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Shiloh: Bloody Sacrifice that Changed the War

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The Battle of Shiloh effected a great change on how the American people and its soldiers viewed and fought the Civil War. William Tecumseh Sherman is famous for stating “war is hell,” and Shiloh fit the bill. Shelby Foote writes:

This was the first great modern battle. It was Wilson’s Creek and Manassas rolled together, quadrupled, and compressed into a smaller area than either. From the inside it resembled Armageddon […] Shiloh’s casualties [roughly 23,500-24,000], was more than all three of the nation’s previous wars.¹

The battle itself was a horrific affair, but Shiloh was simply more than numbers of killed, or the amount of cannon fired, or some other quantifiable misery. The deaths at Shiloh made America comprehend what type of cost would be exacted to continue the war, and was a foreshadowing of the blood-letting that lie ahead. With incredible resolve, both sides marched onward.

After the success at Forts Henry and Donelson, Union troops felt that the war would soon be over, and even “Unconditional Surrender” Grant was convinced that “the Confederacy was a hollow shell about to collapse.”² Grant wanted to continue with his troops to Corinth, but his superior Henry Halleck constrained him to wait for General Buell to arrive, when the combined forces could be assured of victory.³ Grant seemed not to fear any attack, assured that the rebels would only fight

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³ Foote, *The Civil War*, 323, “Don’t let the enemy draw you into an engagement now. Wait ‘til you are properly fortified and receive orders.”
a defensive war and would concentrate at Corinth only for that reason. Sherman wrote as much in his memoir, “I always acted on the supposition that we were an invading army...we did not fortify our camps against an attack, because we had no orders to do so, and because such a course would have made our men timid.”⁴ And so the spade was abandoned, as was any defensive preparation to protect the camp that Sherman himself picked. He wrote, “The ground itself admits of easy defense by a small command, and yet affords admirable camping grounds for a hundred thousand men.”⁵ What Sherman could not know was less comforting: nearly a hundred thousand men would be fighting there.

Generals Albert Sidney Johnston and P.G.T Beauregard had little time to organize and prepare their troops for the coming battle, and that they did so in two weeks under the cloud of recent defeat was nothing short of a miracle. Braxton Bragg wrote of Johnston’s army:

> It was a heterogeneous mass, in which there was more enthusiasm than discipline, more capacity than knowledge, and more valor than instruction. The task of organizing such a command and supplying it...was simply appalling.⁶

After receiving the much-anticipated report from Nathan Bedford Forrest that General Buell was “marching quickly to join Grant on the Tennessee River,” Johnston ordered his troops to march towards Pittsburg Landing.⁷ Johnston’s raw army took three days to travel the short distance of twenty-three miles, bogged down in the mud from recent rains and from the

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⁵ Ibid., 233. This was the only significant piece of land along the TN River not currently under water.
lack of urgency from some of the troops. The march took so long that Beauregard lost his will, “convinced that the tardy advance had deprived it of all the advantage of surprise,” and wanted to call off the attack and return to Corinth.8 Johnston went with his “gut feeling,” determining that they would go on the offensive at daylight, when he reportedly stated “I would fight them if they were a million.”9 When the attack began at dawn, inconceivably, the Rebel army remained undetected by Union troops.

There was some tentativeness as the Confederate skirmishers spread along the battlefront: “Southerners were supposed to be the ones with the strong military ethos and should have been more eager to engage the enemy, but Grant’s troops had the smell of recent victory…”10 With little resistance, their courage swelled and the three Corps broke upon unsuspecting Union troops mulling over their breakfast fires. “Thousands of grey-clad demons erupted from the woods...the fighting was widespread and terrible...fields swarmed with thousands of men intent on butchering one another.”11 The fight began well for the Rebels, but bogged down in the face of fierce resistance, from plundering the Union camps, and from Beauregard’s flawed attack design.12 Because the battlefield was shaped like a funnel, with Snake Creek on one side and the Tennessee River on the other, “the battle line narrowed with each Southern advance, and the concentration of fire intensified” in the smaller area.13

9 Roland, Johnston, 324.
12 Instead of each Corp having an objective on the field, they were spread across the entire front in hopes of over-running the enemy with brute force. This negated Johnston’s plan to turn the Union left, which would cut the Yankees off from Pittsburg Landing and resupply, and push them off the high ground.
13 Frank, Seeing the Elephant, 88.
usual means of attack, and was used primarily by both armies to stop men from fleeing the field and corralling them into yet another charge or to hold the line.

