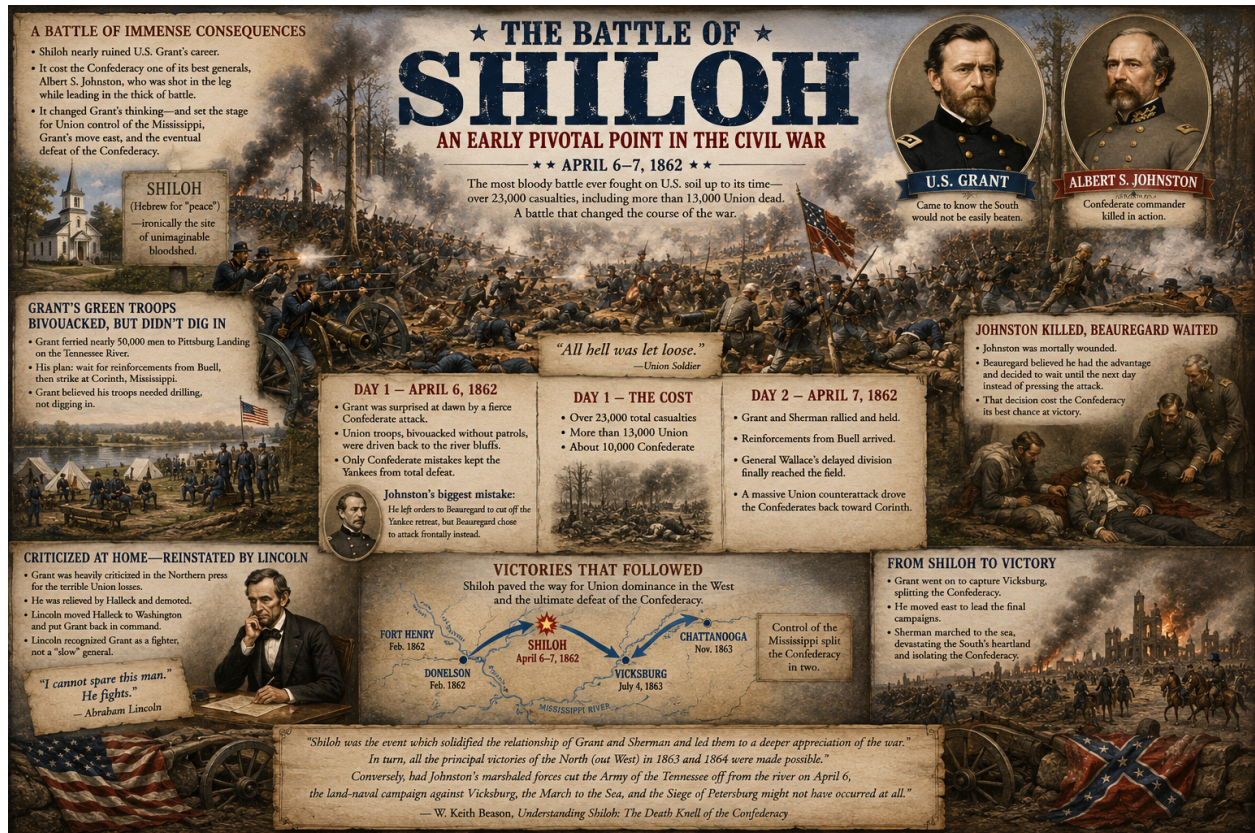


The Battle of Shiloh--An early pivotal point in the Civil War

By Curtis Jerry Smothers



The Battle of Shiloh in April of 1862 is perhaps one of the most overlooked in its relative importance to the outcome of the Civil War. It was certainly the most bloody battle ever fought on US soil up to its time, with over 23,000 dead, 13,000 of whom were northerners.

Shiloh nearly ruined the career of U.S. Grant. The battle also cost the Confederacy one its best generals, Albert S. Johnston, who was shot in the leg while riding in the thick of battle. (Johnston bled to death.)

