

Episode 137: The Universe of Battle: Life in the Caves of Vicksburg

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The first assault on Vicksburg was a disaster for the Union forces and proved the strength of the Confederate Army. Grant planned his second attack for three days later with greater care by digging approach trenches and building interlaced artillery emplacements. Beginning at midnight May 22, a bombardment of 220 pieces of artillery and naval gunfire from 18 vessels caused moderate damage to the city itself, little to its military defenses, but drove the civilian population to panic.

“Grant attacked a three-mile section of the crescent-shaped defenses of Vicksburg with all the power he could muster. At 10 A.M. the Federals surged forward against the Confederate lines extending from Stockade Redan on the north to Fort Garrott on the south. The charge over deep, narrow ravines that added to the man-made defenses of the city was against six strong points and a line of high breastworks protected by dirt and logs. Sherman’s troops reached the top of the wall but failed to hold it. McClellan’s men likewise managed to gain the barricades here and there, but to no avail. One breakthrough at Railroad Redoubt was briefly successful, but counterattacks closed the breach. Strong Confederate defenses beat back continued charges. Federal gunboats and mortars bombarded. Later, Grant regretted making the suicidal attack. Losses were heavy. It created further antagonism between Grant and McClellan. Of 45,000 Federals, 502 were killed, 2550 wounded, and 147 missing for 3199 casualties. Confederate losses were under 500. Grant never again tried to assault Vicksburg. Instead the Federals began the siege in earnest, digging approach trenches and building artillery positions. Union and Confederate soldiers alike soon knew the tedium as well as the dangers of a siege.”

As a result of these two assaults, General Pemberton's 20,000 man force was reduced by 5,000 casualties and then attrition by disease, starvation, and flagging morale began to be the greater enemy. The city's residents dug caves and "bomb proofs" into the clay bluffs surrounding the city as daily, and nightly, bombardments by General Grant's guns and Admiral Porter's gun boats became the entirety of everyday life, and still the entrapped population endured. A North Carolinian, who eventually became a Northern prisoner of war wrote of the passion of these days:

"The colors drop, are seized again-again drop, and are again lifted, no man in reach daring to pass them by on the ground-colors, not bright and whole and clean as when they came first from the white embroidering fingers, but as clutched in the storm of battle with grimy, bloody hands, and torn into shreds by shot and shell. Oh, how it thrilled the heart of a soldier, when he had been long away from the army, to catch sight again of his red battle-flag, upheld on its white staff of pine, its tatters snapping in the wind!- that red rag, crossed with blue, with white stars sprinkling the cross within, tied to a slim, barked pine sapling with leather thongs cut from a soldier's shoe! This rough red rag my soul loved with a lover's love. How often in long prison days have I sat and dreamed over it, imagining friends to release us, and my first meeting with its fairness! How I clasped it in my arms, and kissed it, and cried over it!"

Both sides were witness to uncommon valor of this nature. The same week President Abraham Lincoln greeted a group of convalescent veterans on the lawn of the White House. The group was aptly and accurately named the "One Legged Brigade" since every man had suffered that fate. Called upon to make a speech, Lincoln declined saying: "there is no need for any speech as these men upon their crutches are the orators- their very appearance speaks more eloquently than any words."