall who failed to pay the penalty.”⁶³²

Just how long the two brigades could hold on to their hard won forward positions remained an open question. As during prior assaults, while success in gaining fire superiority at close range was no small feat, it remained mostly tactically insignificant unless it could be exploited by a coordinating maneuver element. With no such force available, there could be no breakthrough. Communicating via aides with Spooner across Graveyard Road, Smith started to receive troubling reports from all along his brigade frontage. “Their loss had been fearful, falling upon their best line and non-commissioned officers,” he reported. “Captain after captain had been shot dead; field officers were falling,”⁶³³

As the fearful hours dragged on and daylight began to fade, it gradually became evident to those still hugging the southern wall of the Mint Spring ravine that neither reinforcements nor assault orders were likely forthcoming. The wholly unsupported division's attack had failed, and it was time to begin thinking about how to escape the potential total destruction or capture that might accompany a Rebel counterattack. Although Kilby Smith had already started to consider how best to fortify his newly won ground, even going so far as to begin sighting potential battery positions under the slope, an aide from Sherman arrived at his position near nightfall with orders to fall back whenever he thought he could. After confirming the order with Blair, Smith somewhat reluctantly began the retrograde movement as soon as darkness blanketed the battlefield, in many cases one company at a time. By 3 o'clock the next morning, nothing but a

⁶³² T. K. Smith's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 268.

⁶³³ T. K. Smith's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 268.

few skirmish teams still resided in no man's land, and Blair's battered division was once again behind the crest from which the bloody assault had begun.⁶³⁴

In contrast to the Rebels guarding Stockade Redan, the Secessionists responsible for repelling Thayer's and Ewing's assaults on Blair's right at the 27th Louisiana Lunette opted for a more conventional shock-reliant defense. Ewing's Buckeyes, arrayed in line of battle, advanced into the ravine with a screen of skirmish teams deployed well to the front, instead of ensconced upon the north ridge to their rear as the rest of the division had done. Ensnared by felled trees and telegraph wire and incapable of further forward movement, the stalled half of the brigade "retired to the first cover, laid down," and peppered the parapet with "a heavy fire" to help keep Rebel heads down as the rest of the brigade approached. The left wing continued forward. As Col. James Dayton's 4th West Virginia neared the parapet, the Louisianans opened with a fearsome shock volley that felled every member of the color guard. Urging the men on from the front, the regiment's major was likewise cut down. Only a portion of the men reached the ditch at the foot of the parapet, but the enemy fire they encountered even there proved "too strong to be resisted" anyway, prompting them to sprint back to a bluff about 75 yards from the parapet to await orders. Attempts to coordinate a renewal of suppressive fire from the batteries in support of a final push broke down. Unaware of the plan, those of Ewing's command still lodged for safety in the ditch at the base of the scarp took the fire of the Federal guns as a signal not for assault, but as cover for their withdrawal to salvation. Those who made it back to the cover of the brigade's jumping off position left fifty of their dead behind. Nearly 200 of Ewing's command were wounded, and six wholly unaccounted for. "The history of the charge of the Kanawha

⁶³⁴ "Report of Lt. Col. C. W. Fisher," May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 276.; T. K. Smith's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 269.

Brigade ... is similar to that of every Brigade engaged,” one Buckeye later wrote. “In short, we were repulsed everywhere.”⁶³⁵

Indeed, the story in Thayer's brigade, assaulting the redan from a position 400 yards west of Ewing, was little different. With the still decimated 4th Iowa in reserve, the Hawkeyes of Thayer's 26th, 9th, and 30th Iowa charged down the northern slope of the ravine with a cheer at the sound of the artillery signal. Their brigade frontage mangled by the intervening smaller ridges, draws, and fingers of higher ground that filled the ravine, the Iowans received a Louisianan shock volley while still attempting to make their way across the bayou itself. Only the veteran 9th, which had yet to face such a volley in its history, withstood the fire without halting behind cover in the ravine bottom. Lacking any obvious support visible to the right or left, and facing a dauntingly steep rise to their front, the Iowans opted to employ the time-tested strategy of survival with honor. Taking cover under the protection of the defiladed southern slope, the Hawkeyes did not budge until dark allowed for cautious withdrawal northward. Sherman's assault had failed.⁶³⁶

In his formal report, Blair attributed the failure of his division to a combination of the “insuperable” terrain in many places along his command's frontage and the enemy's ability to reinforce the main point of attack due to his not being engaged simultaneously at any other location.⁶³⁷ In reality, the terrain itself had not been “insuperable” for any but Ewing's right-wing regiments. Instead, it was the capacity of the dense abatis, intervening bald ridge lines, and sharp

⁶³⁵ Charles Hipp [37 OH] Report, May 23, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 283.; Ewing's Report, May 27, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 281-282.; James Dayton [4 WV] Report, May 25, 1863, Hugh Ewing Papers, Ohio History Center; Ewing's Report, May 27, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 282-283; Brinkerhoff, *History of the Thirtieth Regiment Ohio*, 70.

⁶³⁶ Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days*, 361.

⁶³⁷ Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257.

Rebel fire to cause total breakdowns of command and control that had utterly dismantled Blair's assault, just as the same factors that had disrupted the corps's maneuvers in every previous assault it had attempted during the war.

To these exogenous factors were added Blair's perennial personal coordinative failings and those of his staff. After spending most of the previous day and early morning deployed as skirmish teams who were charged with maintaining contact with their Rebel counterparts to the front, Lt. Col. Cyrus Fisher's 54th Ohio was nearly out of ammunition by the time an aide reached it with orders to prepare for the assault. An effort to replenish the regiment's cartridge boxes was botched when crates marked “.69 caliber” were pried open only to reveal the wrong ammunition for their muskets. While Fisher and his lieutenants urgently sought to remedy the debacle, Blair arrived in person with orders for the regiment to connect with the left flank of the neighboring 55th Illinois, and conform his regiment's movements to theirs. Before Fisher could even ascertain what exactly was expected of his command, the brigade was in motion toward the redan. “I had no previous notice of the forward movement, or an idea that the regiment was the front of an assaulting column,” Fisher confessed afterward. Lodging itself along the same ridge as the rest of the brigade and keeping up “a brisk fire on the parapet,” the Ohioans exhausted their little remaining ammunition in short time and thus became useless to the division once forward movement ceased. Ordering his men to cease firing, “reserve one round in the piece, fix bayonet, and lie down until ammunition could be sent,” Fisher dispatched a runner to Smith to report his situation. Fortunately, the 57th Ohio was nearby and able to relieve Fisher promptly, but his Buckeyes were unable to reach the ammunition wagons and rearm in time to return to the fight. Insufficient preparation and poor communications had all but eliminated an entire

regiment's contributions from a critical flank of Blair's attack, and the Rebels along Fisher's front were able to shift and concentrate their defensive fire elsewhere.⁶³⁸

While Blair's division and Thayer's brigade futilely flung themselves at the Rebel works, the remainder of Steele's division hunted the Mississippi and the long sought after northern road out of Vicksburg. Though ordered to participate in the general assault at 2 o'clock, this contrasted with Sherman's previous orders to close with the river and secure the army's new vital supply line back to the Yazoo. Accordingly, while dispatching Thayer to participate in the assault, Steele sent Manter's (originally Blair's) and Woods's brigades westward through a dense forest and canebrake to complete Grant's northern encirclement of the city. Proceeding the furthest west of any command in the army, Woods's lead regiments found the road, and were within 150 yards of the river when they debouched from the timber upon a bald ridge line and immediately drew the fire of Rebel batteries to the south. Deploying to counter this threat, Landgraeber's howitzer teams sprinted into the open at a full gallop under fire, unlimbered, and began to respond to the Rebel battery, mostly without effect. Meanwhile, Woods's infantry cleared a house on a nearby prominent vista, and recognized that they could silence the battery themselves.⁶³⁹

Lt. Col. Seay led his Missourians into the house and ordered the riflemen to the windows to keep up a steady fire on the Rebel works and all batteries within range. "We are fighting at long range, losing but few men," he proudly reported, as the regiment "kept the Rebs so completely driven from their guns they could not use them." Though his 32nd Missouri had been spared the worst at both Chickasaw and Arkansas Post, they were now proving that they were "hard to beat as sharp shooters." Seay himself grabbed a rifle to join in the fun. "I shot till my

⁶³⁸ Fisher's *OR* Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 276-277.

⁶³⁹ Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days*, 361-362.

shoulder was sore from the kicking muskets,” he laughed. All along the line, Steele's regiments found cover and practiced their sharpshooting on Rebel works and gun teams. Accurately estimating the distance between himself and the Rebel guns to be about 300 yards, Pvt. Calvin Ainsworth, 25th Iowa, elevated the rear sight on his rifle before he and his Hawkeye comrades each fired twenty carefully aimed rounds into the Rebel positions. Lt. Alonzo Abernathy's company of the 9th Iowa fired sixty per man during the day. While usually remaining silent behind cover, the Rebel guns did respond at opportunity. One enemy Parrott, thought to be silenced, suddenly let loose a fury of grapeshot that killed and wounded several Hawkeyes in the 25th Iowa. Despite these losses, the regiment remained sheltered under the brow of the hill, firing at targets of opportunity until its ammunition was completely exhausted.⁶⁴⁰

That night, having secured their assigned western objectives, Steele's division dug in “to protect ourselves somewhat,” one young Missourian remembered. “As soon as the batteries began to shell us, each one slipped into his hole like mice.” The shallow rifle pits were anything but well established. Early the next morning, as one Irishman of the 3rd Missouri calmly read a newspaper from his foxhole, he was suddenly decapitated by a Rebel shell. “We were not safe for a minute,” one private realized. The men would have to dig deeper, and fast.⁶⁴¹

IV. “Forlorn Hope”

As the sore and half-disillusioned corps awoke on the morning of May 20, word passed through the ranks of Blair's bloodied division “that an assault would be again made upon our left; and that we would make a demonstration in favor of the attack.” That afternoon, Sherman's

⁶⁴⁰ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, May 20, 1863, 47; Calvin Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, May 19, 1863, Calvin Ainsworth Diary, Bentley Historical Library; Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, May 19, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.; John Bell [25 IA] Diary, May 19, 1863, 207.; Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, May 24, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 171.

⁶⁴¹ John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 29.

batteries again thundered their deep notes, and most of the division crowded into protected positions along the crest of the northernmost ridge in the ravine, peppering the Rebel parapet with rifle fire. “The ruse” continued for four hours, without any actual assault ever taking place. Even so, all had plentiful opportunities to find the range to the Rebel works. The men of the 30th Ohio fired no fewer than 30,000 cartridges during the day – more than a hundred per man – “and would have fired more, had they been furnished in time.” Moving rearward from the firing line that evening, the Buckeyes were covered in powder, with “blackened lips ... and blackened hands.” Orderly sergeants discovered that only a mere three men had been wounded during the day's operations, prompting several to grow “loud in expressing their preference for always fighting just such kind of battles.” In sharp contrast to the previous day's maneuvers, “they were so safe, and pleasant ... had all the excitement of a real battle, without any of its dangers.” They also produced much the same in the way of results: very little.⁶⁴²

During the day, Grant met with his three corps commanders, and after comparing notes the officers came to a consensus that the previous day's assault had failed “by reason of the natural strength of the position, and because we were forced by the nature of the ground to limit our attacks to the strongest parts of the enemy's line.” Along the Fifteenth Corps front, that meant the deadly Graveyard Road, which still remained the only viable route left open to reach Stockade Redan. Beyond this, the greater problem had been the failure of any but Sherman's corps to attack as ordered, the others not yet having reached their jumping off positions when Blair surged forward. After much deliberation, and no little reluctance, Grant determined they

⁶⁴² Brinkerhoff, *History of the Thirtieth Regiment Ohio*, 70-71.

would try again. This time, though, the enemy would be attacked simultaneously all along the line, preventing another Rebel concentration against any single assaulting force.⁶⁴³

Always bent on formulating his plans based on the most complete assessment of the situation possible, Sherman personally reconnoitered the area to his corps's front after the meeting with Grant. He knew that the narrow Graveyard Road was still the only clear route from Federal lines to the redan, but this time he also noticed “another point in the curtain about a hundred yards to its [the redan's] right (our left)” that might prove viable if an attacker could cut his way through the *abatis*. He ordered his staff to prepare general orders announcing Grant's intentions to the corps. Blair's division, with all its officers on foot, would again assault down the Graveyard Road, but this time not in line of battle, but rather in a narrow column “preceded by a selected, or volunteer, storming party of about 150 men.” Simultaneously, Steele's division would “in like manner attack, by any route he may select.” While Sherman suggested “the front of Thayer” as the most promising route, as usual he left the details entirely up to Steele, remaining fixated on the operations of his beloved “old Division.” So as to avoid the confusion of Arkansas Post and the 19th, he ordered all division assaults to be coordinated “by the watch, and not depend on [artillery] signals.” Commanders were not to sacrifice momentum when fearful of lacking support on their flanks. “All must presume that others are doing their best,” he instructed, “and do their full share.”⁶⁴⁴

Prior to any of this, skirmish teams along the entire corps front would “during the night, advance within 100 yards of the enemy's works,” and use shovels or axes to “prepare pits, or fallen trees, so as to give them cover from which to kill artillerists who attempt to load the guns,

⁶⁴³ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 351.

⁶⁴⁴ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 351; G.O. #38, May 21, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 334-335.

[and] also to keep down the fire of the enemy's infantry in the rifle-pits during the assault.” Experience at Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post had taught “Cump” the vitality of establishing fire superiority with skirmishers prior to and during any major assault. It had also impressed upon him the importance of pummeling Rebel positions with artillery before any attack. Starting at daylight, all the corps's batteries were to open “with great care and precision” on the portions of the Rebel works that were to be principally targeted by the assault columns. Only 100 rounds of canister and shrapnel “for service after passing the parapet” were to be retained as a reserve in battery caissons.⁶⁴⁵

The volunteer detail charged with leading the attack down Graveyard Road, referred to by the contemporary military term “forlorn hope,” consisted of two officers and fifty men from each of the three brigades of Blair's division placed temporarily under the command of Captain John Groce, 30th Ohio. Together, they would carry their guns, axes, boards, and hand-fashioned ladders to enable the main body to scale the steep scarp of the redan. Both Grant and Sherman visited the detachment personally and promised a sixty-day furlough upon completion of their deadly mission.⁶⁴⁶

The rest of the division would follow close on the heels of the “forlorn hope,” directly down the Graveyard Road in a tightly-packed column. Ewing's brigade, “by right of rank” and having suffered the fewest losses on May 19, would lead the way, followed up closely by Giles Smith's and then Kilby Smith's. If all went according to plan, the forward deployed skirmishers would keep Rebel heads down while the “forlorn hope” rushed across no man's land to the redan and established a secure breach. Ewing's brigade would subsequently mount the parapet and

⁶⁴⁵ G.O. #38, May 21, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 334-335.

⁶⁴⁶ Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257.; *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 245.

drive a wedge into the Rebel line that could be exploited by the combined weight of the other two brigades.⁶⁴⁷

Although this time the corps's assault would fall on the Rebel works simultaneously with Grant's other two corps, thus preventing the enemy from sending reinforcements to bolster their line to his front, Sherman's own tactical-level plans failed to replicate this logic. The inability of half of Ewing's brigade to surmount the obstacles in Mint Spring ravine during the last assault had convinced him that the only realistic approach was the narrow Graveyard Road itself. At the same time, the moment any attacking column was spotted by any Rebels who were not adequately suppressed by the skirmishers deployed in the ravine, it would immediately draw a debilitating fire from the front and both uncontested flanks. While Grant's plans ensured that Sherman would face no more Secessionists than currently held the works to the immediate front, Sherman's plans ensured that nearly all of those in the area would be able to concentrate their fire on the head of his single attacking column.

At “precisely two o'clock” on May 22, the dauntless volunteers of the “Forlorn Hope” debouched from the cover of a berm along the northern slope of Mint Spring ravine and took off down Graveyard Road toward the redan. It took the party three minutes to sprint for their lives the full distance down the road and into the ditch before the rampart of Stockade Redan. Under a heavy Rebel fire for the entire distance, many fell – all posthumously awarded the brand new “Medal of Honor.” Others simply lost their nerve. Overcome with fear only 20 yards from the base of the redan, one lieutenant of the 127th Illinois dove off the roadway and behind its embankment for cover along with ten others. The squad refused to budge for the remainder of the fight. A surprising number of the party successfully reached their objective in one piece. Sadly,

⁶⁴⁷ Kilby Smith's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 269; Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257.

just after leaping into the trench and starting to catch their breath, two shots rang out from afar, and two officers of the 6th Missouri, both survivors of the hell at the Chickasaw sandbar, fell severely wounded. One Zouave lodged the detachment colors into the loose dirt of the parapet. Looking up the ten-foot high rampart “for a head to shoot at,” and then back toward Federal lines, the survivors anxiously awaited support. Fortunately, although the preliminary bombardment had failed to erode the slope of the parapet, it had “pretty well pulverized” the scarp so as to ease the process of digging with bayonets for cover. From above came frequent Rebel cries to “Surrender, Yanks!” which elicited the reply: “Come and get us.”⁶⁴⁸

Ewing chose his own original command, the veteran 30th Ohio, having been in reserve during the previous assault, to spearhead his attack. Behind them would follow Lt. Col. Louis von Blessingh's German 37th Ohio minus three companies detached to duties elsewhere. In a customary display of his considerable personal courage, Blair stood near the head of the column, head uncovered, awaiting the moment to assault. Ewing, in shirt sleeves, was at his side, anxiously watching the desperate charge of the “Forlorn Hope.” Behind him, the German Lt. Col. Hildt stood at the head of his regiment, silently observing the party's sprint to destiny. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Blair ordered the division to attack, Ewing screamed “Forward!” and Hildt, through a thick accent, echoed the call, starting the Buckeyes forward at the double-quick.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁸ W. C. Porter [55 IL] Report, May 23, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 273-274.; John O'Dea, “Vicksburg Again,” *National Tribune*, May 26, 1892; *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 245; W. C. Porter [55 IL] Report, May 23, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 273; John O'Dea, “Vicksburg Again,” *National Tribune*, May 26, 1892; *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 245.

⁶⁴⁹ Ewing's Report, May 27, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 281; Joseph A. Saunier, ed., *A history of the Forty-seventh regiment* (Hillsboro: Lyle Printing Company, 1903), 144; Charles Hipp [37 OH] Report, May 23, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 273; Brinkerhoff, *History of the Thirtieth Regiment Ohio*, 72-73.

Immediately upon the column's coming into sight, the Rebels then focused on executing the surviving members of the Forlorn Hope shifted their fire to the Ohioan column hurdling down Graveyard Road with a cheer. Once again, Blair found himself confronting an attrition-based defense, attempting to erode his division from 400 yards before it could even approach its objective. "To the right of us, to the left of us, and to the front, a perfect sheet of flame issued from the enemy's fortifications," one Buckeye recalled. Confronted by no other proximate advancing column – as Grant's original plans had contemplated – the Secessionists manning the works for a considerable distance on both flanks were free to concentrate their fire against the head of Hildt's lone vulnerable regiment. Veterans of brutal handling at the battle of South Mountain the previous year, the Buckeyes had "stood up against a front fire ... for forty-five minutes," only to spend the following night crowded around campfires wondering "how could a single man escape?" This, though, was different. "It is difficult to describe the horrors of a cross and concentrated fire," one Ohioan wrote. "Forward, forward!" Hildt and Ewing cried through the din, and the regiment continued to surge ahead through the storm of lead. The sight of the "Stars and Stripes" of the Forlorn Hope through the smoke, waving from the scarp of the parapet, was encouraging. The sight to the rear was not. Although the entirety of Ewing's Kanawha Brigade had been ordered down the road, Lt. Col. Von Blessing's German 37th Ohio, formed in column behind the 30th, had not followed Hildt's Buckeyes in the charge. In fact, watching the Rebel fire seemingly converge from all points of the compass onto the lone embattled regiment, the lead German companies stubbornly, and disastrously, refused to budge.⁶⁵⁰

Blair was confounded. Most of the Rebel fire still seemed to be focused on the surviving lead elements of the 30th, yet the Germans positively would not advance. Fewer than ten had

⁶⁵⁰ Brinkerhoff, *History of the Thirtieth Regiment Ohio*, 73-74.

been killed, and just over thirty would receive wounds over the entire course of the day, yet “the men lay down in the road and behind every inequality of ground which afforded them shelter,” he later angrily reported. “Every effort” of Blair, Ewing, von Blessingh, the regiment's junior officers, and even its sergeant major proved ineffectual to budge them. In any assault, even if the majority of a regiment maintained its confidence, the nerves of a few inevitably gave out. At Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post, as most brigades had attacked in line of battle, these men were those observed dropping from the ranks and taking cover as their comrades continued on. This time, as Ewing's column attempted to wedge itself through a tight gap, the psychological breakdown of even a handful of Germans at the front of the formation had brought the entire division to a sudden halt. While plenty of those in the ranks remained willing to do their duty, none were about to step out of line and continue into the open individually when it was clear that the rest might not follow suit. Thus, despite the best wishes of its commander, the 37th Ohio stubbornly stayed put.⁶⁵¹

Suddenly finding themselves in a position not at all dissimilar to that confronted by Williamson's bloodied 4th Iowa at Chickasaw Bayou, the 30th promptly halted and took cover itself on the southern slope of the ravine, still more than 150 yards from the parapet before attempting one final surge toward the works. Struggling alone through a narrow defile near the salient, the thick Rebel fire from front and both flanks quickly dismantled the unit. Casualties literally piled up within the defile, blocking the way for the rest following behind. “The second company forced its way over the remains of the first, and a third over those of the preceding,” Ewing watched in horror, “but their perseverance served only further to encumber the impassable way.” While a small number of the 30th made their way all the way into the ditch at the foot of

⁶⁵¹ Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257-258.

the scarp, the ranking officer present determined that their numbers were hardly “sufficient to warrant my thrusting them over the ramparts, to be either slaughtered or taken prisoners.” Barely underway, Blair's attack had already stalled.⁶⁵²

Showing far more flexibility than at Chickasaw, while his terrified Germans balked, Blair quickly adapted by ordering the rest of Ewing's command, the 47th Ohio and 4th West Virginia, to bypass their traumatized comrades, forego the Graveyard Road completely, and continue directly into the tortuous ravine. Giles and Kilby Smith's brigades followed closely behind. Enraged by the sight of the insubordinate Germans, Colonel Augustus Parry instructed the privates of his 47th Ohio to shoot any officer they saw halting to take cover behind a tree or stump, then told the officers to do the same with balking privates. While offering far more protection than the road, the new route through the ravine quickly proved “almost impassable with abatis of felled timber,” and would not “admit of anything like a charge,” Blair later reported with frustration. The best he could now hope for was to use the protection of the ravine itself to gradually move his division close enough to the parapet to organize a final lunge at the redan. The stall of his brigade in the captured trenches at Chickasaw Bayou and the intractable tarry of the corps at Arkansas Post had shown how effecting such a lunge after the men had found good cover would be exceedingly challenging, but Blair had little choice. Once again, a combination of nightmarish terrain and Rebel fire had eradicated Sherman's best laid plans and broken up the cohesion and momentum of his corps's assault.⁶⁵³

⁶⁵² Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257; Ewing's *OR* Report, May 27, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 282; W. C. Porter [55 IL] May 23, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 273.

⁶⁵³ Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257; *A history of the Forty-Seventh regiment*, 148.

With the division's cohesion rapidly deteriorating in the chaos, Blair again adapted by handing control of the finer details over to his subordinates. Ewing's two remaining regiments took up positions along a ridge of higher ground halfway through the ravine and began adding their fire to suppress the Rebels behind the redan, still about seventy yards distant. Feverishly pouring lead into the enemy position "as fast as we could load and fire," some Ohioans discharged as many as 240 rounds during the attack. One Buckeye's musket became so hot "he could hardly hold it in his hands." Sadly, though well intentioned and at close range, much of this fire fell short and into the backs of comrades ensconced in the ditch or sheltering against the parapet. On at least one occasion, this prompted a few of those now under fire from both directions, to tragically fire back toward the rear in anger.⁶⁵⁴

Making his way to Giles Smith, Blair ordered the veteran brigadier "to go forward as rapidly as the nature of the ground would admit, and to assault whenever he found it practicable to do so" under the cover of Ewing's fire. Kilby Smith was to follow on his heels, in preparation to "support any movement."⁶⁵⁵ Struggling through the vine-choked ravine at the head of his column, Smith was pleased to find Ransom's brigade of McPherson's neighboring corps, likewise mired in the morass of vegetation and telegraph wire enroute to the works. Quickly explaining his debacle, Smith and Ransom agreed to work together in their approach to the redan and coordinate their combined assaults upon arrival. The two brigades used the terrain to scale the cluttered slope of the hill until within striking distance of the Rebel works. As the rounds zipped by and cut into the dirt, Smith boldly rose and shouted over the din to the Zouaves. "Boys, they'll give us one volley," he screamed, "before they can reload, we'll be inside their works!" Along

⁶⁵⁴ Ewing's *OR* Report, May 27, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 282.; *A history of the Forty-Seventh regiment*, 148, 153.

⁶⁵⁵ Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257.

with the command to charge – an uncharacteristic assignment for the Zouaves – he added the additional directive to “Hurrah like hell!” The men of both brigades obediently cheered wildly and rushed from cover up the slope toward the redan with abandon. Immediately visible all along the line, the attack prompted a redoubling of fire from Blair's batteries and Ewing's riflemen still peppering the crest of the parapet as fast as possible.⁶⁵⁶

Those few of Smith's brigade who were able to reach and mount the parapet quickly found themselves engaged from both front, flank, and even rear, as the Rebels holding the salient of Stockade Redan, then unchallenged to their front, turned to assist in repelling the assault on their flank and rear. The brigade “met so severe a fire from my front and left by both musketry and artillery that I found it absolutely necessary to order the brigade to fall back,” Smith later reported. Yet again, as at Chickasaw, Arkansas Post, and two days prior, terrain had nullified Sherman's numerical advantage, and funneled his brigades into piecemeal assaults that confronted an overwhelming volume of Rebel fire from almost every direction. “It was found impossible to advance,” Blair somberly admitted.⁶⁵⁷

As the survivors took shelter behind whatever cover they could find and continued to take shots of opportunity at hats and heads peeking over the parapet, Grant found Sherman watching the disaster from the rear, and the two concurred that their assault had failed yet again. Just then, an orderly from McClelland's corps arrived and handed Grant a hastily scrawled message. McClelland's assault to the south had been successful, broken through the enemy line, and “the flag of the Union waved over the stronghold of Vicksburg.” He urgently requested a renewal of

⁶⁵⁶ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 243; Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257; Bearss, *Vicksburg*, Vol. III, 817-818.

⁶⁵⁷ Smith's *OR* Report, May 26, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 264; Blair's *OR* Report, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 257.

the attack all along the line so as to prevent a Rebel concentration or counterattack against him. Both Grant and Sherman were skeptical, but if there was any truth to the amateur general's claims at all, it would have been criminal to withhold support. Grant departed to learn what he could in person, telling Sherman that "if I did not receive orders to the contrary, by 3 o'clock P.M. ... try it again." No follow on orders ever arrived from Grant, but the sounds of continued heavy fighting to the south did. Assuming these echoes to be those of McClellan's supposed breakthrough, Sherman reluctantly opted to order a renewal of the assault.⁶⁵⁸

Tuttle's Third Division would repeat exactly the same plan which had just gone bloodily awry. This time, however, the Graveyard Road column would hopefully benefit from the suppressive fire of the first assault's survivors, still dispersed behind cover all along the Mint Spring ravine. Alas, just as with that of Blair's skirmishers ahead of the first assault, such fire was fated to be mostly ineffectual given the steep slope of the ravine and parapet and the all but complete exhaustion of both the men and their ammunition. Ordered out of the road to make way for the assaulting column of Mower's brigade, Ewing's surviving Buckeyes were told "they had made several charges in different battles, and never been repulsed." At exactly 3 o'clock, Mower's brigade surged forward down the road, with its commander trodding brazenly at the head of the column. The brigade advanced "closed up beautifully," with "no running, [and] no excitement."⁶⁵⁹ All of the pomp and circumstance of the ostentatious approach, however, to include the Bald Eagle, "Old Abe," perched next to the regimental standard of Mower's lead regiment, came to a screeching halt a short distance from the works under the weight of a sudden Rebel shock volley. More than one hundred and fifty casualties resulted from the single blast,

⁶⁵⁸ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 352.

⁶⁵⁹ Brinkerhoff, *History of the Thirtieth Regiment Ohio*, 75.

prompting Sherman to immediately call off the attack. “This is murder,” he exclaimed to a staffer, “order those troops back.”⁶⁶⁰

Sherman had always intended for the attack on Stockade Redan to represent the corps's main effort. But, in the spirit of Grant's intent, he also ordered Steele's division to launch “a strong demonstration” against the 27th Louisiana Lunette to the west in an attempt to prevent the Rebel reinforcement of Stockade Redan from that direction. This time, Steele was to employ the entirety of his division against the lunette. Thayer's Hawkeyes would again spearhead the attack, followed closely by Woods's brigade, with Manter's regiments in reserve. The brigade had advanced through the ravine at night, using the darkness to screen its movement, and expected to attack at 10 a.m., yet nothing happened. It took the arrival of Steele himself and Woods's brigade from the right to commence the attack up the steep southern slope toward the lunette.⁶⁶¹

The lengthy delay of Steele's “strong demonstration” was principally caused by the extraordinarily difficult and deadly challenge of getting Woods's brigade from the far right to a jumping off position alongside Thayer's brigade – a problem that Sherman apparently had given no consideration to whatsoever. Much of this maneuver necessarily took place across an all but bald ridge in full view, and minimal range, of the Rebel works, “through gullies, single file, over hills, fallen trees, etc.” The unforgiving terrain and lack of cover made it necessary for each regiment to sprint through enemy rifle and artillery fire in single-file lines on multiple occasions, “running the blockade,” as many sardonically called it, referencing the army commander's already legendary maneuver to bypass the Vicksburg batteries.⁶⁶²

⁶⁶⁰ Bearss, *Vicksburg*, Vol. III, 842.

⁶⁶¹ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

⁶⁶² John Bell [25 IA], May 19, 1863, “Diary of Captain John Bell,” 207.

Once the two divisions had finally reached their combined jumping off positions, one Hawkeye predicted grave results should they be ordered to advance further. “They can fire at us from their fort, from their front and from their right and left,” he worried as he scribbled in his diary under fire, “it is folly in my opinion to make this charge.”⁶⁶³ Moreover, with Blair's division already repulsed, it was highly questionable what, if anything, such a charge could even achieve. Steele could never hope to realistically carry the lunette, at the very top of such an all but vertical slope, and indeed his orders never contemplated as much. His orders instructed him to launch a diversionary attack in support of another assault elsewhere – an assault which, by the time his command was in position to make it, had already failed. Tragically, this did not stop him.

“We found ourselves on a very steep hillside, slanting, as it seemed to me, at an angle of 45 degrees,” Sgt. Maj. Reichhelm later observed. “Some distance back of it stood the rebel fort, so that we were directly under and in front of it, but sheltered from its fire until we should reach the crest.” The brow of the ridge was too narrow to support even an entire regiment in line of battle, the brigade would have to charge in column, and even then only in groups of two or three companies at a time.⁶⁶⁴ Half of the 25th Iowa were deployed along the crest of the ridge as sharpshooters, charged with suppressing the Rebel works at long range until the rest of the brigade column had rushed past. They were then to fall back in with their regiment, adding their weight to the assault.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶³ Calvin Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, Calvin Ainsworth Diary, Bentley Historical Library.

⁶⁶⁴ Calvin Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, Calvin Ainsworth Diary, Bentley Historical Library.

⁶⁶⁵ Calvin Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, Calvin Ainsworth Diary, Bentley Historical Library.

At about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, just as Steele was beginning to scan the foreboding terrain to his front from the foot of the hill behind his division, an artillery salvo thundered across the Mint Spring ravine. Mistakenly taking this to be the signal for Tuttle's renewed assault on Stockade Redan – one that, by that time, had already been launched and repulsed, Steele hurried his brigades into position.⁶⁶⁶ After what seemed like hours of waiting, his shrill voice cried out: “Forward! Charge!” Beside him, Thayer echoed the command, screaming “Forward, forward!”

The Hawkeye skirmishers attempted to provide some vestige of suppressive fire from behind the brow of the northern hill, but found “the rebs behind their rifle pits could seldom be touched.” Because of this, as soon as the division's foremost companies crested the southern hill, they were butchered mercilessly. “As the men rose to a level with the crest a terrific fire seemed to sweep the front rank away as the wheat falls before a mower blade, and the colors went down almost instantly,” one mourned. “Whoever poked his head over the hill was a dead man,” another observed. “Forward, forward! Follow me, boys!” officers screamed, often moments before being cut down alongside their men. “We struggled forward against the weight of dead and wounded who fell backward into our ranks, and the ground on the steep incline gave way under our feet,” Sgt. Maj. Reichhelm remembered. From the rear, Steele watched as his division was fed piecemeal into a veritable gauntlet of death. Finally, those regiments not yet to the crest decided that “to mount the crest of the hillside was certain death . . . and it seemed impossible to pass beyond it alive.” Steele's and Thayer's ceaseless cries of “Forward! Forward!” gradually lost their effect. “Rank had lost its power,” Reichhelm remembered. “The column refused to move and our repulse was accomplished.”⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁶ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

⁶⁶⁷ Reichhelm, “The Taking of Vicksburg,” *The Bayonne Herald*, Jan. 18, 1902; Bell [25 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863,

In fact, a handful of Thayer's brigade had managed to rush through “the terrible hail,” steeled by the confidence of the veteran 9th Iowa in its center, a few making it all the way to the cover of the Rebel parapet. “Terribly thinned out,” the Hawkeyes anxiously gazed back through dense smoke for Woods's supporting regiments, but in vain. Only the Germans of the 12th Missouri had rushed ahead “hard on their heels.” “To our disappointment & chagrin none [other] came,” Lt. Alonzo Abernathy observed with disgust. Still balking behind the brow of the hill, Steele's lieutenants urged, cursed, and shoved men over the crest and into the fire “only to meet death.” The remainder of Woods's brigade, still traumatized from their still all too palpable repulse at Arkansas Post, simply refused to advance. The brigade's cultural aversion to frontal assaults, forged under fire only a few months prior, held it in place. Only the German 12th Missouri, having avoided the debacle at “the Post,” moved forward.⁶⁶⁸

With the colors less than ten paces from the crest of the parapet, Thayer's Hawkeyes naturally grew concerned over their capture. Given that those huddling against the scarp frankly assumed “that we would all be shot dead or taken prisoner,” they took pains to remove the flag from the front, and “passed it down from one to the other until it reached below safely.”⁶⁶⁹ The rest awaited their fate until dark, long after Steele had accepted defeat and called off the “strong demonstration.” Once the sun was down, the survivors slipped off the slope and through the ravine back to their original positions. Thayer's and Woods's brigades had sustained a combined 345 casualties during the charge – almost double the total number of effectives in several of their

210.

⁶⁶⁸ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines; Henry Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, June 17, 1863, Hess, *A German in the Yankee Fatherland*, 108; Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, SHSI Des Moines; Calvin Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, Bentley Historical Library.

⁶⁶⁹ Henry Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, June 17, 1863, Hess, *A German in the Yankee Fatherland*, 109.

regiments. Seventy-two of the division's officers and men were dead on the field, and nothing was gained. Yet again, the Fifteenth Corps had been brutally repulsed.

Spared the worst of the engagement due to the breakdown of its lead regiment, Ewing's brigade lost only about half the men it had during the May 19 assault, reporting a total of 25 dead and 116 wounded. Giles and Kilby Smith's brigades also suffered fewer casualties the second time around, though combined the two still sacrificed 158 men in the futile assault, 31 of whom were killed. Four of Blair's regimental commanders were seriously wounded, and two of Steele's killed. Mower's brigade of Tuttle's division also paid a heavy price for their brief contribution. Nearly 200 of the command fell. Altogether, Sherman's corps suffered 1,570 total casualties, including 283 dead, across the two fruitless charges. Since most regiments in the corps had reported fewer than 200 men for duty that bloody week in May, the losses in aggregate represented the temporary loss of nearly eight regiments worth of effective manpower, and the permanent loss of more than one.⁶⁷⁰

McClermand had not in fact made any breakthrough. The heavy losses suffered by McPherson's and Sherman's corps in attempting to support his imaginary success “caused great feeling with us, and severe criticisms on General McClermand,” Sherman later remembered. The error would eventually lead to Grant's removal of McClermand from corps command after the latter published statements blaming the assault's failure on “the fact that McPherson and Sherman did not fulfill their parts.”⁶⁷¹

Precisely what had possessed the men to allow them to so much as even attempt both deadly charges was a topic of considerable discussion and not a little astonishment in its

⁶⁷⁰ Ewing's *OR* Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 283.

