

## **The Twin Rivers Campaign**

The state of Tennessee was the last of eleven states to secede from the Union, on June 8, 1861, after Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to put down the "rebellion" following the bombardment of Fort Sumter. Immediately posters went up all across Tennessee urging the men of that state to enlist and fight the Northern "invaders." With its secession, Tennessee found itself to be the northern border of the young Southern Confederacy. Tennessee leaders strived to protect as much of their state's soil from Federal troops as possible. Integral to the defense of Tennessee and the Southern Heartland were two forts that were soon ordered into construction. Fort Henry, on the Tennessee River; and Fort Donelson, on the Cumberland River. These two forts, along with Columbus, Bowling Green, and Knoxville, would come to anchor the Confederate defensive line stretching from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River a department commanded by Albert Sidney Johnston.

A.S. Johnston was Kentuckian by birth but a Texan by choice. He was, like most Civil War generals, a Mexican War veteran, along with a close friend of Jefferson Davis. After the Mexican War, he received command of the vaunted 2nd U.S. Dragoons, compliments of his friend Jefferson Davis, who was at the time a U.S. senator. During the years approaching the Civil War, Johnston was stationed in California. Once he heard of his adopted Texas's secession from the U.S., he immediately resigned from the U.S. army and made his way east through the terrible desert conditions. He then received a commission in the Confederate army from his old friend Jeff Davis, who was now the president of the Confederate States of America. Johnston soon found himself to be the second highest-ranked Confederate commander and commander of the huge military department encompassing the Confederacy west of the Appalachians. As Confederates began to build a defensive line in northern Tennessee to resist any Union offensive, their enemies prepared for the expected offensive. Cairo, Illinois, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, became the focal point of Union operations in the west. For

both Confederates and Federals in the Western Theatre of operations, procuring a good firearm or a firearm at all was the greatest challenge of military life for the green soldiers. Many Northern troops were using low-quality, inferior foreign rifles; Southerners were meanwhile equipped with hunting rifles or shotguns from home or antiquated flintlock muskets. In many a Confederate unit, many or most of the guns they did have were non-working.

With its many navigable rivers, the Western Theatre was bound to see a large amount of naval action. Two shipping boats were soon acquired by the U.S. Navy and converted into warships, then re-christened the Tyler and Lexington, both of which would soon become parts of a new class of naval ships called timberclads. Meanwhile, several prototype ships called ironclads were being constructed for the U.S. Navy in St. Louis by a civilian contractor named James B. Eads. The American navy had never built an ironclad ship, so these new ones were to prove whether or not ironclads were a viable innovation. John Rodgers was in command of this powerful Union naval force. The Confederates were themselves building a new, enormous ironclad to be named the Eastport at Cerro Gordo, which was to defend the Tennessee River. It appeared the Federals were ready to battle the Confederates on the water. Adolphus Heiman, a German who immigrated to Nashville, eyed the high ground in Kentucky across the Tennessee River from his position at Fort Henry. Fort Henry, with the exception of its outer earthworks, was located on low, marshy along the shore of the Tennessee. But Kentucky's declared neutrality prevented Heiman from getting permission from his superiors to cross the river and fortify the high ground in the Bluegrass State. Yet events soon transpired that allowed Heiman to gain his much-desired ground in Kentucky. On September 4, 1861, General Gideon Pillow, a veteran Tennessean of Mexican War fame, crossed the Kentucky border and fortified the Mississippi River bluff at Columbus, thereby lifting the neutrality barrier. With Kentucky's neutrality no longer barring him, Heiman crossed his 10th Tennessee, a regiment of mostly foreign immigrants, to the west side of the Tennessee, where they then began construction on a new fort, to be designated Fort Heiman in honor of the 10th Tennessee's German immigrant commander. Fort Henry was dominated by Fort Heiman, which heavily strengthened the

Confederate position if the latter fort could be held. But unfortunately for the Confederates, no heavy guns were mounted in Fort Heiman before the Union offensive was launched against the two forts.

