

The Fight for the Yazoo, August 1862-July 1864: Swamps, Forts and Fleets on Vicksburg's Northern Flank

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Review

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Smith, Myron *The Fight for the Yazoo, August 1862-July 1864: Swamps, Forts and Fleets on Vicksburg's Northern Flank*. McFarland, \$55.00 ISBN 978-0-7864-6281-0

A Review of the Importance of the Yazoo Campaign

The Union attempt to capture the Confederate fortified city of Vicksburg, Mississippi, and its environs entailed a long and exhausting series of operations that included various land and water-based assets. Author Myron J. Smith, Jr. has chosen to focus primarily on the efforts that centered on the Yazoo River approaches to the city, including those involving the Confederate naval yard and facilities at Yazoo City, as well as the various defensive positions and resource producers and centers that dotted the region. Smith takes readers on a detailed journey aboard the vessels and supporting elements that tested, and ultimately bested, the attempts to thwart these advances, in addition to the extensive countermeasures the Confederates utilized to safeguard their territory from such incursions.

The narrative carries the combatants across the varied landscapes of swamps, bayous, tributaries, bluffs, plantations and communities through several significant campaigns, highlighting the successes and setbacks that characterized each. Federal ironclads, tinclads and steamers of various types churned the local waters in search of a successful avenue of approach to Vicksburg from points north of that city or in support of deployed land forces. When not focused on the Confederate bastion itself, the Union forces targeted facilities, infrastructure and resources in the region for capture or destruction, requiring their opponents to scramble to conduct a viable defense or employ a "scorched earth" program to deny these same elements to their adversaries. The author chronicles the Confederate efforts to employ scuttled blockships, deploy rafts, construct or convert vessels, build batteries and earthworks, and lay torpedoes (or underwater mines) at critical points to hold the blue advance at bay. Throughout these

operations, combatants on both sides battled shifting water levels, myriad weather conditions, and daunting natural and man-made obstacles, as well as each other, to accomplish their missions. Frequent mishaps and miscalculations plagued the participants on both sides, until Federal forces finally subdued their opponents, taking Vicksburg and asserting nominal control over the surrounding region.

Smith's volume is at its best when the forces engage and the military action unfolds. Unfortunately, these moments of drama are less prolific than the thorough discussions of the movements of the opposing forces as they work themselves into position for battle. In the chapter on the extraordinarily difficult Yazoo Pass expedition, for example, the author succeeds perhaps too well in conveying the excruciating progress of the Union fleet as the participants struggle to overcome clogged and narrow passageways for their vessels. The rich detail provides many layers of information, but can bog down the text, while the sudden shifts from one side to another in the narrative as each day unfolds threaten to leave the general reader as perplexed as the participants usually were themselves with regard to the actions of specific individuals.

Several maps help to orient readers, although some of them exhibit a clutter or lack of clarity that minimize their effectiveness, while the absence of a map of the larger region that depicts the significant points of interest in this story prevents an easier understanding of the complex natural and man-made features that appear in the narrative. The course of movements is not easy to follow in the multifaceted set of waterways and roadways which the opposing forces are required to traverse. Readers unfamiliar with the area can understand the lamentation of one Union participant over the confusing assortment of names for watercourses in the region.

Another of the chief concerns of the volume is the daunting number of geographic and typographic anomalies that appear throughout that might have been addressed in the publication process. For instance, the town of Helena seems as likely to be located in Arizona as in Arkansas at various points in the text, while Fort Donelson is found on the Tennessee River rather than the Cumberland. Ship titles, officer ranks and personal names appear to experience unintended variations that are distracting, if not problematic, for the reader. Avoidable repetition marks several chapters and captions frequently employ textual material verbatim or are simply mislabeled. For research purposes, the end notes are clear when involving the descriptions of vessels and officers, but

much less so when concerning the specific sources for quotations.

Given these points, *The Fight for the Yazoo* offers much to its readers. It provides a sweeping depiction of the military maneuvers that took place in the region north of Vicksburg in the period that opened in the late summer of 1862 and continued after the fall of the city in the summer of 1863. Most impressive are the ways in which individuals work to overcome the numerous challenges they face. A greater appreciation of the many aspects of waging war in a usually hostile environment and the manner in which creative minds attempt to surmount obstacles from almost every quarter in order to fulfill their duties are among the most welcome outcomes for readers. While the volume will likely have stronger appeal to specialists than to a general audience that typically prefers a broader treatment, readers are bound to gain a greater understanding of this aspect of Civil War history.

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