⁶⁷¹ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 353.

aftermath. In many cases blind faith and resignation to one's ultimate fate had carried men considerable distances toward the Rebel works. "I have been left constantly to think how entirely we are dependent upon God for our preservation," one Hawkeye reflected. During the assault "it seemed as though human thought[,] reason[,] and intelligence was of no avail." There seemed no good reason to consciously govern one's speed in an effort to cross the expanse in greater haste, as "by so doing perhaps the fatal bullet would penetrate the body that otherwise might fall harmlessly at the feet," he reasoned. The same mortal consequence might attend a lunge to the left or right. "There was but one way to do and that was to go forward," he concluded, "and trust in God." While a sound strategy for coping with the likely prospect of imminent death, the Iowan's statement was simultaneously an admission of his lack of confidence in the likelihood of success. The corps had obediently advanced at the order, but few were the men who thought it even possible that the Rebel works could be carried.⁶⁷²

Indeed, in the aftermath, the widespread consensus in the ranks of both divisions had it that the assault could never have succeeded. This was most especially the case among those in Blair's division who, on May 19, "had been favored with a very near view of the exterior slope of the bastions ... knowing these works to be manned by veteran soldiers of similar blood to our own." Watching the whole nightmare unfold from the relative protection of his battery's fortified position, one Illinoisan gunner thought it "almost if not entirely impossible to have ever taken those Bluffs from the front.". Others found it hard to even refer to the action as an assault. One Hawkeye officer preferred the word "slaughter ... for I can call it nothing else." Another chose "destruction, [for] I don't call it a battle." One of Steele's Missourians thought it "a wonder that the whole division was not destroyed on the spot." Just as in the aftermath of the Chickasaw

⁶⁷² S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Parents, June 2, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

repulse, the survivors were left regretting “that so many lives were thrown away and so much danger incurred when it was not necessary and no good accomplished.” The only bright lining seemed to be that the men were now, yet again, “richer in experience.” All now had unquestionably gained “satisfactory proof that Vicksburg cannot be taken by storming it,” one reasoned.⁶⁷³

Those in the ranks were well aware of the grave lack of coordination which had hamstrung both assaults from the beginning. In Steele's division, many of Thayer's survivors blamed Woods's brigade for failing to provide support to their lodgment under the parapet. Those few elements of Woods's brigade which had upheld their part of the plan, the 12th Missouri and parts of the 3rd, blamed the others for refusing to go “forward properly.” The rest blamed Steele for his failure to coordinate the timing of his assault with that of Blair or even Tuttle. “The common soldier does not ascertain who was responsible for this murder,” Private Buegel, 3rd Missouri, admitted. Beyond rumors of “jealousy and betrayal,” his comrades sensed “that a general attack was supposed to take place on the whole line, but was not carried out.” Thus, as usual, “the enemy could throw his troops against this division.” “The troops have only a portion of them been engaged at a time,” another Hawkeye complained. Yet another merely noted somberly in his diary: “Bad management somewhere. Don't want to see another one.”⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷³ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 242; Charles Affeld [1 IL LA B] Diary, May 27, 1863, Charles Affeld Diary, <http://taylors-battery.com>; Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, May 23, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 169; Calvin Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, Bentley Historical Library; John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 29; S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Parents, May 24, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City; John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 29.

⁶⁷⁴ Alonzo Abernathy [9 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, Alonzo Abernathy Papers, SHSI Des Moines.; Henry Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, May 26, 1863, Hess, *A German in the Yankee Fatherland*, 101-102; Reichhelm, “The Taking of Vicksburg,” 210; Buegel [3 MO] Diary, 30; S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, May 24, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City; John Gay [25 IA] Diary, May 22, 1863, John Gay Diary, SHSI Iowa City.

Many found themselves consumed with the same outrage that had dominated campfire discussions after Chickasaw Bayou. “Today the most deplorable event in this campaign occurred – the vain assault of the enemies [sic] works,” Sgt. Maj. Reichhelm recorded ruefully in his diary. “It was Sherman's order and that bloodhound and madman is responsible for a thousand more lives vainly and foolishly sacrificed.”⁶⁷⁵ This, Reichhelm later asserted, was the “sentiment of every man with whom I came in contact that day and the day following.” It was certainly the sentiment of Lt. Henry Kircher, 12th Missouri. As far as he could tell, a third of his regiment had been “murdered, only because Sherman thinks that everything can be forced by the stormers without knowing the terrain or testing it out.”⁶⁷⁶ The notion that these tactics were the best “our Generals” could devise seemed impossible to believe. “Why did not the great charger S[herman] come and lead it himself,” Kircher wondered. “But no, only orders are given to charge up the hill and take the pits,” and his intrepid German comrades were always, and remained, “willing to obey orders from our superior officers.” That said, he hoped and prayed that “this be the last fit of insanity that our commanders will ever have.”⁶⁷⁷

Liquor, of course, was an oft discussed culprit. Multiple officers were “said to have been under the influence of liquor while in the fight and their behavior is the talk of all who talk of it,” one Illinoisan overheard. Yet another rumor made the rounds that Grant himself was chiefly responsible for the slaughter. “All the generals were supposedly greatly opposed to this last storm, but Grant wouldn't let himself be stopped and still gave the order for the entire line to charge,” Kircher reported home to his mother. Inevitably, the experience of the bloody repulses

⁶⁷⁵ Reichhelm, “The Taking of Vicksburg,” *The Bayonne Herald*, Jan. 18, 1902, 210.

⁶⁷⁶ Henry Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, May 24, 1863, 100.

⁶⁷⁷ Henry Kircher [12 MO] Diary, May 22, 1863, 101.

were compared in conversation and contemplation to past experiences. “I thought we had to work at the 'Post,’” Captain Jacob Ritner, 25th Iowa admitted, “but that was a mere nothing to this.” The “terrible hail of bullets” had been like nothing “I nor anybody had ever heard before,” Kircher, a veteran of hard fighting at Pea Ridge, observed. One thing was beyond any doubt – Sherman's corps had reached a new low in its deterioration of confidence in assaulting Rebels behind works. Many officers, in fact, were convinced that the loss of efficacy was now total. “I do not think there will be any more charges made,” Ritner predicted. “The men cannot be made to do it.”⁶⁷⁸

While opinions vary as to the efficacy and necessity of Grant's second assault on Vicksburg, historians have rightfully been uniformly critical of Sherman's handling of his corps's operations. In his magisterial three-volume history of the campaign, Ed Bearss attributed Sherman's failure on May 22 to his having completely “lost control of his corps.” Contrary to the logic of Grant's larger assault plan, “he had launched three separate and disjointed attacks,” allowing the Rebels to swiftly reinforce any embattled portion of the works without worrying about weakening another still under attack. “It is clear,” Warren Grabau, another historian of the battle, observed, “that Sherman did not fully understand the reasoning behind Grant's decision.” Overawed by the vexing abatis that had ensnared Ewing's brigade on May 19, and the lack of effective artillery support during that attack, he opted to mass all his artillery and attempt a second storm “by ramming an assault column right down the road.”⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁸ Charles Affeld [1 IL LA B] Diary, May 22, 1863; Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, May 26, 1863, 102.; Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, May 23, 1863, 169-170.; Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, May 26, 1863, 102.

⁶⁷⁹ Edwin Cole Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. III* (Dayton: Morningside, 1986), 844; Grabau, *Ninety-Eight Days*, 369-370.

Even so, although given the benefit of years worth of retrospective reflection, Sherman himself always remained of the opinion that the failure of both assaults was due exclusively to the unique strength of the Vicksburg defenses. The attacks had failed “by reason of the great strength of the position and the determined fighting of its garrison,” he asserted. No mention of his failure to coordinate the attacks even of his own corps, let alone Grant's struggles to accomplish the same across the army, were ever acknowledged by either officer. Both attacks had been necessary, they maintained, because without them the army never could have known if such an assault was possible. In fact, Grant later spuriously asserted in his memoirs that the May 22 assault had been necessary in large part because “the troops believed they could carry the works in their front, and would not have worked so patiently in the trenches [afterward] if they had not been allowed to try.”⁶⁸⁰

Benefiting from the vantage point of a more objective observer, members of the press who had witnessed the prosecution of both attacks were more honest in their assessment of the failure to take Vicksburg by assault. One embedded journalist of the *Chicago Tribune* thought both operations had broken down chiefly because of either “bad management or disobedience of orders on the part of those to whom high commands were entrusted, or from the dreadful character of the work to be performed, I will not attempt to decide.” One way or another, it was undeniable that there had been “a want of co-operation between subordinate and superior officers and commands.” Assault columns “went gallantly forward, but were left to perish for want of

⁶⁸⁰ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 353; U. S. Grant, E. B. Long, ed., *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), 277.

support.” Individual units charged valiantly, “only to be disappointed in their expectations of receiving success and help.”⁶⁸¹

Another from the *New York Times* did not even bother narrating the second assault in detail. “It is needless to give particulars,” he explained, as “it was in the main like the other, only on a larger scale.” In fact, given the recent experience of the army over the course of the winter, it seemed decidedly unremarkable, even given the excessive loss of life and limb. “The usual character of assaults prevailed,” he observed. “Some gallant heroes went up the hill into the very ditches, others failed when half way up, others never started.” These types of things never seemed to succeed, he suggested. All along the line the story had been more or less the same: “down a broken hill under showers of grape, canister, fragments of shells and musket-balls; up a long ascent covered with almost impenetrable abatis, broken into hallows [sic], nearly inaccessible to a pedestrian in the most peaceful times,” he wrote. Indeed, it seemed unlikely that any force could have surmounted the parapet even had no Rebels been defending it. Assaulting works began to seem, in the parlance of the men, utterly “played out.”⁶⁸²

Despite their repeated failures to seize the bastion by storm, or perhaps even because of them, most of the officers and men in Sherman's corps were confident of the efficacy of the inevitable forthcoming siege. “We are sure to take Vicksburgh,” Capt. Farwell wrote confidently. “We have them surrounded with an army that cant be whipped in a fair fight and victory is sure to come sooner or later.” Now that “our Generals” had finally come to the same conclusion as those in the ranks, “all that is necessary is to wait patiently ... instead of charging upon works that have been built upon the best military knowledge and principles,” and victory was all but

⁶⁸¹ “Siege of Vicksburg: News to Tuesday, May 26th,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 2, 1863.

⁶⁸² “The Seige [sic] of Vicksburg,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 1863.

inevitable. “This is the only way in which the place can be reduced without immense loss of life,” another Hawkeye remarked. “If we cant storm them we can starve them out,” Private Henry Bear, 116th Illinois, wounded in the side during the May 19 assault, proclaimed. On the far opposite flank, Lt. Col. Seay agreed. “I have no doubt that we will have a long, bloody siege,” he prophesied. “Those of us who survive will be able to stand anything.”⁶⁸³

The men of the corps were well aware that the only reason a siege was even possible was because of the arduous feats of endurance they had performed during the long campaign of maneuver from Young's Point to the gates of Vicksburg. They rightfully prided themselves on their proven capacity for swift long-distance movement on an exceedingly tight logistical budget, just as they had after the risky bayou expeditions of the previous months. By an indirect campaign of maneuver, the army had positioned itself there was no need for bloody assaults. Those that had been ordered anyway, in their eyes, represented grievous errors of judgment – just as they had at Chickasaw and Arkansas Post. The experience dramatically reified the enormous confidence the men in Sherman's regiments had developed in their capacity to make even the most daunting maneuvers on foot with great speed and agility. Their quick and efficient dismantling of Jackson's capacity to allow safe haven for Rebel forces likewise bolstered confidence in their ability to thoroughly prosecute “war in earnest.” At the same time, brutal repulses during the subsequent dual assaults had likewise solidified their sense of the corps's coordinative failings and firmly solidified their aversion to assaults. After witnessing once again

⁶⁸³ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Parents, May 24, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.; John Bell [25 IA] Diary, May 23, 1863, 211.; Henry C. Bear [116 IL] to Wife, May 21, 1863, *Bear Letters*, 41.; A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, May 22, 1863, *Civil War Diary*, 48.

the defensive advantages naturally accruing to well-planned and soundly constructed earthworks, both the Fifteenth Corps and its commander took to the spade themselves as they underwent their most complete evolutionary adaptation yet.

CHAPTER VI: “ONE OF THE BEST TRAINING SCHOOLS”: THE SIEGES OF VICKSBURG AND JACKSON, MAY - JULY 1863

“It is astonishing how soon we become accustomed to things.”

~ Cpt. Jacob Ritner, 25th Iowa⁶⁸⁴

With characteristic understatement, Sherman began his report to Grant on the evening of May 22 with an admission that his corps “had a hard day's work, and all are exhausted.” Two brigades of Blair's division, Giles Smith's and Ewing's, still remained ensconced along the ridge half-way between their jumping off positions and Stockade Redan. These he ordered to dig in and fortify their positions, ordering a thousand picks and shovels delivered to assist them in the labor. Certainly, it would be possible to cut a mine underneath the Rebel redan, he considered, and blow the position sky high. But this would have to wait. “My men are too exhausted to do all this to-night,” he confessed.⁶⁸⁵

General orders composed at Sherman's headquarters that evening set the stage for the next phase of operations against the “Gibraltar of the Mississippi.” The Fifteenth Corps would hold what little ground it had won during the second assault. Smith's and Ewing's commands were to “construct in their front a rifle-pit or breast-height of logs, and lay out a covered road to their rear.” All batteries were to replenish the ammunition expended in support of the assault.⁶⁸⁶ More instructions followed the next day, finally acknowledging the Rebel works as “too strong

⁶⁸⁴ Jacob Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, June 5, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 179.

⁶⁸⁵ WTS to Grant, May 22, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 341.

⁶⁸⁶ G.O. #39, HQ 15 AC, May 22, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 342.

to be carried by assault,” requiring reduction “by a system of regular approaches.” Just like the enemy works themselves, these “approaches,” zig-zagging across the rugged terrain in no man's land, would be hand-fashioned by the corps “according to the well-established principles of the military art.” On May 25, Grant confirmed Sherman's assessment by ordering the entire army to “the work of reducing the enemy by regular approaches,” to begin immediately under the supervision of the army's Chief Engineer, Captain Frederick E. Prime.⁶⁸⁷

Lacking more than a handful of officers with professional training in military engineering, Grant's siege would represent both the “last traditional Vaubanian siege in the history of the Western world,” and a departure from established doctrine in siegecraft. As historian Justin Solonick has observed within his masterful treatment of the Vicksburg siege, the Army of the Tennessee “embraced conventional engineering maxims and adapted them” based upon what they considered Western common sense and the many lessons they had derived from the experience of past campaigns. While Solonick and others have comprehensively examined the operations of the forty-two day siege in great detail, few have considered how the manner in which the army set about its novel assignment were influenced by past experience, as well as how the experience and lessons of the siege itself left an indelible mark on the beliefs, habits, and indeed culture of the commands that prosecuted it.⁶⁸⁸

The eagerness of those in the ranks to turn toward siegecraft was in large part derived from the realization that there would be no more suicidal assaults. Just as historian Steven Sodergren has observed of an Army of the Potomac emerging from its fierce bloodletting during

⁶⁸⁷ G.O. #40, HQ 15 AC, May 24, 1863, OR, I:24, III, 344, 348.

⁶⁸⁸ Justin S. Solonick, *Engineering Victory: The Union Siege of Vicksburg* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), 4.

the 1864 Overland Campaign into the comparative safety of the Petersburg trenches, siegecraft “was welcomed by those in the ranks for the escape that it offered from the frontal assaults and charges” which characterized high-intensity combat. “The boys now seem perfectly willing to siege the place,” one Illinoisan artillerist sensed, “being confident that storming will not do it.” Hawkeye Private Thomas Coffman captured the logic of the siege succinctly in a brief note home to his sweetheart. The army had gone “to work and built forts as well as the rebs and we are going to let them come out and fight us when they get hungry enough.” It seemed to all that “Gen. Grant deems the game caged and he does not want to sacrifice life” in any more fruitless assaults.⁶⁸⁹

I. “Shot until my shoulder is beat very sore”

In order to “secure a fair share of labor, and to keep the good soldier at his post,” Sherman laid out a series of “rules” meant to govern the corps's siege operations. First of all, each of the three division commanders would set his pioneer detachments to constructing a “good covered road from his base toward some salient of the work in his front,” taking advantage of any and all natural cover along the way. In places where such cover was wholly unavailing, zigzag approach trenches with a “regular 'sap” were necessary. “Sap rollers,” Captain W. L. B. Jenney, the only staff officer of Sherman's headquarters who enjoyed any professional training in military engineering, would rove between divisions providing “general supervision of this work” in light of his understanding of Captain Prime's intent, and appointing various officers to oversee the most important portions of each brigade's effort. While the lion's

⁶⁸⁹ Steven E. Sodergren, *The Army of the Potomac in the Overland & Petersburg Campaigns: Union Soldiers and Trench Warfare, 1864-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 11; John D. Antwerp [26 IA] to Samuel Van Antwerp, June 5, 1863, Spared & Shared 13, <http://www.sparedshared13.wordpress.com>; Charles Affeld [1 IL LA B] Diary, May 22, 1863; Thomas Coffman [30 IA] to Jeannette, May 29, 1863, Thomas Coffman Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

share of the labor was to be conducted by fatigue details drawn from each regiment, Sherman made clear that “negro labor, when organized” would also be employed to save the sweat of his bloodied veterans.⁶⁹⁰

The corps quartermaster department ensured that the supply routes to the landings along the Yazoo were kept constantly in the best possible condition. This would prevent any shortage of ammunition or provisions, temporary stores of which were maintained in the immediate rear of each division, from slowing the progress of the siege, as well as allow for regular transfer of casualties and mail to the rear. While Steele would retain the black laborers of First Division's pioneer corps, Blair's “negro force” was assigned duty maintaining the crucial supply route back to Chickasaw Bayou and the Yazoo. Those relatively few white pioneers serving alongside these black men noted, with some racist derision, how “some are very easy to learn, [but] others are slow.” While unfortunately no record of how the black pioneers felt about their white counterparts survives, the ceaseless and efficient flow of supplies across the nightmarish terrain of the old Chickasaw Bayou battlefield throughout the siege is indisputable evidence of the indispensable contributions of these ex-slaves to the command.⁶⁹¹

Engineer Captain W. L. B. Jenney sited and ordered the establishment of covered approaches along the fronts of each brigade in Blair's division immediately after the receipt of Sherman's orders. From left to right, or west to east, these were Smith's, Ewing's, and Lightburn's approaches, along with another cut by Captain Young, commanding Tuttle's pioneers. On the right, Captain Herman Klostermann, commanding Steele's pioneers, superintended two

⁶⁹⁰ G.O. #40, HQ, 15 AC, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 344.

⁶⁹¹ G.O. #40, HQ, 15 AC, May 24, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 344.; W. L. B. Jenney Report, Sept. 22, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 187; William T. Seward [9 IA] Diary, June 24, 1863, William T. Seaward Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

additional approaches along Woods's and Thayer's fronts. Only the latter would be pushed to fruition. Second Division's white pioneers were responsible for maintaining the roads between the works of the corps's nine brigades. The remaining pioneers took charge of the construction of siege materials and supervised the erection of fortified battery positions all along the line. Gabions and fascines, neither of which most in the ranks were familiar with, were hand-fashioned from vines, cane, and saplings growing along the crest and rearward slope of the Walnut Hills. In at least one case, Sherman himself had to instruct junior officers in the novel art of manufacturing such siege materials.⁶⁹²

Although many of the “old” regiments of Blair's division had accrued considerable experience with constructing modest field fortifications during Halleck's campaign for Corinth, the complicated works and “regular approaches” at Vicksburg were “more elaborate than any we had yet seen,” one Illinoisan later noted.⁶⁹³ On the far right of the corps line, Thayer's Iowans first cut into the Mississippi loess soil on the night of May 30 to begin down the long meandering path toward the Rebel works approximately 300 yards distant. Surveying the route, Klostermann marked out the pathway for the approach trench so as to reduce the task of the unschooled volunteers to mere digging – much as had been done along the De Soto canal. As the approach ran by necessity down the steep northern slope of the ravine before climbing the southern embankment toward the Rebel works, daily Hawkeye details from Thayer's regiments and the division's pioneers found themselves inevitable targets of Rebel sharpshooters. To solve this deadly problem, the men fashioned fascines out of cane, and placed them over the six-foot deep

⁶⁹² Jenney Report, Sept. 22, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 188; Frederick Prime and Cyrus Comstock Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 171.; *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 249; Solonick, *Engineering Victory*, 63-64.

⁶⁹³ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 248.

and six-foot wide trench, forming “a roof which hid the movements of our men, and [which], where well constructed, [was] impenetrable to musket balls.” Rebel shells would have obliterated the cane roof, but the inability to sufficiently depress the guns and the perpetual volume and accuracy of covering fire from Steele's riflemen and artillery usually kept the enemy batteries silent.⁶⁹⁴

Off to Thayer's left, the approach of Ewing's brigade just north of Graveyard Road was to become the corps's primary focus. Still convinced that Stockade Redan, blocking access to Graveyard Road's path into the city from the north, remained the primary tactical objective of his corps, Sherman focused maximum attention on this approach. The Buckeyes of Ewing's regiments had begun cutting what would become the sap the day after the failed assault, two days before even receiving Grant's orders to begin the siege. Having established an impromptu forward rifle pit only a hundred yards from Stockade Redan as cover for the survivors of the attack, Ewing's approach was initially started as a mere shallow “covered road” by which to provide ammunition to skirmishers rotating in and out of the advanced position. Once Grant and Prime ordered them on May 25 to commence siege work, the men began converting the covered road into a proper zig-zag approach. Mechanically-skilled men from the 35th Missouri, erstwhile assigned to the pontoon train and not members of the corps, were charged with the technical aspects of the work while the regiments of Ewing's brigade provided rotating 50 man daily details to move earth.

Just south of Graveyard Road, Giles Smith's battered brigade began its own approach toward the right flank of the redan, more or less concurrently with that of Ewing's to the north. Beginning in the ravine bottom secured during the assault, Smith's Zouaves alongside the 6th

⁶⁹⁴ Frederick Prime and Cyrus Comstock Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 172.

Missouri and 116th Illinois cut multiple approach trenches which converged when nearing the redan. Smith's approaches measured eight-feet wide, intended to allow for a column four-men abreast to debouch from their confines and spring violently onto the redan parapet.⁶⁹⁵

Despite cane fascine roofs and sap rollers, labor on the works and approaches during daylight hours quickly proved more dangerous than it was worth all along the line. Instead, most brigades alternated between sharpshooting and heavy artillery barrage during the day and siegecraft during the night. The necessity of laboring on approaches under the cover of darkness forced the men to accustom themselves to working, communicating, and coordinating operations at night. This was a novel experience for most regiments. While a handful of Sherman's expeditionary force had found themselves digging battery positions in the rain through the night following the repulse at Chickasaw Bayou, and Steele's division had made its miserable tramp westward in the darkness of night at Arkansas Post, corps operations had usually come to a halt following "Taps" and the extinguishing of lights in camp each evening. Work now continued in one capacity or another at all hours of the day and night.⁶⁹⁶

On June 9, Sherman ordered a permanent and unbroken "continuous chain of sentinels" to be established across the entire corps front, to "act as sharpshooters or pickets" after being instructed to allow "no human being [to] pass into or out of Vicksburg, unless on strictly military duty, or as prisoners." Individual sentinels on duty were to connect with those to their left and right and remain in close contact with others massed in reserve to the rear. In effect, this "continuous chain" was to function as a permanent "cloud of skirmishers" meant to harass the Rebel works continually and provide covering fire for those working in or on the approach

⁶⁹⁵ Bearss, *Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. III*, 901-904.

⁶⁹⁶ Solonick, *Engineering Victory*, 93.

trenches during the dangerous daylight hours.⁶⁹⁷ Regiments often divided companies into five reliefs, each spending two hours in forward sharpshooting pits cut perpendicularly off the approaches during each day, providing all effective manpower in the corps a daily opportunity to practice their marksmanship.⁶⁹⁸

Sharpshooting details quickly found they could “see the town from where we are ... but the rebel sharpshooters can see us also so we have to keep close [down].”⁶⁹⁹ Duty in the forward pits was exceedingly hot in both senses of the term: air temperature and enemy fire.⁷⁰⁰ Regiments converted empty grain sacks into sandbags, just as they had done to dam the entrances and exits of Grant's ill-fated canal, and stacked them along the forward edge of trenches in a manner that produced “port holes” out of which to aim and shoot “at the unlucky head that hap[p]ens to appear above the other works.” At night, details covered the pits with roofs of rails and brush, both to hide the riflemen during the day and protect them from the merciless rays of the summer sun.⁷⁰¹ Although some regiments erected “head-logs” to protect their shooters, for others, “it had not yet occurred to us to use logs on top to protect our heads when firing, as became the custom later on.”⁷⁰²

Riflemen had to take extra care when scanning for targets and exposing themselves behind the portholes, as many of the Secessionists proved crack shots themselves. “The enemy

⁶⁹⁷ G.O. #44, 15 AC, June 9, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 394.

⁶⁹⁸ Willison [76 OH], *Reminiscences*, 56; Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, May 30, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 174.

⁶⁹⁹ John Gay [25 IA] Diary, May 27, 1863, John Gay Diary, SHSI Iowa City.

⁷⁰⁰ Arch M. Brinkerhoff [4 IA] Diary, June 2, 1863, Edwin C. Bearss, ed., “Diary of Private Arch M. Brinkerhoff, Co. H, 4th Iowa Infantry, at Vicksburg,” *Iowa Journal of History* 59 (April 1961): 228.

⁷⁰¹ Arch M. Brinkerhoff [4 IA] Diary, June 4 & 6, 1863, Bearss, 228-229; Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, June 5, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 179.

⁷⁰² *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 248; Willison [76 OH] *Reminiscences*, 57.

have Squir[r]el rifles' which are very accurate,” one Iowan observed, “[and] they watch these 'port holes' and when they see the flash from our gun [they] put a bullet general[l]y right through.” Very quickly, the men adapted accordingly, and “learned to get down as soon as we fire.” Unfortunately, this tactic also reduced their ability to judge the accuracy of their fire. “If we stand to see what effect our shot has had we are all most sure to share the fate of one of our boys of Co. D,” Private Robert Henry, 26th Iowa observed of a comrade recently shot through the head. Another Hawkeye explained to his wife how he and his comrades had to learn how “to dodge and where to stand up, and so keep pretty well concealed.”⁷⁰³ At night, officers worked to identify “the best and most concealed places” in which to place detachments so as to maximize coverage and the potential effectiveness of their fire the next day. Although judging the accuracy of sharpshooting fire was difficult for the men in the pits, in retrospect it is clear that the riflemen of the corps exacted a fearsome toll on the Rebel regiments to their front. The 27th Louisiana, charged with holding the works to the immediate front of Ewing's brigade during the siege, lost every field officer it had, either killed or wounded, to the fire of sharpshooters. In fact, on June 27, Brig. Gen. Martin E. Green became the highest ranking casualty of the corps's “chain of sentinels” when he boldly shouted to his men that “a bullet has not been moulded that will kill me” just prior to rising up to check the progress of Smith's sap only to be cut down immediately by a bullet fired from the 116th Illinois.⁷⁰⁴

At first, Henry and his comrades found themselves “a little timid” on sharpshooting duty, exposed to the snap and buzz of incoming Rebel balls overhead in a continual stream throughout the day. The young Hawkeye “involuntarily dodged at every Whiz but they were so frequent that

⁷⁰³ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, June 5, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 179.

⁷⁰⁴ Bearss, *The Vicksburg Campaign, Vol. III*, 897, 903.

it became tiresome and I soon got so I could stand the racket,” he proudly reported. By the time his company's daytime rotation was complete, “I was as mindless of them [Rebel bullets] as of the hum of flies.”⁷⁰⁵ Most men assigned to the task armed themselves to the teeth with ammunition, in almost giddy anticipation of expending all of it over the course of a day. Private John Mains, 6th Missouri, routinely took at least a hundred rounds along with him on duty in the pits. Private Arch Brinkerhoff, 4th Iowa, regularly fired until his “shoulder is very much bruised, where my gun kicks me,” frequently expending between thirty and sixty-five rounds per day.⁷⁰⁶ By mid-June, at the height of the siege, Brinkerhoff estimated that his company fired approximately 1,000 cartridges per day when assigned to the forward pits.⁷⁰⁷ One Buckeye estimated that he alone fired “at least one thousand rounds” over the entire course of the siege.⁷⁰⁸ While unfortunately reliable numbers are all but non-existent, if Brinkerhoff's estimates are even remotely correct, Sherman's corps likely fired tens of thousands of cartridges per day.

The rate of this fire was contingent upon each shooter's ability to identify potential targets, find the range, and take careful aim. Each day his company made its way forward to sharpshoot, Brinkerhoff would set himself to carefully “looking for Rebs.” “Every time I would see a rebel [I] would shoot at him,” he dutifully recorded in his diary. The availability of such targets was often dependent upon the weather. On intensely hot days, the men rarely spotted Rebel heads to shoot at. On cooler days, however, “our game stirs about more and we have some pretty fair shots.” The range to targets likewise varied significantly dependent upon how far

⁷⁰⁵ Robert Henry [26 IA] to Wife, June 20, 1863, Robert Henry Papers, SHSI Iowa City.

⁷⁰⁶ Arch M. Brinkerhoff [4 IA] Diary, June 8, 1863, Bearss, 229.

⁷⁰⁷ Arch M. Brinkerhoff [4 IA] Diary, June 17, 1863, Bearss, 231.

⁷⁰⁸ Willison [76 OH], *Reminiscences*, 61.

advanced each brigade's forward pits were at the time of assignment to them – most progressively advancing week by week and day by day until shooters were within a hundred yards or less of the enemy works. Some riflemen even established their own personal positions from which to partake in their routine sharpshooting assignment. Private Charles Willison, 76th Ohio, happened upon a particular piece of terrain that allowed him visibility into a highly vulnerable portion of the Rebel line at almost a thousand yards distance. “My rifle was sighted for one thousand yards and practice enabled me to get accurate range of the spot so I could see the dust fly just where I wanted to hit,” Willison explained. The Buckeye became so good at such extreme long-range firing that it was at this very spot “I hit the only man I was *sure* of during the war,” watching as the Rebel threw his hands into the air before being evacuated by stretcher.⁷⁰⁹

On the occasion of general artillery bombardments, entire companies blazed away “pretty fast to keep the rebels down, so the Battery men can work the cannons,” sometimes even firing by volley. On other days, the enemy did his best to contest the corps's fire supremacy. “Sometimes the Johnnies shoot pretty close,” Brinkerhoff observed. “We have to take good care of our heads.” A few of the 30th Iowa took to holding their hats up on ramrods to draw Rebel fire and “see how quickly some Johnnie would fire at them; and they would nearly always hit it if above the log.” The Hawkeyes learned, just as their enemy counterparts did, to look carefully for targets immediately after the shot, and “if they saw a rebel put his head up above their works to see if he had hit some Yank ... they would pull on him.” Others less interested in taking such risks to get a clear shot merely watched for the darkening of Rebel artillery embrasures – an occasion which would inevitably draw “five to ten ready to shoot into it.” One day in late June, a

⁷⁰⁹ Arch M. Brinkerhoff [4 IA] Diary, July 2, 1863, Bearss, 235; Willison [76 OH], *Reminiscences*, 62; John Bell [25 IA] Diary, June 1, 1863, Bearss, 214.

company of the 25th Iowa was amazed to spot “50 naked rebs” within range attempting to reach the river to bathe. Immediately, “ten crack shots” opened upon them, “forcing them to leave suddenly, leaving their clothes on shore.”⁷¹⁰

Although individual companies and even whole regiments regularly rotated to and from the forward pits, many also selected rearward positions at the crest of the southern lip of the Mint Spring ravine where men could practice their marksmanship on the Rebel works at more or less personal whim. This surprising liberality in ammunition expenditure represented the extraordinarily bountiful supply that Grant's army enjoyed atop the Walnut Hills. It also effectively converted the enemy works into a kind of “free-fire zone” where even junior enlisted men needed little to no authorization from superiors to engage at will. On days when Brinkerhoff's Hawkeye company was not assigned to sharpshooting duty, the young private found he enjoyed shooting so much that he frequently climbed the ridge to the embrasures of the 1st Iowa Battery and shot “till I get tired.” Firing from more than 400 yards distance, it was difficult to tell if he “hit any one body,” but he nevertheless continued “until my shoulder is beat very sore.” The safety of long-range sharpshooting even allowed for photography, and Brinkerhoff and his comrades “got our pictures taken in a group standing skirmishing ... Some loading some firing in all positions.” Sadly, these images do not survive.⁷¹¹

Unlike the dismal swamps of Young's Point or the Yazoo bottoms, the Walnut Hills were “high, healthy, and good ... in direct and easy communication with our supplies,” offering substantial cover for those in the rear from the intermittent fire emanating from the Rebel works.

⁷¹⁰ John Mains [6 MO] to Father, July 26, 1863, John Mains Letters, SHSM Rolla; Arch M. Brinkerhoff [4 IA] Diary, June 2, 8, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, & 20, 1863, Bearss, 228; Brinkerhoff, *History of the Thirtieth Ohio Infantry*, 30-31; John Bell [25 IA] Diary, June 19, 1863, Bearss, 220.

⁷¹¹ Arch M. Brinkerhoff [4 IA] Diary, June 30, 1863, Bearss, 234.

Most regiments established cantonments on the reverse slope of the ridge from which both major assaults had been launched. If not assigned to sharpshooting duty, most did their best to stay out of the sun and “lie by in the middle of the day as much as we can.”⁷¹² Still, the static monotony of siege life inevitably eroded discipline and cleanliness, just as it had in the camps at Young's Point. Regimental commanders found themselves frequently issuing and re-issuing sharp-toned general orders threatening punishment if companies failed to maintain well-policed spartan encampments. In the 26th Iowa, many junior enlisted men who failed to painstakingly care for their quarters and clothing drew the ire of their commander, Colonel Milo Smith. Inspecting his regiment behind the works, Smith was astounded to find several “exceedingly filthy,” a few of whom were so infested with lice “that these vermin can be seen 'even at a distance' crawling upon their persons at all hours of the day.” Smith warned his junior officers that failure to address such a sad state of affairs would soon result in “details ... made for the purpose of washing such men.” The Hawkeyes of the neighboring 30th Iowa were ordered to concern themselves with an altogether different sort of cleanliness. Lt. Col. W. M. G. Torrence, after observing how “the Great God” had bestowed upon the regiment “blessings” of “good health and cheerfulness” throughout the campaign, did not want to risk alienating His benevolence. Accordingly, Torrence ordered “everything which might prove offensive” to God be immediately removed from camp.⁷¹³

Sherman required commanders of every company and battery in the corps to conduct three daily roll calls, ensuring that familiarity with orderly sergeants would not produce spurious

⁷¹² John D. Antwerp [26 IA] to Samuel Van Antwerp, June 5, 1863.

⁷¹³ G.O. #26, HQ 26 IA, Jun. 17, 1863, G.O. #27, HQ 26 IA, Jun. 18, 1863, 26th IA Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA; Circular, HQ 30 IA, June 28, 1863, 30th IA Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA; G.O. #81, HQ 25 IA, June 8, 1863, Co. C, 25th IA Order Book, RG 94, NARA.

reports that erroneously inflated the army's perception of available manpower. The unusually honest reports that reached corps headquarters daily were rarely uplifting.⁷¹⁴ Hard work each night and stifling heat each day took a heavy toll on the health of the corps.⁷¹⁵ Constant details to picket duty or fatigue parties left little free time remaining to bathe or wash clothes.⁷¹⁶ Watching his men bake in their camps to Steele's rear, one Hawkeye noted how "the sun pores its rays of heat down upon them," producing widespread "fever and ague" in the ranks. By the first of July, the men present for duty in his regiment, the 25th Iowa, had decreased by more than 23% since the opening of the campaign in May. Still a "new" regiment, the 25th suffered considerably greater losses to its effective strength during the siege than did the "old" veteran 4th and 9th Iowa regiments of Steele's division. On a whole, First Division suffered a decrease of 8% in available effective on duty strength between May and July. Blair's Second Division, in no small part due to the grievous losses sustained during its two ill-fated charges, suffered far worse, losing 21% of its effective strength across the three months of the campaign. Including Tuttle's Third Division, Sherman's corps experienced a decrease of more than 14% of its already heavily depleted effective manpower during the campaign, leaving it with only 14,644 of the 27,116 men borne on its rolls (54%) in the works atop the Walnut Hills with their companies on July 1.⁷¹⁷

The 410 infantry companies and 9 artillery batteries assigned to Fifteenth Corps headquarters averaged about 35 effectives each by July, though many rarely mustered even half that number. Company I, 26th Iowa reported 14 privates, 5 corporals, 3 sergeants, and a first

⁷¹⁴ G.O. #44, 15 AC, June 9, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 395.

