

Episode 136: The Start of the Siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi

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General Ulysses S. Grant commanded one of the great campaigns of military history in order to find himself in front of the gates of Vicksburg, Mississippi in May 1863. His federal army has marched 200 miles through the most difficult country and fought and won five major battles- Port Gibson, Hayne's Bluff, Jackson, Champion's Hill and Big Black River. Now he surrounded Vicksburg itself, trapping Confederate General Pemberton and 31,000 troops along with the town's entire civilian population.

On Tuesday May 19 Grant began. He was anxious to cap his campaign with the quick surrender of Vicksburg.

“Skirmishing broke out as the Federals approached the well-prepared fortifications. Grant hoped a sudden assault would prevent Pemberton from completing his arrangements. In midafternoon Sherman attacked, despite heavy fire on the Union right, and made some advance at Stockade Redan. However, he failed to penetrate the works and was driven back. McPherson and McClernand had even less success. About a thousand Federal casualties attested to the strong Confederate position. Federal mortars began pounding Vicksburg from the Yazoo.”

The scholar of the siege, Winston Groom, wrote in his monograph, Vicksburg 1863:

“Grant believed that Pemberton's troops were better armed than his own. But many of them, like many of Holmes's, Kirby-Smith's, and Johnston's troops, were in rags, with rough rawhide shoes or none. As the winter had set in, Major-General Hindman at Fort Smith had predicted that unless the nakedness of his troops was cured, half of them would die ere spring. Food shortages in the Arkansas-Mississippi region were growing, for although Grant's troops found the country south of Vicksburg full of grain and livestock, in other areas the wholesale removal of Negroes southward, and the ravages of armies and guerillas, had stripped the country bare. The British officer Lieutenant-

Colonel Fremantle of the Coldstream Guards, who reached Natchez from Matamoras this spring and pressed on to Jackson and Virginia, found Mississippi and Alabama in an extremity of anguish. He saw boys of fifteen and sixteen badly wounded, and sometimes vain over a missing limb. He visited farmhouses where the women had scarcely any clothes, nothing but the coarsest side meat and cornbread to eat, and sweet-potato coffee to drink; they were in a miserable uncertainty as to the fate of their relatives and their own future. When he ate with Johnston and his staff the only cooking utensils were a battered coffee pot and frying pan, and they shared a one-pronged fork among them. He found the railroad to Meridian almost unusable; the cars had proceeded but five miles when the engine left the track.”

Describing the scene at the level of the individual infantryman of the South, Anna Jordan, in her Fighting For Lee says:

“Although the soles of his boots were wearing bare, and the blisters and cuts on his feet were aching, he kept walking. He knew he couldn’t stop; he had been walking and fighting for days on his bad ankle, but he never wanted to stop.”

“Grant tried to seize the town by force and was beaten back. ‘Thanks be to the great Ruler of the Universe,’ a Mississippi chaplain wrote on May 19, ‘Vicksburg is still safe. The first great assault has been most successfully repelled- All my fears in reference to taking the place by storm now vanished.’

Two more assaults failed before Grant settled in for a siege, resolved, he said, ‘to outcamp’ the enemy. His soldiers were happy for the rest. ‘Now that we have tried to take the enemy’s works by storm,’ an Illinois private said, ‘we suffering terrible and doing the enemy but little harm, we are all-generals and privates-content to lay a regular siege to the place.’

Grant began a steady artillery barrage. Confederate civilians and soldiers alike vowed simply to ignore it. ‘It is such folly for them to waste their ammunition like that,’ one woman wrote. ‘How can they ever take a town that has such advantages for defense and protection as this? We’ll just borrow into these hills and let them batter away as hard as they please.’

The investing Northern troops began also to tighten the vise around Vicksburg and to forage from the surrounding countryside to deny supplies to the defenders and to augment their own. Groom writes:

“Compel your cavalry officers to see that their horses are properly groomed. Put them in some place where they can get forage near the railroad or send them to your rear for grass and ear corn. When in good order start them, 1,000 at a time, for the rebel communications, with orders never to move off a walk unless they see an enemy before or between them; to travel only so far in a day as not to fatigue their horses; never to camp in a place in which sunset finds them; and to rest in a good pasture during the heat

of the day. [Also] to keep some of their eyes open night and day, and never pass a bridge without burning it, a horse without stealing or shooting it, a guerilla without capturing him.