

Union Victory at Mobile Bay

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By the summer of 1864, only two major ports, Mobile, Alabama, and Wilmington, North Carolina, remained open to Confederate blockade runners. Of the two, Mobile was the most vulnerable to attack, and would provide the North with a point of entry for future operations in to the Deep South. Guarding the entrance to Mobile Bay were two fortifications. On Dauphine Island, Fort Gaines guarded the entrance from the west; while Fort Morgan, located on a peninsula jutting into the bay, guarded the eastern entrance. Both mounted heavy cannon to defend against an attack by the Union navy, while 180 mines, also known as torpedoes, were placed in the main ship channel entering Mobile Bay. A small Confederate fleet consisting of three gunboats, C.S.S. *Selma*, *Gaines*, and *Morgan*, as well as C.S.S. *Tennessee*, one of the most powerful ironclads afloat, also defended Mobile. The southern naval forces were commanded by Admiral Franklin Buchanan, who had previously commanded the C.S.S. *Virginia* in its battle against the *Monitor* two years earlier. The Federal navy would be led by Admiral David Farragut, who had gathered a substantial fleet including four ironclad monitors. General Gordon Granger commanded the Union land forces that would participate in the campaign.

The operation against Mobile commenced on August 3, when 1,500 Federal infantry under Granger landed on Dauphine Island to threaten Fort Gaines. On the morning of Friday August 5, Admiral Farragut prepared to run his fleet through the narrow entrance to the bay, placing his heavily armored monitors in front of his wooden frigates. In the lead was the U.S.S. *Tecumseh*, which struck a torpedo and sank almost immediately with most of its crew. As the

following ships, hesitant to meet the same fate, slowed, Admiral Farragut, lashed in the rigging of his flagship the U.S.S. *Hartford*, gave the famous order of, “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead.” The remainder of the fleet passed safely through the minefield and the guns of the two Confederate forts with minor loss. Several Union ships then engaged C.S.S. *Tennessee*, while others fired on the Confederate gunboats. The Federal fleet pounded the rebel ironclad into submission, and Buchanan was eventually forced to surrender. In the fighting the Federals suffered 145 killed, including 93 who drowned on *Tecumseh*, 170 wounded, and four captured. Confederate losses were 12 killed, 20 wounded, and 270 captured. With the passage of the southern forts and the destruction of the Confederate fleet, the Federals controlled Mobile Bay and could threaten the city and its fortifications. Isolated by land and sea, Fort Gaines would surrender in a few days after a heavy bombardment, followed by Fort Morgan in two weeks. The city of Mobile, however, remained in Confederate hands until the spring of 1865. The victory at Mobile, followed soon after by General Sherman’s capture of Atlanta and General Sheridan’s victories in the Shenandoah, raised northern morale and contributed greatly to President Lincoln’s reelection in the fall.

In addition to the battle of Mobile Bay, fighting also continued around Atlanta and in Virginia. General Philip Sheridan who had been detached from the Army of the Potomac, was placed in command of the Army of the Shenandoah, with orders to destroy Jubal Early’s Confederate force in the Shenandoah Valley. General Sherman made another effort to capture East Point, Georgia and cut the Confederate rail lines leading into Atlanta. Elements of the Army of the Ohio and the Army of the Cumberland attacked Confederate positions at Utoy Creek on August 6. Heavy undergrowth and strong Confederate earthworks stopped the Union assaults, though the southerners were forced that night to retreat to a second line of

entrenchments. Union attacks on August 7 failed to break this new position, and Sherman ordered his troops to resume siege operations. At the end of the month he would make another attempt to capture the railroad, which would prove successful.