⁷¹⁵ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Wife, June 28, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁷¹⁶ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, July 1, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁷¹⁷ William Nugen [25 IA] to Mary, June 24, 1863, William Nugen Letters, Duke University; "Abstract from Return," *OR*, I:24, III, 249, 453.

lieutenant for duty on July 1. Their brother Hawkeyes in Co. E, 31st Iowa counted only 8 privates, 3 corporals, 2 sergeants, 1 lieutenant, and their captain for duty on the same day – only one less leader than the total number of privates still able for duty. While these represented some of the more extreme cases of company-level attrition within the corps, they were by no means singular. Very few companies could boast more than 30 aggregate men of all ranks for duty by the beginning of July. This shrinkage naturally transformed most companies into increasingly tight-knit groups, as the survivors bonded ever more closely over the course of the siege. By the summer of 1863, even within the ranks of the newer regiments, those who remained understood that “the weak members [had] been left behind or winnowed out” of their companies.⁷¹⁸ After the combined blood-lettings of Chickasaw Bayou and “the Post,” the protracted nightmare of Young's Point, the long slog to invest Vicksburg, and the two desperate assaults, all that was left of Sherman's “skeleton regiments” were the lean sinews and connective tissue that constituted each unit's true combat power. Indeed, while all the regiments of the corps would continue to leach men from their rolls throughout the rest of the war, the rugged and wiry cohorts that filled the Walnut Hills works that summer would represent the veteran core of each command for the duration.

By mid-June, many began to tire of the monotony of siege life. “Just the same old programme,” John Gay, 25th Iowa jotted in his diary. “Some firing but not much[,] can't see why they dont pitch in and I think twentyfour [sic] hours firing would be more than the reb's can stand as it would be a fire from every quarter.”⁷¹⁹ Unsubstantiated and erroneous rumors that “our army corps is to make another assault upon the rebel works” rustled the feathers of many in

⁷¹⁸ Willison [76 OH], *Reminiscences*, 60.

⁷¹⁹ John Gay [25 IA] Diary, June 15, 1863, John Gay Diary, SHSI Iowa City.

Steele's division. Capt. John Bell, 25th Iowa, was aghast at the news. "I hardly believe it," he scribbled in his diary. "It is fool-hardy and useless in my opinion." While most agreed that assaulting the works again would be suicidal, some thought that if the parapet itself could be breached by heavy artillery, it might be possible to exploit the gap. "All say the third time is to prove the charm," one Illinoisan in Blair's division asserted, somewhat singularly.⁷²⁰ While still confident that such rumors of a forthcoming assault were untrue, Bell's brother officer Capt. Jacob Ritner began to worry considerably about the growing rates of sickness sapping his company's effective strength. "If we have to lie in these rifle pits another month," he fretted, "we will lose as many men by sickness as we would by a charge." While the Rebels remained all but silent during the day, it was the "continual excitement and strain on the nerves" that Ritner feared the most. It would "wear out any set of men" eventually.⁷²¹

On clear evenings, moonlight usually offered ample illumination for digging approaches and gun positions and gradually inching the saps ever nearer the Rebel works. "Strong covering parties" of skirmishers maneuvered through no man's land in the darkness to provide protection and early warning for fatigue details toiling in the trenches.⁷²² While both sides occasionally attempted nighttime raids between trenches to capture pickets and gain intelligence, far more frequently an informal "common understanding" existed between Federal and Rebel pickets that "musket firing ceases at dark," leaving work details comparatively safe to push forward the saps and improve the works.⁷²³ The cover of night also frequently brought Rebel deserters into

⁷²⁰ David Holmes [55 IL] to Parents, June 2, 1863, David Holmes Papers, ALPL.

⁷²¹ John Bell [25 IA] Diary, June 11, 1863, Bearss, 218; Jacob Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, June 15, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 185.

⁷²² *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 250.

⁷²³ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Sister, June 2, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City; *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 251.

Federal lines, bearing tales of woe from within the beleaguered city that significantly boosted morale and confidence in eventual success. “They all told the same tale of being worn out with sleeplessness and fatigue,” one Illinoisan of the 55th Illinois recalled, “of hospitals crowded with sick and wounded; of women and children slain in the city by fragments of shells.” The emaciated Secessionists “bitterly complained that their daily ration of meat was but a mouthful of bacon, and half spoiled at that; that beef and flour and even corn meal had long been exhausted ... [and] that raw pork and musty pea-meal bread formed a monotonous diet.”⁷²⁴

Despite the apparent dejection of Vicksburg's inhabitants, Grant grew increasingly concerned about a Rebel relief force under General Joseph E. Johnston supposedly coalescing in the Federal rear. On June 11, he ordered Sherman to detach Tuttle's Third Division from behind the corps lines for duty along the Big Black River to the east. Its departure left the entirety of the siege work along the corps's front to Steele's and Blair's divisions alone. Moreover, when Grant assigned Sherman to command of all detached divisions forming along the Big Black on June 22, in preparation for a potential enemy onslaught, Steele – as the senior division commander – assumed temporary command of the corps.⁷²⁵

Shortly before Sherman's departure, Capt. William Kossak took charge of the trenches and saps of Ewing's approach, then extending to within 20 feet of the Stockade Redan parapet. To the right, Colonel Oskar Malmberg, 55th Illinois, superintended a new approach by Lightburn's brigade, picking up where Buckland's had abandoned their sap, and aiming at the stockade itself. Malmberg, a product of some formal education as a military engineer in Sweden prior to immigrating to America, cut an eight-foot wide trench to allow for a column four abreast

⁷²⁴ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 253.

⁷²⁵ Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 394-395; Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg, Vol. III*, 969-1139.

to assault the works from its head.⁷²⁶ Employing a combination of pioneers, a company of miners drawn from a Missouri regiment, and regularly rotating 50-man details from various others, Kossak was charged with advancing the approaches close enough to the enemy works to allow for a point-blank plunging fire to be poured directly into the Rebel trenches. While constructing “trench cavaliers” to achieve this, some of Kossak's pioneers thought they heard sounds of tamping, a tell-tale sign that “the enemy was mining to blow up the head of my sap,” Kossak reported. Frantically digging counter-ditches in multiple directions, Kossak hoped to strike the Rebel mine chamber, but to no avail. Early in the morning of the 26th, explosives in two of these enemy mines were detonated, throwing gabions into the air and collapsing several of Kossak's counter-ditches. Undeterred, the details continued to shovel Mississippi dirt by both day and night, even as Rebels threw shells with lit fuses over the parapet amid the fatigue parties. Fortunately, none were killed by these bombs, nor even by the detonation of the Rebel mines. “A few men were covered by earth and gabions falling on them from the parapets,” Kossak observed, “but they extricated themselves without material injury.” To return the favor, his details flung their own grenades over the redan parapet, and the Illinoisan heavy guns “shelled the enemy handsomely.”⁷²⁷

II. “One of the best training schools”

By late-June, the saps had reached such a near proximity to the outlying Rebel works that many again began to wonder if yet another bloody assault was likely to be ordered. Fatigue details working at the saps were “within Ten steps of the rebs if not Closer,” Private John Mains,

⁷²⁶ Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg*, Vol. III, 901.

⁷²⁷ William Kossak Report, July 13, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 189-190; G.O. #48, 15 AC, June 19, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 419.

6th Missouri observed. “They will soon be [sic] close enough to eat off the same dish.”⁷²⁸ Many of the foremost pickets had ceased exchanging fire even during the day.⁷²⁹ Given the short distance now necessary to cross under fire, even some of the most recently pessimistic members of the corps wondered if such a maneuver might now meet with success. Even still, “it would be attended with losses very great and I think Gen Grant desires that the place be taken without further loss of life,” Sewall Farwell explained.⁷³⁰ While many found relief in this assumption, they were also wrong.⁷³¹

All of the corps's saps were now well within 100 yards of the Rebel works. Ewing's was within twenty feet of Stockade Redan and Lightburn's twenty-five. All realizing that further forward progress was both unlikely and probably imprudent, on the evening of July 3 Captain Prime instructed all to turn to mining operations in preparation to explode mines underneath the enemy works prior to a direct assault from the approaches on the morning of July 6.⁷³² “Little farther progress could be made by digging alone,” Prime considered. “We could put the heads of regiments under cover within from 5 to 100 yards of his line,” thus avoiding what most of Grant's headquarters believed to be the primary cause of failure in May. “Long-continued exposure” to enemy fire, most felt, had resulted in the army's repulse. Now, with assault columns debouching simultaneously from the ten approach trenches no more than 20 feet from the enemy parapet, Rebel defenders would struggle to get even a single volley off as the men crested the

⁷²⁸ John Mains [6 MO] to Parents, June 24, 1863, John Mains Letters, SHSM Rolla.

⁷²⁹ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, June 14, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁷³⁰ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Wife, June 7, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁷³¹ Thaddeus Capron [55 IL] Diary, June 29, 1863, “War Diary,” 365.

⁷³² Prime and Comstock Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 175; William Kossak Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 190.

works and fell directly upon them with the bayonet. Instead of a Rebel shock volley, each attacking regiment's crucial "penultimate moment" would come either as stunned (and starved) Secessionists fled in terror, or in the throes of hand-to-hand combat.⁷³³ Not knowing much of anything about mining, Malmborg, Ewing, and Smith were at a loss until Kossak recalled that many in Lightburn's 4th West Virginia were "old coal miners." A detail of 16 Appalachian miners were drawn from its ranks and distributed to each brigade's approach to superintend the process, but they were never put to work. The very next day, the Rebel garrison of Vicksburg surrendered.⁷³⁴

Many found the euphoria of victory ineffable. After suffering through every traumatic step of the campaign from the Yazoo bottoms to the surrender, Private Burke Wylie, 31st Iowa was filled "with feeling almoste [sic] too full for utterance." Robert Henry could only exclaim, "What relief! What pleasure! No pen can ink or painter paint . . . the thrilling pleasure."⁷³⁵ Even so, much of the ineffability of the moment arose from the sadness of loss that mitigated the otherwise unbridled joy. "How I wish that all of Company B was here to enjoy the victory," Captain Ritner lamented, reflecting on the many losses sustained over the campaign within his company of the 25th Iowa. "I don't feel much like rejoicing. It takes off a great deal of pleasure to me to think what it cost to win." Pledging never to forget the fallen, he hoped their names would be "remembered with honor and pride by a grateful people."⁷³⁶ Many others likewise found "little that was boisterous in the glad acclamation." Instead of cheers, most merely turned

⁷³³ Prime and Comstock Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 170.

⁷³⁴ William Kossak Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 190.

⁷³⁵ E. Burke Wylie [31 IA] to Brother, July 4, 1863, E. Burke Wylie Papers, SHSI Iowa City; Robert Henry [26 IA] to Wife, July 4, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁷³⁶ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, July 4, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 197.

to their filthy comrades to offer “hand shakes of mutual congratulation, [with] moist eyes and silent prayers of thankfulness.”⁷³⁷

The long awaited fall of the city also revived the army's trust and confidence in Grant's generalship. “Every body likes Genl Grant & well they may, for he has done well,” one Hawkeye pronounced on the day of the surrender.⁷³⁸ “He has gained a greate [sic] victory here,” another wrote home, “and consequently is the greatest General of the time.”⁷³⁹ One of the 55th Illinois thought that Grant had “shown himself to be one of the very best planning and maneuvering generals that we have in the service.”⁷⁴⁰ In fact, he was certain that in coordinating the circuitous campaign to invest Vicksburg, the army commander had “displayed the best generalship yet shown since the beginning of the war,” and hurraed for “Grant and W. T. Sherman, long may they live to lead our armies.” In truth, such celebrations of Sherman were comparatively few and far between within the corps. Even so, while the command had by no means yet developed the passion and love for “Uncle Billy” that they would later exhibit, by the conclusion of the siege little of the disgust and hatred that had accompanied his name in late May still lingered on the lips or pens of the men.⁷⁴¹

Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, it was clear to all who had endured and survived the protracted siege that the experience had imparted many lessons and skills which would later prove invaluable. Foremost among these was the sheer volume of marksmanship

⁷³⁷ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 255.

⁷³⁸ William T. Seward [9 IA] Diary, July 4, 1863, William T. Seward Papers, SHSI Des Moines.

⁷³⁹ E. Burke Wylie [31 IA] to Brother, July 4, 1863, E. Burke Wylie Papers, SHSI Iowa City.

⁷⁴⁰ Thaddeus Capron [55 IL] Diary, June 18, 1863, “War Diary,” 364.

⁷⁴¹ Thaddeus Capron [55 IL] Diary, July 4, 1863, “War Diary,” 365.

practice the siege provided. “While we lay there fighting our men were given a better opportunity for becoming good marksmen than they would have had without such practice,” one Iowan later recalled, “and it helped our army ever afterwards.”⁷⁴² Adjutant Charles Miller, 76th Ohio, likewise observed how the companies daily rotating in and out of the sharpshooting pits eventually “became almost perfect in [finding] their range.”⁷⁴³ Overall, he thought the siege “presented one of the best training schools for engineering and gunnery known to modern times.”⁷⁴⁴

The riflemen taking their turn in the foremost sharpshooting pits were not the only members of the corps provided unprecedented opportunities for marksmanship practice during the siege. Each gun crew in every one of Sherman's batteries likewise capitalized on the opportunity to hone their skills on live captive Rebel targets and “became almost perfect in range and center shots,” Adjutant Miller observed.⁷⁴⁵ In fact, according to most accounts and historical analyses, the accuracy and precision of Federal artillery fire far exceeded that of the “sharpshooting” riflemen of Grant's army.⁷⁴⁶ Sending individual shells from the corps's Parrott and James rifles sailing directly through narrow embrasures to silence Rebel guns from a distance of often more than 700 yards was no small feat, but after weeks of opportunities for trial and error, the volunteer artillerymen had mastered their craft and learned much about their weapons in the process. While howitzer crews were usually incapable of matching the accuracy

⁷⁴² Brinkerhoff, *History of the Thirtieth Ohio Regiment*, 31.

⁷⁴³ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 98, 105.

⁷⁴⁴ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 105.

⁷⁴⁵ Miller [76 OH], *Struggle*, 98.

⁷⁴⁶ Solonick, *Engineering Victory*, 136-137, 155.

of the rifled guns, they found a separate niche in battering down earthen Rebel parapets and habitually setting fire to cotton bales used to bolster the enemy works. Once the approaches had been advanced adequately to maneuver howitzer crews to within 300 yards of the enemy works, they too began to take aim at the embrasures.⁷⁴⁷ Over the course of the siege, the 4th Ohio Independent Battery of Steele's division fired a total of 1,865 rounds from its two 12 lb. Howitzers and four James rifles while supporting the advance of Thayer's approach.⁷⁴⁸ Artillery practice was far more plentiful along Blair's front, where the gunners of Battery A, 1st Illinois Light Artillery expended an astounding 9,690 rounds from their two Parrott rifles and five 12 lb. Napoleons over the course of the siege.⁷⁴⁹

The amount of firing a given battery might accomplish each day often had to be gauged by the volume of incoming rifle fire that filled the air, and thus the opportunity for such extensive artillery practice was almost entirely contingent upon the ability of the corps's sharpshooters in the trenches to suppress their Rebel counterparts. Crews learned the hard way to stay low to the earth while sponging their barrels and loading the guns. As Charles Affeld was sponging the bore of his crew's piece while supporting the May 22 assault, a fellow crew member was shot through the heart and killed instantly while thumbing the vent and “standing erect.” Had he “been more careful he would probably [have] been living yet,” Affeld observed.⁷⁵⁰ Another member of Battery A was killed well behind his gun's embrasure while washing his hands during the siege. “Getting some soap in his eyes, he called for a towel and holding out his

⁷⁴⁷ G. Froehlich Report [4 OH LA], July 29, 1863, Hugh Ewing Papers, Ohio History Center.

⁷⁴⁸ G. Froehlich Report [4 OH LA], July 29, 1863, Hugh Ewing Papers, Ohio History Center.

⁷⁴⁹ John W. Rumsey [1 IL LAA], August 11, 1863, Hugh Ewing Papers, Ohio History Center.

⁷⁵⁰ Charles Affeld [1 IL LAB] Diary, May, 22, 1863.

hands, he raised himself a little too high and a rebel bullet went through his heart,” a comrade lamented.⁷⁵¹

Occasionally, riflemen waiting their turn in the saps or the forward pits were detailed to man the heavier guns so as to give their crews a rest. In doing so, they “became expert artillerists,” Adjutant Charles Miller, 76th Ohio noted, and “after getting their range, planted some remarkable shots into the works.” Those fortunate enough to earn a chance to work the guns found the detail “a great deal better than ... [the] infantry.” One Hawkeye earnestly hoped “to try and stay in the artillery till the war is over and I dont think that will be very long if General Grant keeps on as he has.”⁷⁵² Although infantry details were routinely assigned to establish or improve the gun emplacements of each battery, many artillerists found their work insufficient, unimpressive, or worse. When Battery B, 1st Illinois Light Artillery was moved at night to a new position dug by infantry details in preparation to support the May 22 assault, gunner Charles Affeld and his team were aghast at what they found. “The infantry had done a poor job, either on account of poor management or not enough tools,” he griped. In an attempt to manhandle their piece into the shoddy earthwork before the sun arose along with the Rebel sharpshooters, they found there was barely enough room for the gun alone, let alone its crew. After feverishly scraping away at the dirt “so the gun would at least stand straight,” they hurriedly “cut brush to screen us from observation ... so as to be protected from sharpshooters.”⁷⁵³

⁷⁵¹ Charles B. Kimbell, *History of Battery “A,” First Illinois Light Artillery Volunteers* (Chicago: Cushing Printing Company, 1899), 64.

⁷⁵² Thomas B. Coffman [30 IA] to Jeannette, May 29, 1863, Thomas B. Coffman Letters, SHSI Iowa City; Hugh Boyle Ewing Papers, Ohio History Center.

⁷⁵³ Charles Affeld [1 IL LA B] Diary, May 22, 1863.

While all in the corps maintained a subjective sense of fire superiority throughout the siege, the true extent to which the command had succeeded in winning and defending its fire supremacy was not apparent until the Rebel surrender. After the capitulation of the city, Grant's chief engineer, Captain Prime, was astounded at the discovery of more than 40,000 rounds of yet unused Rebel artillery ammunition. "If at almost any point they had put ten or fifteen guns in position, instead of one or two to invite concentration of our fire, they might have seriously delayed our approaches," he observed. During the course of the siege, he and others had remained of the apparently erroneous opinion that the comparative silence of the Rebel guns had been due "to the lack of ammunition." Even a "small portion of this [ammunition], judiciously used, would have rendered our app[roach much slower," he thought.⁷⁵⁴ Those who had enjoyed an opportunity to grasp the tactical realities of the daily situation from the forward rifle pits well understood why the enemy's guns had been so comparatively silent. "We have so many batteries that can be brought to bear on one point that they dare not fire," one observed.⁷⁵⁵ More accurately, the tactical symbiosis of suppressive sharpshooting fire from the forward pits and surgical precision fire from the corps's batteries marked a major advance in the command's tactical capabilities on the battlefield – one that the corps would apply with deadly effectiveness on future fields.

The experience of near ceaseless shell and rifle fire had inured those in the trenches to the sounds and sensations of battle. "It is surprising how soon one will become indifferent to the roar of artillery and the whistling of bullets," one Hawkeye noted.⁷⁵⁶ "There is not five minutes at a

⁷⁵⁴ Prime and Comstock Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 175.

⁷⁵⁵ Arch M. Brinkerhoff [4 IA] Diary, May 28, 1863, Bearss, 226.

⁷⁵⁶ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, May 24, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 171.

time here but you can hear a cannon,” Private Joseph Orr, 76th Ohio wrote his father. “I have got so use[d] to them that they don't sound louder than a rifle shot to me.” By June, not even the constant firing of the heavy Illinoisan Parrotts at all hours of the day and night could keep Orr awake. Another Hawkeye was awed at the “continual roar of cannons and muskets all the time.” One Iowan thought the perpetual daily “crack, crack, & pop, pop” from the foremost rifle pits began to sound little more threatening than popping corn.⁷⁵⁷ The ability to think clearly while under fire was a vital capability for all in the ranks of the corps, and the experience of the siege provided plentiful opportunities to hone their confidence and focus under exceedingly dangerous conditions. Even as Rebel balls and shells whizzed over their encampment during breakfast, one noted of his comrades that “all got so we do not notice it.”⁷⁵⁸

The success of the siege had, to a truly unique extent, been the product of the adaptive “native good sense and ingenuity” of the men. “Whether a battery was to be constructed by men who had never built one before, a sap-roller made by those who had never heard the name, or a ship's gun-carriage to be built, it was done,” Prime observed in his report, “and, after a few trials, was well done.” It astounded him how quickly the veteran regiments of citizen-volunteers had accustomed themselves to the novel labor despite having received no specialized training. “Officers and men had to learn to be engineers while the siege was going on,” he wrote.⁷⁵⁹ This proved no problem at all for Sherman's corps. “It is astonishing how soon we become accustomed to things,” Captain Ritner reflected.⁷⁶⁰

⁷⁵⁷ Joseph Orr [76 OH] to Father, June 8, 1863; William Nugen [25 IA] to Sister, June 23, 1863. William Nugen Papers, Duke University.

⁷⁵⁸ Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, May 24, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 171.

⁷⁵⁹ Prime and Comstock Report, *OR*, I:24, II, 177.

⁷⁶⁰ Jacob Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, June 5, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 179.

III. “A miniature Vicksburg”

The Fifteenth Corps was not to immediately enjoy the fruits of its momentous victory. The evening after the city fell orders from Sherman reached both Steele and Blair instructing them to prepare to move at short notice.⁷⁶¹ By five o'clock the next morning, the corps was already out of its works, in column, and headed east toward the Big Black River with orders to join Sherman's Expeditionary Force and pursue Joseph Johnston's ragged Rebel band all the way to Jackson if necessary.⁷⁶² On July 6, both divisions crossed the river at Messenger's Ford and continued eastward through the oppressive heat and dust. Armed with their recent experience of success in siege craft, most expected to employ much the same tactics against Johnston. “The intention is to surround his Army and 'bag' them all as was done in Vicksburg,” Robert Henry wrote.⁷⁶³

Despite a “terrific thunder storm” on the evening of July 7, the insufferable heat and dust of the road east made the remainder of the journey trying in the extreme. “The dust rose in suffocating clouds about the sweltering columns,” one Illinoisan recalled, “and the men suffered wo[e]fully.” Very quickly the “men and horses were of the same color as the ground.” Many fell dangerously ill with heat exhaustion and sunstroke, “and others were constantly seen dropping out of the ranks and lagging behind from exhaustion.” Potable water proved all but non-existent as groups of parched volunteers wandered listlessly away from the column in desperate attempts to parch their thirst. “We were obliged to use w[h]at water to drink that in peaceable time would not make good answer for washwater for your feet,” one Hawkeye admitted, and even that “was

⁷⁶¹ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 255.

⁷⁶² *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 257.

⁷⁶³ Robert Henry [26 IA] to Wife, July 15, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

very scarce.” Most that could be found nearby was “covered with a green scum and warm.” In other places, Johnston's retreating army had intentionally poisoned springs and wells with the carcasses of livestock so as to prevent their use by Sherman's onrushing force. On frequent occasions details were forced to haul water to camp from miles away just to boil for cooking. Those who managed to find it often sold full canteens for as much as fifty cents apiece, with great success. After the minimal rations brought along from Vicksburg were expended, most regiments sustained themselves exclusively on blackberries and green corn, stripping whole acres near encampments. Corn still in its husk was laid atop rails over a fire, and once “the husks were burned off the corn would be cooked by the steam and be in a delicious state to be eaten.”⁷⁶⁴

By the ninth, the foremost elements of Steele's column were within sight of Jackson's outskirts. The next day, at about 10 o'clock in the morning, a Rebel battery caught sight of the advanced guard and sent a fusillade as a warning.⁷⁶⁵ Remarkably level by comparison with the nightmarish terrain of the Walnut Hills, the ground sweeping ahead of Steele to the impressive Rebel works had been mostly clear-cut by enemy pioneers in an effort to establish a clear field of fire. Most of Sherman's force, including Tuttle's division, was already in place and investing the city by the time of Steele's and Blair's arrival. Shuffling the two newly arrived commands into the center of his lines of investiture, it was quickly obvious to all that “Sherman had evidently no intention of ordering any hasty or unnecessary assaults,” which came as a great relief to the

⁷⁶⁴ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 255-257; Kimbell, *History of Battery “A,”* 64; S. S. Farwell [31 IA], Undated Manuscript, S. S. Farwell Papers, SHSI Iowa City.; E. Burke Wylie [31 IA] to Brother, Aug. 9, 1863, E. Burke Wylie Papers, SHSI Iowa City; *History of the Thirteenth Illinois*, 333-334.

⁷⁶⁵ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 257.

entire corps.⁷⁶⁶ Indeed, it relieved all observers who took one quick look at the impressive Rebel works. “The batteries and long lines of rifle-pits could have enfiladed and swept the wide, open space in front with a murderous fire,” an embedded journalist with the *New York Times* observed. “It is well that an assault was not ordered.”⁷⁶⁷

Although frequently brushed over by historians of the Vicksburg campaign, the subsequent siege of Jackson, while brief, provided powerful evidence of a profound evolutionary shift in Sherman's tactical philosophy. While Johnston, with every good reason, seems to have assumed that his opponent would squander his numerical advantage once again by hurling it against the well-prepared Rebel works ringing the city, for perhaps the first time in his brief tactical career, Sherman thought twice. This time, as he later explained to Admiral Porter, “the forts and lines were too respectable to venture the assault,” and instead, he opted to employ what he termed – in language that made clear how the strategy was a direct product of learning from experience – “a miniature Vicksburg.” In fact, he not only “made no assault – indeed – I never meditated one,” but instead progressively enveloped the city by maneuver while the men engaged chiefly in sharpshooting from rifle pits, or what he somewhat quaintly called “picket work.”⁷⁶⁸

Just as at Vicksburg, many regiments almost automatically set to digging in “to protect ourselves.”⁷⁶⁹ Once again, most work on the fortifications took place “in the shades of night,” whereas skirmishers and batteries dueled with their Rebel counterparts at considerable range

⁷⁶⁶ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 258.

⁷⁶⁷ “The Capture of Jackson,” *New York Times*, Aug. 1, 1863.

⁷⁶⁸ WTS to Porter, July 19, 1863, *SCW*, 504.

⁷⁶⁹ John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 30.

during the day.⁷⁷⁰ The gunners of Battery A, 1st Illinois Light Artillery immediately put to work the hard won experience of preparing gun positions at Vicksburg, and quickly established “the safest works we ever occupied.” “Sinking our guns into a pit,” the crews threw the dirt ahead of the breastwork while others fashioned an embrasure of cotton bales. With such defilade, enemy fire “invariably shot over us.” Moreover, the distance to the Jackson works being much greater than that at Vicksburg, the battery was able to post a spotter well ahead of the guns while still within audible shouting distance. Whenever smoke billowed out of one of the Rebel embrasures, before the sound of the shot could even reach the position, the spotter would scream “Down!” and Illinoisan crews instinctively hit the ground until the shot struck or passed. After several close calls, the men responded in the same fashion even if in the middle of loading their guns. Fortunately, such dangerous encounters were relatively rare given that the teams had mastered their aim so well at Vicksburg that enemy crews were almost always silenced by the long-range rifled guns long before they could do much damage.⁷⁷¹ Other batteries were assigned far less precise targets. The four James Rifle crews of the 4th Ohio Independent Battery found themselves ordered to “throw all the projectiles in the direction of the State House, so that the[y] may be destructive in the town.” Initially conservative in their ammunition expenditure prior to re-supply from Vicksburg, the battery eventually increased its rate of fire until July 14, when it was “ordered to fire one shot every five minutes day or night in the direction of the State House or ... into the enemy Rifle Pits” at a distance of about 850 yards. At no point were the battery's

⁷⁷⁰ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 258.

⁷⁷¹ Kimbell, *History of Battery “A,”* 64, 70-71.

howitzers engaged, both the town and enemy being beyond the effective range of the smoothbore guns.⁷⁷²

Once again, nearly all the powder the corps's infantry expended during the siege was burnt by sharpshooting details. Because the volume of fire called for was significantly lower than at Vicksburg, and because targets were generally at much greater range, frequently such details were more impromptu affairs conducted by a handful of “picked marksmen.” Just such a squad was thrown together by the First Sergeant of Company A, 55th Illinois on July 11 in the interest of silencing a frequent harassing fire from nearby Rebel skirmishers. Selecting six men to join him, the team maneuvered into a dry creek bed and “crept on within shorter range of the rebel lines” to positions behind cover. Employing a single Colt Revolving Rifle – the only one of its kind in the regiment – the First Sergeant “cleaned out a whole picket post,” cutting down several unsuspecting Rebels and scattering the remainder.⁷⁷³ Such small unit actions, though they usually went unrecorded, illustrated many of the particular strengths of the corps's tactical culture: high degrees of initiative by non-commissioned officers, the capacity to operate in impromptu groups, considerable marksmanship experience, and small unit maneuver through difficult terrain.

After a last-ditch effort to raid Sherman's supply lines with Rebel cavalry, Johnston came to the same conclusion Pemberton had in Vicksburg. There was no escaping the grip of such a leviathan, and now veteran, Federal force. Accordingly, on July 16, he opted to evacuate Jackson and escape northward with his “Army of Relief” in hopes of employing it more fruitfully elsewhere within the embattled Confederacy. Vicksburg and Jackson, and with them the Mississippi River, following the near contemporaneous fall of Port Hudson to the south, were

⁷⁷² G. Froehlich [4 OH LA] Report, July 29, 1863, Hugh Ewing Papers, Ohio History Center.

⁷⁷³ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 259.

now firmly in Federal hands. Well aware that his army was utterly exhausted, Sherman prudently not to pursue the fleeing Secessionists, instead ordering his victorious legions back into Jackson for a second time that summer.⁷⁷⁴

Unlike during the corps's brief visit to the capital in May, when it bore orders from Grant concerning the specific extent and character of destruction he wished meted out on the city, this time the army commander simply instructed Sherman's command to “do the enemy all the harm possible” and “inflict on the enemy all the punishment you can.” In fact, he added that he had “no suggestions or orders to give” and that Cump was to deal with Johnston “in your own way.”⁷⁷⁵ On July 13, just before the fall of the city, he sent follow-on orders for Sherman to “destroy ... everything valuable for carrying on war” he found in the city. This lack of specificity in orders for targeted destruction has been identified by historian Mark Grimsley as altogether “something new” in the war and “unmistakably different” from prior Federal policies even of “war in earnest.” In the wake of Vicksburg's capitulation and Johnston's flight, the strategic dynamic of the campaign changed dramatically. Grant was no longer in fear of a Rebel relief army falling upon the rear of his siege lines, and thus there was “little need for such destruction [of Jackson] if the objective were the 'pragmatic' one of preventing an enemy force from operating ... in the area,” as it had been along Deer Creek, Grimsley notes. Instead, the corps's second visit to the Mississippi capital was intended to “destroy the region's economic value to the Confederacy,” plain and simple.⁷⁷⁶

⁷⁷⁴ Ballard, *Vicksburg*, 409-410.

⁷⁷⁵ USG to WTS, July 3, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 461; USG to WTS, July 4, 1863, *OR*, I:24, III, 473.

⁷⁷⁶ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union military policy toward Southern civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 159.

The corps most certainly went about its mission in its “own way,” perhaps to an extent well beyond what Grant had originally contemplated. The lack of clear boundaries delimiting Grant's definition of what constituted “everything valuable for carrying on war,” Sherman's habitual incapacity to control the destructive tendencies of libertine volunteers, and the lessons derived by the rank and file of the Fifteenth Corps's recent experiences of “hard war” in the Deer Creek valley all combined to produce the swift, complete, and unequivocal erasure of Jackson, Mississippi as a strategic point on any military map. In truth, however, much of Jackson was already either in flames or ashes by the time Sherman's force entered the environs. Fires started by Johnston's retreating army in an attempt to keep valuable stores out of Sherman's hands quickly spread to adjacent blocks of homes and shops and proved resistant to efforts to put them out. As usual, the corps's brigades fragmented into smaller fatigue details and went to work dismantling the capital with a vengeance. What railroads had been crudely repaired during the Federal absence were once again demolished for a distance of ten miles in every direction. All rolling stock discovered in the city was fired, and along with 4,000 cotton bales utilized in the Rebel earthworks, the sky over Jackson turned black with smoke.⁷⁷⁷ While junior officers and non-coms attempted to corral their work details and prevent straggling, some excesses were all but inevitable. “Our men in spite of guards have widened the Circle of fire” begun by the evacuating Rebels, Cump lamented.⁷⁷⁸ As working parties continued their punitive work in the capital, Sherman dispatched Steele with three brigades of the corps eastward 13 miles to Brandon, Mississippi, where he was to continue the destruction of the railroad in that direction. When combined with the prior efforts of Woods's detached brigade at Canton, by July 18, the

⁷⁷⁷ WTS to USG, July 28, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 536.

⁷⁷⁸ WTS to Porter, July 19, 1863, *SCW*, 505.

Fifteenth Corps had effectively “ruined the main arteries of travel and communication in the heart of Mississippi,” and thus its work was done.⁷⁷⁹ Looking on as “the skies are illuminated by a fire in the northern portion of the city,” one journalist had trouble feeling much sympathy for the Rebel city. “Nothing is safe or respected here, but everything destructible seems doomed to destruction,” he wrote. “Such is war.”⁷⁸⁰

“The place is ruined,” Sherman reported bluntly. His command had “desolated this land for 30 miles round about.”⁷⁸¹ Far more impressive to him, however, was the apparent reaction of its dejected inhabitants as the Fifteenth Corps quartermaster began distributing rations to the destitute citizens of the city in an effort to “relieve the immediate wants of suffering humanity.”⁷⁸² “The people are subdued,” he wrote, “and ask for reconstruction.” All across the city he encountered Mississippians admitting “the loss of the Southern cause.” While, as usual, abhorring the fiery excesses of “stragglers” in his ranks, Cump simply could not ignore the clear psychological, and thus strategic, impact their heavy-handed tactics appeared to have on erstwhile rebellious Southerners.⁷⁸³

Finally granted a well-deserved respite, Sherman's expeditionary force departed Jackson enroute westward to the banks of the Big Black River in late July to establish long-term cantonments. Once occupied, “Camp Sherman” would allow the corps to catch its breath, re-organize its shrunken battalions, allow for those most deserving to depart home on leave, and

⁷⁷⁹ WTS to USG, July 28, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 537.

⁷⁸⁰ “The Capture of Jackson,” *New York Times*, Aug. 1, 1863.

⁷⁸¹ WTS to Grant, July 20, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 530.

⁷⁸² WTS to USG, July 21, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 530; WTS to USG, July 22, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 531.

⁷⁸³ WTS to Grant, July 17, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 528; WTS to Grant, July 18, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 529; WTS to USG, July 20, 1863, *OR*, I:24, II, 530.

begin the long process of preparing for the next campaign. When Grant suggested deploying Sherman's corps south to Natchez to conduct a similar operation to that which the command had just conducted at Jackson, Cump showed a keen awareness of the habitual tendencies of his command, as well as his inability to control them. "As he left it to my option I preferred to stay here for good reasons," he explained in a letter home. Unlike the agriculturally rich hinterlands of Natchez to the south, "This land is stripped of niggers, and Every thing" by virtue of the recent campaign. Indeed, all the area between Vicksburg and Jackson had been effectively "cleared out and all the mischief done." "Were we to go to Natchez it would be one endless strife about run away Negros, plundering and pillaging soldiers and I am sick and tired of it," he asserted. The still quite conservative Cump had "had my share of this trouble and am willing others should try it." In truth, while he would always remain ashamed that so many in the ranks of his corps had become "Expert thieves, sparing nothing not even the clothes of women, children & Negros," he began to understand how the sheer destructive capacity of the volunteers, even when bridled to the minimal extent he and his lieutenants could achieve, could itself prove a powerful strategic weapon.⁷⁸⁴ In fact, if the experience of the long campaign for Vicksburg had been any indication, such a weapon might even have a greater potential to put down the rebellion than did direct confrontation with Rebel armies on the battlefield. Commanding a corps which had yet to find success in the attack, but which had frequently shown a profound capacity for swift long-range maneuver and frighteningly efficient destruction of enemy assets, Sherman's "slow evolution," as B. H. Liddell Hart called it, only slightly trailed that of his corps's tactical culture.⁷⁸⁵

⁷⁸⁴ WTS to Philemon B. Ewing, July 28, 1863, *SCW*, 508; WTS to David Stuart, Aug. 1, 1863, *SCW*, 512.