It was also obviously vital that the Cumberland River be fortified, to shield Nashville from naval attack. A position was chosen just west of the small county seat of Dover, Tennessee. The fortress, named Fort Donelson, was itself spotted on high ground, with upper and lower water batteries for protection from water, with Southern soldiers and slaves providing the labor for the construction. Several miles of outer entrenchments were also constructed, with the small town of Dover actually encompassed within these works. On the rolling hills within the fort were several hundred log cabins built by the Confederates as winter shelter. The water batteries dominated a view of the river for hundreds of yards, with a water barrier also constructed. But the rapidly rising waters of the Cumberland negated the effectiveness of this obstruction. Farther upriver at Clarksville, another fortress was being fabricated to be designated Fort Defiance. But an inability to obtain heavy guns and trained gun crews for the bastion hampered Southern attempts to strengthen it.

In Cairo a young commander named Ulysses Grant commanded an infantry force of several thousand men. He was a Mexican War veteran but a miserable failure in civilian life, where he failed in several ventures before taking a job for his father in Galena, Illinois. He saw the Civil War as a chance for him to support his family, and so volunteered, thereafter being given command of a regiment and then higher command. Grant had thus far shown no command abilities, with a stinging defeat at Belmont, Missouri in November hanging over his head. His department commander, Henry Halleck, held little confidence in his young subordinate. Yet he was to soon show his superior wrong.

The first year of the war had passed by in the Western Theatre with little military action of consequence. But the Federal high command did not plan to let much of 1862 do the same. Vital to the Confederate defensive line now running through northern Tennessee

and southern Kentucky were Forts Henry and Donelson or the twin river forts as they would become known. If these forts were captured the whole Southern line would be broken, and the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers would be gained by the Union as arteries from which to launch further offensives into the Southern Heartland. Nashville, "Athens of the South", would be necessarily abandoned by the Confederates, possibly along with the rest of the state of Tennessee. The advantages to seizing the twin river forts were numerous.

To accomplish the seizure of these forts was a U.S. military force of around 20,000 men, along with a strong naval flotilla, now commanded by abolitionist Andrew H. Foote, who had replaced John Rodgers. February 1862 was chosen for the start time for this new offensive, and none of the Southern high command expected winter fighting. Grant's military force--the nucleus of what would become the Army of the Tennessee was to cooperate with Foote's naval flotilla, which was at this point in the war still controlled by the army. The first Confederate stronghold (if it could be called that) was Fort Henry. The plan was for two Union divisions C.F. Smith's and John McClernand to be shipped up the Tennessee River to just out of range of Southern guns at Fort Henry, from where they would then march to cut off all escape routes out of both Forts Henry and Heiman. C.F. Smith was to seize the commanding Fort Heiman, while McClernand seized its companion fort across the river. In the meantime, Foote's flotilla would sail up the river and reduce the fort's water batteries. After Forts Henry and Heiman were captured, Fort Donelson would then be marched upon and seized in like order. That was the plan, but only time would tell if it would be executed as well as it was planned.

On February 3, 1862, nine transports carrying 15,000 men steamed out of Cairo, picking up Foote's naval flotilla of seven ships four ironclads and three timberclads along the way. This combined naval- land force then steamed up the Tennessee River, toward Forts Henry and Heiman. Upon reaching Itra landing, the troops were disembarked and began to encamp, while Foote's ships scouted the Confederate position. General Lloyd Tilghman, commanding the Confederate garrison at Fort Henry, had 2,800 troops, most of whom were sick and poorly supplied. Fort Henry was now under several feet of water,

