



Union Siege Line May 19, 1862



Like Nothing Before It

The Siege of Corinth lasted from April 29 to May 30, 1862, and it remains a common theme among authors and historians to criticize Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck for the slow pace of his advance which averaged less than a mile a day. While it is true, had Halleck pushed his infantry forward they would have been at the gates of Corinth within two days instead of thirty. But if his army was not immediately successful those same men would have faced starvation. It is an old military axiom; amateurs talk tactics, professionals talk logistics. Henry W. Halleck, who would gain the nickname “Old Brains” during the siege, was facing a task no other American military officer had ever faced; how to move three armies across a near-trackless wilderness during abominable weather and then face a strongly fortified city defended by a well-supplied foe. It was to be in the number of men engaged, the largest siege ever on the Western Hemisphere.

A Siege from the Start



Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck

At its height, the Siege of Corinth would involve over 200,000 soldiers and an undetermined number of enslaved laborers. On the Northern side were Halleck’s three armies numbering some 120,000 soldiers under three capable major generals; the Army of the Tennessee under George H. Thomas; Don Carlos Buell’s Army of the Ohio, and the Army of the Mississippi commanded by John Pope. The Confederates, led by Gen. Pierre G.T. Beauregard, were composed of two armies, Braxton Bragg’s Army of the Mississippi, and the Army of the West under Earl Van Dorn. The Confederates numbered close to 75,000 on paper though sickness reduced the actual level closer to 53,000 effectives. In addition to the men in uniform, the Southerners utilized thousands of slaves

in the construction of their strong defensive network.

There is a common misconception that the Union army was not within striking distance of Corinth until the final days of the siege. In reality, Pope’s army, fortunate to have well established roads on high ground, was within six miles of Corinth by May 2. Likewise William T. Sherman’s division on the far right was astride the State Line Road two days later, only eight miles from the all-important rail crossing. The hold-up was in the center with the Army of the Ohio. Heavy rains in early May turned every creek into a raging torrent which had to be spanned by a bridge capable of supporting artillery and heavily loaded wagons. Scores of bridges were fabricated.

“Well drenched this night with rain”

Col. Robert Ingersoll of the 11th Illinois Cavalry described the challenges faced during the advance. “From here to Pittsburg landing, some twelve or fourteen miles, the road is perfectly blockaded with artillery, baggage, mules, women, and sutlers. Every wagon is in the mud and there is cussing and swearing enough on that road every fifteen minutes to send a world to Hell.” Buell’s army travelled on three roads, each of which had to be corduroyed for virtually the entire distance. Pvt. James Hines of the 16th Wisconsin Infantry recalled “a long row of oxen attached to one siege gun, slowly struggling with it through the mud. I saw six mules struggling with a wagon, in which was a single bale of

pressed hay. I counted sixteen horses stuck with one ammunition wagon. It rained each night I was there.”

The roads were vital to supply the army group with food and the material of war. If each man and animal (approx. 13,000 horses and mules) was given the authorized daily ration of food, it took over 500 tons of supplies per day to feed the army. And this did not take into account the hundreds of other necessary items like ammunition, uniforms, telegraph wire, candles, horse shoe nails, spare wagon wheels, medical supplies, etc. It was a logistical nightmare that required organization on a scale unheard of.

As you would draw a badger out of his hole



General Charles F. Smith

It was slow work and though folks on the home front may have chaffed at the delay, this was not so with the soldiers. “But to us boys who have to do the work,” stated a soldier from the 8th Wisconsin, “this master policy which obliges an enemy to surrender or evacuate, or fight against great advantage is rather agreeable. I think I can safely say that there is not a regiment in the whole Western army that really has much of a ‘hankering’ for another field of Shiloh.”

The earthworks here were constructed on May 19 by Brig. Gen. Thomas Davies’ 2nd Division, Army of the Tennessee. They connected Hurlbut’s 4th Division to the north

and McKean’s 6th Division to the southeast. Thomper. A soldier of the 8th Wisconsin and correspondent for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* wrote, “One division goes forward one night, digs entrenchments, and puts itself in perfect readiness to resist almost any force. The next night up comes another.” Halleck moved his forces methodically forward and after each small movement his armies would erect fortifications to consolidate his gains.