⁷⁸⁵ B. H. Liddell Hart, *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American* (Boston: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1929), 202.

The long Vicksburg and Jackson campaigns nearly disintegrated many companies in Sherman's corps. Captain Sewall Farwell found only 19 men in his company of the 31st Iowa well enough for the march to Jackson after the surrender, and he left the remainder in the trenches before Vicksburg. After the tough march to the state capital and the pursuit of Johnston to Canton, the company could muster only five men, including Farwell himself, for daily duty. By late July, it was a company only in name. Another Hawkeye company “had no one able to march, except a Sergeant and Corporal — no privates,” Farwell remarked.⁷⁸⁶ The experience had likewise disintegrated the clothing of most in the corps. Private Charles Willison, 76th Ohio, “was down to hardpan in the way of clothing.” By the time Vicksburg capitulated the one shirt he had left “was gone all but the front and one sleeve,” and before the regiment went into camp after the fall of Jackson, he had no shirt at all, and “my pants were in an indescribable condition, my blouse all rags, and my only fairly respectable covering a forage cap.” The uniforms of several were in such poor condition that they had even taken to donning captured Rebel uniforms, likely seized at Jackson. Understandably alarmed at this practice, regimental commanders promptly condemned it by general orders after their arrival at “Camp Sherman.”⁷⁸⁷

Once the corps's new camps were comfortably established, Sherman charged Hugh Ewing with compiling brief historical reports from each regiment in the corps with an eye toward awarding authorizations for the adornment of each unit's national colors with the names of battles in which it had honorably taken part. Not all requests were authorized. The 37th Ohio was disallowed the honor of bearing “May 22 Assault” on its banner due to its ignoble refusal to

⁷⁸⁶ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, July 22, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁷⁸⁷ Willison [76 OH], *Reminiscences*, 66; G.O. #96, HQ 25 IA, Aug. 4, 1863, 25 IA Regimental Order Book, RG 94, NARA.

advance that day. Regardless of the honors bestowed or withheld, the duty required the staff of each regiment and battery in the corps to reflect upon their experiences in service, and forge a coherent narrative that emphasized the most salient episodes in the brief military careers of their units. For the most part, reports consisted of little more than a brief paragraph highlighting each major battle in which the unit had taken part. Details were limited to when the unit arrived on the field, the most basic elements of what had been expected of it, its most signal tactical successes, and the casualties it sustained. The embattled 76th Ohio's trials at Arkansas Post were reduced to a single sentence: "Charged Rebel works on the Right to within 75 yards silencing 2 Parrott Guns and musketry fire untill [sic] the surrender." Its entire participation in the long and bloody Vicksburg campaign was likewise summarized: "Were under fire and in the front and sharp shooting with the enemy during the entire Siege." Because neither the Steele's Bayou nor Greenville expeditions, to say nothing of the ill-fated canal project, had constituted major battles, regimental reports ignored these experiences completely despite their being among the most salient influences on the development of an emerging corps-level tactical culture.⁷⁸⁸

The Fifteenth Corps and its commander emerged from the lengthy struggles for Vicksburg and Jackson molded by experience in specific and indelible ways. The beliefs, assumptions, predispositions, and habits of thought and behavior concerning operations that predominated throughout the command and guided its tactical behavior, performance, and decision-making were all direct byproducts of the particular experiences through which it had passed over the previous eight months since its founding. As would always be the case, each individual regiment and battery within the command had developed its own distinctive unit-level

⁷⁸⁸ "Untitled Report," Hugh Boyle Ewing Papers, Ohio History Center; "Report of 76th Ohio," Hugh Boyle Ewing Papers, Ohio History Center.

tactical “micro-culture” due to the limitations of its “personal angle of vision” and lessons learned from its unique experiences across each campaign. Even so, the many cultural differences between the regiments of the corps, which had been so striking upon the formation of Sherman's expeditionary flotilla, were ever increasingly subtle. The component units of the corps were becoming ever more culturally like each other and less like those of the other corps across the U.S. Army. As the corps's units accrued ever more experience alongside one another, enduring the same campaigns in pursuit of the same corps-level objectives, their members naturally arrived at similar conclusions as to the key lessons of their experiences, developed consistent levels of confidence in their relative capacity to successfully achieve certain missions, and gained varying levels of skill in conducting certain tasks due to disproportionate opportunities for practice. In this fashion, a coherent and easily discernible corps-level tactical culture finally took shape.

Perhaps the single most signature element of this tactical culture was the corps's deeply ingrained aversion, widespread lack of confidence, and proven incapacity to charge Rebel breastworks. Crucially, this aversion to assaulting works did not extend to a lack of confidence in all attacks. Many within the ranks yearned for what they called a “fair fight” against Rebels in the open – a fight they both were certain they could win and, at the same time, had almost never experienced. Instead, the men had developed a greatly inflated respect for the defensive advantages accruing to infantry fighting from behind works, and thus for earthworks and field fortifications themselves. It was in large part this profound respect for entrenchments, borne of the corps's recent painful experiences charging them, that inspired Sherman's corps to dig so ardently over the course of the campaign and fight so brazenly from the protection of works.

While Blair's division, still bearing the influence of Morgan Smith, remained far and away the most effective light infantry force in the corps, the ongoing sharpshooter's war that unfolded across the siege gradually converted even Steele's division into expert skirmishers. The extensive marksmanship practice that Sherman's regiments had enjoyed set them, and the rest of Grant's army, apart from all other field armies who's regiments rarely fired their weapons outside of major engagements. Moreover, the considerable experience the corps accrued when components operated as fragmented details and detachments that were led by junior leaders and charged with a variety of tasks and missions transformed the corps, making it extraordinarily flexible in approaching novel tactical challenges both on and off the battlefield. From digging earthworks in the dark, coordinating the fire of sharpshooters and artillery against Rebel embrasures, swiftly tearing up railroad tracks, or hunting water and sustenance to sustain the punishing daily march, almost everything that the corps did at the tactical level it conducted in small groups guided by junior leaders. This competence, confidence, and experience in independent and detached small-unit operations represented a defining element of the corps's tactical culture that would prove absolutely vital in future campaigns.

Finally, though often much to its commander's chagrin, the corps continued to show an especial skill in the efficient, widespread, and even occasionally excessive destruction of Rebel property. When such violence to Secessionist military articles was ordered and critical to operational success, the corps had proven itself to be among the most effective and swift commands in the U.S. Army for destroying valuable enemy resources and infrastructure. Due to Grant's habitual reliance on Sherman to conduct his "dirty work" distant from the remainder of the army, the corps developed a cultural affinity for raiding operations due in large part to its past experiences of success. As in the Deer Creek valley, the reactions of Mississippians, whom the

men all but uniformly presumed to be the rankest Secessionists, to the torching of their property signaled a special kind of victory to those in the ranks. If the Rebels chose to hide in their impenetrable rifle pits, then the enlisted men and an increasing number of their officers determined that they would instead effectively “smoke them out” by dismantling the rest of the so-called “Southern Confederacy” that was left unguarded.

Despite what several historians have claimed, neither Sherman nor Grant were wholly responsible for imparting this panoply of cultural elements. Neither officer had molded the command by hand, nor imparted their unique personalities to the subordinate units serving under their headquarters. In fact, in many ways the exact opposite had occurred, and continued to do so. The real process of first genesis and then evolution of the corps's tactical culture was one of constant interaction between the command, its commanders, and the experiences through which they passed together.

Grant's exerted his primary influence on the evolution of the Fifteenth Corps through his assignment of particular missions and objectives to it as a subordinate component of his army. Thinking of Sherman as an avatar of the corps (rather than the specific component units it contained) when contemplating these assignments, Grant rarely showed evidence of any special contemplation of the organization's proven tendencies, strengths, weaknesses, or even recent history when determining which tasks to assign to it. Instead, he almost instinctively reached for Sherman to conduct those operations furthest away from his immediate supervision, feeling a constant need to shepherd the other two inexperienced corps commanders through the trials of the campaign.

The manner in which Sherman chose to prosecute the missions that Grant handed down to his corps was always a byproduct of an ongoing feedback loop of experiential learning.

Sherman's unique personality and tactical philosophy mixed with empirical evidence of what his still young command either could or was not likely to accomplish. As the disasters of Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post had suggested, and the bloody repulses before Stockade Redan and the Louisiana Lunette only dramatically reified, he still commanded “no troops which can be made to assault.” Although he and his senior lieutenants still disagreed with most of the rank and file as to why the corps seemed to be habitually hobbled in offensive operations, its chronic inability to carry Rebel works from the front was indisputable.

Though commanding more than just his own corps at Jackson, Sherman's striking departure from his habitual reliance on bloody assaults was powerful evidence of his learning from experience. It also hinted at the somewhat singular personality trait that would eventually propel Sherman into the ranks of American military history's truly great commanders. While plenty of bayonet assaults launched by both sides during the war did in fact successfully carry entrenched positions, Sherman had never personally witnessed nor commanded such tactical successes, and thus could reflect only upon, and learn only from, his personal uniform experience of failure. That he eventually did reflect upon it allowed him to learn vicariously from (and about) those in the ranks of his command, thus gradually imbibing the culture that saturated the force he commanded due to its particular history. By way of their particular successes and failures when assigned particular objectives, due in no small part to their relative levels of confidence and skill associated with each task or mission, the men of the corps transmitted their culture from the bottom-up to their chief. Slowly, Cump was becoming one of them.

For all its unfortunate shortcomings in the assault, the corps's phenomenal successes off the battlefield throughout the campaign imparted a new confidence in Sherman's perception of the organization's true operational capabilities. The command proved time and again that it could

sweep across unforgiving terrain at impressive speed, endure lengthy marches on extraordinarily tight logistical budgets, swiftly and efficiently dismantle Rebel infrastructure, construct fieldworks worthy of admiration by the most professional military minds of the era, and fight in small teams as skilled marksmen with both small arms and artillery to deadly effect. As Sherman's own thinking about the root causes of the rebellion and the ideal strategy to put it down started to transform, he realized, like so many in the ranks of his corps had done months prior, that the inability to coordinate desperate massed frontal assaults against entrenched Rebels across vast frontages of nightmarish terrain might not be so debilitating a liability after all. Perhaps the tactical culture that emerged from experience within the ranks of his corps was something he could work with.

CHAPTER VII: “JUST IN FROM THE MISSISSIPPI”: CHATTANOOGA

“The effect was the same as we had seen at Arkansas Post and Vicksburg.”

~ John Buegel, 3rd Missouri⁷⁸⁹

By the fall of 1863, Col. Adin Underwood was a hard-bitten veteran of the fiercest fighting the Army of the Potomac had seen in the eastern theater of the Rebellion. After fighting in the Valley, Second Bull Run, and Chancellorsville, and being wounded at Gettysburg, he and his veteran 33rd Massachusetts, along with 15,000 men of the hard-luck 11th and 12th Army Corps, Army of the Potomac, were transferred west across the Appalachians to Lookout Valley just outside Chattanooga, Tennessee as the War Department hurriedly consolidated a force to raise the Rebel siege. After pushing the enemy out of Chattanooga, the three dispersed columns of Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans's Army of the Cumberland had been caught off guard that September by retreating Secessionists at the especially bloody battle of Chickamauga in northern Georgia. Only narrowly averting total disaster, Rosecrans managed to fall back to the relative safety of Chattanooga to await reinforcement. Gen. Braxton Bragg, commanding the Rebel forces hot on Rosecrans's tail, subsequently laid siege to the town that fall from the heights of Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge frowning down upon it from the south. Judging any frontal assault of Rosecrans's defensive works too risky, Bragg settled in to starve the Federals out that fall instead.⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁹ John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, John Buegel Civil War Diary, SHSM Columbia, 34.

⁷⁹⁰ Adin Ballou Underwood, *Three Years' Service of the Thirty-third Mass. Infantry Regiment, 1862-1865* (Boston: A. Williams & Co., 1881), 177; Peter Cozzens, *The Shipwreck of Their Hopes: The Battles for Chattanooga* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Wiley Sword, *Mountains Touched with Fire: Chattanooga Besieged*,

Despite their lengthy journey, Underwood's Bay Staters, along with their Eastern comrades in other Potomac regiments, took pride in the tidiness of their new camps, the sharp appearance of their fresh uniforms, and all the "general marks of Eastern trimness and setting up," as Underwood put it. These traditional hallmarks of martial professionalism had long been an important part of the Army of the Potomac's culture, first instilled by Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan in the aftermath of the Bull Run disaster and scrupulously maintained by each and every one of his successors.⁷⁹¹ On November 20, however, what appeared to the Potomac men to be the very "slouchy" antithesis of military bearing came trudging into the valley from off the mountains to the west. "Just in from the Mississippi," Underwood observed, the advanced elements of Sherman's Fifteenth Army Corps tramped down the muddy road and past the Eastern encampments, "dusty and dirty, ragged and shoeless." While having never met the Westerners in person, the Bay Staters were well apprised of the exploits of Grant's "Vicksburg rats," which had only recently "won him his victories."⁷⁹² Crowding the sides of the roadway to catch a glimpse, the spit-and-polished Massachusetts men quickly drew ridicule. "What elegant corpses they'll make in those good clothes!" one of the ragged Westerners shouted. "We prided ourselves upon not having a superfluity about us," an officer in the 55th Illinois explained, "not an ounce of weight that did not mean business – the business of the campaign." After all, "clothes were of minor consequence." The only possession of real importance was one's weapon, "always in

1863 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

⁷⁹¹ Stephen Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 79-104; Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan's War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 130-131; Joseph Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, xii.

⁷⁹² Underwood, *Three Years' Service*, 177; Robert W. Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Dec. 9, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

perfect order and readiness, and the powder kept dry.”⁷⁹³ Though donning the same uniform and enrolled in the same U.S. Army, the Eastern and Western veterans seemed culturally worlds apart. “Each one thinks their army is best,” Captain Jacob Ritner observed of the interactions. “For my part I don’t see what the Army of the East has to be proud of. If I belonged to it, I should be ashamed to own it,” he added.⁷⁹⁴

“What’s your badge?” one of the Potomac men shouted out, frustrated at being unable to identify the column by the characteristic corps badges worn by all soldiers in the Army of the Potomac. “Badge is it?” an Irish Westerner replied. Thinking quickly, he patted his cartridge box. “Why fourty rounds to be shure, besides twinty in me pocket,” he crowed with arrogant confidence. Rugged Westerners had no time for foppery like corps badges, the response implied. There was a war to fight, and while the Eastern armies had certainly endured a rough time, Grant’s “Vicksburg rats” had been too busy winning to spend time designing corps badges with which to adorn their hats. Though probably apocryphal, the story eventually made its way to corps headquarters, where it was so heartily appreciated that it inspired the corps’s only official badge. Although adopted at nearly the end of the war, all of those still serving in the Fifteenth Corps in the spring of 1865 would adorn their chests with a cloth or metal badge marked by nothing more than a symbolic cartridge box inscribed with the words: “40 Rounds” – the individual rifleman’s standard load of ammunition.⁷⁹⁵

Much has been made since the war of the supposedly major cultural differences between Eastern and Western volunteers serving in the U.S. Army during the war. For the most part,

⁷⁹³ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 280.

⁷⁹⁴ Jacob Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Nov. 20, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 244.

⁷⁹⁵ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 281.

Eastern troops thought of their Western counterparts as “crude, undisciplined and slovenly” – all characteristics frequently attributed by those still huddled along the Atlantic to the inhabitants of the antebellum Western states. Likewise, Westerners assumed that the grand Potomac army was filled with exactly the same kinds of “effete, liquor-soaked, money-mad” dandy frippery and extravagant display that they attributed to life “back East.” Too much attention to appearances distracted attention from simply winning the war, they thought, and led to the production of “‘bandbox’ troops, fit only for parade and garrison.”⁷⁹⁶ Many historians have been quick to accept this sociocultural explanation for the supposedly distinguishing characteristics of Eastern and Western Federal volunteers. The Army of the Tennessee frequently maintained a somewhat shoddy appearance and prosecuted its campaigns in the manner it did in no small part “because it was the way their own fathers had approached the challenges of carving farms out of the wilderness,” Steven Woodworth posits.⁷⁹⁷

In truth, little of the Fifteenth Corps’s appearance that crisp fall day had anything to do with the Western sociocultural origins of its men. Had Underwood instead first encountered Sherman’s legions while they were ensconced in their snug camps along the Big Black River a few months prior, he would have had difficulty telling them apart from his Massachusetts comrades. Wearing fresh uniforms (in some cases even white parade gloves), under orders to appear “neat and clean” at all times, and toting brightly polished weapons with their shoes “properly cleaned and blackened,” the “Vicksburg rats” had regained much of their proper military bearing and appearance after only a brief respite from the prolonged trials of the

⁷⁹⁶ Bell Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 321-324; Earl Hess, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 311-315;

⁷⁹⁷ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, x.

Vicksburg campaign.⁷⁹⁸ Much had transpired since then to dramatically deteriorate their outward appearance once again.

After receiving urgent instructions from Halleck to send reinforcements to Rosecrans, Grant turned to his most trusted subordinate before heading northward to assume command of all Federal forces in Chattanooga. Sherman was to take the three divisions of his and one of McPherson's corps upriver from Vicksburg to Tennessee. Disembarking at Memphis in early October, the command immediately set out eastward toward Chattanooga, repairing the Memphis and Charleston Railroad along the way so as to alleviate Rosecrans's supply problems while sparring with Rebel cavalry intent on preventing such repairs from taking place. On October 27, an exhausted courier arrived at Sherman's headquarters with a note from Grant, ordering him to "hurry eastward with all possible dispatch" and abandon repairs to the railroad. He needed his dependable Army of the Tennessee to break the siege in Chattanooga, and he needed it fast.⁷⁹⁹

Stripping down the army's trains dramatically and determining to live off the land to furnish the balance of rations he lacked the transportation to haul, Sherman rushed his four divisions over more than two hundred miles, often averaging more than fifteen miles a day.⁸⁰⁰ Forced to take a meandering route due to a combination of abysmal roads, burned bridges, and impassable fords, the columns frequently found themselves headed almost every direction but east toward their objective. While the weather largely proved amenable to the march, at other times it did its very best to slow or even halt the advance entirely. Foraging liberally off the countryside, the corps illustrated its penchant for extensive resource extraction all along the way.

⁷⁹⁸ G.O. #3, HQ 1 DIV 15 AC, Sep. 3, 1863, RG 393, NARA; G.O. #4, HQ 1 DIV 15 AC, Sep. 5, 1863, RG 393, NARA.

⁷⁹⁹ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 108-110; Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 460.

⁸⁰⁰ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Wife, Nov. 19, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

While most of the humble inhabitants of south-central Tennessee clearly “could spare little” of their meager foodstuffs, Sewell Farwell still watched as the ravenous columns “took every thing and made the country desolate” as they marched.⁸⁰¹ One elderly man Farwell noticed standing by the side of the road as his Hawkeyes marched passed could only muster the cry, “What will become of us[?] What will become of us[?] ... as every thing was swept from him.”⁸⁰² Having fine-tuned their extractive capacity throughout the Vicksburg campaign, Sherman’s men had few compunctions when hungry. Only after nearly a full month of marching and counter-marching did the much bedraggled Army of the Tennessee finally stumble off the eastern slope of the Cumberland Plateau and into Lookout Valley.⁸⁰³

The corps had withstood the more than 200-mile march remarkably well. Surveying his exhausted but hardy 6th Missouri, Maj. Delos Van Deusen noted how although there was “not a sick man in our regiment,” those in the ranks were “nearly all out of shoes,” many traipsing barefoot past the Eastern camps.⁸⁰⁴ Capt. Jacob Ritner, whose company was also barefoot by the end of the march, was similarly impressed at the forbearance with which his Hawkeyes stood the march. “It does my heart good and I feel proud of my company when I see with what fortitude and good will they bear hardship and fatigue,” he commented. “They don’t talk now like they did in the ‘dark days’ at Young’s Point.”⁸⁰⁵ His veteran Iowans had matured markedly over the course of a year. While their rough appearance had much more to do with the circumstances of

⁸⁰¹ S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Nov. 19, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁸⁰² S. S. Farwell [31 IA] to Brother, Nov. 19, 1863, S. S. Farwell Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁸⁰³ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 120-125.

⁸⁰⁴ Delos Van Deusen [6 MO] to Wife, Nov. 17, 1863, Delos Van Deusen Papers, Huntington Library.

⁸⁰⁵ Jacob Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Nov. 17, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 238-239.

the long, grinding march than their regional origins, Underwood's observation that Sherman's columns were "just in from the Mississippi" was more heavily freighted with significance than he knew. Unlike the two corps of the Potomac army, the Fifteenth Corps and its tactical culture were direct byproducts of the war in the lower Mississippi Valley. The command's distinctive "way of war," its tactical strengths, weaknesses, assumptions, and predispositions, had all been forged in the particular assignments it had pursued there as a component element of Grant's Army of the Tennessee. The degree of success which its regiments would enjoy while pursuing the many diverse missions and objectives Grant assigned them during the forthcoming campaign was in no small part contingent upon this distinctive tactical culture.

Due to the nature of the campaign, the men enjoyed relatively few opportunities to write. What little does survive, mostly in the form of formal reports, memoirs, and hurried but illuminating entries in pocket diaries, still offers a vivid glimpse at the degree to which the men and officers of the Fifteenth Corps had become powerfully aware of their distinctive tactical strengths and weaknesses as a military organization by the conclusion of the command's first year. By the winter of 1863, this self-awareness extended well beyond those in the ranks, all the way up the chain of command to Sherman's headquarters. Over the long course of the Vicksburg campaign, Cump and his corps had mutually molded one another into powerful but limited instruments of warfare: nearly unmatched masters of certain operational tasks while all but completely incapable of others. In requesting his most trusted subordinate and the corps he still nominally commanded to assist in breaking the Chattanooga siege, Grant thought almost entirely in terms of aggregate numbers. Just as Sherman had given little thought to the nuanced qualitative and cultural differences between the various subordinate units comprising his downriver flotilla a year prior, Grant likewise paid little attention to the major differences in past

experience and thus tactical culture within each of the field armies and corps. Just as Sherman had learned the hard way, Grant ignored such nuance at his own peril.

I. “Camp Sherman”

For three months, the shady billets at “Camp Sherman” along the banks of the Big Black River in Mississippi had provided Sherman's exhausted corps with an invaluable opportunity to recuperate, refit, and re-organize after the hard trials of the Vicksburg and Jackson sieges. Fatigued officers and many enlisted men received brief furloughs home to recruit their health and spirits. A few used the opportunity to try and recruit fresh blood to replenish their “skeleton regiments,” though usually with little success.⁸⁰⁶ While present for duty strengths would fluctuate some over the course of the coming Chattanooga campaign, most of the corps’s regiments rarely fielded more than 250 officers and men on any given day, nearly all of them veterans. Even so, of those men regularly present with their units, an average of 83% would be reported as “for duty” that fall – the highest rate the corps would ever achieve during the war.⁸⁰⁷ Those veterans still in the ranks after the hard trials of the lengthy Vicksburg campaign represented the resilient core of each unit, and short of debilitating illness, injury, or death, little would manage to shear them away from their formations until discharge.

The officer corps at the regimental-level had matured along with the corps’s units. Of the twenty-eight infantry regiments serving in First and Second Divisions, only five had been commanded by the same officer since enlistment. All those currently at the helm of the corps’s regiments had learned their trade, and in most cases gained the entirety of their military experience, as junior officers within the martial bodies they now led. The U.S. volunteer Army’s

⁸⁰⁶ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 263.

⁸⁰⁷ “Abstract of Returns,” Nov. 30, 1863, *OR*, I:31, III, 292.

policy of internal promotion of field officers maintained the integrity of regimental culture by avoiding contamination by outsiders. A regiment's commander had typically experienced the same events from the same particular limited "angle of vision" as all those in his charge, and thus the tactical choices he made and the manner in which he comprehended his orders were both products of his regiment's particular combat experiences. This naturally led in most cases to leaders at the regimental-level who were well aware of what they could realistically expect their respective commands to accomplish, and what they could not. While not every commander would (or could) always take such factors into careful consideration, none were ignorant of their regiment's true capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses.

The same could not necessarily be said of Sherman's highest ranking lieutenants. Shortly after the establishment of "Camp Sherman," First Division's chief was called westward to command Federal forces culminating at Helena, Arkansas for a new campaign. Having loyally served alongside his friends Sherman and Grant throughout the struggle for Vicksburg, "Fred" Steele was off to punish a different corner of the Rebellion. In his place, Brig. Gen. Elias Smith Dennis, an outsider from McPherson's corps, stepped temporarily into the void to administer First Division's operations at "Camp Sherman" until the first of September. On that day, a stern looking redheaded officer strode into division headquarters and took the command he would hold for the next thirteen months before taking over the entire corps.⁸⁰⁸

Maj. Gen. Peter Joseph Osterhaus came to First Division with a distinguished military history. A native of Prussia and an infantry veteran of the 1848 revolutionary conflict, he had come to America shortly thereafter to evade arrest. After raising the 12th Missouri in St. Louis after the outbreak of the war, Osterhaus had risen rapidly through the ranks as a result of his

⁸⁰⁸ Dyer, *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, Vol. I, 498.

proven tactical acumen on every field from Wilson's Creek to Pea Ridge to Vicksburg. After the fall of the latter bastion, he had explicitly requested a new command encompassing the veterans of his old regiment, the 12th Missouri. Heartily recommended by multiple of Grant's highest-ranking lieutenants, Sherman accepted the request and assigned the Prussian command of the First Division in Dennis's place.⁸⁰⁹

To hear the veteran Germans speak of him around the campfires of "Camp Sherman," one could reasonably form the impression that Osterhaus was anything but a nuanced tactician. "*Späne Peter*"⁸¹⁰ they called him – "Chips Peter" – in reference to orders he had shouted over the din at Pea Ridge just prior to launching them into a frontal bayonet assault: "Strike them so as to make the chips fly!"⁸¹¹ They had done so with great success, making the 12th Missouri one of the only regiments in the Fifteenth Corps to have ever successfully conducted a frontal assault. Needless to say, the Germans were elated at Osterhaus's appointment. "Wherever the Red One can go, we can go too," Henry Kircher wrote confidently home. "The assurance that General Osterhaus will lead us wherever we are going satisfies me."⁸¹² He had other nicknames, too. "Red Peter," in reference to his flaming red hair, or occasionally even just "the Red One." The latter moniker took on even greater meaning due to First Division's bright red guidon marking the command's headquarters in the field.

While anti-German nativism continued to thrive in mid-nineteenth century America, even within the Army, Osterhaus managed to quickly overcome any reservations the command may

⁸⁰⁹ Mary Bobbit Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse: A Biography of Major General Peter Osterhaus* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 120.

⁸¹⁰ Pronounced "*spay-ne pay-tuh*."

⁸¹¹ John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 15.

⁸¹² Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, Sept. 26, 1863, Hess, *A German in the Yankee Fatherland*, 125.

have had about his ethnic background by consciously exhibiting the highest possible standards in his personal military bearing and perpetually earnest appearance. “Everyone in the division loved the General,” one native-born Hawkeye remembered, “and would cheer when he rode by.” The Prussian, he estimated, “was a fighter to the finish.”⁸¹³ Osterhaus’s natural capacity for charismatic leadership contrasted sharply with the reserved professionalism of Steele, who at no point during his lengthy tenure of division command had ever earned even a fraction of the same esteem and trust from the men.

Specific experiences in division command in Arkansas and during the long campaign for Vicksburg had led Osterhaus to embrace a very similar tactical philosophy to that of Morgan Smith. Like Smith, “the Red One” had come to appreciate the capacity of relying heavily on skirmishing tactics to conserve lives in the main body of an attacking force. This tactical conservatism was mirrored in the Prussian’s passion for artillery – the heavier the better. Whenever a tactical problem could possibly be solved exclusively with accurate artillery fire and an open order skirmisher “cloud,” Osterhaus had continually shown an inclination to avoid risking any more lives than necessary. He understood well that effective artillery could spare his veteran infantrymen, and joked about wishing he could “put bayonets on the guns and make charges with them.”⁸¹⁴ Even during the occasional frontal assault, as conducted by his division on the second day at Pea Ridge, “*Späne Peter*” frequently ordered the same Zouave-style rushes that Morgan Smith cherished to preserve the integrity and ensure the survival of his command.⁸¹⁵ While some historians have occasionally criticized this tendency as excessively cautious, the

⁸¹³ Calvin Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Bentley Historical Library, 66.

⁸¹⁴ Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 118.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

men in the ranks unsurprisingly did not share this opinion. In all of these tactical tendencies, Osterhaus could not have differed more dramatically from the hard-charging direct-approach of Steele. Instead, Osterhaus's tactical philosophy paired perfectly with the evolved tactical culture of First Division in the wake of the Vicksburg campaign, most especially its aversion to frontal assaults and recent extensive experience with both rifle and artillery marksmanship practice. For the first time in its service, the division stood to benefit from the leadership of a commander who, though an outsider, was perhaps the perfect officer to command it.

Steele took Brig. Gen. John Thayer along with him to Arkansas, prompting Osterhaus to consolidate the division's three "skeleton" brigades into two, each commanded by the division's two most accomplished Colonels: the indomitable Buckeye Charles Woods and veteran Iowan James Williamson. This represented the first shuffling of regiments the division had yet undergone. Moreover, for the first time, these brigades were organized almost exclusively along state-lines. Woods's new command, with the exception of his own original 76th Ohio and the hard-luck 13th Illinois, included every Missouri volunteer infantry regiment in the division. Williamson's, unsurprisingly, retained its exclusively Hawkeye character. The command's artillery, just as it had been across the Vicksburg campaign and siege, remained consolidated and independent of the two infantry brigades.⁸¹⁶

Immediately recognizing the "depleted condition of our ranks," Osterhaus took steps to maximize the available combat strength in each unit. Noticing several able-bodied white volunteers employed by regiments as teamsters shortly after taking command, he promptly ordered them "replaced by good Negroes."⁸¹⁷ He also ordered the smaller units in each brigade to

⁸¹⁶ Dyer, *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, Vol. I, 498.

⁸¹⁷ Circular, Sep. 3, 1863, HQ 1 DIV 15 AC, RG 393, NARA.

pair up “for all tactical purposes” with another regiment from the same state to form what he called “tactical battalions.” Woods’s brigade would contain six of these battalions, and Williamson’s five. Seven of the division’s largest regiments were to operate as independent tactical battalions. Regardless of the regimental identities of their members, the battalions were subdivided into four equal “divisions” and eight equal “companies,” commanded by the senior officer in the battalion. When in camp or on the march, each regiment would retain its independence under the leadership of its original commander, but under fire it would become half of its respective “tactical battalion.”

This innovation, apparently of Osterhaus’s own invention, allowed veteran regiments to maintain their *esprit de corps* and distinctive identities while simultaneously maximizing their combat potential by increasing the modularity of the division as a whole. Though his heavily depleted veteran commands obviously could not muster the raw firepower of a full-strength 800-man regiment, Osterhaus understood the maneuverability advantages of smaller units. In his native Prussia, infantry companies with strengths of no more than 250 men were routinely given independent tasks in combat, consolidating with the three others in their battalion as necessary. The “tactical battalion” concept mirrored this logic. When needed, individual “skeleton regiments,” usually of fewer than 250 men, could be maneuvered quickly and tasked independently to perform a particular mission, only to later be paired with another in a tactical battalion to maximize defensive firepower. First Division’s officers had long struggled with the command and control dynamics of moving large regiments and lengthy columns through nightmarish terrain (most dramatically at Chickasaw Bayou). The “tactical battalion” concept promised to help avoid these challenges in the future. Whereas Second Division’s shrunken

“skeleton regiments” maintained about the same available manpower strengths as Osterhaus’s, the “tactical battalion” idea appears to have only been instituted in Osterhaus’s division.⁸¹⁸

In late July, Frank Blair departed on a lengthy leave, prompting the shuffling of Second Division’s command structure as well. Through most of the summer and early fall, Brig. Gen. Joseph Lightburn took the helm and coordinated the administration of the division. Lightburn was subsequently replaced by Brig. Gen. Giles Smith in early September. On October 6, however, while the tired blue column trudged eastward across Tennessee enroute to Chattanooga, electrifying news spread through the ranks. “The Zouave” had finally mended sufficiently from his gory Chickasaw wound to return to command, and Morgan Lewis Smith once again took over his beloved Second Division.⁸¹⁹

Although long separated from their chief, Smith’s impress on the evolution of the division’s tactical culture had always been on display. Despite orders to launch desperate frontal assaults, the division’s leadership and junior officers had routinely leaned heavily upon the skirmisher-centric Zouave-style tactics that had long been Smith’s trademark. Added to this foundation was a panoply of skills and increased confidence in light infantry combat embodied in regiments now barely half the size since the last time Morgan Smith had led them. He announced his return with characteristic humility. “Having been debarred the privilege of being with you in your last and most brilliant campaign, I feel very much like a recruit upon joining an old Regiment,” he admitted in his first general order read aloud to each company. He earnestly hoped for “the disposition of every officer and man to look upon my mistakes as errors of the

⁸¹⁸ S.O. #5, Sep. 5, 1863, HQ 1 DIV 15 AC, RG 393, NARA; J. H. Anderson, *The Austro-Prussian War in Bohemia, 1866* (London: Hugh Rees, Ltd., 1908), 18.

⁸¹⁹ Dyer, *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Vol. I*, 499.

head and not the heart,” remaining confident that “we shall have no difficulty in resuming our former pleasant relations.” Indeed, they would not. With the return of Morgan Smith and the appointment of Osterhaus to command of First Division, both of the corps’s original divisions were now led by officers whose tactical philosophies were perfectly calibrated to the tactical cultures that had organically arisen within their commands.⁸²⁰

Following Smith’s return, his brother Giles returned to command of First Brigade, while Lightburn retained the Second. Like those of First Division, both brigades consolidated their “skeleton” regiments, though not along state lines like in Osterhaus’s command. Tuttle’s Third Division, briefly attached to Sherman’s corps during the Vicksburg campaign, would remain at Vicksburg and never again rejoin the command after it headed northward to Memphis. Instead, three brigades of the old Sixteenth Corps division of Brig. Gen. William Sooy Smith, veterans of the Jackson siege but not the bloody battles for Vicksburg, were transferred into the corps to operate as a new Fourth Division in Tennessee. Sherman assigned this division, comprised of the brigades of Col. John Loomis, Brig. Gen. John Corse, and Col. Joseph Cockerill, to his foster brother Brig. Gen. Hugh Ewing, representing the 37-year old’s first division command. The brigades were by no means a *tabula rasa* of tactical culture. Just as Steele’s and Smith’s divisions had before them, the brigades of Loomis, Corse, and Cockerill all joined the corps bearing the cultural impress of their own unique historical experiences. Most strikingly, they lacked the deeply ingrained aversion to frontal assaults shared by the remainder of the corps, having avoided the same experiences of bloody repulses suffered by First and Second divisions across the past year.⁸²¹

⁸²⁰ G.O. #1, Oct. 11, 1863, HQ 2 DIV 15 AC, RG 393, NARA.

⁸²¹ Dyer, *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Vol. I*, 500-502.

Ironically the least significant command change occurred at the very top. Having been called east to Chattanooga to take the reins of all beleaguered Federal forces in the area, Grant could not simultaneously command his beloved Army of the Tennessee. On October 24, that task passed to Sherman, leaving formal command of the Fifteenth Corps to Frank Blair upon his return to the army en-route to Chattanooga on October 29. A changing of the guard at headquarters immediately prior to a major campaign typically carries major implications, but Blair was not fated to play much of an active role in forthcoming operations. In fact, he would ultimately take so little ownership over the command that he never even filed a formal report in the aftermath of the campaign. Instead, Sherman and his spartan entourage of staffers, along with the same headquarters culture they had developed over the years, would remain nominally at the helm of the corps throughout the battles for Chattanooga. For at least a few more months, the command remained, for all intents and purposes, Sherman's corps.⁸²²

II. "You will attack the enemy"

On November 15, Sherman personally arrived at Chattanooga ahead of his army and participated in a hurried conference wherein Grant explained his plans to break the siege. Having successfully re-opened his supply line to the west via a series of daring maneuvers in Lookout Valley, the hero of Vicksburg now turned to the much more daunting problem of removing Bragg from Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge to the south. Aware that Bragg had recently detached one corps of his army to threaten Federal forces under Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside at Knoxville, Grant knew he needed to quickly finish up with Chattanooga and respond to the new threat. Frantic dispatches from Washington constantly underscored that fact. Things needed to move expeditiously, but given that nearly all of the Army of the Cumberland's horses were dead

⁸²² Dyer, *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Vol. I*, 497.

of starvation after the prolonged siege, it was unlikely that it would be doing anything expeditious anytime soon. Despite the recent arrival of the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps of the Army of the Potomac into Lookout Valley, Grant still hoped, as usual, to rely on his most trusted subordinate to achieve the most critical portion of his plan.