and most of the torpedoes planted downriver by Southerners has been swept away by flood waters or rendered impotent. Tilghman quickly decided to abandon the incomplete Fort Heiman and concentrate his ragged force at Fort Henry. The days in between the Federals' landing downriver from the two forts and the subsequent Union assault were marked by reconnaissance forays by both sides and sharp, little skirmishes. By February 6, Grant was ready to move. His troops slowly made their way through quagmired roads, while Foote's warships began their attack on Fort Henry at 12:38 p.m. Tilghman had already determined that Fort Henry was indefensible, but vowed to save as many of his troops as possible. So while 50 Tennessee gunners remained behind to fight off the Federal warships as long as possible, the rest of the garrison would march east to Fort Donelson. Tilghman himself would stay behind to surrender the fort. Foote decided to maneuver his ships through the chute on the west side of Panther Island, just within range of the Confederate artillery at Fort Henry. The chute had earlier been blocked by Southern torpedoes, but those torpedoes has been washed away. His flotilla plowed lazily through the water, with the ironclads leading and the vulnerable timberclads following. As the Federal juggernaut advanced, the two sides traded long-range shots. The closer the Union ships came, the more fearful the slaughter within both the fort and the warships became. The Essex received a hit to its boilers, effectively knocking it out of the fight, while the Cincinnati was itself badly damaged. But, after 21 Confederate gunners had been killed by the ferocious Union gunfire, Tilghman asked for surrender terms from Foote. The flotilla commander, in turn, sternly demanded nothing but an unconditional surrender. The Southern garrison commander had no choice but to surrender the fort and the few gunners left. But these gunners had heroically purchased, with their own blood, enough time for their comrades to escape. Grant's infantry, handicapped by the muddy roads, did not arrive until late afternoon.

Federal ships now traveled freely up the Tennessee River. The incomplete Confederate ironclad Eastport was seized by Federal ships in a raid soon after the capture of Fort Henry. The railroad reaching out from the Danville bridge was destroyed for miles in either direction, and a Southern training camp at Savannah, Tennessee was dispersed. Union sailors reported seeing some civilians along the river run out to the shore waving

American flags, while most of them fled before the advancing ships. Grant decided to rest his troops at Fort Henry, while he received supplies and reinforcements. As Grant's victorious troops rested, the Confederate high command was trying to decide what to do. It was decided that all Confederate forces in northern Tennessee and southern Kentucky would retreat southward, all the way to the east-west running Memphis & Charleston Railroad. This railroad would provide an easy means of Southern concentration in southern Tennessee. This, of course, meant Nashville would have to be necessarily abandoned. As Johnston concentrated Confederate forces in southern Tennessee, a delaying would be fought at the Cumberland River. Johnston ordered John Floyd, Simon Buckner, Gideon Pillow, and Bushrod Johnson to Fort Donelson with their commands, bringing Southern troops numbers to close to 20,000. Floyd would command the enlarged garrison. Grant would now be facing a very formidable enemy force.

Grant began his eastward movement to Fort Donelson on February 12, with the now dried roads allowing easy passage for the Federal troops. Lew Wallace, commanding a newly arrived division, was ordered to stay behind and garrison Fort Henry. Grant's vulnerable columns marched unopposed to the outskirts of the Confederate works at Fort Donelson by the evening of the 9th. Union troops expected to see the easy victory at Fort Henry repeated, with Foote's ships capturing Fort Donelson, while the infantry surrounded the Confederate bastion. But Foote's flotilla was nowhere to be seen, as he had steamed his ships, except the Carondelet, north to Cairo for repairs. As Grant awaited Foote's arrival, his troops set to work investing Fort Donelson, and he set up headquarters at the home of a local widow named Crisp.

While Grant's army tightened its grip around the garrison at Fort Donelson, Confederate commanders sat dormant, allowing the surrounding of their force. On the morning of February 13, Grant requested more reinforcements from Halleck and ordered Lew Wallace, with his division, from Fort Henry to the Donelson area. This day saw two small Federal attacks. Grant had ordered his commanders C.F. Smith and John McClelland not to bring on any engagement. But obviously his subordinates did not understand. Early in the morning, C.F. Smith ordered two of his brigades Lauman's and Cook's--to assail the

Confederates outer earthworks, on a ridge over 1,000 yards away. The two brigades attacked, only to become abruptly halted in a ravine by a combination of Southern abatis, thick underbrush, and heavy enemy fire. They were soon forced to retire. McClellan also launched his own assault against the Confederate breastworks. He had been shifting his right flank farther and farther to the right, so as to complete the encirclement of the Southern garrison. As his troops executed this movement many of them came under severe fire from a Confederate gun behind breastworks. McClellan ordered Morrison's brigade and three regiments from W.H.L. Wallace's brigade to rush this troublesome Southern battery, commanded by a Tennessean by the name of Maney. Of course the assault faltered just as Smith's earlier attempts did. All these two unnecessary attacks did was add over 100 more Union men to the casualty list.

