

The Siege of Vicksburg: Climax of the Campaign to Open the Mississippi River, May 23 – July 4, 1863

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Review

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Smith, Timothy B. *The Siege of Vicksburg: Climax of the Campaign to Open the Mississippi River, May 23 – July 4, 1863.* University Press of Kansas, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$50.00 ISBN 9780700632251 pp. 724

In 1976, military historian John Keegan published his brilliant, groundbreaking book *The Face of Battle*. In a single stroke, Keegan altered the landscape of military history when he wrote that battle was not something “any quantity of colored maps will reveal,” but instead, could only be understood as the “behaviour of men struggling to reconcile their instinct for self-preservation, their sense of honour and achievement of some aim over which other men are ready to kill them.” Now, forty-six years later in the style of Mr. Keegan, Timothy B. Smith has produced an impressive study of the final forty-three days of the campaign which led to the capture of an entire Confederate army, contributed to the surrender of Port Hudson, demoralized Southern citizens, and ensconced General Ulysses S. Grant as President Lincoln’s number one commander.

In *The Siege of Vicksburg: Climax of the Campaign to Open the Mississippi River, May 23 – July 4, 1863*, Smith describes the strategic and tactical complexity of the siege, but just as importantly, he devotes considerable attention and detail to the plight of the common soldier and the suffering and deprivations of Vicksburg’s citizens. For Union soldiers, the constant torment of mental stress and the fear that the next enemy sharpshooter’s minié ball or artillery round would kill you or worse, leave you to suffer a gruesome wound, combined with the intense heat during the day and constant digging and vigilance at night is described in full detail. Contaminated food and water along with unsanitary conditions left soldiers with unrelenting and debilitating dysentery from which many did not recover. Mosquitoes, chiggers, lice, snakes, and poison ivy added to the soldiers’ distress and misery. For the Confederate army locked into Vicksburg, the food, water, and sanitary conditions were worse. Civilians trapped in the city resorted to digging caves into hillsides to protect themselves from the constant bombardment of Grant’s artillery and Admiral David Dixon Porter’s gunboats. Cave-ins happened often as did the

deaths of men, women, children, and beloved pets. Both sides could always smell the stench of gunpowder and the dead.

Smith's book has much to offer. In addition to the sanguinary nature of soldiers' and civilians' day to day lives, the book investigates the complexity of the military operations during the siege, the extent of those operations, and the strategic and tactical challenges generals faced. Most compelling is the author's posit that the Army of Tennessee's capture of the Army of Vicksburg and the city was not a predestined or foregone conclusion. Smith spends considerable time analyzing why Confederate General Joseph Johnston failed to attack Grant from the rear or why Confederate generals John C. Pemberton and Johnston were never able to coordinate simultaneous attacks against the Union army. The author does not speculate as to what might have happened if Johnston attacked Grant from the east, but on page 414, Smith makes clear that there was a "window of opportunity" in the two weeks after Grant's May 22nd assaults, "to do something" because Union forces were not fully entrenched and Johnston and Pemberton outnumbered Grant.

The author's research is impressive. Using countless letters, diaries, and reminiscences, he tells the story of the siege primarily through the eyes of the participants. From the perspective of common soldiers describing the daily tedium of expanding earthworks and repairing damages, to the perspective of division, corps, and army commanders, as they manage a myriad of problems and challenges, we see the impacts of the battle. Here Grant is center stage—brilliant in his ability to learn from his mistakes, masterful at paying tireless attention to details, strategic as he prepared for Johnston's attack, which never came, and adroit at managing the personalities and skills of his commanders. After the city fell, he used the aggressive William T. Sherman to launch an offensive against Joe Johnston, and he used the tactful and gracious James B. McPherson to manage the dejected and spiteful Confederate officers and civilians now Union prisoners inside the city.