Sherman's divisions would cross the Tennessee River at Brown's Ferry, west of Chattanooga, and then march into the hills behind the city to screen their movements and give the impression to Rebel onlookers atop the heights that they were in fact headed northward to reinforce Burnside in Knoxville. Instead, the columns would slip eastward, away from the city, again using the hills as a screen, until arriving at a creek feeding into the northern bank of the river where they would find pontoon boats waiting for them. Under the cover of darkness one brigade of the army would utilize these boats to cross the river, silently secure a bridgehead on the opposite bank, and allow for the rest of the command to be ferried across until a pontoon bridge could be laid down. Once Sherman had the entirety of his force on the south bank of the river, he would proceed southward, skirting the banks of North Chickamauga Creek until reaching the "northern extremity" of Missionary Ridge and, presumably, Bragg's extreme right flank.⁸²³

"The general plan," Grant explained in a note to Thomas on November 18, was merely for Sherman to "secure the heights on the northern extremity [of Missionary Ridge] to about the railroad tunnel" (see map) and threaten Bragg's sole supply line before he could shift forces northward in response. Beyond that, the plan would evolve fluidly based on the behavior of the Rebel foe.⁸²⁴ A month after the battle, Sherman also confirmed this interpretation in a letter to his

⁸²³ Woodworth, *Nothing But Victory*, 462-463; Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 114-116.

⁸²⁴ USG to GHT, Nov. 18, 1863, in Ulysses Grant, *Personal Memoirs* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 335.

Senator brother. “The whole philosophy of the battle was that I should get by a dash a position on the Extremity of Missionary Ridge from which the enemy would be forced to drive me,” he explained. Once ensconced upon “the extremity” of the ridge, he fully “expected Bragg to attack me at daylight,” when he could repel him from works in the same bloody fashion he himself had been repelled so many times before.⁸²⁵

In his own subsequent orders to division commanders Sherman made clear that the corps’s objective was merely to secure “possession of the end of Missionary Ridge,” which it was to “hold, and fortify.” No mention was ever made by him of any “assault,” “sweep,” or even “attack” of Bragg’s lines, nor of any movement against Rebel positions further south than the “northern extremity to about the railroad tunnel.”⁸²⁶ The Fifteenth Corps’s officer corps must have breathed a sigh of relief given the command’s habitual incapacity for such maneuvers. Grant’s orders seemed perfectly calibrated for the corps’s tactical culture. Making “a dash” over difficult terrain after a risky amphibious landing, followed by the rapid fortification of key terrain were all tasks the corps had mastered over the course of its year in service, and thus the men and officers of the command had every reason to be confident about this their most recent assignment.

As usual, things quickly became more complicated. Under a deluge of cold rain on November 20 and 21, Cump’s ragged-looking legions crossed the Tennessee at Brown’s Ferry. Morgan Smith’s brigades along with John Smith’s Seventeenth Corps division, followed shortly thereafter by Hugh Ewing’s new division. In truth, the crossings themselves had proven a bit perilous, given the proclivity of the river’s rushing current to dismantle the rickety pontoon

⁸²⁵ WTS to John Sherman, Dec. 29, 1863, *SCW*, 577.

⁸²⁶ Orders, 15 AC, Nov. 23, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 589-590.

bridge. Before Osterhaus could push First Division across, the bridge fell apart yet again – this time in a much more complete fashion, leaving “the Red One” and his brigades stranded on the west bank. Anxious of any further delay, Grant promptly ordered Sherman to do without. The First Division would be detached from the rest of the corps, remaining in Lookout Valley for the time being and reporting to Hooker instead. Sherman, the two Smith’s, and Ewing trudged northeast, away from Brown’s Ferry and into the hills to shroud their movements from prying Rebel eyes atop Lookout Mountain. Halting at a hidden camp, the three divisions bedded down in preparation for the next move.⁸²⁷

On November 23, Sherman ordered Giles Smith’s brigade to the waiting pontoon boats in preparation for the nighttime crossing. After dark, the brigade would board the boats and “drop down silently to a point above the mouth of South Chickamauga [Creek], then land two regiments” which would “move along the river quietly and capture the enemy’s river pickets.” It was an exceedingly perilous endeavor fraught with potential for miscalculation or even failures of navigation. Moreover, should the south bank of the river contain more than just a few scattered Rebel outposts, the two “skeleton regiments” could easily prove more a sacrifice than an advanced guard.⁸²⁸

That night, cloud cover reduced visibility to nearly zero, and a steady light drizzle made for an unpleasant evening. All of Smith’s regiments carried a hundred rounds of ammunition per man – a signal that a desperate fight for the opposite bank might be in the offing. Each of the craft was loaded with twenty-five men and manned by four oarsmen who self-identified as having past experience on the water. Having chosen his own Zouaves of the 8th Missouri to

⁸²⁷ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 465-466.

⁸²⁸ Sherman’s Report, Dec. 19, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 572.

spearhead the landing, followed close-up by the veteran 55th Illinois, Smith boarded a boat himself for the journey. “All guns were loaded but not capped,” one Illinoisan remembered, “and no one was to fire on any pretence [sic] whatever, unless by orders.” Talking above a whisper was strictly prohibited, and even the oars were “carefully muffled.”⁸²⁹

Silently drifting down the swollen river, oarsmen hunted a roaring bonfire on the northern bank which marked a point opposite the area designated by Sherman as the landing site. Those along for the ride nervously eyed a string of fires on the southern bank that “glimmered through the mist,” accompanied by the shadows of Rebel pickets “throwing wood upon them” and talking among themselves. Finally, after the lead *batteau* came abreast of the signal fire, it turned hard to the left against the current, and deposited its load of anxious Zouaves onto the south shore.⁸³⁰

Although the regiment never filed a surviving formal report on the action, enough anecdotal evidence is extant to suggest that the twenty-five Zouaves on each boat likely operated more or less independently under the direction of their junior officers once ashore. After all, the vast majority of the 8th Missouri’s operational experience had been conducted in just such a fashion, scattered across a wide front in small skirmish teams led by junior officers or senior non-coms. The command also enjoyed considerable amphibious experience, having served with distinction during the Steele’s Bayou expedition. With their vast experience and training moving stealthily and carefully from tree to tree in combat from Fort Donelson to Arkansas Post to

⁸²⁹ *History of the Thirty-Seventh Regiment, O.V.V.I.* (Toledo: Montgomery & Vrooman, 1889), 198; *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 282; Saunier, *History of the 47th Regiment, O.V.V.I.*, 198.

⁸³⁰ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 283.

Vicksburg, the Zouaves were the ideal candidates for the mission, and they did not let Smith down.

Creeping silently through the dark along the riverbank toward the nearby outpost fires, a captain and his contingent of Zouaves managed to get close enough to overhear the idle conversation of one Rebel group. “It would be a good joke if the Yanks floated down the river some night and took us in,” he later remembered hearing one of them say. “Boys, that’s just what Uncle Billie has done,” the Zouave captain allegedly shouted out, springing from the darkness upon them. “Guess you’ll surrender, won’t you?” All along the riverbank, desperate looking Zouaves startled unprepared Secessionists without the need for any bloodshed. Only one shot was fired over the entire course of the operation, and that by a startled Rebel picket “who in his nervous surprise, fired in the air.” Another frantic mounted Rebel “came up at full speed, shouting, ‘The Yanks are coming!’ only to be “promptly dismounted and invited to join his comrades just captured.”⁸³¹

Elated by the news of the safe and secure landing, Sherman quickly ordered the shuttling of the rest of his force to the south bank. After consolidating their prisoners and ensuring that no greater enemy force was in the immediate area, those on the south bank began, in typical “Vicksburg rat” fashion, digging in and securing their newly won position. “At this point we expected to have a desperate struggle,” Major Thomas Taylor, 47th Ohio, wrote, “and it took strong nerves to bear up under the contemplation of this prospect.” If the stray shot from the startled Rebel’s musket had drawn the attention of those atop Missionary Ridge to the south, only a handful of boats remained on the bank with which to escape. “We had no artillery,” he worried, “and only the ground we stood upon.” Accordingly, he and his fellow officers “put a spade in the

⁸³¹ *History of the Thirty-Seventh Regiment, O.V.V.I.*, 26.

hands of each man ... with instruction to ‘bury himself’ in the shortest possible space of time.”⁸³²
The gravity of the situation was not lost on any present. “Every man worked with a will,” an Illinoisan recalled.⁸³³

The extensive experience of Smith’s brigade with digging and preparing earthworks from Corinth to Vicksburg to Jackson paid off. Within less than five hours, the command had established “a line of pits over a mile and a half long, almost four feet deep and the same wide, with good parapet capable of resisting shell and shot from ordinary sized guns.” As the rest of the corps focused on the laborious process of moving across the river, partly by pontoon boat, then by steamer ferry, and finally by pontoon bridge, Second Division turned the south shore of the Tennessee into a “miniature Vicksburg,” just as it had the outskirts of Jackson, Mississippi five months earlier. Even Sherman, an especially stern critic of field fortifications, pronounced the fruits of their labor “very respectable.”⁸³⁴

It took the rest of the morning to get the remainder of Sherman’s army across the river. Most historians of the campaign still remain sharply critical of this delay, arguing that Cump ought to have sent Smith’s division southward toward Missionary Ridge immediately after landing, alone if necessary. “Had the Federals pushed forward instead of stopping to entrench, they could have occupied [Missionary Ridge] without firing a shot or losing a man,” Albert Castel argues.⁸³⁵ Another historian has recently condemned Sherman’s “excessive caution” and insists he “wasted time by ordering the construction of entrenchments before moving toward

⁸³² Albert Castel, *Tom Taylor’s Civil War* [47 OH] (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 85.

⁸³³ *Story of the Fifty-fifth*, 283.

⁸³⁴ Castel, *Tom Taylor’s Civil War*, 85-86.

⁸³⁵ Albert Castel, *Tom Taylor’s Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 86.

Tunnel Hill.”⁸³⁶ While there is no way of knowing for sure just how much blood and toil may have been spared by such a maneuver, historians continue to ignore the full weight of past experience and thus ingrained tactical culture that informed Sherman and his command at dawn on November 24, when the decision to entrench along the bank was made.

Both the 8th Missouri and 55th Illinois were filled with veterans of the near total disaster at Shiloh in the spring of 1862. With their backs to the very same river, the entire army had been surprised by a sudden Rebel onslaught without the benefit of any earthworks from which to repel the attack. Grant’s army, along with his and Sherman’s military careers, had only barely escaped total destruction. Cump, ever the consummate paranoiac, was not about to commit the same blunder again. Neither were his men. Over the long course of the Vicksburg campaign they had routinely witnessed the powerful advantages accruing to even vastly outnumbered defenders when fighting from behind the most rudimentary of field fortifications. All of those veterans in the regiments ensconced along the south bank of the river that morning still maintained vivid memories of having been brutally repulsed by a force less than half their number at Arkansas Post from behind a rifle pit prepared in a manner of a few hours using only blunt fence boards. If an enemy counterattack was forthcoming, and there was every reason to believe it might be, they meant to be prepared. Their behavior, and Sherman’s decision, were the direct byproducts of painfully won experience.

While Smith’s veterans cut away at the Tennessee mud, Sherman rallied his division commanders and explained the details of his plan to seize the “northern extremity of Missionary Ridge.” The three divisions across the river would array themselves *en echelon* from left to right facing south toward the ridge. Morgan Smith’s command would form the left wing, sweeping

⁸³⁶ Larry Peterson, *Decisions at Chattanooga* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018), 44.

south with its own left flank skirting the steep western bank of South Chickamauga Creek. In the center, John Smith's Seventeenth Corps division would advance alongside, with Ewing's division in column on the right flank, "prepared to deploy to the right on the supposition that we would meet an enemy in that direction." The 20-lb. rifled Parrotts of Lt. Francis De Gress's Illinoisan battery, already installed in positions prepared for them by Second Division, would send a salvo southward to signal the coordinated advance of the command.⁸³⁷

Before the conference had concluded, the dense fog of the early morning was already converting into a light rain. Sounds of heavy fighting echoed across the valley from the west, apparently from the far slope of Lookout Mountain. Finally, at about noon, De Gress's guns thundered, and the Fifteenth Corps stepped off with its customary heavy "cloud" of skirmishers screening its front. From the beginning, the fog and rain paid enormous dividends. While the base of Missionary Ridge to the south was unmistakable, its crest was shrouded in clouds and thus the corps's advance was invisible to the Rebels snug within their defenses atop the height. Although meeting with no resistance, the command still moved with caution, edging its way forward behind the skirmisher cloud until pausing briefly around 3 o'clock at a railroad track "to correct our lines." Nearing what appeared to be the steep rise of the "northern extremity" of Missionary Ridge, Morgan Smith ordered Lightburn's brigade to move swiftly up the hill and "carry the ridge." Captain E. W. Muenscher, a captain in the 30th Ohio then creeping south on the skirmish line, received orders to "go ahead with my company" and seize the heights. Obediently, Muenscher "gave the order, and up we went on the run."⁸³⁸

⁸³⁷ Sherman's Report, Dec. 19, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 573.

⁸³⁸ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 58; E. W. Muenscher [30 OH], "Missionary Ridge," *National Tribune*, Apr. 8, 1909, 7.

Just as the Zouaves had been a perfect fit for the daring nocturnal crossing, Muenscher's Buckeyes, and in fact the entirety of Lightburn's brigade, were ideal candidates to spearhead the corps's ascent up the ridge. As the only group of regiments within the corps with extensive experience maneuvering and fighting within the mountainous terrain of western Virginia, the veterans of the "Kanawha Brigade" had every reason to be comfortable coordinating disparate skirmish teams across the broken terrain and steep slopes of densely wooded hills. Even so, the Buckeyes later admitted that as "we gradually ascended and possessed ourselves of the hill ... our confidence increased. We thought when we gained the summit that if the enemy then advanced we could receive him on more equal footing." The Ohioans reached the crest unopposed and caught their breath briefly before continuing southward to clear the rest of the hill. After cresting himself, Lightburn recognized immediately that the summit was "not ... the [crest of the] hill designated" in his orders, perceiving that another point to the south was in fact the real objective. Accordingly, he dispatched the 47th Ohio, also veteran mountain fighters from the Virginian campaigns, to seize the wooded eminence.⁸³⁹

The Buckeye skirmishers, still maneuvering individually from tree to tree, moved carefully through the fog and mist until reaching their objective atop the southern hill. Shortly after their arrival, however, the woods erupted with fire. A single Rebel regiment, also maneuvering as dispersed skirmishers, had rushed to the hill after receiving word from an anxious scout that a massive Federal host was en-route to Missionary Ridge. As surprised to find Federals already atop the height as the Ohioans were to meet them, the Rebels quickly gave way under the full weight of Lightburn's brigade, falling back off the hill to the west. As the fog still hanging atop the crest of the hills severely hindered visibility, the precise location of the brigade

⁸³⁹ "Missionary Ridge," E. W. Muenscher [30 OH], *National Tribune*, Apr. 8, 1909, 7; *Tom Taylor's Civil War*, 85.

remained somewhat of a mystery to all present. What topography could be made out in the fading light did not seem to match anyone's expectations.⁸⁴⁰

While the lingering clouds and the angle from which both Sherman and Grant had originally observed the "northern extremity of Missionary Ridge" from afar had suggested that the furthest hilltops east were in fact an organic and unbroken extension of the ridge, Lightburn's brigade had actually crested a free-standing height known locally as Billy Goat Hill. Between Billy Goat and the real Missionary Ridge was a deep saddle nearly 300 yards across and at least 150 feet deep. Frustrated at learning this, Sherman also recognized that Billy Goat "was so important that I could leave nothing to chance." With night coming on quickly, and still concerned about the same imminent counterattack the corps had worried about since the beginning of the operation, Cump "ordered it to be fortified during the night." After all, the command had successfully reached "the northern extremity of Missionary Ridge," even if it was not technically on the ridge itself. Grant's original plans had made clear that Sherman was to "hold, and fortify" just such a position. Given the surprise saddle to his front, Sherman must have wagered that it was tactically better to have the saddle between himself and the Rebels likely atop Tunnel Hill than to have it at his back. Moreover, as the men hauled Second and Fourth division's heavy guns up Billy Goat with ropes by hand, the corps's batteries would soon have a perfect elevated position from which to pummel Tunnel Hill. Despite these advantages, historians since the end of the war have been unmerciful in their criticism of Sherman's "uncharacteristic caution" in choosing to consolidate his gains by again digging in. "Normally more aggressive," Larry Peterson suggests, "Sherman had erred on the side of caution," and in so

⁸⁴⁰ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 151-154; Report of Brig. Gen. Joseph Lightburn, Nov. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 629.

doing, “significantly alter[ed] the battle’s future course” and even “undermined Grant’s entire plan of action.”⁸⁴¹

A few historians do cut Cump some slack, given a brief and oft overlooked episode that occurred that evening on the corps’s left flank, then resting along the steep banks of South Chickamauga Creek. While Lightburn’s skirmishers fought off the unsuspecting Rebels atop the crest, the rest of Morgan Smith’s division continued its sweep southward along the creek bank, moving around the back side of Billy Goat with its skirmisher “cloud” advanced well to the front. At about four o’clock, the lead elements of Giles Smith’s brigade suddenly took both sporadic musket and artillery fire from across the creek to the east. Rushing a battery into position to counter the unanticipated Rebel threat, Smith hurried forward on foot to ascertain the true nature of the situation. Suddenly, “the peculiar whir of a charge of canister shot coming straight for us filled the air,” wrote one officer standing nearby, who also heard one of the iron balls “strike the General as plainly as one would hear a ball of putty thrown against a wall, and it sounded much as that would, too.” The wounded Smith “was staggered, but did not fall, and was supported by his companions and led from the field.”

The ambushing Rebel force proved meager and uninterested in pressing any significant attack, withdrawing shortly thereafter out of range of the brigade’s guns. Frantic shouts filled the air. “Where is Col. Tupper? Where is Col. Tupper? Where in hell is Col. Tupper? He is in command of this whole thing and does not know it!” Following Smith’s removal from command, the ranking officer on the field, Col. Nathan Tupper, 116th Illinois, suddenly found himself at the helm of First Brigade. Crippled in one arm, Tupper had ignored his disability and quit his law

⁸⁴¹ Sherman’s Report, Dec. 19, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 573; Steven Woodworth, *The Chattanooga Campaign* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 59; Peterson, *Decisions at Chattanooga*, 62.

practice to raise a regiment the moment he heard of his brother's death at Shiloh. Having commanded the regiment since Chickasaw Bayou, Tupper had accrued considerable experience with leading the Sucker cohort, but none at the brigade level. Moreover, First Brigade had enjoyed the most stable leadership of any brigade in the corps, having served under Giles Smith since Chickasaw Bayou. Now, as dusk faded to night, First Brigade struggled to regain its balance and adapt to the change while attempting to find itself on the map.⁸⁴²

Despite the temporary discomfiture rendered by Smith's wounding, the corps as a whole had performed admirably in achieving the limited objectives Grant had assigned to it. Its success was in no small part a product of the mission's near perfect compatibility with the evolved tactical culture of the command. The vital skills necessary to complete the corps's assigned objectives just happened to be those with which it had experience. The brazen amphibious mission across the Tennessee was tailor-made for Smith's Zouaves. Once across the river, and then later atop Billy Goat, the corps tapped into its extensive expertise derived at Vicksburg to quickly erect field fortifications and prepare an impressive defense. About midnight, however, a courier arrived at Sherman's headquarters with a directive from Grant that shifted the operational paradigm in a dramatically disadvantageous direction for the Fifteenth Corps. "You will attack the enemy at the point most advantageous from your position at early dawn to-morrow morning," it read. Thomas and his "Cumberlanders" would likewise assault "early tomorrow morning," aiming either to seize the Rebel rifle pits at the foot of the ridge or "move to the left to your support, as circumstances may determine best." As before, Grant's instructions left

⁸⁴² Sword, *Mountains Touched with Fire*, 198-199; N. M. Baker [116 IL], "Wounding of Gen. Giles A. Smith," *National Tribune*, Jul. 24, 1902, 3.

considerable room for flexibility, leaving even the precise hour for Sherman's forthcoming assault up to his own judgment.⁸⁴³

Grant's initial orders had contemplated a mission that Cump knew was ideally suited to the capabilities and tactical strengths of the divisions he had on hand. Probing ahead to secure what Sherman and his lieutenants all presumed to be the "northernmost extremity" of Missionary Ridge, with an eye to fortifying the same and bringing on an imminent and presumably futile Rebel attack, the tables seemed to have finally been turned. For once, the corps would have the chance to repel hopeless charges from behind the protection of works instead of being repelled itself. The intervening valley that ran between Billy Goat and Tunnel Hill was just one more obstruction to a Rebel counter-attack Sherman fully expected would come. Alas, it was not to be. Grant's follow-on orders to assault the Secessionists atop Tunnel Hill effectively converted a mission erstwhile perfectly calibrated for the Fifteenth Corps to one monstrously out of step with its operational heritage and culture.

As Grant had no way of seeing the tortuous and confusing tangle of thickets, marshland, ridges, saddles, hills, and spurs to Sherman's front, he also could not have known how dramatically out of step his orders were with the terrain. To be sure, the deep saddle between Billy Goat Hill and the real Missionary Ridge, somewhat counter-intuitively, would have little bearing on the course of the fight. Instead, it was the combination of Missionary Ridge's exceedingly narrow crest along with an additional Rebel-held eastward projecting spur that made Sherman's attack all but impossible from the very beginning. Assaulting the narrow rise from the north end would dramatically reduce the available frontage for any attacking force. Little more

⁸⁴³ USG to WTS, Nov. 24, 1863, John Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, July 7-December 31, 1863* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 441.

than a “skeleton regiment” or two could ever manage to pack themselves into the limited ground before those on the wings were no longer able to engage Rebels atop the crest. Moreover, though Sherman did not yet know it, attacking the ridge from its rear or eastern slope would also prove impossible due to a combination of nightmarish terrain and enfilading Rebel fire from the eastward-projecting spur. As Steven Woodworth suggests, the hesitation and delay to carry out his orders for which so many historians have castigated Sherman was more likely evidence that he fully grasped the impracticality of Grant’s expectations – most especially given his perceived lack of “troops that can be made to assault.” Cump’s hesitance was less a blunder and more a powerful expression of his growing awareness and understanding of both his own weaknesses and those of his corps combined with a veteran’s eye for truly impossible terrain.⁸⁴⁴

At dawn, Sherman and his staff surveyed the entire front prior to issuing his orders, “catching as accurate an idea of the ground as possible by the dim light of morning.” Across the deep saddle, he could see Rebels preparing “a breastwork of logs and fresh earth, filled with men and two guns” atop the crest of Tunnel Hill.⁸⁴⁵ Even more Secessionists appeared to be forming beyond. The likelihood of pushing them off must have seemed exceedingly small, but with positive orders from his close friend and superior Sherman had little choice but to commit to disaster. He evinced anything but confidence when he delivered the attack orders to his adoptive brother. “I guess, Ewing, if you’re ready, you might as well go ahead,” a nearby journalist overheard him say without even so much as a shred of conviction. Ever the consummate theater connoisseur, Sherman had seen this show too many times. Two of Ewing’s brigades, those of Corse and Loomis, would attack the ridge from opposite directions: one from the northern end

⁸⁴⁴ Woodworth, *The Chattanooga Campaign*, 67-68.

⁸⁴⁵ Sherman’s Report, Dec. 19, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 574;

and one from the western face of Tunnel Hill. They would be supported to the limited degree possible on the eastern slope by elements of Lightburn's brigade, which had not been engaged the previous day. Almost as an after thought, Sherman added that Ewing ought to try and maintain his formational cohesion "till you get to the foot of the hill." Whatever awaited the men at the crest, he knew it would require cohesive mass to punch through – cohesive mass that terrain and Rebel fire had routinely conspired to rob from his assault columns in each and every previous attack long before they reached their objective. "Shall we keep it after that?" Ewing asked. "If you like," Cump responded somberly. "If you can."⁸⁴⁶

Although Sherman intended that at least three coordinated assault columns, each striking Tunnel Hill at more or less the same moment, nightmarish terrain would nullify his numerical advantage and play the key role in dismantling Federal coordination and cohesion. Just as deep bayous and meandering tributaries had done at Chickasaw Bayou, smoke and dense woods had accomplished at Arkansas Post, and the maddening maze of hills effected north of Vicksburg, the terrain confronted by the corps's attack exacerbated its lingering struggles with coordination and destroyed its cohesion in the assault. Worse, Ewing had never commanded a division in combat, and the challenges of attempting to learn how to do so while operating across an extended exterior line against a concentrated Rebel foe was altogether too much to for him to handle. Sherman likely knew and understood all of this prior to giving his brother the orders to attack, but evidently could imagine few alternatives.

At about 9 a.m., Sherman rode to the left to find Lightburn and order him to support Ewing's main effort attack by sending "200 men to occupy Tunnel Hill." Presumably, he meant for these men to step off at roughly the same time as Ewing's lead brigade, but alas these

⁸⁴⁶ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 206

specifics seem to have been left out. Instead, Lightburn ordered the detachments across the deep intervening valley immediately. The 47th Ohio he left in reserve, it having seen the brunt of the skirmish the preceding afternoon. While an order for 200 men would have accounted for less than two companies a year prior, by the fall of 1863 it encompassed the entirety of the “skeleton” 30th Ohio along with two additional companies of the 4th West Virginia in support. “It was the understanding that they were to advance firing, then halt behind trees, load and advance again,” Captain Muenscher recalled, alluding to what had by then become the standard Second Division manner of attack. Encountering little resistance, “this was forgotten, and they went on a dead run down one side of the ravine, across the valley and up the other side ... in less than five minutes.” A few Rebel videttes cowering in a mostly abandoned trench were scooped up in the process at the point of the bayonet, but little in the way of enemy fire was met until the panting riflemen neared the crest of the hill’s northward protruding bench. Flattening out before rising again after a few hundred yards, the lip of the bench provided some cover from the Rebels waiting behind their log works atop the summit. Catching their breath, and then working their way east around the hill so as to approach the works from the more densely wooded portion of the slope, the Buckeyes mustered a brief and meager probe toward the breastworks alone. Unsurprisingly, given their woeful lack of numbers, the attempt was very limited, and they fell back to the cover of the trees still within rifle shot of the works and began sharpshooting. As they peppered the Rebel logs with fire in an attempt to keep their heads down, the Ohioans awaited the next assault column to try its luck. Anyone who had seen the Fifteenth Corps assault before would have found the scene painfully predictable.⁸⁴⁷

⁸⁴⁷ Lightburn’s Report, *OR*, I:31, II, 629; E. W. Muenscher [30 OH], “Missionary Ridge,” *National Tribune*, Apr. 8, 1909, 7.

The next phase of the bloody performance brought Corse's brigade of Ewing's division hurdling off Billy Goat with a yell of confidence and the thunderous applause of every one of Sherman's batteries. Although commanding four under-strength regiments, the exceedingly narrow ridge precluded Corse from deploying any more than one to his front, dispersed as skirmishers so as to take advantage of every last inch of available ground. Once again, the inability to mass the firepower of more than a single regiment as skirmishers against the imposing Rebel breastworks proved decisive. While a handful reached within a stone's throw of the log works before being cut down mercilessly by both musket shot and canister, the brigade fell back to the protection of the lip of the bench to regroup. Once sufficiently rallied, the bloodied command made a second attempt, only to meet with precisely the same fate and the severe wounding of its commander. Even worse, smelling blood, the Rebels sallied briefly from their works, sweeping the survivors (along with Lightburn's most advanced elements) from their positions and chasing them back to the shallow trench captured by the Buckeyes earlier that morning.⁸⁴⁸

By 11 a.m. things were going poorly, but they were about to get much worse. Finally managing to get Colonel John Loomis's brigade underway on its attack route west of the ridge, Sherman and Ewing shifted their attention to that front. Originally intended to fall upon the Rebels simultaneously with Lightburn's and Corse's attacks, instead Loomis's regiments debouched from a tree line and into a broad field in clear view of every Secessionist atop Missionary Ridge. Moreover, these Rebels were unoccupied after having already repelled the prior two brigade attacks. Hurdling his brigade forward through a dense fire, Loomis managed to reach the slight protection of an elevated railroad embankment near the foot of the ridge, but

⁸⁴⁸ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 204-210.

immediately required additional units deployed from John Smith's Seventeenth Corps division, and even more from an attached brigade of Pennsylvanians to secure his left flank from harassing Rebel sharpshooters. These reinforcements attacked eastward up the slope independently so as to get out of the raking fire in the bottomland, only to be halted in their tracks halfway up by Rebel guns in exactly the same manner as Lightburn, Corse, and Loomis. Once again, inspiring bravery and intrepid obedience to orders by the men and junior officers of the corps was squandered by a complete failure of command, control, and coordination, due in large part to the complex terrain and expansive distance between maneuvering elements.⁸⁴⁹

Fortunately, at Arkansas Post and during both Vicksburg assaults, Rebel forces ensconced snugly behind their protective works had never yet attempted the *coup de grâce* of any successful defensive effort: a bayonet counterattack. The peculiar contour of Tunnel Hill and Missionary Ridge, however, offered unique opportunities for adept Rebel leadership, embodied in Maj. Gen. Patrick Cleburne, to land a devastating counterpunch. After all six of the brigades Sherman had committed piecemeal to the attack had been forced to ground by Rebel fire, and after nearly four hours of close-range sharpshooting began dwindle supplies of ammunition, at about four o'clock disaster struck.⁸⁵⁰

Watching from the slopes of Billy Goat Hill as his regiment idled in reserve, Maj. Thomas Taylor, 47th Ohio, stood anxiously near an equally nervous Sherman who "chewed the stump of his cigar earnestly." Suddenly, the command team distinctly heard the yipping Rebel yell through the din, followed by a handful of blue-coated men sprinting from the trees off the

⁸⁴⁹ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 211-243; Woodworth, *The Chattanooga Campaign*, 61-65; Report of Brig. Gen. Hugh Ewing, Nov. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 631-632; Report of Col. John M. Loomis, Dec. 6, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 633-635.

⁸⁵⁰ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 235-239.

hill. “Anon others and whole regiments came flying back,” Taylor watched. Shortly thereafter entire Federal brigades came flying off the ridge – the victims of a brutal Rebel counterattack that swept across the face of Tunnel Hill and took each of them in the flank. The result was pure pandemonium. “Oh, what a stampede – each one for himself,” Taylor lamented. “I was mad and uttered a few expletives,” he admitted, but took solace in an explanation he overheard for the disgraceful behavior before him. “I was informed they were of Chancellorsville, Va. and not from the 15th A.C.,” he wrote, referencing the Army of the Potomac men the corps had first encountered in Lookout Valley a few days prior. Certainly these could not have been rugged “Vicksburg rats” routing ingloriously from the hillside. “The rebels followed, shrieking like fiends,” he watched, as the disaster continued to unfold. “The poor, cowardly devils run over that space,” he added. “I never saw such a sight before.” Fortunately, the “boys of the 15th [Corps] held their own.” While indeed the fugitives were exclusively men of John Smith’s Seventeenth Corps and the lone Pennsylvanian brigade, the Fifteenth Corps had only barely “held their own,” and very shortly thereafter began to withdraw from their sharpshooting positions. Sherman’s assault had failed, at a cost of nearly 2,000 men killed, wounded, and captured.⁸⁵¹

In his history of the campaign, historian Peter Cozzens deems the attack on Tunnel Hill “one of the sorriest episodes in this or any other battle of the war.” The failure of the Fifteenth Corps to succeed in turning Rebel lines “defies explanation,” he argues. That Sherman “had the forces needed to do it is undeniable.” Still, while Sherman’s piecemeal deployment of only a small fraction of his 30,000 total men available still routinely comes in for condemnation by historians, given the extremely limited viable frontage atop Tunnel Hill, combined with the nightmarish terrain and prohibitive enfilading fire to its east, it is hard to see how he could have

⁸⁵¹ Thomas Taylor [47 OH] to Netta, Dec. 20, 1863, Thomas Taylor Papers, OHC.

possibly done better. While Cozzens argues that “it is undeniable” that Sherman “had the forces needed to do it,” such an assertion is based entirely on quantitative measurements. Qualitatively, the general himself had every good reason to believe that, in fact, he did not.⁸⁵²

To be fair, the odds of success were by no means improved by Sherman's selection of brigades to make the assault. As at Chickasaw, Arkansas Post, and Vicksburg, successfully assaulting the entrenched Rebels atop the high ground called for high levels of confidence and collective efficacy – neither of which the regiments of Ewing's new division enjoyed. None of the regiments in Corse's brigade had ever before assaulted enemy breastworks, let alone fortified rifle pits and gun positions perched atop such a foreboding height. The very same could be said for Loomis's command. In fact, the only Federal units then on the field who could claim past success in frontal assaults were those of John Smith's division, resting idly in reserve to the rear of Billy Goat Hill for most of the battle, and finally committed only when it was too late to have much effect.

Even so, whereas most histories of the battle have focused on the bloody assault and repulse of Ewing's and Smith's brigades, relatively little effort has been made to explain the lack of any simultaneous coordinated attack by Tupper's First Brigade on the backside of Tunnel Hill. This trend is especially curious, given that most historians continue to blame Sherman's failure, to a significant degree, on the lack of any such attack. Had Tupper assaulted the hill along his front, they argue, Cleburne's position atop the crest would have been doubly enveloped, if not completely surrounded, likely routing it in its entirety and collapsing the whole right flank of Bragg's army. As such a Rebel disaster probably would have occurred almost simultaneously with contemporaneous breakthroughs on Bragg's left, the maneuver may very well have secured

⁸⁵² Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 241.

the total destruction of the Army of Tennessee, and perhaps even the end of major operations in the western theater.⁸⁵³

This specific criticism of Sherman's handling of the battle first began with an operational narrative penned by Brig. Gen. William F. "Baldy" Smith shortly after the war. Sherman ought to have "put in all his force to turn Bragg's right, instead of attacking the strongest place on the right," he insisted.⁸⁵⁴ Nearly every subsequent historian has agreed. Tupper's brigade had been "within rifle range of cracking the fragile shell of Cleburne's defenses to the right of Tunnel Hill," Cozzens argues. Neither Sherman nor Morgan Smith nor Tupper had apparently given "any serious thought to the brigade or what it might accomplish." Although tantalizingly proximate to the rear of Rebel defenses atop Tunnel Hill during the day, the brigade had never been ordered to attack. Had things gone otherwise, the brigade "might have changed the outcome of the fight," Cozzens argues. The fact that the veterans had not even been "permitted to try" was, by his estimation, "unconscionable."⁸⁵⁵ Even so, although long castigated by historians as all but incomprehensible, Sherman's reluctance to employ Smith's brigade in a heavier attack up the backside of Tunnel Hill is far more easily explained when historicized within the broader context of the Fifteenth Corps's operational history and its evolved tactical culture.

One artifact of the corps's tactical culture which had, by the winter of 1863, become so firmly held as to approach dogma, was the tradition and principal of unit rotation on the front lines. Those commands which had most recently been employed in an arduous mission or under

⁸⁵³ Peterson, *Decisions at Chattanooga*, 69.

⁸⁵⁴ William F. Smith, "An Historical Sketch of the Military Operations Around Chattanooga, Tennessee, September 22 to November 27, 1863," in *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, Vol. VIII* (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1910), 210.

⁸⁵⁵ Peter Cozzens, *The Shipwreck of their Hopes: The Battles for Chattanooga* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 241-243.

fire were customarily held in reserve during the next phase of operations. This principal of using the “freshest” troops to spearhead each operation had been standard practice since Chickasaw Bayou, so much so that the men and their officers had come to expect it. Those in Second Division outside of Lightburn’s brigade openly assumed that Sherman's reluctance to employ them more directly in the assault had been motivated by this very tradition. “They were held back for the reason that they were the brigade which risked so much in the start, and performed the feat of crossing the river in boats and landing right under the enemy's works at night,” one explained. The nighttime crossing of the Tennessee had been exceedingly dangerous, the exhausted brigade had hardly slept in nearly forty-eight hours, and its beloved commander of more than a year had been lost to it only the night before. Thus, Sherman respectfully held the command in reserve the next day. In addition, of all the brigades in the corps, Tupper’s contained the greatest number of regiments which had comprised Sherman’s much beloved “old Division.” For this reason, he may very well have been moved by an even unconscious, if quite vain, urge not to destroy them in a maneuver he had every reason to believe would not, indeed could not, succeed.⁸⁵⁶

Not all historians have been as merciless toward Sherman’s decisions as others. Several undeniable practical factors also precluded any dramatic charge launched up the rear slope of Tunnel Hill by Smith’s brigade. By far the strongest of Sherman’s defenders, B. H. Liddell Hart, in his 1929 biography of the general, argued that to throw more men into the narrow corridor between Tunnel Hill and the South Chickamauga Creek – Tupper’s front – “would not only lead them to a well-blocked end but would have massed his troops along a defile under the fire of the

⁸⁵⁶ Thaddeus Capron [55 IL] to Family, Nov. 29, 1863, “War Diary of Thaddeus H. Capron, 1861-1865,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 12, 3 (Oct. 1919), 371.