On the evening of February 13, Foote arrived with his flotilla, minus the Essex and Cincinnati, which were still being repaired. Foote did not believe his flotilla was in fighting condition, but he had been ordered by Halleck to support Grant at Fort Donelson. By the time Foote came within eleven miles of Fort Donelson and prepared to assail the bastion by water, darkness descended on the battlefield.

The next morning, at 9:00 a.m., Grant visited Foote at his gunboats to try to convince him to assail the Confederate water batteries. Foote decided to make his attack. Of course his sailors and Federal infantrymen were expecting another easy victory for the ironclads. Foote's gunboats appeared around the bend in the Cumberland River at 2:00 p.m., within sight of the Southern water batteries. They snaked their way through the water, trading distant shots with Confederate guns. Foote decided to try to repeat his easy victory at Fort Henry. But he found Donelson to be a tougher nut to crack than Henry. As his ships crept closer to the Southern batteries, they began to get the worst of the fight. Foote himself was wounded in both the arm and ankle at the height of the fighting. The murderous fire became too much for all of the attacking Union ships, except the Carondelet, and they streamed away from the water batteries. All along the Confederate lines, a loud cheer rose through the cold, winter air. The inexperienced Southern gunners had given their side its first victory in the Twin Rivers Campaign. Grant was terribly

surprised at the rebuff of the Federal ironclads, as he now saw that Fort Donelson would not be as easily captured as its companion bastion on the Tennessee. Grant even wrote his wife talking of a long siege being necessary to reduce Donelson.

Floyd convened a council of his ranking generals that night—Buckner, Johnson, and Pillow attending. Pillow wished to stay at Fort Donelson; Floyd and Buckner preferred to fight their way out of the trap in the morning. But the details of what was to be done once the breakthrough was accomplished were blurred. Pillow understood that once the enemy lines were broken, the troops would return to their earthworks to grab baggage, artillery, rations, the water batteries gun crews, and other troops. On the other hand, Buckner believed the troops would keep going once achieving the breakthrough, leaving behind their belongings, rations, and comrades to their fates. This error in understanding between the generals would soon retard a very good plan. The night of the 14th saw Confederate troops of Buckner's division, on the right flank, shifting to the left in support of the morning attack. They left one Tennessee regiment of 450 men, armed with shotguns, to hold off C.F. Smith's whole Federal division. The offensive began around 6:00 a.m. on the 15th, with McClelland's right flank, anchored on Dudley's Hill, being overcome by masses of determined, yelling Southerners. As McClelland's surprised division began to melt away, Buckner threw the weight of his fresh division in the assault. Before long, McClelland's division, along with small parts of Lew Wallace's division, were streaming rearward. Gradually Lew Wallace defied orders from General Grant and began to reinforce McClelland with many of his brigades.

While the Federal right flank collapsed, Grant was visiting the wounded Andrew Foote at his gunboats. The thick woods had stifled the sounds of battle, so when a messenger appeared at the gunboats with news of the right flank caving in, Grant was understandably surprised and disturbed. Immediately he sped his way back to headquarters on horseback. By the time Grant arrived on the battlefield, the Confederate offensive had been blunted by poor command leadership and determined Union resistance. As the Wynn Ferry Road and escape lay open to the Confederates, indecision and a lack of leadership halted the jubilant Southerners. Pillow ordered the men back to



their works to gather all they would need on the escape march to Nashville. Yet the other commanders believed they were to continue marching away from the fort. With all this confusion reigning in Confederate command, the Federals were given time to prepare a defense line, from where a determined assault by Brown's Tennesseans was repulsed. Grant determined that for the Confederates to attack so strongly on their left, they must have weakened their right, so he ordered C.F. Smith to assail Southern entrenchments in his front. He also ordered for the ground lost to the Confederates in the morning fighting to be regained.