However, Shiloh's importance lies in how it changed Grant's thinking and how it set the stage for Union domination of the Mississippi River, Grant's going east and the eventual defeat of the Confederacy.

The sobering reality of the war to come

After Shiloh, Grant came to know that the South would not be easily beaten. Before Shiloh, and based on his earlier easy victories at Fort Henry and Donelson, Grant had scant respect for the Confederate fighting spirit and ability.

After the carnage and near defeat of his bivouacked, green Union troops, who ran from the hordes of yelling rebels and covered by the river bluffs, Grant came to know what his subordinate and friend, William Tecumseh Sherman, knew: the war would last for years, and the South would have to be completely crushed.

Grant's green troops bivouacked, but didn't dig on

The Battle of Shiloh took place on the western bank of the Tennessee River, where Grant had ferried his nearly 50,000-man army to place called Pittsburg Landing. (Much of the bloodiest fighting took place around a church called "Shiloh," whose name, ironically, is derived from the Hebrew for "peace.")

Grant's Plans were to wait for reinforcement from General Buell and strike out at the Confederacy with his superior numbers with the goal of capturing the major Confederate rail junction at Corinth, Mississippi. Grant, who was not prone to digging in or building entrenchments, figured his raw troops needed to be drilled and shaped up—not dug in.

Confederates could have won

In the early morning hours of April 6, 1862, Grant was totally surprised by the Confederates, who overran Yankee camps that had failed to even post patrols. In the ebb and flow of the battlefield on the first day, it was only through the lack of good tactical leadership, experience and good weaponry on the part of the Confederates that prevented a total Yankee defeat at Shiloh.

Confederate General Johnston's biggest mistake was a personal visit to the battle front. He left orders to his subordinate Beauregard to stay behind and execute the battle plan of cutting off the Yankee retreat to the river, but Beauregard had a different plan, which was to run straight ahead and push the Yankees into the river. As Johnston bled to death after a leg wound daylight waned, Confederate hopes of victory also died.

Beauregard decided to wait until the next day

The battle of the first day ended after Grant and Sherman rallied to stabilize the Yankee positions. Beauregard, however, figured that he had the better of Grant and would finish off the Yankees the next day.

Beauregard also figured that he still outnumbered Grant, but Yankee General Don Carlos Buell's reinforcements arrived the next morning; and Grant's subordinate, General Wallace, whose division had taken the wrong road the day before, finally showed up for duty.

The second day of Shiloh saw a revitalized Yankee force and a massive counterattack that relentlessly pushed the depleted Southerners back towards Corinth, Mississippi.

Grant took a beating in the press, but Lincoln rehabilitated this fighting general

The battle was over, but the recriminations and controversy would continue. Beauregard would be vilified for not pressing his advantage at the end of the first day. Grant would take a beating in the northern press for the massive Union casualties, and would be relieved by General Halleck and demoted to a do-nothing second-in-command position.

In the end, though, Lincoln would move Halleck to Washington, D.C., and reinstate Grant to command in the West. (Lincoln recognized Grant as a fighter not prone to the "slows" like many other Union generals.)

Grant would go on to amass an astonishing record of victories in the west that would culminate in the capture of Vicksburg, which would split the Confederacy at the Mississippi.

After victories in Tennessee, Grant would come east to eventually end the war, and Sherman would go South and due east cutting a swath of destruction that would isolate and cripple the Confederacy.

In his web page "Understanding Shiloh: The Death Knell of the Confederacy," (<http://www.angelfire.com/ga/wkb/shiloh.html>) W. Keith Beason sums it up nicely:

"Shiloh was the event which solidified the relationship of Grant and Sherman and led them to a deeper appreciation of the war. In turn, all the principal victories of the North (out West) in 1863 and 1864 were made possible. Conversely, had Johnston's marshaled forces cut the Army of the Tennessee off from the river on April 6, the land-naval campaign against Vicksburg, the March to the Sea, and the Siege of Petersburg (below the Confederate capital) might not have occurred at all."