Confederate guns on the heights and on other heights beyond the river.” Indeed, aside from the nearly impossible terrain in the sector, Giles Smith’s command would have likely become the victims of enfilading fire from nearly every direction had it continued to advance. “Compressed cannon-fodder, indeed,” he added grimly.⁸⁵⁷

In the end, a number of interacting factors, some endogenous and other exogenous to the Fifteenth Corps, culminated to prevent any decisive attack by Tupper’s brigade during November 25, 1863. While historians continue to debate whether or not such an attack may have, at the very least, destroyed or captured an entire division or more of Bragg’s army, such alternative histories are fundamentally less helpful to understanding the Chattanooga campaign than are maximally holistic explanations for the decisions and operational behaviors that did occur. Such explanations are only possible by placing the events of that day within the broad context of the particular histories of the individuals and commands involved and considering them within the separate but related context of the particular operational situation and terrain confronted at the time.

While never saying so explicitly, Sherman’s behavior left breadcrumbs of clues that suggest a powerful evolution in his awareness of the true capabilities of the men, officers, and regiments of his Fifteenth Corps. For a year, “the great charger S[herman],” as a dejected Henry Kircher once referred to him, had seemed to maintain “that everything can be forced by the stormers without knowing the terrain or testing it.”⁸⁵⁸ His nuanced approach to the “miniature Vicksburg” at Jackson had suggested to many that a change of heart, if not yet of mind, may

⁸⁵⁷ B. H. Liddell Hart, *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American* (Boston: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1929), 221.

⁸⁵⁸ Kircher [12 MO] Diary, May 22, 1863, Hess, *German in the Yankee Fatherland*, 101; Kircher [12 MO] to Mother, May 24, 1863, 100.

have been in process. Given the liberty of independently determining if or when to employ a bloody frontal assault, he happily chose not to. Given Grant's positive orders to attack at Tunnel Hill, his hand had been forced. Still, despite the destruction of Ewing's and John Smith's divisions strewn across the northern and western slopes of Tunnel Hill, it seemed that Cump was nearing the apex of his learning curve. While never willing to consider insubordination, he also knew better than any other living officer what his corps was capable of, and what it was not. From this point on, though not without occasional missteps, he began to act accordingly. He had finally become one of them.

III. "Ah, colonel, this is glorious!"

Divorced from their native corps as they frequently had been over the previous twelve months, the veteran brigades of Osterhaus's First Division experienced a very different series of engagements, and thus experiences, serving under the command of Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker. Initially charged by Grant with making a feint toward Lookout Mountain (considered by all to be less tactically important than Missionary Ridge, despite its greater elevation), Hooker was slated to play a bit role in the coming drama by comparison with Sherman. This was by design. After "Fighting Joe's" lackluster performance at the battle of Chancellorsville in May, the entire nation remained ambivalent about his command capabilities. Although mostly unfair, Grant shared in their skepticism, and thus planned for Hooker and his Potomac veterans to do little more than hold the attention of those Rebels atop Lookout Mountain while his trusted friend Cump landed the key blow.⁸⁵⁹

At a height of 2,388 feet, Lookout Mountain commanded the entire region. Peering up at the ominous height from Lookout Valley at its base, Pvt. Calvin Ainsworth, 25th Iowa, confided

⁸⁵⁹ Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 124-125.

his thoughts to his diary. "Lookout Mountain looms up before us like a giant," he wrote. "Our forces must take it."⁸⁶⁰ Between Hooker's camps and the mountain itself lay a wide valley through which ran the waters of Lookout Creek. Only four viable crossing points were evident on the map, at least two of which would need to be secured before any force could so much as begin to address the immense challenge of scaling the mountain while simultaneously confronting its Rebel defenders. No feint toward the mountain would convince anyone if exclusively conducted on the west bank of the creek.⁸⁶¹

Conferring with his new temporary commander at Hooker's headquarters on the night of November 23, as Second Division piled into the pontoon boats miles away to the east, Osterhaus was present when an urgent dispatch from Grant arrived near midnight. The message ordered Hooker to "abandon the scheme of a feint," Osterhaus recalled, "and with the assistance of my Division to attack and dislodge the Rebels from their Lookout positions."⁸⁶² Accordingly, late into the night the two officers hatched a plan by which Hooker's Potomac brigades would cross Lookout Creek some distance to the south, scale the mountain beyond the Rebel defenses, and sweep northward along its slope as if to brush the unsuspecting Secessionists off the heights and into the river. Meanwhile, Osterhaus would keep up appearances in the valley and repair the bridge he required to add his own weight to the attack. Waiting to act as the dustpan for Hooker's northward sweep, once the bridge was ready, Osterhaus would advance against the face of the mountain at the moment he perceived the Easterners as having reached a point immediately adjacent to his front. By that point, the Rebels would be on the run, and First Division would

⁸⁶⁰ Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Nov. 24, 1863, BHL.

⁸⁶¹ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 159-163.

⁸⁶² Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 124.

have little left to do but police prisoners and apply additional pressure wherever needed. It was the kind of parsimonious plan the Prussian could appreciate, and thus very early the next morning things were set in motion.⁸⁶³

In customary fashion, Osterhaus planned to fulfill his part of the operation in a manner most conservative with the blood of his division. Recent experience in skirmishes during the march to Chattanooga had illustrated to him how adept his new command was at combining accurate artillery gunnery with small unit maneuver as skirmishers without any need for larger massed infantry advances or bayonet assaults. This style of attack differed dramatically from that employed by Hooker's Potomac veterans, who were to conduct nearly the entirety of the operation without even so much as a skirmisher screen, massed shoulder-to-shoulder until the terrain made such tactics impossible, just as their own particular experience in the Eastern theater had taught them to do.

As Hooker's legions started southward toward their respective crossing points, the Prussian mounted the division's fourteen heavy guns atop a string of hills skirting Lookout Creek which afforded overwatch of all the viable crossing points in his sector, and a clear shot to the still fog shrouded western slopes of Lookout Mountain. Detaching a few of the "skeleton" regiments from both Williamson's and Woods's brigades to support these batteries in the event of a Rebel surprise, Osterhaus set the guns to suppressing enemy pickets on the east bank of the creek while his pioneers toiled to repair the bridges over the creek. The rest of Woods's brigade fanned out as skirmishers along the west bank to add their own covering fire to that of the batteries in an effort to prevent any Rebel suppression of the pioneers.⁸⁶⁴ The veteran gunners of

⁸⁶³ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 162.

⁸⁶⁴ "Report of Brig. Gen. Peter J. Osterhaus," Dec. 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 598-600; "Report of Brig. Gen. Charles R.

First Division's batteries employed their Vicksburg-borne skills with deadly effect. "The rebels can scarcely move," one Hawkeye supporting the guns observed. "We see them dodge from rock to rock, the shot and shell is poured into them directly in front of Hookers advancing column so they have but little to oppose them."⁸⁶⁵ From the perspective of a nearby Missourian, the frantic Rebels looked "so small, like ants swarming on the mountain."⁸⁶⁶ The combined fire of riflemen and artillery, just as it had done at Vicksburg, achieved complete fire superiority while also distracting those Rebels further south from the comparatively silent advance of Hooker's columns up the slopes of the mountain. The fog also assisted in this, shrouding the maneuvers of the Federals in the valley just as it hid the approach of Sherman's ill-fated columns toward the northern end of Missionary Ridge.

By ten o'clock, the veteran pioneers had already finished with the bridge, and all that remained was to await the arrival of the Potomac men herding frantic Rebels from the right at the point of the bayonet. After only another hour, sounds of heavy musketry on the right made clear that Hooker would not disappoint. In very short time, as the fog began to dissipate, all in the valley caught a glimpse of the operation unfolding precisely according to plan. "Up, up, they go in a straight line," one Hawkeye watched, "a long unwavering line of blue" sweeping across the face of Lookout Mountain.⁸⁶⁷ Another was awed by the sight of rigid discipline under fire. "How steadily and with a fine alignment [did] the Potomac veterans face that storm of lead," he

Woods," Nov. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 606-607.

⁸⁶⁵ Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Nov. 24, 1863, BHL.

⁸⁶⁶ Wilhelm Osterhorn [31 MO] to Minna, Dec. 8, 1863, Osterhorn Family Papers, MHMLRC.

⁸⁶⁷ Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Nov. 24, 1863, BHL; William Seaward [9 IA] Diary, Nov. 25, 1863, SHSI Des Moines, 113.

wrote.⁸⁶⁸ As thinly-manned Secessionist defenses were visibly being rolled up by the Easterners from the south, Osterhaus knew it was First Division's moment to strike. On his command, the batteries redoubled their fire in an effort to exacerbate the chaos whirling around the surprised Rebel lines and Woods's Missourians crossed the creek and started toward the western face in line of battle, with a dense skirmisher "cloud" advanced well to the front.⁸⁶⁹

Pushing forward up the steep slope from tree to tree, Woods's skirmishers encountered sharp resistance from their dispersed Rebel counterparts, but also enormous numbers of frightened surrendering Secessionists.⁸⁷⁰ Added to those who had been surprised in the valley by the sudden Federal rush over the creek, the "skeleton" regiments were quickly overwhelmed by the need for detachments to watch over the many prisoners. In fact, by the time the command had made it half way up the slope, so many of Osterhaus's 250-man regiments had been detached from their "tactical battalions" that both Woods and Williamson (having advanced his Hawkeyes over the creek and into connection with Woods's right) were rapidly running out of available manpower to contribute to a fight which continued to escalate in ferocity as their battalions climbed the slope. Indeed, the grade itself posed serious challenges. "It was not an easy task and not much fun," John Buegel, 3rd Missouri later remembered. "If one took a step forward he slipped back two."⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁸ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *On the Skirmish Line*, 142.

⁸⁶⁹ Osterhaus's *OR* Report, 601-602; Woods's *OR* Report, 607; Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 128.

⁸⁷⁰ Woods's *OR* Report, 607-609; William R. Oake [26 IA], Stacy Dale Allen, ed., *On the Skirmish Line Behind a Friendly Tree: The Civil War Memoirs of William Royal Oake* (Helena: Farcountry Press, 2006), 143-144.

⁸⁷¹ Osterhaus's *OR* Report, 602; John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 34; Townsend *Yankee Warhorse*, 128-129; "Report of Col. James A. Williamson," Nov. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 613-614.

Identifying the front line quickly became difficult. Scattered in small groups behind cover, just “as they had fought at Vicksburg,” each of the scattered riflemen of First Division fought his own independent battle to gain the initiative in the firefight, coordinating individually with his comrades to combine their fire and maneuver. “Each man fought his own way,” one Hawkeye observed, “here and there a squad but all with faces up the Steep [slope].”⁸⁷² One “Potomac officer” nearby, anticipating that the lack of any discernible battle line would spell disaster for the Westerners, later spoke with surprise about how the division fought “like rats ... broke all up, but the pieces kept a going.”⁸⁷³

Watching the adept independent maneuver, coordination, and skirmishing prowess displayed all along the western face of Lookout Mountain, it was hard to believe that these men, though a fragment of their former numbers, were the very same who less than a year prior had charged up the bald slopes of the Walnut Hills in “popular pictorial” fashion, straining to maintain their formations as their comrades were mercilessly cut down. It was hard to believe that they were the same men who had struggled through point-blank shock volleys at Arkansas Post, enduring a violent baptism by fire before they learned first-hand the psychological power of shooting back. It was hard to believe that the veteran sharpshooters fighting individually from cover could be the same men who had hurled themselves in a tightly packed mass at the Louisiana Lunette as their division commander screamed “Forward! Forward!” Indeed, it was hard to believe that the veteran officers deftly maneuvering their “tactical battalions” independently across the rugged terrain, and the individual skirmish teams, fighting tree to tree and boulder to boulder, were the same men who had terribly bungled so many seemingly

⁸⁷² Robert Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Dec. 9, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁸⁷³ Robert Henry [26 IA] to Wife, Dec. 9, 1863, Robert Henry Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

straightforward maneuvers in the past. But while the flesh and blood of First Division scaling the face of Lookout Mountain that afternoon remained the same, it no longer consisted of green “new” regiments full of impressionable citizen volunteers. These were “soldiers from experience.”

Upon receiving word that a nearby Potomac brigade was rapidly running out of ammunition, “the Red One” sprung into action, gathering together two hundred men from the 3rd Missouri and about the same from the 27th, forging an impromptu battalion-sized element from the dispersed pieces of his modular division and rushing up the slope to the rescue. Consolidating behind the cover of a rock wall situated on a bench of flat land running along the northern slope of the mountain, the riflemen of Woods’s brigade arrived just in time. Sensing that the Easterners had run out of ammunition, Rebel reinforcements rushed into position in an attempt to stem what had become a catastrophic situation for the Secessionists. Near dusk, they launched a desperate counterattack. Unbeknownst to the yipping Rebels, Osterhaus’s “Vicksburg rats” awaited them. For the first time in the Fifteenth Corps’s history, the tables were turned.⁸⁷⁴

Kneeling behind a rock wall with their rifles loaded, the Missourians immediately recognized the situation from their own painful experience. “We were well protected and knew the game,” John Buegel wrote, “so we let Johnny Reb approach within a hundred paces, and then gave them hot fire. The effect was the same as we had seen at Arkansas Post and Vicksburg.” This time, there was “death and destruction in the ranks of the enemy” instead of among those of First Division. After only “a few more salvoes of the same sort, those who were still alive ran in wild flight,” and that “put an end to the slaughter.”⁸⁷⁵ Having learned their own lesson, the

⁸⁷⁴ Woods’s *OR* Report, 607; Williamson’s *OR* Report, 614; Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 128.

⁸⁷⁵ John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, 34.

repulsed Rebels fell back and took cover, just as Buegel and his comrades had done in the aftermath of their own repulse at Arkansas Post. The irregular opposing lines of skirmishers strung out along the slopes hunkered down as dusk turned to night.

Riflemen continued to exchange sporadic fire through the dark for the entire chilly evening. Others simply lay on the ground, “wet to the skin, without fire, and hungry without anything to eat.”⁸⁷⁶ A few attempted to kindle small fires behind boulders until the dim light drew the fire of Rebel sharpshooters further up on the mountain.⁸⁷⁷ By midnight, many in Osterhaus’s division had expended all of the hundred rounds issued to them earlier that morning.⁸⁷⁸ Eventually, however, the enemy fire slackened and then silenced altogether. At dawn the cause became evident: the Rebels were gone. Hooker had successfully seized Lookout Mountain.⁸⁷⁹

While their successes would have been impossible without the valiant and able efforts of Hooker’s main effort, Osterhaus’s veterans had proven their tactical prowess when employed in close accord with their evolved skillset and tactical culture and allowed the independence to operate in their own inimitable fashion. Tasked with elements of the larger mission well calibrated to their unique capabilities as a combined arms element that coordinated the effects of long-range, accurate artillery gunnery with dispersed skirmisher “clouds,” those in the ranks gained markedly in their self-confidence. The opportunity to return the favor of repeated brutal repulses at the hands of entrenched Rebels only solidified their confidence and increased the

⁸⁷⁶ John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, 34.

⁸⁷⁷ *History of the Thirteenth Illinois*, 375.

⁸⁷⁸ E. Burke Wylie [31 IA] to Father, Dec. 2, 1863, E. Burke Wylie Letters, SHSI Iowa City.

⁸⁷⁹ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 197-198.

intense respect their history had imparted for the advantages accruing to defenders behind works issuing a last minute shock volley.

As the sun rose, and Sherman began his preparations to launch his ill-advised piecemeal assaults far away on the “northern extremity of Missionary Ridge,” Hooker began his own preparations to continue in his contributions to Grant’s larger plans. The men found the air atop the mountain “pure and fine as in paradise,” and the sun quickly became so warm “that our clothes soon dried on our bodies.”⁸⁸⁰ At ten o’clock, Osterhaus received Hooker’s orders to prepare First Division to lead the way off Lookout Mountain eastward into Chattanooga Valley, toward Rossville Gap and the southern end of Missionary Ridge in pursuit of the fleeing Rebels. As the division trudged off the mountain and eastward into the valley, the desperate fighting on Tunnel Hill was clearly audible to the northeast, even at considerable distance. “I think it is the heaviest I ever heard,” one Hawkeye considered.⁸⁸¹

Discovering the bridge across Chattanooga Creek, halfway through the valley, burned by retreating Rebels, Osterhaus once again set his small 70-man bi-racial pioneer detachment to work. Just as at Lookout Creek the day before, they were protected by skirmishers from Woods’s brigade who managed to cross over a narrow “hastily constructed” foot bridge of driftwood and fan out among the trees along the east bank. Immediately coming under fire by Rebel infantry, the skirmishers of the 27th Missouri once again leaned on their skills as riflemen honed in the trenches at Vicksburg to keep them at bay while the pioneers toiled.⁸⁸²

⁸⁸⁰ John Buegel [3 MO] Diary, 34.

⁸⁸¹ Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Nov. 25, 1863, BHL; Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 130.

⁸⁸² Osterhaus’s *OR* Report, 600; Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 131; “Report of Col. Thomas Curly” [27 MO], Dec. 13, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 610-611.

In the time it took to cross the rest of Osterhaus's infantry over the impromptu bridge, an enemy battery managed to unlimber in the middle of Rossville Gap supported by two regiments of infantry, intent on making a last stand to protect the vulnerable extreme left of Bragg's army atop Missionary Ridge. While, almost without question, the hard-charging Steele likely would have attempted to overwhelm the meager Secessionist gunners with the full weight of a massed bayonet assault by his entire division, "the Red One" was too conservative for such a blunt approach. Instead, he once again tapped into what he knew to be the division's proven acumen for maneuverability and pursued a double envelopment of the enemy guns. First Division split into two diverging brigade columns. Woods's command headed to the right to scale an exceedingly steep slope on the left flank of the Rebel battery and Williamson's column cut left to scale the southern end of Missionary Ridge. While the frustrated Rebels managed to fire a few salvos in the direction of Woods's flanking regiments, they quickly ascertained the extreme threat posed by their being outmaneuvered on both flanks and abandoned the gap entirely, fleeing to the east and out of the battle. At almost zero cost to his division, Osterhaus had single-handedly captured the strategically vital Rossville Gap and, as no Rebel forces now held the terrain east of Missionary Ridge, the thinly defended extreme rear of Bragg's entire army.⁸⁸³

Climbing back off the steep slopes after confirmation of the Rebel rout, Woods's and Williamson's ebullient commands rallied at a crossroads east of the gap to await Hooker's orders. They arrived in short time. Osterhaus would continue northward along the road running behind Missionary Ridge toward Chattanooga, pushing any and all Rebel resistance aside and collecting prisoners while the Potomac men simultaneously swept across the crest and northern

⁸⁸³ Osterhaus's *OR* Report, 600-601; Woods's *OR* Report, 607; Williamson's *OR* Report, 614-615; Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 131-132.

slope of the ridge itself. In effect, the plan contemplated a repetition of the “battle above the clouds” the previous day. Due to the nature of the terrain, Hooker urged Osterhaus to act independently “as circumstances might demand,” with an understanding of the larger plan. This loose leash once again represented both Hooker’s confidence and respect for the Prussian’s tactical acumen, as well as a perfect opportunity for the division to continue to operate in a manner well calibrated to its strengths.

As Hooker’s divisions battled through consecutive lines of Rebels atop the ridge, taking each in the flank, Osterhaus pushed his two brigades northward “as fast as the column of infantry could move” along the backside of the ridge. Once he had ascertained that both brigades had outflanked all the Rebel units confronting Hooker, he changed front to the west, shifted the brigades into line of battle with skirmishers well to the front, and charged up the back slope. Lt. Col. A. J. Seay, long a critic of shoddy generalship, was floored at the sight of “our men running, yelling, shooting with furious impetuosity” as they hurdled confidently toward the Rebel rear. He considered it “the most restless charge I ever witnessed.” Falling almost entirely upon Secessionist infantry distracted by Hooker’s threat to their front, the maneuver was fantastically successful. “We’ve got ‘em in a pen!” the bare-headed Prussian shouted above the din, eagerly urging on both brigades.⁸⁸⁴

Bragg’s flank had been effectively converted into “a swirling, struggling mass of panic-stricken men, signaling frantically to make us understand they surrendered,” one Buckeye wrote. “Each ran for himself as best he could to get out of range of our bullets,” another Missourian crowed.⁸⁸⁵ Continuing to surge northward through the confused masses of surrendering Rebels,

⁸⁸⁴ A. J. Seay [32 MO] Diary, 63; Osterhaus’s *OR* Report, 601-602; Williamson’s *OR* Report, 615; Woods’s *OR* Report, 607-609; Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 131-133.

⁸⁸⁵ Charles Willison [76 OH], *Reminiscences*, 77; Wilhelm Osterhorn [31 MO] to Minna, Dec. 8, 1863, Osterhorn

periodically pouring fire into the last vestiges of enemy defenders, the division was surprised to meet Thomas's "Cumberlanders" also atop the crest of Missionary Ridge. Sent by Grant in a probing assault against the enemy pits at the base of the height designed to support Sherman's flagging efforts on the northern end, the Army of the Cumberland had taken it upon themselves to continue all the way up the ridge that afternoon despite an absence of orders. Now, their impromptu actions were fortuitously coinciding with those of Hooker and Osterhaus to dismantle the Rebel army. Despite the total ignorance of Sherman and the remainder of the Fifteenth Corps to the north, shrouded from all visibility of these developments by the lay of the land, the battle for Chattanooga was rapidly nearing a victorious conclusion for Federal arms.⁸⁸⁶

As the massive attack of the "Cumberlanders" all across the entire western face of the ridge swept thousands of Rebels from their positions, Osterhaus's veterans merely held their positions and collected prisoners. "The troops on the other side of the ridge had shaken the tree and we were holding the bag to get the fruit," one Illinoisan later wrote. Overawed at the gravity of their success, the men of First Division let forth loud hurrahs while "the Red One" rode up and down the lines atop a captured Rebel horse shouting, "Two more hours daylight and we'll destroy this army!" Turning to an aide, the beaming Prussian pronounced, "Ah, colonel, this is glorious!"⁸⁸⁷

IV. "From the front we could not do anything"

Those Rebel commands on Bragg's right that had avoided utter destruction or rout during the day escaped from Sherman's front during the night, pulling out from their works silently.

Family Papers, MHMLRC.

⁸⁸⁶ Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 132-135; Osterhaus's *OR* Report, 601-602; Woods's *OR* Report, 607-608; Williamson's *OR* Report, 615-616.

⁸⁸⁷ Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 134; Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 315-319.

Limping eastward, the badly damaged Army of Tennessee attempted to avoid total catastrophe by hurrying toward Ringgold, Georgia and a critical mountain gap of the same name. Hoping to bag or destroy the remainder of Bragg's army, Grant somewhat belatedly ordered Hooker's ad-hoc corps to pursue.⁸⁸⁸

In the afternoon of November 26, First Division was on the road toward Ringgold. After making a distance of about six miles from Missionary Ridge, the division encountered its third burned bridge of the campaign at a critical crossing of Chickamauga Creek. A nearby ford served the purposes of ushering the infantry across the water, but there was no time to repair the main span adequately for the division's batteries to join. Instead, the guns would have to wait for the time-consuming repair of the original bridge. Having whipped such an apparently mighty host without the help of artillery (the batteries having been left on the west bank of Chattanooga Creek) the day before, it is possible that some in First Division were not worried about potentially operating in their absence. Ever the consummate artilleryman, Osterhaus was likely not among their number. Even so, when Hooker advised the Prussian that he intended to place First Division in the lead the next morning, and that contact with Bragg's rear guard was likely somewhere near Ringgold, Osterhaus had no choice but to plan to operate without his precious guns.⁸⁸⁹

By that time the vast majority of the battered Rebel force, with the exception of the tail end of its baggage train, had already escaped through Ringgold Gap, leaving behind a token force commanded by none other than Maj. Gen. Patrick Cleburne, who had only two days prior

⁸⁸⁸ Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 135; The best operational treatments of the battle of Ringgold Gap can be found in Justin S. Solonick, "Saving the Army of Tennessee: The Confederate Rear Guard at Ringgold Gap," in Steven Woodworth, ed., *The Chattanooga Campaign* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 132-150; Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 370-384; Sword, *Mountains Touched with Fire*, 334-346.

⁸⁸⁹ Osterhaus's *OR Report*, 603; Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 135-136.

brutally repulsed Sherman's legions from the works atop Tunnel Hill. The recent success of his regiments had left them quite confident in their ability to do so once again. Now, on the morning of November 27, the veteran Rebels would try their hands against the only remaining division of the Fifteenth Corps they had not yet encountered. Their defense, though meant to be little more than a delaying action, would be considerably eased by the heights of White Oak Mountain, towering over the gap on its northern flank. Covered with dense woods and pock-marked with massive boulders and irregular undulations, the western slopes of the rise offered ample opportunities for defensive positions, and Cleburne planned to use the mountain to prevent Federal efforts to flank northward while placing all his available artillery in the gap itself. As the gap's southern flank was naturally protected by the waters of Chickamauga Creek, no double envelopment (like Osterhaus had conducted at Rossville) would be possible.⁸⁹⁰

Those in the ranks of First Division arriving in Ringgold west of the gap that morning took one look at the looming ridge they assumed held Rebels and immediately "knew the game." Any direct assault would inevitably lead to the same bloody results as so many times before. "From the front we could not do anything," John Buegel, 3rd Missouri, survivor of every one of the division's failures from Arkansas Post to the Louisiana Lunette, scribbled in his diary. The enemy certainly "had all the heights fortified and well manned." The only option was to advance "by flanking movements" in an attempt to dislodge the Secessionists from their strong position. Unfortunately, such was not to be the case.⁸⁹¹

With nothing more than suppositions that the impressive heights of White Oak Mountain contained hidden Secessionists, Osterhaus judged that little more than tacit Rebel resistance held

⁸⁹⁰ Osterhaus's *OR* Report, 604; Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 136-137.

⁸⁹¹ Buegel [3 MO] Diary, SHSM Columbia, 35.

the gap itself. Cleburne's guns had been carefully masked from prying eyes by brush. After a brief conference with Hooker, the Prussian, in his typical tactically conservative fashion, offered that only a swift cavalry rush toward the gap was likely necessary. With no cavalry immediately on hand, and eager to bag Bragg's trains, Hooker was not interested in delay. Instead, Osterhaus would launch a two-pronged frontal attack directly against the face of the mountain and into the gap itself, he explained, to be supported by an additional flanking movement by his Potomac veterans on the left if absolutely necessary. Ever the soldier's soldier, any reservations "the Red One" may have had about these orders were buried beneath his penchant for martial obedience. Despite his division's heritage of failure in frontal assaults, despite the dread already recorded upon the pages of some in the ranks, and despite the absence of his beloved heavy guns, Osterhaus acceded to Hooker's request.⁸⁹²

To their credit, Osterhaus, Wood, and Williamson approached the grim problem at hand with a nuance borne of their particular command experience and the culture of First Division. Despite a sweeping open plain extending for some distance before the mountain that offered plenty of room for a wide frontage of close-order formations and waving battle flags, the command trio instead approached the terrain and their tactics from the perspective of a "Vicksburg rat." Through the middle of the plain, from north to south, ran the tracks of the Western & Atlantic Railroad, elevated on an earthen embankment that represented a natural breastwork almost identical to the levees the men had encountered at Chickasaw Bayou. Advancing in column and deploying into line of battle behind the embankment, the two brigades quickly established themselves in a defensive posture in preparation for Osterhaus's orders to advance on the mountain and gap.

⁸⁹² Osterhaus's *OR* Report, 604; Townsend, *Yankee Warhorse*, 138.

At about nine o'clock, those orders came, and Woods's 3rd, 12th, and 31st Missouri – originally nearly 2,500 men but now fewer than 600 in total – sallied over the embankment and toward the gap, screened by the skilled Turner skirmishers of the 17th Missouri, as usual. As the skirmishers neared the gap, however, Cleburne's gunners rushed from hiding, tore away the brush screens from their batteries, and fired blasts of canister and shell toward the brigade that felled several of the Missourians and prompted Woods to immediately fall back to the protection of the embankment. Uninterested in risking mass casualties in any bayonet assault against the guns, Osterhaus took a more dynamic approach, seeking to concentrate "a converging fire on the enemy's artillery, which I hoped to secure, by driving off the cannoneers and supports." Harassing enemy batteries with sharpshooting fire was something the division had considerable experience at doing, and thus the plan was in close accord with its tactical heritage. Ordering the veteran 13th Illinois to rush forward from the embankment and occupy a cluster of farm buildings that would allow them to employ their Vicksburg-borne sharpshooting skills to silence the guns, the fewer than three hundred remaining survivors of Blair's desperate charge at Chickasaw Bayou once again flung themselves into the fray.⁸⁹³

Surprised at a sudden silence of Rebel arms as they approached the cluster of houses, the Illinoisans quickly closed the distance to the gap. The Secessionists having again masked their batteries, only when the regiment had neared the farmhouses did the gunners again return to their posts and send forth a blast of canister that tore directly into the left flank of the command. "This was a surprise and a severe test of our nerve and power of concession as a regiment," one veteran later recalled, and "at a word from the officers, all the men lay flat on the ground but stayed in

⁸⁹³ Osterhaus's *OR* Report, 604; Woods's *OR* Report, 608.

place.”⁸⁹⁴ Hard won lessons for survival from past experience thrust the Suckers to the ground for protection. After a short time under fire, sharpshooters worked to suppress the Rebel batteries long enough that the regiment could sprint to the cover of the nearby farmhouses. Many never made it. Those who did immediately began to apply their sharpshooting skills from the windows of the barn and outhouses “in the most determined way.” Robbed of a consecutive series of commanding officers by Rebel fire, the men were mostly left to coordinate the desperate fight among themselves.⁸⁹⁵

Meanwhile, hoping to flank northward and seize the northern end of the mountain from Rebel units he had spied moving that direction along the crest, Osterhaus ordered Woods’s 76th Ohio along with Williamson’s 4th, 9th, and 25th Iowa to advance in a northeasterly direction and confront any Rebels they discovered on the western slope. While Williamson personally went forward with his Hawkeyes, Osterhaus retained the two hundred men of the 31st Iowa in reserve, deploying two of their companies as sharpshooters along the embankment to pepper the mountain with long-range covering fire as their brother Hawkeyes crossed the open expanse. Despite this support, Williamson’s advance faced harassing fire for the entire distance to the base of the hill, at which point the Buckeyes and Col. George Stone’s 25th Iowa began the long climb up the steep slope dispersed as skirmishers.⁸⁹⁶

Despite the rugged nature of the mountain, good cover for riflemen proved somewhat sparse. “A few large rocks and scattering trees and logs were the only places of safety,” Private Calvin Ainsworth observed. Having now spent more than a year fighting mostly as skirmishers

⁸⁹⁴ *History of the Thirteenth Illinois*, 384; Woods’s *OR Report*, 608.

⁸⁹⁵ Osterhaus’s *OR Report*, 604; Justin S. Solonick, “Saving the Army of Tennessee,” in Steven Woodworth, ed., *The Chattanooga Campaign* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 138.

⁸⁹⁶ Williamson’s *OR Report*, 616-617.

across all types of terrain, Ainsworth and his fellow Hawkeyes were experts at sniffing out any viable protection along a line of advance. Fighting across the unforgiving broken ground of the bayous and hills of Mississippi had imparted a particular skill and predisposition toward fighting “Indian fashion,” as Ainsworth called it, “each man for himself, dodging from tree to tree, from rock to rock, advancing in the meantime.”⁸⁹⁷ Such a tactic seemed to them the only viable method by which the Rebels ensconced along the crest could safely be challenged. “Every time we would expose ourselves the bullets would rain around us,” Ainsworth explained.⁸⁹⁸ Thus, each Iowan sought first and foremost “to get a tree between myself and the rebel bullets.”⁸⁹⁹

A considerable distance behind the four-man Hawkeye skirmisher teams creeping cautiously up the slope was Williamson's massed battle line. The veteran general had no intention of storming the ridge with a close order bayonet charge. His Iowans had attempted such futile maneuvers too many times before. He had no idea whether or not the Rebels hiding in the dense brush at the crest, engaging his skirmishers at opportunity, were already ensconced behind breastworks, but he had no intention of finding out the hard way. If necessary, those Iowans not bounding from cover to cover with the skirmishers could be deployed incrementally to support their dispersed comrades, but barring any unforeseen contingency, he planned to fulfill his mission with the least possible risk to his brigade.⁹⁰⁰

As the skirmisher battle on the northern end of the mountain ebbed and flowed, seesawing Williamson's lines alternatively further up or down the western slope of White Oak

⁸⁹⁷ Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Nov. 27, 1863, BHL.

⁸⁹⁸ Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Nov. 27, 1863, BHL.

⁸⁹⁹ W. R. Oake [26 IA], *On the Skirmish Line*, 148.

⁹⁰⁰ Williamson's *OR* Report, 616-617.

Mountain, Cleburne made a risky move. Hoping to break through Woods's line at the railroad embankment in a counterattack similar to that which they had enjoyed so much luck with against Sherman at Tunnel Hill, several Rebel battalions came hurdling out of the gap and into the open. Comfortably situated behind the embankment, Woods's veterans still "knew the game," just as they had proven on Lookout Mountain a few days prior. Waiting until the Secessionists had come within easy range, the Missourians let loose several "well-directed volleys" that promptly dismantled the assault and sent the survivors hurrying back into the gap. Trying to consolidate their tactical victory, Woods's riflemen continued to ply their deadly trade as marksmen borne of long experience in the Vicksburg works. Every time "a rebel stuck his head out from behind a tree, he would be fired upon," one Missourian remembered.⁹⁰¹

Hooker seems to have been as unimpressed with this defensive feat as he was frustrated with the lack of forward progress. Bragg's trains were escaping, and Osterhaus and his Westerners seemed apparently less than up to the task at hand. Greatly annoyed at the sight of Woods's initial repulse from the Rebel battery in the gap, and with Williamson's apparent lack of obvious momentum on the left, he decided it was time to add more weight to the northern flanking effort. Casting about for available troops, he chose Brig. Gen. John Geary's Second Division, and more specifically Colonel William Creighton's brigade of Potomac veterans, for the maneuver. The manner in which Creighton's command approached its mission, in stark contrast to its Fifteenth Corps counterparts, illustrated dramatic differences in tactical cultures – each derived from very different operational heritages.

⁹⁰¹ Osterhaus's *OR* Report, 604; Wilhelm Osterhorn [31 MO] to Minna, Dec. 8, 1863, MHMLRC; Woods's *OR* Report, 608.

Delivering his orders to Creighton in person, Geary instructed him “to charge up the ridge and drive the enemy from it.”⁹⁰² Without pause, even given the obvious difficulty Williamson’s Hawkeyes were having with accomplishing the same objective, Creighton ordered his four regiments into two tightly-packed lines of battle, each with orders to maintain a strict distance of one hundred yards from the other. The foremost contingents were the 28th and 147th Pennsylvania, with Creighton’s own original 7th Ohio and 66th Ohio following behind in support.⁹⁰³ The brigade crossed most of the intervening open ground between the railroad embankment and the foot of White Oak Mountain without issue, given the preoccupation of most of the Rebels atop the height with the sharp skirmisher fight along its slopes. Creighton maneuvered the brigade slightly to the left of Williamson’s massed reserve waiting at the base of the mountain for the results of the skirmisher battle ahead. One look at the tightly packed battle lines of the Potomac regiments shocked the Hawkeyes, who had rarely seen any experienced veteran command approach combat in such a fashion. Worse, on their current trajectory, once upon the slope they would risk breaking up the cohesion of the Hawkeye skirmisher “cloud” which extended some distance beyond the flanks of the massed Iowan reserve to the rear.⁹⁰⁴

Spurring his mount hurriedly over to Creighton’s formation, Col. George Stone “ordered and begged” the onrushing regiments to shift their formation further to the left so as to avoid breaking up the integrity of his skirmishers, but “the officers in command said they had orders for doing as they did,” Williamson later reported, “and persisted in their course.” At the very least hoping to reduce what seemed their all but inevitable imminent destruction, Stone warned

⁹⁰² “Report of Col. Thomas J. Ahl” [28 PA], *OR*, I:31, II, 413-414.