So in early afternoon, both Union flanks launched a counteroffensive. C.F. Smith's fresh division launched its attack, storming the forward Southern line on a ridge across a ravine. After seizing the first line, Smith's troops continued to roll forward toward a second line across a ravine, but this time the Confederates were reinforced, by Buckner's returning men. The elder Smith's attack dwindled away, although he could call having captured the forward works a success. As Smith opened his attack, the Union counterattack on the right pushed back the tired, disorganized troops of Buckner's and Pillow's divisions. The now demoralized Confederate troops had bravely fought their way out of the trap, only to see the ground gained at the cost of their blood lost by incompetent leadership. The day's fighting had cost both sides a cumulative loss of 3,000 men, and the Southerners were still entrapped within their bastion, hoping for the best.

The dreary night of the 15th was the scene of yet another council-of-war between the ranking commanders of the Confederate garrison. This time the debate centered around whether or not to surrender. At this war council it was decided by Floyd, Pillow, and Buckner that capitulation was the only option. But Floyd and Pillow decided to escape the fort instead of capitulating to the Federals, handing command down to Buckner, who decided to stay behind to share in his troops' fates. During the meeting, the daring Nathan Bedford Forrest stormed in and declared that he did not come to Fort Donelson to surrender, and so told the Confederate high command he proposed to escape from the bastion. Floyd and Pillow, having already decided to escape, attached themselves to Forrest's escape column, which included over 1,000 infantrymen, cavalymen, and

artillerymen. Through the dark, cold night, Forrest's command escaped, fording the supposedly impassible Lick Creek, and meeting no resistance.

Buckner sent a aide bearing a note addressed to General Grant asking for surrender terms. The aide first had cross C.F. Smith's lines. Upon seeing the surrender note, Smith declared that only an unconditional surrender would be acceptable. Grant then answered back to Buckner's inquiry about surrender terms by declaring: "No terms except unconditional surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works." Buckner grew disdainful over Grant's stern response. Yet he knew that surrender was the only viable option for his garrison, and so sent back to Grant accepting a surrender meeting in Dover. The surrender meeting took place in the Dover Hotel, a small, two-story building by the river. McClernand was first to reach Dover Hotel, with Grant arriving one hour later. The terms, of course, were unconditional, but Buckner felt compelled to accept them. And so Grant's troops marched into Fort Donelson, but Grant forbade any cheering on the part of the triumphant Federals.

Now pilfering was begun, and by men of both sides. Grant did the best he could to stop the wanton destruction of private property, but keeping the Federals and Confederates alike in hand was easier said than done. There was also the problem of what to do with this sudden influx of Southern prisoners 17,000 of them. The Confederate POWs were soon shipped to makeshift POW camps all over the north, from Boston to Chicago. Reporters flocked from newly arrived riverboats, seeking to get some good stories. Along came volunteer nurses and doctors from the town of Dover itself and the North.

A.S. Johnston was now in a crisis. His whole defensive line had been cracked within a stretch of ten days, and lost 20,000 valuable men. While Grant's force sat dormant, resting and consolidating its position at Forts Henry and Donelson, Johnston began the task of making an orderly withdrawal from southern Kentucky and northern Tennessee. His Central Army of Kentucky retreated through Nashville, where panic ensued news of the capture of Fort Donelson by the enemy. Columbus was abandoned, as Confederates all across Tennessee fled south, toward a reconcentration. The point of concentration for Southern forces was Corinth, Mississippi, at the junction of two major railroads. From here an adequate defense of the Tennessee and Mississippi River Valleys could be had. On the Union side, Halleck got what he wished for when he received command of all of

the Western Theatre.

Grant became eager to sail his force up the Tennessee River, so as to seize the vital city of Corinth. But this time, at the Battle of Shiloh in April, an organized Confederate force, and would also be surprised. His army would nearly be pushed into the river, which would give the Confederacy the Western victory they needed. But the Southerners would fall just short of their goal. It's interesting to speculate what effect the 20,000 Confederate troops lost in the Twin Rivers Campaign could have had on the outcome of the Battle of Shiloh.