

Episode 80: Confederate Conscription, New Orleans Threatened

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On April 16, 1862, the Confederate Congress passed a Conscription Act that required men between 18 and 35 to join the army for a three-year term. Those currently in the army would have their terms extended by three years. The act was a reaction to the realization that the Confederacy was heavily outnumbered by the North and that the war would not be a short one.

This was the first American conscription law. Although colonial laws required men to be prepared to serve in a militia, actually requiring men to enlist in the army was new. While conscription was an ancient practice, the first modern version of it had come in France after the French Revolution. Napoleon won his victories with drafted men. But up until 1862, all American armies had been filled with volunteers.

There were some interesting features to the Conscription Law, the most notable being that those drafted could allow those under 18 or over 35 to substitute for them. The practice of draftees paying for substitutes led to the phrase “rich man’s war and poor man’s fight.” The draft was selective in other ways, as those involved in certain occupations such as miners, railroad workers and teachers were exempt. By September of 1862, the Confederate congress felt the need to increase the eligible age to 45 and later in the war to 50. Still, the South was never able to match the seemingly endless waves of men that the North could throw into the battle.

During this same week, an important military action began about 70 miles south of New Orleans. At that point Fort Jackson and Fort St. Philip stood guard against Federal invasion of the city. The two forts were positioned on a bend in the Mississippi River so that any ships

making their way up river would be forced to slow down and become easier targets. These forts were critical to Confederate defense of the Mississippi, as many of the fortifications in New Orleans had been removed for use on the battlefield. If the forts fell, the entire Mississippi River would be vulnerable to Federal attack.

In the middle of March, a Union fleet under Captain David Farragut began to bring ships into the mouth of the Mississippi and by April 14 his fleet was in sight of the forts, a distance of about 40 miles. In addition to his gunboats, Farragut had been supplied with 26 mortar schooners and instructed by the Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox to use them to reduce the forts.

On April 18, the mortar boats opened fire on the forts. Over the next five days they assaulted the two forts with almost 17,000 shells. Surprisingly, the bombardment did little more than make the men in the two forts miserable. At first, the fuses in the mortar shells were found to be too short and the shells were exploding too early. When the fuses were lengthened, the shells did not explode until they had buried themselves in the mud around and inside the forts. Only two men were killed and seven pieces of artillery in the forts disabled. After several days of the mortars firing, Farragut was beginning to realize that he would have to take another approach to dealing with the two forts.

To prevent passage up ships upriver, the Confederates had strung a long chain across the river below the forts. On April 20, Farragut ordered three of his boats to try to break through the chain. While they did not succeed in completely destroying the chain, the boats were able to open a large enough gap for other ships to pass through. Farragut began to formulate a plan for running his ships past the forts and all the way to New Orleans.