⁹⁰³ “Report of Capt. E. J. Krieger” [7 OH], *OR*, I:31, II, 417-419.

⁹⁰⁴ Cozzens, *Shipwreck*, 381.

the intransigent officers that should their battle lines continue approaching the slope “in the manner they were going,” massed in tight formation “as if on parade,” and without even the benefit of a skirmisher screen, the hidden enemy would most assuredly cut them to pieces just as soon as they came within close range. Indeed, he and his 25th Iowa had learned that very lesson the hard way at Arkansas Post. He advised breaking up the ranks and deploying companies into four-man skirmish teams as his Hawkeyes had done prior to picking their way carefully up the ridge behind cover. The Potomac men would have none of Stone's entreaties, brushing him aside with a cocky rebuff about how they intended to “teach 'Western troops a lesson.” Another Iowan overheard one of Creighton's officers shout out to his men that they would “show these western boys how to fight.”⁹⁰⁵

Approaching the base of the slope, Creighton halted his Pennsylvanians and fired a volley blindly toward the crest, as if to announce his arrival on the field. After this ineffectual fire, the supporting Potomac veterans continued boldly up the slope, still with no skirmishers deployed to their front.⁹⁰⁶ By the time the line had crawled within sight of the Rebels atop the heights, the Potomac men were exhausted. “It was as much as we could do to climb the rough and steep mountain-side without having to fight,” one remarked. Still bent on showing “these western boys how to fight,” Creighton ordered his men to fire by carefully controlled volleys, into the dense woods without knowing precisely what was to their front. The results were less than spectacular. “We were tired,” one admitted, “and our fire was not delivered with that accuracy and effect that might have been hoped for.”⁹⁰⁷ Though the brigade had unquestionably “advanced beautifully,”

⁹⁰⁵ Williamson's *OR* Report, 616-617; “Report of Col. George Stone,” Nov. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 623; Calvin Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Nov. 27, 1863, Calvin Ainsworth Diary, Bentley Historical Library.

⁹⁰⁶ Krieger [7 OH] Report, Dec. 3, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 418.

⁹⁰⁷ George Skinner, *Pennsylvania at Chickamauga and Chattanooga* (W. M. Stanley Bay, 1900), 84.

even given the unforgiving terrain, its combat effectiveness upon arrival before the foe left much to be desired.⁹⁰⁸

Recognizing the need to attempt to turn the Rebel line, but still wanting to do so with a flourish, Creighton ordered his own 7th Ohio out of reserve and up a draw to the left. “Boys, we are ordered to take that hill,” he shouted, characteristically adding that he wanted “to see you walk right up it.” Struggling mightily to maintain their useless formational integrity in the ascent, the Ohioans maneuvered into column and made their way up the ravine the best they could, “not stopping to return the fire” that emanated from every Rebel who suddenly noticed the opportunity to pour lead into an unprepared Federal column blindly groping its way up the slope. This fire rapidly grew in both volume and intensity until finally it reached a pitch altogether “too heavy and effective for flesh and blood to withstand.”⁹⁰⁹ The Buckeye commander, Lieutenant Colonel Orrin Crane, was among the first to fall. Perceiving that the same fate may befall themselves, the Pennsylvanians fell back in panic and confusion. It was only a matter of moments before the valiant Creighton shared Crane's fate, and soon the entire brigade found itself in a panicked rout down the slope. A consummate showman to the last, Creighton pleaded with those nearby to “Tell my wife I died at the head of my command,” as his brigade fled for its life off the bloody slope of White Oak Mountain.⁹¹⁰

Even during the hottest moments of the engagement, the Hawkeye skirmishers had watched with great interest what seemed the almost exotic behavior and tactics of the Easterners. “I noticed that when one of their officers fell half a dozen men would break ranks to carry him

⁹⁰⁸ George Skinner, *Pennsylvania at Chickamauga and Chattanooga*, (W. M. Stanley Bay, 1900), 84.

⁹⁰⁹ E. J. Krieger [7 OH] Report, Dec. 3, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 418.

⁹¹⁰ Cozzens, Shipwreck, 382; Skinner, *Pennsylvania at Chickamauga and Chattanooga*, 84.

off the field,” Ainsworth observed. “That is something we never did.”⁹¹¹ Indeed, the Potomac regiments operated almost as if part of an altogether different army from that in which the Hawkeyes had served across their previous year in uniform. When Crieighton's line finally broke, however, there was no time for fascinating ethnography. The Potomac veterans, so recently filled with bluster, routed directly through the scattered Hawkeye skirmish teams, carrying them all in a blue tide rushing down the steep slope “like an avalanche, carrying everything before them,” Williamson later grieved. Fleeing his scant cover, Hawkeye Calvin Ainsworth “never ran, or tried to run so hard in my life. Bullets were flying about my head and I could see the dust rise whenever the ball struck the ground.”⁹¹² Halting at the foot of the mountain, where Williamson managed to rally his command, the brigade gave up on its orders to seize the mountain and determined to merely hold its position instead. Hooker’s attack had failed. Left alone near the crest, the remnants of the 76th Ohio’s skirmisher teams rallied to form a defensive perimeter and independently fought off successive Rebel counterattacks until finally disengaging and withdrawing down the slope. In the interim, the Buckeyes suffered nearly 40% losses. Finally, at about one o’clock, the exhausted and disoriented brigade heard the distinctive thunder of Maj. Clement Landgraeber’s howitzers echo through the valley. The artillery had arrived at long last, but it was too late. Cleburne and his Rebel rear guard, along with the tail of Bragg’s army, was already gone.⁹¹³

⁹¹¹ Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Nov. 27, 1863, BHL.

⁹¹² Ainsworth [25 IA] Diary, Nov. 27, 1863, BHL.

⁹¹³ Williamson’s *OR* Report, 617; “Report of Maj. Willard Warner” [76 OH], Nov. 28, 1863, *OR*, I:31, II, 611-612.

V. “The way in which they attempted to go”

Few officers or soldiers in Williamson's command came away from the battle at Ringgold Gap with the impression that Creighton's regiments had failed in their mission due to cowardice. “The fault of these regiments seemed to be more in the way in which they attempted to go up the hill than in anything else,” Williamson determined. His Hawkeyes had naturally “preferred the method of taking [the ridge] by skirmishing and cautiously advancing.” The Potomac men, in sharp contrast, “tried to go up as if on parade where the men could barely have gone up by clinging to the rocks and bushes.”⁹¹⁴

Williamson’s remarks represented one of the most clear and concise elaborations of the Fifteenth Corps’s historically-derived tactical culture, while also highlighting the profound differences between the tactical preferences of his own brigade and those of Creighton’s veterans of other fields. The fact that his comments contained such a matter-of-fact air to them illustrates just how solidified the corps’s tactical culture had become. After all, a tactical culture constituted little more than a shared collection of habitual preferences that informed and shaped “the way in which [a unit] attempted to” prosecute its assigned objectives both in and out of combat. A year’s worth of specific experience had forged a tactical culture within the ranks of Williamson’s brigade, along with that of most its parent Fifteenth Corps, that habitually “preferred the method of ... skirmishing and cautiously advancing” as opposed to boldly storming enemy positions at the point of the bayonet, “as if on parade,” in the manner of Creighton’s tightly-massed ranks. The corps’s preference for tactical conservatism had little to do with its Western sociocultural origins. After all, most of Creighton’s regiments were comprised of Westerners as well, having been raised in the very same state as Woods’s Buckeyes of the 76th Ohio. The less than subtle

⁹¹⁴ Williamson’s *OR* Report, 616-617.

differences in “the way in which they attempted to go” at White Oak Mountain were far more closely related to a much more recent history: the experiences each brigade had undergone while in uniform, the meanings they had attributed to those experiences, and the specific lessons derived from them. The resultant tactical culture that thrived within each organization shaped the manner in which its members collectively interpreted and anticipated the orders they were given, prepared themselves for what was likely to occur, and responded to it when it did. It also represented the full panoply of learned skills, strengths, and weaknesses maintained by all the members of the unit by virtue of having passed through particular ordeals together.

If there had been any doubt about the Fifteenth Corps's particular strengths and weaknesses, the long Chattanooga campaign had removed any and all lingering ambiguity. From the rank and file of both divisions to Sherman's headquarters, a coherent set of beliefs, assumptions, and predispositions governing tactical-level decision-making, behavior, and performance had emerged in the aftermath of the Vicksburg campaign and remained indelibly etched in the ranks of all the corps's subordinate regiments and batteries. Among the most prominent aspects of this corps-wide culture were (1) a preference for fundamentally conservative tactical choices, with an emphasis on the use of artillery and open order skirmisher “clouds” and sharpshooting details as the main effort in almost all offensive operations, (2) an almost complete lack of confidence in the capability of massed bayonet assaults (friendly or enemy) to successfully overcome even modest breastworks, (3) a corresponding affinity for indirect over direct maneuver solutions in general, and finally (4) a strategic preference for long-range maneuver and resource denial over direct armed confrontation with Rebels.

The battles for Chattanooga ultimately had little new to teach the veterans of Sherman's corps about the nature of combat that it had already gleaned over the previous year. Instead, the

campaign reified for the corps, and for Sherman himself, precisely what they had already suspected about themselves and their capabilities as a military organization. Many of those in First and Second divisions, who had long ago suffered through repeated confirmation of their staunchly held beliefs regarding the impossibility of successful assaults against Rebel works, learned that those lessons still applied. At Ringgold Gap, veterans of many of Steele's ill-fated charges, now under the disciplined guidance of Osterhaus, learned little but recalled much. At the same time, first at Lookout Mountain and later at Ringgold Gap, Osterhaus's command learned firsthand that the intrinsic power of defensive works and point-blank shock volleys worked both ways. If assaulting fortified Rebels had again proven to be futile, the survivors of First Division remained more than willing to allow the enemy to try his own luck against works. By painful experience, their respect for the defensive power of breastworks had been strengthened in a manner that would pay great dividends in the future.

In the aftermath, all across the corps those in the ranks tended to focus more on their successes than their failures when constructing retrospective narratives of the campaign, usually seizing on a particular moment as the essence of the whole. Delos Van Deusen and his comrades of the 6th Missouri celebrated their daring nighttime crossing of the Tennessee as the "great success" of the campaign. "Sherman knew it would turn their right and make us masters of the position," he wrote home excitedly, "which proved correct," ignoring entirely the rest of the bloody story.⁹¹⁵ An Ohioan of Lightburn's brigade, writing after the war, still considered it "one of the most strategic manoeuvres of the war, and have always felt a glowing pride in the conspicuous part my regiment bore in that night's work."⁹¹⁶ Thaddeus Capron, a quartermaster in

⁹¹⁵ Delos Van Deusen [6 MO] to Wife, Nov. 27, 1863, Delos Van Deusen Papers.

⁹¹⁶ *History of the 37th Regiment O.V.V.I.*, 27.

Smith's First Brigade, likewise interpreted the operation as a total success from start to finish. "The Confederates finding that we had flanked them, thought to drive us off, but 'Tecumseh' Sherman was prepared, and drove them from their outermost works, and cut their railroad to Richmond," he crowed in a letter home.⁹¹⁷ While George Hildt admitted to having been "despondent at Chattanooga before the battle as they were so nicely fixed," now the victory seemed "only second to Vicksburg." To his eye, no Rebel army could "stand up against Grant with his Western army," and he looked forward to spring when the mighty host would "move forward again."⁹¹⁸

The disaster at Ringgold shook First Division to the core, and thus their reflections on the recent victory at Chattanooga were more subdued. "This was one of the sharpest battles that I was ever in," Calvin Ainsworth, a survivor of both Arkansas Post and the Louisiana Lunette assault remarked the evening after the fight in his diary. "It was a very foolish thing to charge the hill," he added.⁹¹⁹ Hard facts were few and far between. "As to particulars I cannot give you any," another Iowan scribbled home. "You will get them in the papers long before we do here," he added. "All we know is that we have gained a glorious victory, but in doing So have lost many noble men and many hearth stones will be desolate and many hearts bleed for the events of the last week."⁹²⁰

Despite the pain of considerable loss that hung like a pall over First Division, the net positive tone that emanated from all of the corps's regiments was incontrovertible evidence of

⁹¹⁷ Thaddeus Capron [55 IL] Diary, Nov. 29, 1863.

⁹¹⁸ George Hildt [30 OH] to Parents, Jan. 2, 1864, George Hildt Papers, OHC.; "Missionary Ridge," E. W. Muenscher [30 OH], *National Tribune*, Apr. 8, 1909, 7.

⁹¹⁹ Ainsworth [25 IA], Nov. 27, 1863.

⁹²⁰ A. J. Withrow [25 IA] to Lib, Dec. 2, 1863.

one final salient element of the command's historically derived culture: a nearly unshakable confidence in their abilities to crush the Rebellion, provided that "our Generals" stuck to what they knew from experience worked, and avoided all they knew from experience did not. "We have driven the enemy from another strong hold[,] have to a considerable extent destroyed his army and means of injuring us, have reflected great honor upon our corps and its commanding Officers Genl Grant & Sherman and all this with but little loss of life," one Missourian proclaimed⁹²¹ He and his comrades felt "as though we never could tire [of] talking and writing about our great success." Indeed, the breakout from Chattanooga was "as important a victory as that of Vicksburg and will go as far towards ending the rebellion." Grant's "Vicksburg rats" had struck a blow which "opens up Georgia to us, and bids fair to split the rebel states in two again."⁹²² Capt. Jacob Ritner, wounded in the fighting at Ringgold Gap, expressed matters succinctly. "Of all the fights where we have been, no one man here knew what has been done, except the general result." The "general result," as far as he could tell, was that "the rebels have been out-generaled by Grant, and defeated, routed, demoralized, and the whole army gone to the devil where it belongs."⁹²³ That was enough for the men of Sherman's corps, who were already preparing themselves for new fields.

⁹²¹ Delos Van Deusen [6 MO] to Wife, Nov. 27, 1863, Delos Van Deusen Papers, Huntington Library.

⁹²² Delos Van Deusen [6 MO] to Wife, Nov. 28, 1863, Delos Van Deusen Papers, Huntington Library.

⁹²³ Jacob Ritner [25 IA] to Emeline, Nov. 29, 1863, *Love and Valor*, 257.

CONCLUSION & EPILOGUE: “VETERAN CHARACTER”

*“It was this veteran character that utterly dominated Sherman’s army,
... [and] made the March to the Sea and through the Carolinas possible.”*

~ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond* (1985)⁹²⁴

After five frigid months huddled in winter quarters along the banks of the Tennessee River in northern Alabama, on May 1, 1864 the veteran “skeleton regiments” of the Fifteenth Army Corps departed on what would prove to be their final combat campaign. Despite a long rest and the infusion of a handful of replacements, few regiments could muster more than 250 effectives for active duty in the ranks. In many fewer than 200 men and officers still answered morning roll call.⁹²⁵ For the most part, those who remained had been present at the original formation of their regiments. The initial terms of service having run out during the winter for those in the oldest regiments, the majority had re-enlisted as “Veteran Volunteers,” for three more years or the duration of the war. Now commanded by Maj. Gen. John A. Logan, following Frank Blair’s departure for command of the Seventeenth Corps and Sherman’s to command the entire Military Division of the Mississippi, the Fifteenth Corps was very much a veteran’s corps.⁹²⁶ Moreover, it was the command’s “veteran character” – an emergent product of its tactical culture – which Joseph Glatthaar identified as having “utterly dominated” the Western army and enabled

⁹²⁴ Joseph Glatthaar, *March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman’s Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), xii.

⁹²⁵ “Consolidated Monthly Return,” 1 DIV, 15 AC, April 1864, RG 393, NARA.

⁹²⁶ Frederick Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Volume I* (Des Moines: Dyer Publishing Company, 1908), 497-498.

its exploits during the later March to the Sea, that would likewise enable the Fifteenth Corps's signal contributions to Sherman's army during the forthcoming bloody campaign for Atlanta.

In between leave home, routine drills, reviews, and occasional scouting forays into the northern Alabama hills, the corps had spent much of the winter and early spring honing its tactical skills. After three months of inaction after Ringgold, in mid-February all of First Division's infantry conducted target practice so as to refresh their hard-won marksmanship skills. Each rifleman fired a total of twenty rounds on the range – five rounds apiece at targets 200, 300, 400, and 600 yards distance.⁹²⁷ While the necessity of husbanding ammunition often hobbled the Army's wartime efforts to conduct regular rifle practice, even rare exercise provided invaluable opportunities for volunteers to hone their skills and gain additional experience behind the sights. The fact that more than 40,000 rounds of ammunition were required to conduct the practice underscores the prominent place rifle marksmanship enjoyed within the division's (and corps's) tactical culture. Moreover, the opportunity to fire upon targets presented at predetermined distances provided all of those within the ranks a chance to practice manipulating their sights and estimating the distance to a particular target – skills most had initially developed in the trenches at Vicksburg.

In the aftermath of this exercise, and in preparation for the forthcoming campaign season, First Division's veteran officers took the initial substantive steps to integrate the corps's light infantry-centric tactical culture into its operational structure. A month prior to stepping off, the division established its own permanently detailed "Corps of Sharpshooters." While all of the division's "skeleton regiments" would lean on their skirmishing skills throughout the forthcoming campaign, this detachment would provide Osterhaus with a contingent of especially

⁹²⁷ S.O. 55, HQ 1 DIV, 15 AC, Feb. 24, 1864, RG 393, NARA.

skilled riflemen who could be deployed independently of any particular regiment on the battlefield. The sharpshooters were to be commanded by “very energetic Officers with a thorough administration and tactical knowledge,” and who were also “well acquainted with skirmishing practice.” Along with three sergeants and six corporals, the detachment was composed of seventy-five veteran privates who proved themselves “the very best marksmen according to the records of late target practice.” No evidence exists to suggest they were armed differently from the rest of the division. Moreover, as Special Orders from the same period do not survive for the corps’s other divisions, nor at the corps-level, it remains unknown whether such detachments were forged across the corps. Nevertheless, their existence in Osterhaus’s division represented a novel and contemporaneously unexampled innovation in the structure of U.S. volunteer infantry forces, as well as a powerful expression of the Fifteenth Corps’s tactical culture. While many brigades of the Army of the Potomac would eventually form their own impromptu sharpshooting detachments later that summer, after enduring heavy skirmishing across the forthcoming Overland campaign similar to that the Fifteenth Corps had long known, that such details emerged first in the Fifteenth Corps is testament to the impress of its unique experiences on its tactical evolution.⁹²⁸

Just as past experience had taught the corps the vital importance of rifle marksmanship, its time in the trenches at Vicksburg and its victories at Chattanooga had likewise illustrated the salient contributions of dependable and highly accurate artillery support provided to active infantry operations. Instead of simply opening engagements with heavy preliminary

⁹²⁸ S.O. 92, HQ 1 DIV, 15 AC, Apr. 1, 1864, RG 393, NARA; By contrast, all Rebel commands had been ordered by the Confederate government in Richmond to form their own dedicated “sharpshooter battalions” as early as May 1862. Andrew Haughton, *Training, Tactics, and Leadership in the Confederate Army of Tennessee: Seeds of Failure* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 84-85.

bombardments designed to pulverize enemy positions prior to infantry assaults, the Vicksburg siege had taught the corps how infantry and artillery could effectively work together in rudimentary ways to support one another. For this reason, Osterhaus's efforts to hone his division's skills were not restricted to the infantry. All the division's batteries were also to "so arrange the Target practice as to be productive of the greatest possible benefit in the instruction of the men," with all loading and firing "made in strict compliance with the prescribed Manual." Battery commanders were to continually order the crews to limber, move, and redeploy their guns "as soon as the men become habituated to the range, in order to accustom them to estimate distances correctly and quickly." The loss of artillerists to Rebel rifles at Vicksburg impressed the artillerymen with the extreme danger accompanying the maneuver of batteries prior to going into action. "Experience has shown that most of the casualties occur during this critical period," Osterhaus cautioned, "[and] it becomes therefore of the highest importance to shorten the time so occupied." After training on quickly limbering and unlimbering the guns, and ensuring "proper discipline" was maintained at all times, the division's batteries would be able to deploy and redeploy quickly and safely in order to support the light infantry "clouds" operating to their front. Officers kept meticulous records of the target practice and submitted them to division headquarters for review. The speed and accuracy with which the veteran batteries could provide support had proven itself of great value at Chattanooga, and Osterhaus sought to refine these skills for the benefit of future operations.⁹²⁹

I. "One universal skirmish"

The campaign for Atlanta during the spring and summer of 1864, arguably the most strategically important of the Civil War, was to prove profoundly well calibrated for the Fifteenth

⁹²⁹ S.O. 65, HQ 1 DIV, 15 AC, Mar. 5, 1864, RG 393, NARA.

Corps's evolved tactical culture. This was in no small part due to the similarity of the rugged and unforgiving terrain of northwestern Georgia with that which the corps had confronted before at Chattanooga and Vicksburg. Nearly 70% of the area over which the armies clashed during the campaign was still covered in dense pine forests as late as 1870, all but prohibiting the kinds of large-scale textbook bayonet assaults arrayed in massed lines of battle that the corps had habitually proven itself incapable of achieving.⁹³⁰

Instead of pummeling successive Rebel lines of defense arrayed between Chattanooga and Atlanta with bloody frontal assaults, Sherman's southward progress was mostly marked by an adept marriage of the strategic offense with the tactical defense. Digging earthworks to defend part of his army group while the men skirmished constantly all along the line in an effort to hold their Rebel counterparts in place, another element launched repeated "whiplash" turning movements designed to out-flank fortified enemy positions and plunge ever deeper southward toward Atlanta while avoiding any major direct confrontation. Through this "indirect approach," forward momentum toward the army's ultimate objective was still possible despite the general avoidance of major battles between the two competing forces.⁹³¹ Cump habitually relied upon his trusted Army of the Tennessee and Logan's Fifteenth Corps to conduct these "whiplash" turning movements, perhaps in hopes of reducing the amount of combat they might have to endure. His choice leveraged the corps's proven capacity to move swiftly across difficult terrain. Its parent Army of the Tennessee, then under the command of Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson, amounted to what one historian has termed "Sherman's prize pedestrians," and their consistent and

⁹³⁰ 1870 U.S. Federal Census.

⁹³¹ Earl Hess, *Fighting for Atlanta: Tactics, Terrain, and Trenches in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 4.

dependable capacity for arriving at each and every assigned objective on time allowed Cump to hone the “tedious and risky process” of maneuver warfare “to a fine art.”⁹³²

In large part because of Sherman’s initial careful avoidance of major clashes with the Rebel host to his front whenever possible, rolling firefights between scattered skirmishers hidden behind natural cover quickly defined the character of infantry combat during the campaign. After the first full month of fighting and maneuvering Sherman concluded that the campaign had yet to be distinguished by any “real battle,” but rather constituted “one universal skirmish extending over a vast surface” or even “a Big Indian War.” Another member of his army thought the almost perpetual contact with Rebels in densely wooded terrain ought to have been described as a “skirmisher’s war.” Indeed, as Earl Hess observes, more than any other campaign of the war, the drive to Atlanta “offered skirmishers their best opportunity to shine.” The consistent forward momentum of Sherman’s columns through the rugged pine woods of northwestern Georgia was entirely contingent upon the ability of dense “clouds” of skirmishers to screen the army’s front and maintain the tactical initiative. Even when Rebels managed to blunt the forward progress of the leviathan Federal host, “aggressive skirmishing ... helped to shape the contour of operations,” Hess argues, as Sherman’s veterans habitually dug-in and relied upon skirmisher “clouds” to regain the initiative and hold Rebel attention while turning movements unfolded on the flanks. The consistent success of Federal skirmishers to achieve and maintain this initiative enabled U.S. forces to exhaust and degrade the Rebel capacity to resist the army’s inexorable advance toward Atlanta. “Federal skirmishers were seriously degrading the stamina and fighting

⁹³² James Pickett Jones, *Blackjack: John A. Logan and Southern Illinois in the Civil War Era* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 195; WTS to John Sherman, June 9, 1864, *SCW*, 645; Hess, *Fighting for Atlanta*, 4.

effectiveness of troops on the Confederate battle line,” Hess observes. As a direct result, many Secessionist commands gradually found themselves “too weakened to fight effectively.”⁹³³

Few of Sherman’s several corps performed as adeptly along the skirmish line as his original Fifteenth. If the Atlanta campaign was defined by its character as a “skirmisher’s war,” John Logan commanded what, by 1864, had evolved into a veritable skirmisher’s corps. Each of its “skeleton regiments” had been organically molded by experience into a premier light infantry force. Moreover, Sherman’s operational art and the tangled terrain of the region played to the greatest strengths of the command’s tactical culture. “With years of experience behind them,” Hess observed of Federal skirmishers during the campaign, the veteran riflemen utterly “dominated no-man’s land.”⁹³⁴ In a similar vein, historian Andrew Haughton has observed how the relative willingness of Federal and Rebel forces in the western theater to be “flexible and innovative” in their tactics played a major role in determining victory and defeat on the battlefield. Whereas, by the spring and summer of 1864, the Fifteenth Corps conducted nearly all of its offensive operations arrayed in strong skirmisher “clouds,” the Rebels they confronted still emphasized the use of massed battle lines bristling with bayonets in the assault. This intransigence is even more striking given their innovative embrace of dedicated sharpshooter detachments years prior to their creation in any Federal command. Thus, while the western Rebels cannot be accused of neglecting the employment of light infantry entirely, their comparative inexperience actually employing such tactics on the battlefield, as well as their own

⁹³³ Earl Hess, *Rifle Musket*, 156-157.

⁹³⁴ Earl Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2015), 101.

tactical culture, played a major role in allowing Sherman's riflemen to gain and maintain the tactical initiative at most every turn.⁹³⁵

To be sure, there were dramatic missteps. On two separate occasions during the campaign, the corps was once again forced to launch desperate frontal assaults against deeply entrenched Rebel positions. As at Missionary Ridge, Sherman and his lieutenants always showed considerable reluctance when ordering such maneuvers, but in both instances the assaults seemed all but unavoidable. Also as upon earlier fields, uncooperative terrain dismantled the cohesion and coordination of massed formations, rendering success nearly impossible. While during the first of these attacks, undertaken by the corps at the battle of Resaca, advanced skirmisher "clouds" screening the corps's main assault formations proved mostly capable of carrying thinly held Rebel trenches by themselves, this fortuitous success proved dangerously misleading.⁹³⁶



Figure 1. Combat Sketch: Atlanta Campaign. While photography was rare in the Western theater of the Rebellion, this combat sketch by an eyewitness illustrates the Fifteenth Corps's habitual employment of open-order tactics in the assault during the Atlanta Campaign.⁹³⁷

⁹³⁵ Andrew Haughton, *Training, Tactics, and Leadership in the Confederate Army of Tennessee: Seeds of Failure* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

⁹³⁶ "Report of Brig. Gen. Giles A. Smith," May 22, 1864, *OR*, I:38, III, 191; Hess, *Fighting for Atlanta*, 47.

⁹³⁷ "Sherman's Advance – General Logan's Skirmishers Advancing Toward the Railroad at Resaca, May 13, 1864 – From a Sketch by Theodore R. Davis," *Harper's Weekly*, Jun. 11, 1864.

When again charged with launching a similar frontal attack against supposedly thinned Rebel lines at Kennesaw Mountain in late June, the corps paid a heavy price. Although screened by skirmisher “clouds,” which managed to adeptly brush away most outlying Rebel pickets, this time the veterans dispersed in open order proved insufficient to overcome the much more formidable works atop Pigeon Hill at the base of towering Kennesaw Mountain. Passage of the main body of three brigades over intractable terrain marked by every conceivable natural obstacle from creeks to forests to bogs mercilessly dismantled the corps’s cohesion prior to its arrival at the enemy abatis. “The underbrush through which we advanced was so thick that it was impossible to preserve a line,” Brig. Gen. Lightburn later observed with frustration. “The consequence was the entire line was broken ... which was impossible to reform.”⁹³⁸ One Hoosier in his brigade described the tangled thickets as “indescribable confusion,” adding that “it was difficult to tell our position, or see from what quarter danger threatened us.” Attacking adjacent to Lightburn’s brigade was Giles Smith, returned from convalescing after his Chattanooga wounds. “The ground advanced over proved to be worse than anticipated,” he later reported. The “steep and rugged [hillside], covered with brush and felled trees, ledges of rock, and an abatis ingeniously and firmly constructed ... render[ed] the advance in the line of battle entirely impracticable.” Just as so many times before, the rugged terrain eradicated the coordination and thus massed cohesion of the attack, again giving most participants the perception of being entirely unsupported. “There could be no concert of action and little leadership,” one Illinoisan later lamented. “Nothing we had surmounted at Vicksburg equaled it in natural difficulties.”⁹³⁹

⁹³⁸ “Report of Brig. Gen. Joseph A. J. Lightburn,” June 28, 1864, *OR*, I:38, III, 222.

⁹³⁹ Richard A. Baumgartner and Larry M. Strayer, *Kennesaw Mountain: June 1864* (Huntington: Blue Acorn Press, 1998), 114-120.

After suffering 571 men killed or wounded on the wooded slopes and insurmountable thickets, the Fifteenth Corps fell back from its final bloody repulse of the war. Sherman would never make the same mistake again. Still, his private reaction to the brutal repulse at Kennesaw proved that while he had a firm grasp of the command's lingering incapacity for frontal assaults, he still retained an incomplete understanding as to why. "Had the assault been made with one-fourth more vigor," it would have succeeded, he later asserted, echoing the same conclusions he had arrived at in the bloody aftermath of Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post. "I was forced to make the effort, and it should have succeeded, but the officers & men have been so used to my avoiding excessive danger and forcing back the enemy by strategy that they hate to assault," he explained in a letter home. Despite the exceptional experience of the Fifteenth Corps at Resaca, it appeared that Logan, like Sherman, still had "no troops which can be made to assault," even if, as Cump pronounced, "to assault is sometimes necessary, for its effect on the Enemy." Indeed, Sherman was correct in his perception of the corps's tactical culture being founded in no small part upon a trust in the capacity of "Uncle Billy" to "avoid excessive danger and force back the enemy by strategy," but in his frustration Cump misunderstood the true causes of his perpetual tactical failures in the attack. Even so, from Kennesaw onward, Sherman would do everything in his power to avoid direct assaults on fortified Rebel positions if at all possible.⁹⁴⁰

In between the two bloody assaults at Resaca and Kennesaw, another even more nightmarish engagement in the dense woods outside Dallas, Georgia marked the most chaotic contest of the campaign. After launching one of its characteristic "whiplash" turning movements, McPherson's "skeleton" army stumbled into nearly two weeks of an intensely traumatic siege-like gridlock with entrenched and desperate Rebels less than 30 miles from Atlanta. Fortunately

⁹⁴⁰ WTS to Ellen Sherman, July 9, 1864, *SCW*, 663.

for Logan's veterans, their experience with field fortifications and finesse in skirmishing paid off in the “Hell Hole” despite several close run-ins with massed Rebel assaults through the thickets.⁹⁴¹

Despite the immense hardship and bloodletting of the first three months of operations, the true crucible of the corps’s participation in the campaign came at the very eastern gates of Atlanta on July 22. After approaching the apparently abandoned outlying works of the city from the east, the men had not yet enjoyed an opportunity to establish respectable defensive works like those at Dallas before an entire Rebel corps fell upon two of Logan’s most advanced brigades. Although the veterans of Morgan Smith’s Second Division, caught in the open, did their best to repulse the sudden Secessionist onslaught, their complete inexperience with defending a position outside the protection of a trench, along with an unfinished railroad cut on the division’s flank, combined to catalyze total disaster. As wildly yipping South Carolinians and Alabamians poured from the railroad cut onto the Federal flank, much of Smith’s veteran division routed in terror and pandemonium to the rear. Only the combination of the urgent support of First Division’s massed artillery to the north – “accurate in the extreme,” according to one Rebel officer – a frantic counterattack led by Logan in person, and bungled Secessionist orders ultimately saved the corps from complete destruction. While ultimately a victory for U.S. arms, the close call deeply impressed upon the survivors of Logan’s battered corps the importance of fieldworks and carefully protected flanks when defending against a charging foe.⁹⁴²

⁹⁴¹ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 507-519.

⁹⁴² The most comprehensive treatments of the battle of Atlanta remain Gary Ecelbarger, *The Day Dixie Died: The Battle of Atlanta* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010) and Russell S. Bonds, *War Like the Thunderbolt: The Battle and Burning of Atlanta* (Yardley: Westholme, 2009); Albert Castel, *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 408.



Figure 2. Combat Sketch: Battle of Ezra Church. This combat sketch by an eyewitness illustrates the Fifteenth Corps's massed defensive tactics employed during the battle of Ezra Church. While the Rebel attackers are approaching massed in close formations, the Federal veterans each take up positions with which to respond with aimed fire.⁹⁴³

Both of these tactical lessons were on clear display during the final two major engagements of the campaign. Slung westward around Atlanta by Sherman in yet another “whiplash” maneuver designed to cut the city’s final remaining rail lifelines, the Fifteenth Corps led the Army of the Tennessee’s van. Diligently entrenching at each and every nightly halt, the corps’s still traumatized veterans refused to be caught unprepared again. On July 28, less than a week after their ignominious rout, these tactics paid off. Sensing Sherman’s bid to isolate the Rebel bastion, General John Bell Hood launched a counterstroke aimed at destroying the Army

⁹⁴³ “General Sherman’s Campaign – Battle of Ezra’s Church (General Woods’s Division), July 28, 1864 – Sketched by Theodore R. Davis,” *Harper’s Weekly*, Aug. 26, 1864.

of the Tennessee west of the city near Ezra Church. Arrayed in massed lines of battle, several successive waves of Secessionist infantry hurled themselves at Logan's riflemen, ensconced snugly behind impromptu log breastworks and church pews packed with bulging knapsacks. As at Dallas, the veteran regiments fired volley after volley into the Rebels at near point-blank range, utterly destroying their formations. Sherman, too, had learned his lesson. With the tables now finally turned, and his own beloved original corps now unleashing the same punishment it had so often painfully received, Cump knew precisely what was on the menu. "Just what I wanted, just what I wanted," he shouted reflexively aloud to staffers: "Invite them to attack, it will save us trouble, save us trouble, they'll only beat their brains out, beat their brains out!" Indeed, the Rebels did just that, suffering more than 3,000 casualties compared to 562 (50 killed) across the entire Fifteenth Corps. One in every three Rebels making the attack had been cut down in a battle that lasted only two hours. The morale of the Atlanta garrison having been all but completely destroyed by the combined losses of July 22 and 28, Hood's final bid to once again assail Logan's corps at Jonesboro on August 31 fell with even less vigor. Once again suffering mightily in sequential uncoordinated and practically suicidal frontal assaults arrayed in massed battle lines, the Secessionist defense of Atlanta was decisively crushed. On September 1, the Rebel army abandoned the city, and with it much of any hope for the so-called Confederacy's bid for independence.⁹⁴⁴

⁹⁴⁴ The most comprehensive modern treatments of the battle of Ezra Church are Gary Ecelbarger, *Slaughter at the Chapel: The Battle of Ezra Church 1864* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016) and Earl Hess, *The Battle of Ezra Church and the Struggle for Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Ecelbarger, *Slaughter*, 88.

II. “The dawn of the tactics of the present day”

The campaign for Atlanta marked the apotheosis of the Fifteenth Corps’s combat effectiveness on the battlefield. Despite occasional dramatic misadventure, the corps performed well in large part due to the ideal calibration of its tactical culture with the objectives it was called upon to pursue. Just as at Chattanooga, when the corps was required to conduct operations for which its tactical culture and operational heritage had prepared it, its veteran regiments performed admirably. On the other hand, when required to launch frontal assaults across intractable terrain, its signature weaknesses were on vivid display. While Logan and his “veteran volunteers” were appropriately proud of their accomplishments during the drive to Atlanta for the rest of their lives, soldier scholars had much to learn from the experience of the Fifteenth Corps during the campaign as it related to the future of infantry warfare.