The battle all but stalled as General Braxton Bragg’s troops faced off against Brigadier General Benjamin Prentiss’ division at the Hornet’s Nest, where some 4,500 Union held off nearly 16,000 Confederates for several hours, buying Grant enough time to salvage his routing army.14 Save for these two Generals, Shiloh was more “a soldier’s battle” than most, less affected by the actions of superiors than by the men’s own determination to stand. “The blind and intricate battlefield offered little chance for careful planning; the haste and tumult left no time for tactics. On neither side was the guidance of general command of much service; it was the division, brigade, and regimental commanders who fought the battle.”15 General Johnston did have some impact by compelling men forward as well as leading several charges, and Sherman wrote that his death resulted in a “perceptible lull for a couple of hours, when the attack was renewed with much less vehemence,” but Johnston was cut down only half-way through the first day.16 Other commanders had even less of an impact. Grant was nine miles downriver when the battle began, and arrived almost four hours after the cannons began to boom. Beauregard and Grant were largely reduced to shoveling in reinforcements, often according to where the guns sounded the most or loudest. There was

14 James McDonough, Shiloh: In Hell Before Night (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 143. Why Bragg was unable to dislodge his foe when he nearly had a four-to-one advantage has mystified many. James McDonough writes that of the 13 charges upon that position, Bragg never sent more than 3,600 men, thus nullifying any apparent advantage. 15 J. G. Nicolay, “Abraham Lincoln: A History, The Mississippi and Shiloh,” The Century, Vol. 36, Num. 5 (Sept, 1888), 670. 16 Sherman, Memoirs, 247. Additionally, Shelby Foote wrote that Johnston “behaved like a man in search of death,” but I propose that he was performing much like many other Southern generals when their “blood was up.” See Shelby Foote, Shiloh: A Novel, (New York: Random House, 1951), 17.
no controlling the fight with rapid maneuvers to flank the enemy, only frontal assault and counter-attack. It was basically a front-to-front melee, like two heavyweights trading vicious blows until one staggers and drops to the canvas. The battle was set upon the power of one opponent to overwhelm the other, rather than a battle of movement and tactical agility. A Yankee soldier after the battle stated “it was a soldier’s fight, well-put in the expression that the rebels out-generated us, but we out-colonelled them.” The New York Times called Shiloh a “soldier’s battle,” and was glad that “when men were pitted against men, without advantage,” Northern troops “proved superior.” With fewer numbers, Federal soldiers held the field just long enough for the sun to go down.

Generals normally have some benefit from sitting behind the lines, receiving reports and hearing the guns blaze, and are able to perceive through the smoke a larger picture of the battle what common soldiers could not: “The scope and breadth of a battle are almost always invisible to the participant, especially the simple soldier. The affair is generally a hodgepodge of scattered, disjointed encounters, highlighted by moments of supreme fear and incredible courage.” Ambrose Bierce, a soldier in the first division of Buell’s army to reach the battlefield, described the anticipation of the battle:

The breeze bore to our ears the long deep sighing of iron lungs. The division sprang to its feet and stood at attention. I am not sure, but the ground was trembling then. The sound of battle pulsated with regular throbblings, and the tension grew…

17 Frank, Seeing the Elephant, 86-87.
18 Ibid., 88.
19 Roland, Johnston, 350.
Those on the front lines were killing or dying or running away, while nearly all in reserve were anxious to join in, lest they miss “seeing the elephant.” Sam Watkins, a private in the Confederate army, described what it felt like entering the battle:

> Men were lying everywhere in every conceivable position...some were waiving hats and shouting us to go forward. It all seemed to me a dream, when siz, siz, siz, the Minnie balls from the Yankee line began to whistle around our ears...we were ordered to charge bayonets. I had been feeling mean all morning...but when the order to charge was given, I got happy. I felt happier than a fellow does when he professes religion at a big Methodist camp-meeting.23

Some soldiers appeared almost possessed by the urge to kill; a New York Tribune reporter described the transformation to “maniac wildness,” where “men lost their semblance of humanity and the spirit of the demon shone in their faces...their one desire but to destroy.”24 The determination of those soldiers to kill is difficult to understand, but many rested their conscience by relegating their religious beliefs to the rear; instead, they followed their patriotic duty and orders.