One of the many strengths of the book is the attention paid to the Union navy's contribution to the siege. On several occasions during the siege, Grant asked Admiral Porter for his assistance, as Smith writes on page 93, "in various matters where the situation could have gotten serious if not for the naval contribution." For example, as Union soldiers probed northeast of Vicksburg looking for Johnston's Army of Relief, Porter covered the movements with gunboats. The most significant effort during the siege, however, was the constant naval

bombardment of the city and operations to bring massive quantities of supplies to the Chickasaw Bayou landing on the Yazoo River.

The construction of trenches, fortifications, and other essential engineering operations are covered in considerable detail. Major Samuel H. Lockett looms large as the Confederate engineer responsible for maintaining, adapting, and repairing southern fortifications which stretched from South Fort south of the city to Fort Hill north of the city. On the Union side, West Point trained engineers such as Captains Frederick E. Prime, and Cyrus B. Comstock, and Lieutenant Colonel James H. Wilson are credited with displaying the skill and ingenuity necessary to conduct Vauban-style siege warfare. The author frequently mentions the dearth of West Point engineer officers in Grant's army, which according to Smith hampered the progress of the siege, especially along the 13th Corps line of approach. Yet, Smith correctly points out the remarkable engineering work civil engineers turned military engineers such as Captain Andrew Hickenlooper (the engineer in charge of mining operations under the 3rd Louisiana Redan) and Captain Stewart Tresilian (the creator of the wooden mortars used with considerable effect) performed. In Grant's report of the campaign, the general writes that there was a scarcity of engineer officers at the start of the campaign, but practical experience was gained and considerable skill demonstrated in the absence of regular engineer officers. One of the Union army's advantages at Vicksburg, which the author did not emphasize, was in the ingenuity of non-West Point trained engineers who learned their jobs on the spot and executed their assignments skillfully. Colonel Josiah Bissell's Engineer Regiment of the West, and officers like Captains William Kossak, William Le Baron Jenney, William C. Young, and Herman Klostermann deserved more credit for their role in engineering operations.

The author does describe the role enslaved persons, contrabands, and black soldiers played in the Vicksburg siege. The Confederate engineers used slave labor to dig new sections of fortifications and repair existing ones. Union engineers used contrabands to dig saps and fabricate gabions and fascines. Unfortunately, many contrabands faced the ugly racism prevalent in both the South and North. Union soldiers played cruel tricks on Blacks, used them as "pawns for jokes," and often were quite mean. I wish, however, the author had devoted more space in writing about the June 7, 1863 fight at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana. African Americans from the 9th and 13th Louisiana Infantry, and the 1st Mississippi fought alongside white troops from the 10th Illinois Cavalry and the 23rd Iowa Infantry to repel a fierce Confederate attack at what the

latter believed was Grant's major supply depot for the campaign. Approximately forty-five percent of the 9th Louisiana were either killed or mortally wounded. The author did point out that eventually Grant learned from a captured Confederate that a white officer and several Black prisoners had been hanged at Richmond, Louisiana. He immediately wrote a letter of inquiry to Confederate General Richard Taylor, who denied the charges although he did say that the Black prisoners were turned over to civil authorities. Louisiana state law regarding "servile insurrection" would apply.

Smith concludes that it was not for lack of food or ammunition that Pemberton surrendered but that Grant's army had dug so close to the Confederate position that a Union assault along the entire line would overwhelm Pemberton's enfeebled forces. Johnston's weak attempt to relieve Vicksburg also contributed to Confederate defeat. Finally, as both sides faced the detritus of war, the author leaves us with a glimpse of hope. Dora Miller, a civilian inside Vicksburg during the siege, wrote in her diary about a pair of chimney-swallows who built a nest in her parlor chimney. The concussion of exploding shells often sent parts of their nest to the bottom of the chimney. Yet, each time this happened the swallows would patiently collect the bits and re-ascend to the top of the chimney. Amid the destruction of the campaign, we have the image of the regeneration of life. Smith has written a very human story of the siege of Vicksburg. It is an important book and it contributes significantly to the body of Civil War scholarship.

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