More than any other factor, the particular terrain upon which the Fifteenth Corps had confronted its enemies during its early campaigns shaped the command’s light infantry-centric tactical culture on the battlefield, and prepared it to excel during the decisive campaign for Atlanta. Both its penchant for open-order skirmishing and its perpetual struggles with the coordination of frontal assaults were direct byproducts of its traumatic experiences fighting Rebels over the broken ground and dense woods of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee. Reflecting upon his own “Military Lessons of the War” within his 1875 memoirs, Sherman drew upon his experience of commanding the corps when he wrote:

Very few of the battles in which I have participated were fought as described in European text-books, viz., in great masses, in perfect order, maneuvering by corps, divisions, and brigades. We were generally in a wooded country, and, though our lines were deployed according to tactics, the men generally fought in strong skirmish-lines, taking advantage of the shape of ground, and of every cover. We were generally the assailants, and in wooded and broken countries the ‘defensive’ had a positive advantage over us, for they were always ready, had cover, and always knew the ground to their immediate front; whereas we, their assailants, had to grope our way over unknown ground, and generally

*found a cleared field or prepared entanglements that held us for a time under a close and withering fire.*⁹⁴⁵

This passage has recently come under a close and withering fire itself by historian Earl Hess. Europe's battlefields were also "cluttered with obstacles," he argues, and Sherman "generalized far too recklessly" about Civil War tactics based almost exclusively upon his army's unique experiences fighting for Atlanta.⁹⁴⁶ These criticisms ignore the fact that Sherman's observations of "the battles in which I have participated" were limited to his own "personal angle of vision," just as the tactical culture of the Fifteenth Corps had likewise been forged by the content of its own specific experiences. Never having witnessed the titanic "open field fights" of Antietam or Gettysburg in the East, or even their rare counterparts in the West, the entire corpus of combat experience Cump and his corps developed over the course of the war neatly matched his description. Much the same could have be said of Grant. "Our old systems of tactics were translations from the French, and altogether not adapted to territory such as that in which the greater part of the rebellion was fought," he told a *New York Times* reporter in 1881. "In wooded country with narrow roads, we might as well have had no tactics at all, so far as the old system served us. Indeed, it was not infrequently the case that we were obliged to entirely abandon the system and depend upon plain common sense," he added.⁹⁴⁷ Of course, there were plenty of cleared fields in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Georgia, just as there was rugged and nightmarish terrain in Europe and the eastern United States, but the Fifteenth Corps, like both Grant and Sherman, rarely if ever encountered the Rebel enemy upon such ground. Instead, combat came

⁹⁴⁵ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 885.

⁹⁴⁶ Earl Hess, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat: Reality and Myth* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 173-174.

⁹⁴⁷ "Army Circles Astonished," *New York Times*, Mar. 17, 1881, 5; J. P. Clark, *Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern U.S. Army, 1815-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 93.

primarily within “wooded and broken countries,” and the corps’s tactical culture represented a powerful expression of that fact.

Even by 1870, the first postwar census to tabulate cleared versus wooded acres of land in the United States, the difference between Eastern and Western areas of operations remained stark. In Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, where the majority of the major battles of the Eastern theater took place, and where Creighton’s brigade and the Army of the Potomac had learned its trade, only 45% of the land was still covered in forest. Within the eight counties of northern Virginia that experienced the most bloodshed during the conflict, that number dropped to 38%. By contrast, in Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee, where the Fifteenth Corps had fought its battles, 65% of the ground in these much younger states remained densely wooded as late as 1870. In stark contrast, less than a quarter of the acres of Adams County, Pennsylvania, where the Army of the Potomac fought its most climactic engagement at Gettysburg, were still forested at the time of the battle. While the nightmarish bloodletting of the James Peninsula and the Wilderness obviously represented major and important exceptions to the rule, Western battlefields were on average far more heavily forested and cluttered with vegetation than were their Eastern counterparts.⁹⁴⁸

The terrain of American battlefields had long proven far more vexing than those in Europe, and European armies had been forced to adapt their tactics to this environmental reality since the era of initial colonization. Much of prevailing eighteenth and early nineteenth century Western tactical art having been first devised during the Enlightenment era of “limited war” in Europe, theorists assumed that most major clashes between armies would take place upon mostly

⁹⁴⁸ 1870 U.S. Federal Census; Brent Nosworthy, *The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003), 313.

open ground. Even by the early nineteenth century, although much of Europe remained blanketed with dense woodlands, most of the fields upon which Napoleon I fought his great battles were distinguished by “relatively open, gentle countryside where both armies could manoeuvre with ease.”⁹⁴⁹ The contrasting lack of such expanses of cleared terrain in the Americas forced Europeans to adapt their tactics accordingly. For the most part, they did so with remarkable effectiveness, few quite so adeptly as the British.

At least as early as the Seven Years War, the British Army had adapted to the exigencies of congested American terrain by leaning heavily on American colonial militia with their especial skill in light infantry combat when fighting upon heavily wooded battlefields. Habitually extending the distance between the files of their battle lines, the Crown’s infantry learned from experience that “no maneuvers may ever be carried out in serried ranks in these districts that are so terribly wooded.”⁹⁵⁰ Far from the rigid tactics of Hollywood’s “redcoats,” historian Matthew Spring has recently shown that British infantry during the American Revolutionary War once again learned quickly from experience to emphasize open-order skirmishing and a consistent pursuit of Rebel flanks in order to avoid bloody frontal attacks across cluttered ground against an often entrenched enemy. Many conservative British tacticians worried about this trend, arguing that skirmishers had, in America, “instead of being considered an accessory to the battalion ... become the principal feature of our army.”⁹⁵¹ Although the Continental Army eventually achieved victory for reasons that extended well beyond infantry

⁹⁴⁹ Rory Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 16.

⁹⁵⁰ Alex Burns, “How did the British Army adapt to North America in the French and Indian War,” *Kabinettskriege*, June 20, 2017.

⁹⁵¹ Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 21.

tactics, the natural evolution of British infantry deployments during the conflict was powerful testament to the impact American geography could have in shaping tactical culture.⁹⁵²

While both European and American officers across the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries consistently sought to master maneuvers “as described in European text-books, viz., in great masses, in perfect order,” the geography of the United States routinely refused to comply.⁹⁵³ The unforgiving terrain of American battlefields dismantled the cohesion of “touch of the elbow” infantry formations learned and practiced on small manicured parade fields.⁹⁵⁴ While the much smaller commands of earlier conflicts could often conceivably wedge themselves into the meager acreage cleared for planting on American farms, as the sheer size of formations and armies ballooned exponentially during the War of the Rebellion, the same small plots could never hope to play host to even a small portion of titanic battles that involved tens of thousands of men at a time. In the still mostly uncleared portions of Arkansas and Mississippi, where the Fifteenth Corps faced its baptism by fire, the distinctively nightmarish terrain spurred what amounted to an American tactical renaissance in infantry warfare as armies of volunteers trained on the drill field to operate in massed formations learned the same lessons their European counterparts had perennially derived from experience before.

⁹⁵² Matthew H. Spring, *With Zeal and With Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008).

⁹⁵³ Samuel J. Watson, *Jackson's Sword: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1810-1821* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 14; Michael A. Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon: French Influence on the American Way of Warfare from the War of 1812 to the Outbreak of WWII* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh, *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁹⁵⁴ Earl Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 47.

Many antebellum military professionals had long anticipated that such a renaissance was coming, though they had incorrectly judged it a “revolution,” and had fundamentally misjudged what its cause would be. They had harbored grave concerns about the mass arrival of the rifle musket onto modern battlefields for decades prior to the Civil War. While there remained much heated and contentious debate as to what impact the weapon’s increased effective range and improved accuracy would have on infantry tactics, most agreed that infantrymen armed with rifles would open engagements at distances far greater than those common to the Napoleonic era of predominately smoothbore muskets. Because of this, massed formations in “serried ranks” assaulting with bayonets across the open ground typical of Napoleonic battlefields would be utterly butchered by the rifle fire of defenders long before they could strike with cold steel. Only by either speeding up the pace at which such attacks were conducted, or by opening up and extending massed battle lines, could the deadly effects of prolonged exposure to rifle fire be avoided. For this reason, several theorists prophesied, future battlefields would necessitate a heavier reliance upon open-order infantry formations and light infantry-style skirmisher tactics. At the same time, others vehemently disagreed, Napoleon III of France the most influential among them. Arguing that the complicated process of accurate long-range firing would likely prove beyond the pale of comprehension for the dullards who often filled the ranks of European armies, these critics argued that infantry engagements would continue to unfold at more or less the same distance as they had for the last several centuries. Massed bayonet charges following point-blank offensive volleys would continue to define the traditional infantry attack, they argued, and relatively little adaptation would be required.

In the end, the experience of the American Civil War indirectly proved both parties correct. As episodes like Blair’s bloody charge at Chickasaw Bayou made clear, on occasion

defending infantry did pepper onrushing attackers with rifle fire from distances nearing the maximum range of their weapons. This attritional tactic eroded the cohesion and mass of the assaulting force long before its arrival at the defensive *abatis*, just as many antebellum theorists argued it would. At the same time, the vast majority of defenders still relied upon massed “shock volleys” at ranges sufficiently proximal that the extended range of their rifles made little difference. Historians continue to hotly debate the average ranged at which the “average” Civil War infantry engagement (if such a thing existed) unfolded, but as the corps rarely encountered long-range rifle fire when conducting frontal assaults, the fact that the Rebels it confronted were frequently armed with rifles cannot itself explain the corps’s learned tendency to rely chiefly upon open-order skirmishing in battle.⁹⁵⁵

Although antebellum military writers had emphasized the capacity of the rifled musket to revolutionize *defensive* infantry tactics, the experience of the Fifteenth Corps suggests the weapon had a far more significant impact on *offensive* maneuvers, most especially when conducted across broken and cluttered American terrain against an enemy ever increasingly hidden behind field fortifications. If the landscape itself motivated the first vestiges of what historians have deemed an “open-order revolution” during the Civil War in the Western theater, the arrival of the rifled musket played a powerful role in enabling it. While the difference of accuracy between smoothbore and rifled muskets at extremely close range when firing at a massed target of standing men in the open was negligible, when engaging an enemy half-shrouded by cover or hidden in the depths of a rifle pit, exposing only his face and forearm below a protective headlog, the increased accuracy of a rifle could make all the difference. When

⁹⁵⁵ Brent Nosworthy, *The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers), 22-60; Hess, *Rifled Musket*, 9-34.

firing close-range massed volleys designed to pummel an infantry line arrayed in “serried ranks” before driving home a bayonet charge, the performance disparity between smoothbore and rifled muskets mattered little. When attempting to strike fleeting and mostly shrouded targets from the protection of a forward trench amid a prolonged siege, or sniping the gunners of an enemy artillery battery from hundreds of yards away, the rifle was irreplaceable. Indeed, the impressive ranges at which several members of the corps reported engaging Rebel targets with their rifles during the Vicksburg siege suggests that in the capable hands of experienced veteran volunteers, the rifled musket’s full capabilities could be and were often realized on Civil War battlefields, despite the assertions of many historians to the contrary. Moreover, as the men of the Fifteenth Corps almost never fired massed offensive volleys (restricting such tactics to defense against enemy bayonet charges) their particular experience taught them little about the rifle’s relative utility in such circumstances. Instead, when ordered to attack an entrenched enemy that routinely proved resistant to frontal assault but still vulnerable to a skilled rifleman’s ball, the rifle’s increased range and accuracy paired with a veteran’s marksmanship skill, honed over months of practice, frequently proved the ideal tools for the task.⁹⁵⁶

The offensive advantages organic to such tools were squandered when employed within massed formations of “serried ranks.” In order to take full advantage of the rifled musket’s capabilities, individual riflemen needed cover, opportunities to take careful aim, considerable experience behind their weapon, and the independence to take advantage of each and every chance to improve their positions and those of their comrades. Just as Sherman’s loose leash would soon allow his army’s “veteran character” to flourish during his forthcoming raids through

⁹⁵⁶ Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 8.

Georgia and the Carolinas, only by leveraging individual freedom and hard won marksmanship skill on the skirmish line could Sherman's veteran skirmishers achieve, secure, and maintain the critical tactical initiative that facilitated his "indirect" way of war.⁹⁵⁷ While the broken and rugged Mississippi, Tennessee, and Georgia terrain regularly destroyed the cohesive mass and critical coordination of their frontal assaults against Rebel works, by 1864 most of the men and officers of the Fifteenth Corps had determined that such assaults were futile anyway. By instead learning to use the same cluttered Southern terrain, their learned tactical skills as skirmishers, and their modern rifled weaponry to maximum advantage, the volunteer regiments of the corps had naturally evolved into the expert skirmishers who enabled Sherman's drive southward toward Atlanta.

While military professionals had long recognized the tactical utility of skirmishers and light infantry in infantry combat, very few anticipated that they would ever wholly supplant massed lines on the battlefield. As historian Rory Muir observes, Napoleonic contingents of riflemen and light infantry were meant to play an exclusively "negative role" in combat, screening and protecting massed main bodies while "preparing the way for the decisive attack" with the bayonet.⁹⁵⁸ In his *Elementary Treatise on Advanced Guard, Outposts, and Detachment Service of Troops* (1847), widely read and digested by volunteer officers on both sides before, during, and even after the Civil War, Dennis Hart Mahan identified two basic forms of infantry: light and line. The two were meant to habitually support one another in the attack. Light infantry led the way as skirmishers, opened engagements, and kept the enemy suppressed with accurate

⁹⁵⁷ Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 38; Brett Gibbons, *The Destroying Angel: The Rifle-Musket as the First Modern Infantry Weapon* (Independently Published, Brett Gibbons, 2019).

⁹⁵⁸ Rory Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 67.

fire while massed line infantry maneuvered for advantage. Once in a sound striking position, the line would launch its bayonet assault, covered on the flanks by the fire of the dispersed skirmishers who ceased firing once the friendly line passed to the front.⁹⁵⁹ Only if the foe proved a particularly meager host would light infantry ever constitute the main effort.⁹⁶⁰ On the defense, both light and line infantry combined their firepower within a massed battalion to repel enemy assaults with volleys of fire before launching a counter-charge when the exhausted attacker “shows, by the wavering or confusion of his line, a want of confidence.”⁹⁶¹ While Mahan acknowledged that an infantryman capable of operating exclusively as either line or light infantry would prove “inconvenient, at the least,” he still admitted that “perfection is more easily reached by confining the individual to one branch of his art, than by requiring him to make himself conversant with the whole.”⁹⁶² Sherman and his subordinates learned this lesson from experience as their corps, trained on the drill field to act as both line and light infantry, organically transformed into a corps of almost exclusively the latter.

Their transformation probably would have come as little surprise to Mahan, given the corps’s particular experiences while under arms. After all, the success of massed line infantry, he explained, “depend[ed] upon the action of the mass, *ensemble* [coordination], coolness, and determination.”⁹⁶³ Packed elbow-to-elbow in line, they fired by volley, maneuvered in column,

⁹⁵⁹ Dennis H. Mahan, *An Elementary Treatise on Advanced-Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops, and the Manner of Posting and Handling Them in Presence of an Enemy* (New York: John Wiley, 1862), 42; William P. Craighill, *The 1862 Army Officer’s Pocket Companion* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2002), 176-178.

⁹⁶⁰ Mahan, *Out-post*, 51.

⁹⁶¹ Mahan, *Out-post*, 50.

⁹⁶² Mahan, *Out-post*, 41.

⁹⁶³ Mahan, *Out-post*, 41.

and habitually “attack[ed] with the bayonet.”⁹⁶⁴ The “*ensemble*,” or coordination of an attacking massed line was the ultimate key to its success. As the corps had learned painfully on many occasions, large-scale attacks that fell upon Rebel works in piecemeal fashion never had any hope of decisive success. Each and every assault column needed to arrive simultaneously all along the enemy line in order to effectively overwhelm his defenses. Routinely incapable of effecting such cohesive and well-coordinated assaults due to the difficult and densely wooded terrain the Fifteenth Corps habitually found itself operating within, its successive traumatic failures in turn eroded the confidence of its member regiments whenever ordered to assault *en masse*. That very lack of confidence – Mahan’s “coolness, and determination” – when added to the lack of any concerted attempt by their officers to remedy the command’s coordinative challenges, sustained the corps’s signature tactical disability throughout the war.

On the other hand, light infantry, Mahan instructed, fighting habitually in “the dispersed order,” relied instead upon its skill at laying down effective small arms fire upon the enemy for success in its much more limited offensive role. Each skirmisher, though supported by another scattered some distance to his right and left, regularly found himself “thrown upon his own resources, being obliged to take cover where he can most conveniently find it.” To become a master of his trade, the skirmisher needed to “be a good marksman, cool, deliberate, and circumspect.”⁹⁶⁵ The Fifteenth Corps enjoyed plentiful opportunities to develop these skills thoroughly throughout the war. Continually required to fragment into small groups – either four-man skirmish teams on the battlefield or widely scattered fatigue details off of it – the men and officers were more than comfortable operating independently without the direct oversight of

⁹⁶⁴ Mahan, *Out-post*, 41-42.

⁹⁶⁵ Mahan, *Out-post*, 41.

superiors. Cluttered terrain had naturally broken their massed lines into skirmisher “clouds,” even when officers did seemingly everything in their power to prevent it. The very ground and vegetation of the lower Mississippi valley had thrust small units and individual soldiers upon their “own resources.” Pairing the natural fruits of these experiences with the unexampled opportunities the corps enjoyed to master the art of musket, rifle, and artillery marksmanship during the Vicksburg and Jackson sieges, along with the veteran’s “cool, deliberate, and circumspect” approach to combat, it should come as little surprise that Sherman’s command matured into a premiere skirmisher’s corps. That it did, however, also meant that its true tactical capabilities were markedly limited, forcing its commanders to either adapt their operational art accordingly, or neglect doing so at great peril.

By 1864, the Fifteenth Corps could reliably be expected to march great distances at impressive speed, sustain itself off the countryside, extensively denude a region of valuable foodstuffs, and swiftly destroy Rebel railroads and strategic infrastructure. In combat, it could reliably gain and maintain fire supremacy and the tactical initiative on the skirmish line. It could also rapidly construct impressive “hasty” field fortifications from which it could repel even the most savage of Rebel assaults with great confidence. On the other hand, nothing in its operational heritage suggested that it could or should have been reliably expected to successfully carry Rebel positions at the point of the bayonet by a frontal assault. Nor could it dependably stand up against an enemy in the open without the benefit of defensive works. To be sure, these two capabilities arguably represented the most crucial tactical skills for a mid-nineteenth century military organization, but nevertheless had proven time and again to be irrepressible handicaps for the corps’s veteran regiments. Successful prosecution of their assigned objectives was in no

small part contingent upon the relative calibration of assignments with the command's evolved tactical culture.

Having commanded the Fifteenth Corps during the formational period of his lengthy career as a grand tactician and strategist, Sherman's own operational art during the latter years of the conflict as an army group commander showed the indelible impress of the corps's tactical culture. Although historians and military professionals have long lauded Cump's apparent mastery of the "indirect approach" during the latter years of the war, his own personal evolution into a master of maneuver warfare came initially at a great cost in blood and suffering paid by the Fifteenth Corps. Sherman's place in the annals of America's "great captains" was only earned due to his proven intellectual malleability, and a capacity to learn from experience what he could realistically expect his corps (and later army) to achieve given its own specific past experiences. While he always retained an incomplete understanding as to why the command chronically suffered from an inability to carry enemy works from the front, he did apparently finally accept it, and acted accordingly.

The emergent tactical culture of the Fifteenth Corps, borne of its specific historical experiences, was in many ways similar to, but also markedly distinct from, that which an observer may have witnessed at work within any other of the U.S. Army's several *corps d'armee* by the end of the war. Despite similar ultimate evolutionary trajectories, the tactical cultures organic to each corps were likewise the direct byproducts of the specific experiences each formation underwent while in service. The same perfect marriage between the Fifteenth Corps's tactical culture and the specific operational tasks it was called upon to perform during the Atlanta, Savannah, and Carolinas campaigns was not initially enjoyed by those corps serving within the Army of the Potomac during the final year of the conflict in the East. The dense

thickets, Rebel entrenchments, and relentless operational tempo of the Overland campaign introduced most of the Army of the Potomac to a much enlarged and prolonged version of the Fifteenth Corps's earlier week-long "nightmarish sensation[s]" at Chickasaw Bayou for the first time. While much of Sherman's vast army group outside of the Army of the Tennessee, most especially those elements imported from the East, underwent their own rapid crash course in the art of operating predominately as "strong skirmish-lines" under near perpetual fire in the dark and deadly woods of northern Georgia, most units within even the Army of the Potomac had eventually learned the same or similar lessons by the end of the war that the Fifteenth Corps had arrived at long before.⁹⁶⁶

Attempting to retrospectively survey the real tactical significance of the Army's wartime experience during the fall of 1865, military critic John Watts De Peyster spoke with an "officer of experience" who had served in the Army of the Potomac during the war. While most of the Eastern army, as evidenced by the behavior of Creighton's brigade at Ringgold Gap, long maintained a tactical culture which emphasized the continued efficacy of brazen massed frontal bayonet assaults, often without even a protective screen of skirmishers, even the Potomac men had started to evolve into expert light infantry by the end of the war. As during the Fifteenth Corps's experience in the West, this evolution was likely more the result of the vicious terrain confronted by the army during the bloody Overland campaign than it was any reflection of modern military technology's effects on the battlefield. "In actual conflict, unless our lines formed behind a barricade or protective work of some kind," the officer told De Peyster, "they very soon resembled, as to relative formation, a 'Virginia rail-fence,' or a skirmish-line where

⁹⁶⁶ Steven E. Sodergren, *The Army of the Potomac in the Overland and Petersburg Campaigns: Union Soldiers and Trench Warfare, 1864-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017).

squads of fours, distinct and irregularly placed, kept up relatively the direction or emplacement of a line.” Reflecting later upon this statement, and others similar in tone, De Peyster concluded that the veteran “soldiers from experience” in both Western and Eastern theaters of the Civil War, though at different rates, had stumbled upon an important truth of modern infantry combat.⁹⁶⁷

The rigid linear maneuver doctrine of the era of Napoleon I, still enshrined in the officially prescribed drill manuals of the Army, needed to go and fast. While fine for maneuvering massed lines to, about, and from the battlefield, such rigid drill seemed “the very reason why it took four years to make our soldiers what they should have been at the outset,” he complained. “Experience alone taught them that the success of battles depends more on intelligent individual action properly combined, than the hurling of large masses forward to slaughter.” Moreover, given the extreme challenges confronting the command, control, and coordination of attacks in difficult terrain during the mid-nineteenth century, such “hurling of large masses” was almost always ill-fated. Fortunately, by virtue of experience, most “became accustomed to act for themselves, when the actual circumstances of battle or duty found them alone and distant from support.” Indeed, “the very word VETERAN,” he emphasized, “actually expresses that the soldier has become more or less perfectly self-reliant.”⁹⁶⁸

De Peyster remained convinced that the experience of the war proved that the “conversion of the customary main ‘line of battle,’ which is a continuous line of mutually dependent combatants, into a vast dislocated skirmish line of independent marksmen, should be a prominent feature in the infantry tactics of the future.”⁹⁶⁹ If rugged terrain and modern weaponry

⁹⁶⁷ John Watts De Peyster, “American Infantry Tactics,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Oct. 28, 1865, p. 149-150.

⁹⁶⁸ John Watts De Peyster, “Our Infantry Tactics,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Nov. 4, 1865, p. 164-165.

⁹⁶⁹ John Watts De Peyster, “Our Infantry Tactics,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Nov. 4, 1865, p. 164-165.

was to disperse massed attacking lines anyway, it was best to build a tactical doctrine that accepted this reality as *fait accompli*. His visionary conclusion was borne not of the somber hindsight of massed battalions maneuvering with antiquated tactics while being mercilessly cut down in windrows by an enemy at long range as antebellum theorists had prophesied, but rather merely a logical conclusion drawn from direct observation of what the veteran “soldiers from experience” who filled the Union Army had already fashioned into their own informal tactical doctrine by the end of the war. It was now up to the Army to catch up to innovations in the ranks, just as Sherman had.

After several decades of careful study, clearly including Sherman’s memoirs, tactical theorist Colonel Arthur Lockwood Wagner determined, like De Peyster decades before him, that the Rebellion had represented a veritable “turning-point of tactics, there being scarcely a feature of the tactics of the present day that did not have its germ, its prototype, or its development” during the conflict. The first of these developments, infantry “attacks by rushes,” Wagner credited to none other than Morgan L. Smith. First employed by his 8th Missouri Zouaves at Fort Donelson, later by all of Second Division at Arkansas Post and Vicksburg, and eventually by the entire Fifteenth Corps, Wagner deemed the Zouave rush a “brilliant movement . . . far in advance of the tactics then generally in use.”⁹⁷⁰

Since at least the mid-eighteenth century, skirmishers had been utilized “merely to feel and develop the enemy,” but the lessons of the Civil War, most especially in the West, made clear how light infantry had become “the most important element in modern tactics,” Wagner observed.⁹⁷¹ Much more than rifled weaponry, he credited the “wooded country which formed

⁹⁷⁰ Wagner, *Organization and Tactics*, 96.

⁹⁷¹ Wagner, *Organization and Tactics*, 119.

the theater of so many of the principal campaigns” for the habitual heavy reliance on skirmishers in many commands “to a degree before unknown” in Western warfare. He took especial notice of Sherman’s command in particular for having “habitually fought in strong skirmish lines, the men taking advantage of every feature of the ground.”⁹⁷² By 1864, the army’s massed battle lines had become primarily reserves of light infantry, following in the rear “ready to reinforce the skirmishers.” This dramatic change marked “the dawn of the tactics of the present day,” he predicted.⁹⁷³ In the future, as within the Fifteenth Corps, the effective employment of skirmishers would remain “the prime consideration in tactics.”⁹⁷⁴

In 1891 the U.S. Army finally caught up with these tactical lessons. A new infantry manual included nearly every aspect of the informal tactical doctrine the “soldiers from experience” of the Fifteenth Corps had organically developed during the war. It also, for the first time in Army history, instructed readers in more than just linear maneuver on the parade field, providing guidance to commanders at every level on how to actually conduct combat operations. As Upton had written to Sherman in 1880, drill manuals up to that point “have been simply a collection of rules for passing from one formation to another. How to fight has been left to actual experience in war.” Now, drawing directly from the mountain of experience the Army had accrued while prosecuting the Rebellion, it would craft explicit instructions for “how to fight.”⁹⁷⁵

Dispersed “extended order” lines were to thenceforth be the primary mode by which U.S. infantry habitually deployed and fought its battles. Instead of the “touch of the elbow” tightly

⁹⁷² Wagner, *Organization and Tactics*, 101-102.

⁹⁷³ Wagner, *Organization and Tactics*, 102.

⁹⁷⁴ Wagner, *Organization and Tactics*, 105.

⁹⁷⁵ Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground*, 93.

packed “serried ranks” in line of battle, eight man squads commanded by non-commissioned officers became the primary units of maneuver under fire, much as had become the case for the Fifteenth Corps’s “skeleton regiments” as early as 1863. Instead of manicured fields, drills were to be conducted “on varied ground, making use of the accidents of the surface for cover,” and the manual included an entire page of suggestions for how riflemen could potentially use various forms of cover. When cover was not availing, firing from the kneeling and prone positions were foregrounded in training, just as they had been for Smith’s Zouaves during their initial training in 1861. Also like the Zouaves, individual recruits were trained to practice “advancing from cover to cover” against their comrades, as the rest of their squad took note of each and every time they caught a glimpse long enough to take aim. Soldiers were advised to “stoop and even creep or crawl” when necessary in combat, just as the riflemen of the Fifteenth Corps had done in every engagement since Chickasaw Bayou. Maintaining proper alignment in tight formations was all but abandoned, and “close order” marching relegated exclusively to what officers called “maneuver tactics,” meant to carry a command into battle, wherein loose-order “fighting tactics” were employed once a unit was actually engaged with the enemy.⁹⁷⁶ When advancing across open ground, squads were to cross the dangerous expanse “by rushes of about thirty yards,” going prone in between, “and raising the head in order to see the enemy,” just as Second Division had done since Corinth. By no means were these Zouave-style rushes to exceed fifty yards, “else the skirmishers will be winded and unable to aim accurately,” as the exhausted Hawkeyes of Steele’s division had learned the hard way in their charge at “the Post.” Finally, and probably most importantly, the doctrine now included explicit instructions for how to coordinate

⁹⁷⁶ Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground*, 93, 101-103.

organic suppressive fire elements detached from a battalion with a charging main body by bugle – representing the Army’s first substantive attempt at authentic “fire and maneuver” tactics.⁹⁷⁷

As the men and officers of the Fifteenth Corps knew well, this light infantry-centric tactical doctrine came with both advantages and disadvantages that the U.S. Army would encounter on future fields. While relying on dispersed skirmisher squads to carry the main effort of an attack significantly reduced the dangers posed by enemy small arms and artillery, such open-order lines were exceedingly unlikely to overcome a well-entrenched foe by themselves. Prior to the invention of indirect artillery and aerial bombardment to systematically support the advance of open-order infantry, overcoming a snugly dug-in enemy fighting from behind a dense abatis still required either out-flanking their position or overwhelming them at the point of massed bayonets. While dispersed riflemen could suppress entrenched defenders to an extent that made it dangerous for them to reply in kind, the unavoidable break in their suppressive fire requisite for the safe passage of a charging friendly line across the front proved ample time for defenders to reply with a brutal shock volley. The Fifteenth Corps had learned this the hard way during both Vicksburg assaults. Once survivors were forced to ground, they could begin to apply their own suppressive fire to keep enemy heads down, but at the expense of any and all additional forward momentum.

Although every man in the corps was made to understand and actively practice the concept of what would eventually be termed “alternating bounds” on the parade field during skirmish drill – during which one soldier in a pair fired to cover the advance of another – pairing suppressive fire with maneuver at the regimental or brigade levels proved mostly beyond the

⁹⁷⁷ United States Army, *Infantry Drill Regulations, Adopted Oct. 3, 1891* (New York: Army and Navy Journal, 1898).

capabilities of even the most veteran commands during the Civil War. Indeed, even coordinating the far more simplistic simultaneous advance of adjacent formations across broad fronts of challenging terrain consistently proved beyond the pale. The problem of effectively and cohesively “crossing the deadly ground” would continue to vex the Army until the era of indirect artillery support, radio communications, and the machine gun, but was always far more a problem of coordination (and thus also of terrain) than of weapons technology. Once the potential firepower of an entire Civil War regiment could effectively be replaced by a single machine gun crew, the potential for combining suppressive fire with an open-order advance of light infantry increased dramatically. Even so, as late as 1918, many of the old guard still bemoaned failures of unsupported frontal assaults they attributed to the very same crippling lack of sufficient motivation, spirit, and confidence among the attackers that Sherman had decades prior. Not until the Second World War would the manifold advantages of the “indirect approach,” learned by experience in the ranks of the Fifteenth Corps, finally become standard fare among American tacticians. Armed with the myriad mobility advantages provided by the internal combustion engine and aerial transport, by the mid-twentieth century most military professionals agreed that if the “deadly ground” did not absolutely have to be crossed in order to defeat an enemy, unless ample supporting firepower was available, it was best to avoid it altogether.⁹⁷⁸

⁹⁷⁸ For a more comprehensive discussion of the evolution of U.S. Army infantry assault tactics during the period, see Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1899* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994); The still surviving obsession with the power of the bayonet even as late as 1918 is evident in Mark Ethan Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-58. Also, see Michael A. Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon: French Influence on the American Way of Warfare from the War of 1812 to the Outbreak of WWII* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

III. “The diabolical 15th”

The affinity of the Fifteenth Corps’s men and officers for “avoiding excessive danger and forcing back the enemy by strategy” was borne of its traumatic experiences on the confusing battlefields of the lower Mississippi Valley. This tactical predisposition played a powerful and erstwhile overlooked role in seeding the ground for their wholehearted embrace of “hard war” and the government’s strategic turn toward a more direct assault on the South’s “peculiar institution.” Scholars continue to highlight the ways in which repeated military reversals, most especially that suffered by the Army of the Potomac during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign, provided powerful inspiration for the Lincoln administration’s belated decision to target Southern slavery directly. Apparently incapable of decisively besting Rebels on the battlefield, the erstwhile conservative Lincoln government, goaded on by countless acts of self-emancipation by slaves themselves, added aggressive exploitation of the Rebellion’s real center of gravity to its arsenal of strategic methods. This revolutionary policy shift occurred at almost the exact moment of the Fifteenth Corps’s organization: the winter of 1862-63.⁹⁷⁹

Much ink has been spilled in debating precisely when, why, and to what extent the U.S. military effort to put down the Southern rebellion transformed from a conciliatory “kid glove” approach that mostly spared Southern slavery to a “hard hand” of “war in earnest” intended to destroy slavery as a means by which to crush the Rebellion. For the most part, the definitive account of this evolution remains that of Mark Grimsley’s *The Hard Hand of War* (1995). Arguing that a “series of Union military reversals convinced many Northerners to abandon conciliation,” Grimsley asserts that the United States government gradually and reluctantly

⁹⁷⁹ By far the best work concerning the influence of the Peninsula Campaign on the Lincoln administration’s embrace of emancipation is Glenn David Brasher, *The Peninsula Campaign & the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans & the Fight for Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

embraced “actions against Southern civilians and property made expressly in order to demoralize Southern civilians and ruin the Confederate economy” by the second winter of the war. At the heart of this transformation was not so much rational calculation by the Lincoln administration, but rather “tens of thousands of Union soldiers — toughened by war, hungry for creature comforts, and often angry at the civilians in their midst” who embraced “hard war” because they “understood the logic” of the indirect strategy. First emerging in the logistically-strained and sparsely-inhabited Western theater, Federal tactics of foraging liberally off the country naturally evolved over time into the explicit targeting of Southern economic infrastructure more broadly, including most importantly the liberation of millions of slaves. Grimsley argues that this transformation was due in no small part to the perpetual inability of Federal commanders to control hungry, chronically under-supplied, and ill-disciplined volunteers who consistently showed an almost insatiable urge for the theft and destruction of private property, whether loyal or “Secesh.” Indeed, it seems “quite likely that the zest with which soldiers embraced foraging pulled the generals along farther than they might otherwise have gone,” Grimsley asserts.⁹⁸⁰

While Grimsley has most likely accurately identified the origins of “hard war” policies as laying within the enlisted volunteer ranks of the Union Army, his insightful assessment missed an opportunity to address the vital connections between the apparent penchant of Western theater U.S. volunteers for “hard war” and the tactical imperatives of mid-nineteenth century infantry warfare within the “wooded and broken countries” of the “Old Southwest.” Highlighting these connections allows historians to bridge the operational history of the war with the historiography of its broader political contours. Moreover, the experience of the Fifteenth Corps provides a

⁹⁸⁰ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union military policy toward Southern civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3-4, 104.

vivid example of these very connections. Just as the frustrating and somber experience of military reversal after the Peninsula campaign convinced many Northern civilians, those in the ranks of McClellan's Army of the Potomac, and the Lincoln administration that only "war in earnest" stood a realistic chance at defeating the so-called Southern Confederacy, the near contemporaneous traumatic experience of successive and brutal repulse at the hands of entrenched Rebels protected by apparently impassable terrain convinced the men and officers of the Fifteenth Corps that only an alternative strategy of defeating the Rebellion could ever succeed. While most remained reluctant emancipators throughout the war due to their prevailing anti-black attitudes and fundamentally conservative politics, the Westerners of Sherman's corps evolved into "practical liberators" and hard warriors in large part because of their traumatic experiences of tactical failure and rebuff on Western battlefields. When such failures were paired with the striking and comparatively bloodless successes of the Deer Creek and Steele's Bayou raids, those in the ranks emerged from their experiences convinced that "we are crushing the rebellion and will continue to crush it though we be repulsed from every stronghold for months to come." While what happened on the battlefield would always of course remain important to the men of the corps, their hard-won understanding of the inherent limitations of mid-nineteenth century land warfare in the heavily wooded American South spurred their embrace of "war in earnest" against Southern slavery far more powerfully than any pyromania or wartime transformation of moral convictions.⁹⁸¹

While the long and bloody "skirmisher's war" for Atlanta represented the culmination of the Fifteenth Corps's tactical culture on the battlefield, its original commander's legendary

⁹⁸¹ Kristopher A. Teters, *Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

raiding campaigns through Georgia and the Carolinas during the final months of the conflict proved likewise perfectly calibrated for the command's strengths. Once again, this was no coincidence. Sherman had been forged as a strategist in the very same fires that produced his original Fifteenth Corps's tactical culture, and thus by the fall of 1864 the two shared an understanding of how the war ought to be prosecuted and won. Although Southern civilians like those of Columbia, South Carolina bemoaned and "diabolical 15th" as it wrecked the so-called Confederacy's capacity for self-sustainment, just as it had done in the Deer Creek valley, in Jackson, Mississippi, and across a wide swath of Georgia only months before, the corps was in reality not composed of demons. Instead, it was made up of men who, as Sherman would later assert, would throughout the rest of their lives prove "first rate men — farmers and mechanics, and men who are to-day as good citizens as we have in our country, but who went to war in earnest." There was nothing naturally malevolent about their character. They had been forged into expert skirmishers, hard warriors, and "practical liberators" in the very same manner they had transformed from citizen-soldier Western recruits into "Veteran Volunteers." They were, after all, only "soldiers from experience."

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