

Voices from Company D: Diaries by the Fifth Alabama Infantry Regiment, Army of Northern Virginia

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Review

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Shea, William L. and Winschel, Terrence J.. *Vicksburg Is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River.* \$35.00 ISBN 803242549

Water power:

The campaign to control the Mississippi

On July 9, 1863, Port Hudson, the last Confederate bastion on the Mississippi, surrendered to Union forces under the command of Major General Nathaniel Banks. Port Hudson's fall, along with the capture of Vicksburg only a few days before, split the Confederacy in two and brought the long Federal campaign for control of the mighty river to a conclusion.

The story of this arduous and complex struggle is the subject of **Vicksburg is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River** by William L. Shea and Terrence J. Winschel. The work is part of the Great Campaigns of the Civil War series, the goal of which is to provide readers concise overviews of the major campaigns of the war. Thankfully, the series also endeavors to go beyond traditional military studies and place campaigns and battles within wider social and political contexts. Past volumes have presented an engaging look at the Civil War and its effects on the nation and its citizens.

The authors ably craft important secondary works and selected primary sources into a well-written synthesis. Their narrative style is clear and accessible to the specialist and lay reader alike. They begin the volume by demonstrating the economic and military importance of the Mississippi River to both the United States and the Confederacy. The control of the river was ever present in the strategic thinking of both sides. Shea and Winschel go on to chronicle the various Federal efforts to gain control of the river beginning in the spring of 1862 and climaxing with the fall of the last Confederate fortifications in the summer of 1863. In their blow-by-blow account of the struggle, the authors offer an excellent overview of the series of Union thrusts and Rebel counter-thrusts

aimed at control of the Mississippi.

Beyond a narrative of events, the authors point to a host of issues that make this campaign important and unique. For example, it highlighted an extraordinary diversity of military and naval operations such as fleet engagements, cavalry raids, amphibious landings, battles, and siege operations. The Federal assault on the Mississippi was a rarity in that it successfully combined military and naval forces. In addition, the authors contend that the campaign led to the rise and prominence of Union commanders such as Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, David G. Farragut, and David D. Porter, all of whom used the campaign to demonstrate their extraordinary abilities. The authors appear to be exceptionally fond of Grant, who receives great praise for his generalship.

This fondness for Grant is the first of several flaws in the work. The authors are correct in pointing out that the Vicksburg campaign was a critical stage in the evolution of Ulysses S. Grant as a military leader. He had to learn to accommodate political generals, which added tricky considerations to his military planning. He also learned to adjust his plans to new and rapidly changing circumstances. However, while Grant's Vicksburg campaign is considered by most historians to be his best demonstration of generalship during the war, it came at a heavy price for the civilians of Mississippi. Not enough is written in the book about the suffering of the civilian population-- the indiscriminate shelling of noncombatants in Vicksburg, their struggle with starvation, etc. The collateral damage was extensive, and the Union forces failed to operate according to the recognized rules of war. Throughout the campaign Union forces engaged in widespread looting and wanton destruction, yet this escapes the volume in any real sense. What about the southern refugees fleeing into Vicksburg for safety as Grant's army marched across west-central Mississippi? More personal accounts from the civilians caught up in the maelstrom of war is critically needed. In addition, very little information is given concerning the political dimensions of the campaign. What was going on in Washington and Richmond? What influence did Lincoln and Davis and their governments have on the struggle? What was being said in the press about the campaign and its importance? Finally, what about the freed people? What was happening as this region of large plantations was falling under Federal control? How were the freed people affected by the campaign, and, in turn, how did they affect the campaign?

The stated purpose of the Great Campaigns series is to move beyond battlefield narrative to explain and analyze the importance of the military struggle to society as a whole. While many volumes in the series have been very successful in exploring the civilian side of war (most notably Anne Bailey's *Chessboard of War* (2000) and Stephen Engle's *Struggle for the Heartland* (2001)), **Vicksburg is the Key** is lacking in this regard. The authors do include colorful insights from the point of view of the common soldiers, but more research on the civilian population, the press, and the political leadership of both sides would have added depth and understanding to the significance of the campaign.

Another more serious flaw concerns the authors' overstated importance of the Vicksburg campaign. Shea and Winschel believe that because the trans-Mississippi was cut off from the rest of the Confederacy, this campaign marked the turning point of the war. However, they offer no evidence to support their position. How many Confederate soldiers fighting in the eastern and western theaters were from the trans-Mississippi? What percentage of Confederate supply came from the region west of the river? How resource rich were the trans-Mississippi states compared to the rest of the Confederacy? The authors make bold statements about the singular importance of the fall of Vicksburg and Port Hudson. These bold statements necessitate concrete evidence of their validity. They may very well be true, but where is the proof?

The authors go on to say that [t]he capture of Vicksburg and its garrison was a strategic victory of almost incalculable proportions, the single greatest feat of arms achieved by either side during the entire Civil War. What about the battle of Shiloh? Would not a Confederate victory have altered the strategic balance in the region at least for a significant period of time? What about the Union victory at Antietam which ended Lee's first invasion of the North, convinced the European powers (especially Britain) to reconsider political recognition of the Confederacy, and gave Lincoln the opportunity to issue the Emancipation Proclamation which changed the very nature of Union war aims? What about the battle of Gettysburg which ended Lee's second invasion of the North and crippled his army, forever curtailing its freedom of maneuver and offensive power? Surely, the capture of Vicksburg pales in comparison to these examples.

The authors also insist that [w]hen the bitter contest finally reached its climax at Vicksburg and Port Hudson in July 1863, the Confederacy suffered a blow from which it would not, could not recover. In reality, however, the South

still had opportunities to win its independence with or without Vicksburg in Confederate hands. Rebel forces in the trans-Mississippi continued to wage war against the Union, and Confederates in the western and eastern theaters continued to fight savagely against Federal advances even after Vicksburg. For example, the Atlanta and Overland campaigns greatly influenced the U.S. presidential election of 1864, and had they gone differently, the Confederacy could have managed a negotiated peace. Given the preponderance of Union men and material in the latter stages of the conflict, one has a hard time believing that access to the trans-Mississippi's resources would have radically altered Confederate logistical problems. The real significance of the fall of Vicksburg was the capture of Pemberton's army and its supplies, not the loss of the city or even the splitting of the Confederacy. Had Pemberton linked up with Johnston's forces as he was ordered to do, Grant would have captured the city, but perhaps faced a serious military struggle to maintain his control of the city and the river. Surprisingly, the authors fail to explore whether the Confederate loss of the Mississippi was inevitable or if it could have been prevented by a better conceived strategy or more gifted leadership.

Despite these criticisms, **Vicksburg is the Key** is a good book. Shea and Winschel's fast-paced narrative of the struggle for the Mississippi is the first comprehensive single volume account to appear in over a century, and it provides a fine introduction to the complex and intertwined military operations for the control of the river. While not the strongest volume in the Great Campaign series in terms of the non-military dimensions of the conflict, it does fit nicely with the other works. Those interested in a more detailed account of the struggle for the Mississippi should examine Edwin Bearss' three-volume *The Vicksburg Campaign* and David C. Edmonds' two-volume *The Guns of Port Hudson*.

John D. Fowler is an Assistant Professor of History at Kennesaw State University. His first book, Mountaineers in Gray: The Story of the Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, C.S.A., will be published by the University of Tennessee Press next summer. He is currently working on Awash in the Storm: Tennessee In the Civil War Era, a study of the Volunteer State's traumatic experience during the period from c. 1848-1875 (also to be published by the University of Tennessee Press).