Rebel troops were told to fire at the biggest part of the enemy at point blank, to aim for officers and artillery horses, and were forbidden to help fallen comrades.25 Victory was the reward for such practices, as dishonorable as it must have felt. Union men did similar things, such as aiming for the head: one Confederate reported how a Minnie ball hit his friend in the face, where it travelled into his mouth, causing him to swallow the ball. Both thought the man was lost, but the next day his

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23 Sam Watkins, *Company Aytc h, or A Side Show of the Big Show* (Chattanooga Press, 2004).
friend was boasting how he could digest “two ounces of Yankee lead.”

Even amidst the carnage, men could take delight.

Most soldiers had no idea how many they were fighting, knowing only that it was fierce. “When the fighting got hot, the forty-round issue of balls, powder, and caps did not last long. Most soldiers could fire three rounds per minute. At this pace a regiment could conceivably fire their ammunition in less than twenty minutes.” The soldiers did know that the Minnie ball could shatter bones, as well as make a sound when hitting flesh that they would never forget. Some compared the fight to “a hailstorm, mixed with thunder and lightning,” while others compared it to a train-wreck, “with nothin’ but limbs remaining.” After the battle, Grant wrote “I saw an open field...so covered with dead that it would have been possible to walk across the clearing, in any direction, stepping only on dead bodies without a foot touching the ground.” The battlefield itself, particularly “bloody pond,” must have resembled Dante’s description of hell. Warfare, once thought so glorious in the memoriam of 1776, was now showing its true murderous colors.

The horrors on the battlefield were a result of major developments in military technology in the decades before the war, the implications of which had not been integrated into military doctrine. “New artillery fuses, rifled iron tubes, and oblong artillery shells were among the improvements of artillery weapons...however, the most significant innovation was the increase in the accurate range of shoulder-held firearms,” which were accurate minimally to 300 yards. The

26 The Mobile Advertiser and Register, April 11, 1862.
27 O.E. Cunningham, Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1966), 474.
28 Frank, Seeing the Elephant, 92.
29 Grant, Personal Memoirs, 238.
30 Frank, Seeing the Elephant, 104.
commanders’ use of tight formations, which aided in command and control while simultaneously comforting the green troops, presented a broader target and resulted in a much higher casualty count. The medical tents did little to stay the carnage.

The amount of wounded at Shiloh was boggling to outsiders, but it was absolutely stunning to the medical staff on hand. The Charleston Daily Courier reported one observer’s disgust at the “butcher’s table […] groans fill the air, surgeons are busy at work by candlelight […] the atmosphere is fetid with the stench of wounds, and the rain is pouring down upon thousands who yet lie upon the bloody ground of Shiloh.”

The Cincinnati Times had a similar tale: “…the dead and wounded are all around me. The knife of the surgeon is busy at work… all day long they have been coming in… I hope my eyes may never again look upon such sights.” Ambrose Bierce gave a grisly description of the surgeon’s tent:

Hidden in the hollows and behind clumps of rank brambles were large tents, dimly lit with candles, but looking comfortable. The kind of comfort they supplied was indicated by pairs of men entering and reappearing, bearing litters; by low moans from within and by long rows of dead with covered faces outside. These tents were constantly receiving the wounded, yet were never full; they were continually ejecting the dead, yet were never empty. It was as if the helpless had been carried in and murdered, that they might not hamper those whose business it was to fall tomorrow.

Even General Grant had a hard time stomaching the field hospital, and he writes:

…the log house on the bank had been taken as a hospital, and all night wounded men were being brought in, their wounds dressed, a leg or arm amputated, as the case might require, and everything being done to save life or alleviate suffering. The sight was more

31 Charleston Daily Courier, April 15, 1862.
32 Cincinnati Times, April 10, 1862.
33 Duncan, Phantoms, 99.
Men had never comprehended such a disaster; one soldier witnessing the burial detail worried that men had been reduced to the status of animals, deprived of the much-desired “good death [...] they dig holes and pile them all in like dead cattle and have teams draw them together like picking up pumpkins.”

The second day of the battle was decided before it was even begun, when Buell crossed the river at night, and when Lew Wallace’s “lost division” finally arrived. Deprived of its field commander, its men outnumbered and exhausted, the Rebel army put up an honorable defense, but fled the field by early afternoon.

