

Episode 132: Grierson's Raid

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In the spring of 1863 Vicksburg, Mississippi continued to live up to Jefferson Davis's description as the "nail head that holds the South's' two halves together." The heavily fortified city blocked transit in the north-south direction on the Mississippi River and facilitated connection between the western and eastern parts of the Confederacy.

Vicksburg was located on high bluffs overlooking a sharp bend in the Mississippi River and it was very difficult for an enemy vessel to pass the Confederate batteries unscathed. During the winter of 1862-1863, Ulysses Grant, in charge of the Union forces opposing Vicksburg, tried some ingenious methods to attack and circumvent the city. He tried three different canals that would allow passage of vessels without passing the batteries. None succeeded. He tried a couple of expeditions through the treacherous bayous surrounding the city but the terrain, the animals and the Confederates pushed them back.

Grant was determined that Vicksburg would be taken. He decided to have his troops march down the western side of the Mississippi to Hard Times, Louisiana, below Vicksburg. There he would meet gunboats and transports of Rear Admiral David Porter and cross to the eastern side of the river. From there he would launch his final assault on the Confederate stronghold. Porter was able to get past the Vicksburg batteries on the moonless night of April 16. He found that by hugging the eastern bank of the river, he was so close that the Confederate guns could not be depressed far enough to hit his boats.

Grant had one additional trick up his sleeve. To pull Confederate forces away from his river crossing at Hard Times, he ordered Colonel Benjamin Grierson to take three Union cavalry

regiments and pierce Mississippi territory in order to distract the Southern forces. Beginning on April 17, Grierson and 1,700 cavalymen rode roughshod from southern Tennessee to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. They destroyed Confederate property and freed slaves as they went. The infuriated Confederates under Lt. General John Pemberton attempted to stop Grierson and his men but without success. On several occasions Grierson split his men into several smaller groups, thoroughly confusing the enemy as to his intentions and direction of movement.

Over the next 16 days Grierson and his men would travel over 600 miles and suffer only 36 casualties while inflicting over 10 times that many. The exploits of Grierson's raid would be immortalized many years later in the film *The Horse Soldiers* starring John Wayne and William Holden. General William Sherman called the raid the most brilliant expedition of the war.

It was all quite an accomplishment for the quiet spoken music teacher from Illinois. Unknown weeks earlier, he now found his likeness on the cover of *Harper's Weekly*. Remarkably for a cavalry officer, he was quite afraid of horses, having been seriously injured as a child when a horse kicked him in the head. Grierson would continue to perform well during the remainder of the war, and stayed in the U.S. army after the war eventually reaching the rank of brigadier general.

In addition to demoralizing the Confederates, Grierson's raid allowed Grant and his men to cross to the eastern side of the Mississippi without serious opposition. By May 1, Grant and his men were on their way to Jackson, Mississippi. From there, they could approach Vicksburg by land from the east and lay siege to the city. The Confederate bastion would only hold out for two more months.