

Union Parish Soldiers at the Battle of Chickasaw Bayou

by Timothy Dean Hudson

One hundred fifty years ago this winter, Union and Confederate forces began the struggle for control of the Vicksburg, known as the Gibraltar of the Confederacy. Located on the bluffs high above the Mississippi River, Vicksburg's natural defenses afforded the Southern troops command of the river, blocking Union navigation on the river and allowing communication, troops, and supplies to freely flow from Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana to the eastern theatre of the war. The Union navy launched a determined attempt to take Vicksburg in June 1862 with a massive flotilla of battleships, but their month-long bombardment proved ineffective.

In the fall of 1862, Union General U. S. Grant designed a multi-pronged campaign to take Vicksburg. Grant initiated his plan in November with troop movements in Tennessee and northern Mississippi, causing the Confederate military to order the 31st Louisiana Infantry from their camp near modern West Monroe to Mississippi. Three companies of the 31st Regiment, a total of around 350 soldiers, consisted of soldiers from across Union Parish. The vast majority of these soldiers were farmers in their 20s, 30s, and early 40s with wives and children, and they had just joined the Confederate Army the previous spring. They spent the summer and early fall of 1862 in training camps around Monroe, waiting to receive their arms and ammunition.

These Union Parish troops first went by rail to Jackson, then north to Water Valley, Mississippi to intercept Yankee troops on a raid out of Memphis before going to Vicksburg for a few weeks. One rainy night in late November, the soldiers received orders to cook two days' rations and move to Jackson by 3:00 a.m. They travelled to Jackson in box cars with more than 100 men crowded into a single car, forcing the men to stand the entire trip. The cars leaked profusely, soaking the troops. As soon as the rail cars arrived in Jackson, the men were ordered back to Vicksburg, arriving at 3:00 a.m. the next morning. They had spent twenty-four hours on their feet in wet clothing; within ten days, forty of these soldiers died of pneumonia and meningitis.

In December, the 350 Union Parish soldiers in the 31st La Regiment then joined the Vicksburg garrison, which already included about 100 Union Parish soldiers in the 17th Regiment in Company C, the "*Phoenix Rifles*," commanded by Farmerville farmer, former Union Parish sheriff and state representative, Capt. Jordan Gray Taylor. Conditions at the camp in Vicksburg proved less than ideal, with Union Parish troops complaining the most about the food. Farmerville resident Lt. Eaton Jefferson Lee wrote that their meager fare consisted only of corn bread and old, lean beef

that they had to boil to eat. He said the soldiers grumbled that they had not tasted flour, coffee, or pork since they left Union Parish. Lee begged his relatives in Union Parish to send them some “hog meat,” because “...we are very near starved out on beef.”

In mid-December, Confederate President Jefferson Davis toured the western theatre of the war and reviewed the troops at Vicksburg along with General Joseph E. Johnson. Lt. E. Jefferson Lee of Farmerville wrote, “I took a good look at old Jeff. He is a calm looking old fellow. Gen. Johnson is a fine looking officer.”

As he put his plan into action, Gen. Grant split his army into two wings, one moving south on the Mississippi River from Memphis headed by Gen. William T. Sherman, and the other moving south from Tennessee on the Mississippi Central Railroad under Grant’s command. Confederate cavalry raids on Grant’s supply lines and railroads foiled his plans to conduct an overland campaign to support Sherman.

On Christmas Day, 1862, Sherman’s 32,000 Federal soldiers reached Milliken’s Bend on the river north of Vicksburg, and the next day they landed on the Yazoo River and began moving through the swamps. That same day, the approximately 450 Union Parish soldiers in the 17th and 31st La Regiments received orders at 4:00 p.m. to make a hasty march towards Chickasaw Bayou located about five miles north of Vicksburg. They arrived at 9:00 and fell asleep on their blankets, but a torrential rainstorm forced the men to stand the rest of the night. The next morning, they dug trenches along the ridge of bluffs above the bayou on Widow Lake’s farm, with the 31st Regiment taking the center position behind the large Indian mounds.

When the Confederate forces arrived at the Lake farm that night, the brigade commander, Monroe attorney Lt. Col. Richardson, ordered the “Phoenix Rifles” from Union Parish to advance as pickets towards the swamps on the far side of Widow Lake’s old field. Finding nothing, the soldiers sought shelter in the Lake house from the rain. The deluge continued throughout the night, flooding the lowlands and rendering them impassable for artillery. These conditions eventually forced Sherman to concentrate his forces at the Lake farmhouse and follow the road from there to the bluffs, although he meandered for several more days in the swamps in a futile attempt to find another, less exposed route.

While on picket duty at the Lake farm on December 27th, the “Phoenix Rifles” became the first Confederate forces to exchange fire with Sherman’s advance troops. Nineteen-year-old Spearsville farmer Joseph C. Clayton was the first man to fire at the Federal troops, saying, “...come on boys, who is afraid of the Yankees.” Not long after uttering those words, a six-pound cannon ball struck

Clayton in the eye, tearing off one side of his head. Lt. Jefferson Lee wrote, "*Joe... poor fellow he was a brave soldier. He dared danger [and] never knew what killed him.*"

For the next three days, the Federal troops maintained a continual artillery barrage on the bluffs. Their fire proved largely ineffective, as their guns generally shot over the heads of the Southern troops. The Union Parish soldiers behind the Indian mounds suffered only a few casualties from the artillery fire, including 17-year-old Sidney Robinson of Marion, who received a gunshot to the head.

On Monday, the 29th, Sherman's troops emerged from the swamps, and about 2:00 p.m. he formed his army into double columns, eight abreast, and marched them double time across Lake's old field. The columns divided, filed right and left towards the corners of the field, then with a cheer they fronted and charged the Confederate army's position along the bluffs. The Federal troops were within good rifle range from the time they reached Widow Lake's old field, and the slaughter was terrible. The Federal attack crumbled under the heavy fire from the Southerners on the ridge, and they retreated. Sherman regrouped his men and ordered additional assaults, including at least five attempts to seize the position at the Indian mounds manned by the Union Parish troops in the 31st Regiment. The Confederate troops repulsed every charge the Federals made on their earthworks, and the Union Parish soldiers in the "*Phoenix Rifles*" took 400 prisoners.

Gen. Sherman decided it would be pointless to attempt another assault at Chickasaw Bayou, and the difficult terrain presented no other reasonable option to launch an offensive. He withdrew his forces to their transport ships and soon returned to Memphis.

After the war, the soldiers from the piney hills of north Louisiana who had fought at Chickasaw Bayou took great pride in their defeat of Gen. Sherman, who became infamous across the South following the wanton destruction caused by his march across Georgia to the sea in 1864. One veteran of Chickasaw Bayou wrote,

Within less than one week from the landing of General Sherman's army he had been ignominiously defeated and driven from the State by a much smaller force than his own, and Vicksburg, the key to the Mississippi River, for six months longer was saved to the Confederacy.