Neither Buell nor Grant made a serious effort to run down their fleeing enemy, a mistake often made in both theaters of the War, and one which both leaders in Washington and Northern citizens would question. Sherman perhaps summed up the matter best in explaining why Beauregard was not pursued. “I assure you,” he stated, “we had quite enough of their society for two whole days, and were only too glad to be rid of them on any terms.” When news of defeat reached Richmond, it could not have carried a heavier blow; gone was Jefferson Davis’s “pillar in the West,” and with it went the South’s best chance to block the Union invasion. Though Jefferson Davis never would concede victory to the Union forces at Shiloh, the nation was not illiterate, and there sprang up a multitude of eyewitness reports in newspapers across the country, both

35 Faust, Republic of Suffering, 71.
36 Cunningham, Shiloh and the Western Campaign, 501.
accurate and otherwise.

On Wednesday, April 9th, the order of business was suspended immediately after Senator Orville H. Browning from Illinois read an erroneous telegraph dispatch which was received that morning by the *New York Herald*:

> The bloodiest battle of modern times just closed, resulting in the complete rout of the enemy, who attacked us Sunday morning. Battle lasted until Monday 4:35 p.m., when the enemy commenced their retreat toward Corinth, pursued by a large force of our cavalry. Slaughter on both sides immense. Lost in killed, wounded, and missing from eighteen to twenty thousand; that of the enemy is estimated from thirty-five to forty thousand.38

Reports in the South were just as erroneous, as exemplified by the *Savannah Republican*, which estimated that Confederate forces had lost “no more than four thousand,” as compared with the “eighteen to twenty thousand lost” on the Federal side. Though the paper later conceded that Confederate losses had been “nearer ten thousand,” they did not revise their estimate of the Northern troops.39 Jay Cutler Andrew wrote in his two-volume account on Civil War reporting that:

> Probably no battle fought during the Civil War exacted a greater amount of controversy than did the Battle of Shiloh, and for this the army correspondents were in no small degree responsible. Lacking precise information in many cases they dashed off long paragraphs, imaginary for the most part, about desperate hand-to-hand fighting that never occurred; circulated wild stories, wholly untrue, about Sherman’s men being bayoneted in their tents; and exaggerated the extent of both the Union defeat on Sunday and Union victory the next. The faking of eyewitness accounts took place while the self-styled authors never came any closer to the battlefield than Cairo.40

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39 *Savannah Republican*, April 22-29, May 12.
President Lincoln ordered a hundred-gun salute at the National Armory, and though relieved by the victory, he was mortified that the slaughter had been so great.\textsuperscript{41} Turmoil began anew for the Republican President and his soon-to-be-favorite general, as Lincoln was harshly criticized for retaining Grant when poor reports began to surface. Lincoln stood behind him, stating “I can’t spare this man; he fights.”\textsuperscript{42} A reality that the news reports could not obscure was that the war had changed.

“Deceptively easy Union advances and victories in 1862 had apparently confirmed a limited war strategy,” writes James McPherson. Grant’s capture of the Tennessee River forts convinced him the Confederacy was weak; “however, when the rebels regrouped and counter-punched so hard at Shiloh that they nearly whipped him, Grant changed his mind.”\textsuperscript{43} The Union commander now “gave up all idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest.”\textsuperscript{44} Complete conquest meant more than occupying territory, it meant destroying armies. Before the counteroffensive, Grant had been careful to “protect the property of citizens whose territory had been invaded;” after Shiloh his policy changed to “consume everything that could be used to support or supply armies of the enemy.”\textsuperscript{45} Sherman became a pioneer in what was considered “total war” in the 19\textsuperscript{th}-century mind: “I intended to humble their pride...we cannot change the hearts and minds of the people of the South, but we can make war so terrible...that the rebels will tire of it.”\textsuperscript{46}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{The complete desolation of Shiloh lingered in both soldier}\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{42} Daniel, \textit{Shiloh}, 308.
\textsuperscript{43} James M. McPherson, \textit{Drawn With The Sword} (Oxford University Press, 1997), 76.
\textsuperscript{44} Grant, \textit{Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant}, 368.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 369.
\textsuperscript{46} Sherman, \textit{Memoirs}, 249, 254.
and citizen. The battle which looked like a draw in later years must be regarded as one of the most decisive battles of the Civil War, because it steeled the Union for a hard fight, and pushed the Confederates into an ever-defensive war. The world had changed: romantic innocence had vanished and the war had turned vicious. In a letter to his wife following the battle, Grant summed up Shiloh’s importance:

For the number engaged and the tenacity with which both parties held on for two days, during an incessant fire of musketry and artillery, it has no equal on this continent.47