

Episode 179: Red River Campaign Part 1

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Though most of the nation's attention during the first years of the war was focused on the mid-Atlantic and Mississippi River corridor regions, another region of the country was on the mind of many in the Union command. Eastern Texas was a strategic prize worth winning since it was a high producing cotton region and the textile mills of New England looked hungrily toward renewing their supply from the region.

Maintaining control of the region was critical to the Confederate cause. Not only did keeping the cotton away from the Union hurt the northern economy, but the cotton could be used as trade material for Confederate needs. It was also a bargaining chip in the attempt to persuade European nations to come into the war on the Confederate side.

By early 1864, President Abraham Lincoln was feeling intense pressure from his cabinet and New England politicians to mount an expedition into Texas. To lead the expedition he chose Major General Nathaniel Banks. While before the war Banks had been a prominent Massachusetts politician, his military career during the war had been less stellar. He had been beaten badly by Stonewall Jackson at Winchester and then again at Cedar Mountain. Perhaps Lincoln felt that Banks might fare better against presumably weaker troops in a backwater of the war. Banks would proceed up the Red River to get at the Texas cotton.

On March 12, 1864, Banks began to move. He was given two veteran corps from the Sherman's Army of the Tennessee and a powerful squadron of armored boats commanded by Rear Admiral David Porter. On March 12, the Union force overpowered Confederate Fort De

Russy, and continued on by March 15 to Alexandria, Louisiana, where the Red River enters the Mississippi.

The Red River at Alexandria contains a set of rapids that are passable only at certain times of the year. The water was shallow enough that Porter was leery of attempting to up the river but pressure by Banks and Washington convinced him to give it a try. With the help of ropes he was able to eventually get his gunboats up above the rapids.

By April 1, the expedition had reached Natchitoches expecting battle, only to find that Confederates had retreated further up river. But now Banks had to move quickly. Ulysses Grant let him know that if by April 15 the capture of Shreveport was not imminent, that he needed to head back to return the infantry men to Sherman for operations in the Southeast. With his infantry riding the boats or walking on the trails next to the river, Banks pushed on. Above Natchitoches, Banks decided to take a faster overland route to Shreveport, separating his infantry from the boats. On April 8, the Union infantry was surprised and badly beaten by a Confederate attack near Mansfield. The next day, the retreating Union forces were hammered again. Ironically, the Confederate commander was Major General Richard Taylor, who learned under Stonewall Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley against Banks.

Banks and the infantry retreated under constant pressure from Taylor all the way back to Alexandria. Meanwhile, Porter's boats were attempting to get back down to the Mississippi as well but were having a tough time. The river was getting shallower every day and was full of alligators and submerged stumps. Confederate snipers and artillery pestered them every inch of the way. Finally, by the time Porter and his boats met back up with Banks in Alexandria, he realized that his troubles were just beginning. The rapids at Alexandria were now far too shallow for his ironclad boats to get across.