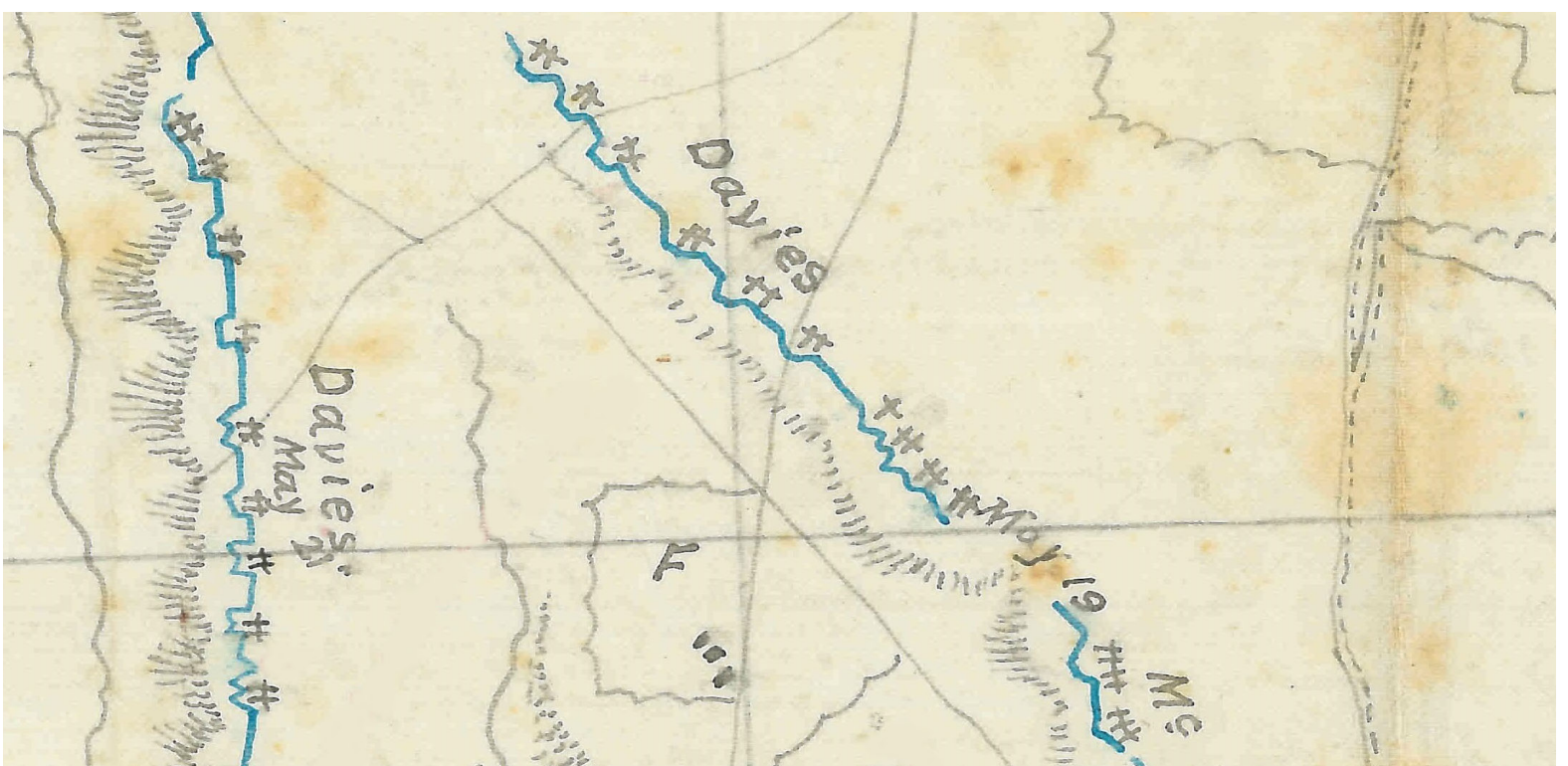
The taking of Corinth was never going to be easy. The previous winter Brig. Gen. Charles F. Smith predicted, “We have got to go there and draw them out, as you would draw a badger out of his hole.”

A Very Formal and Precise Style of Warfare

A soldier of the 16th Wisconsin Infantry described the temporary fortifications. “In the morning the whole division was formed in line, with spades, axes and picks instead of weapons of war. We cut large logs and built the work five feet high and then dug a deep wide ditch outside, throwing the clay against the logs on the inside. We completed this work in one day.” Another soldier from the 8th Wisconsin, described moving massive logs to create impregnable breastworks, but in every instance location was the key to the placement of the fortifications. “Our works are located on the brow of a brow of a commanding ridge, which stretches along for nearly two miles

from the south-east to the north-west.”

In addition to the building of fortifications, thousands of men were sent out with axes to create a clear field of fire. The generals, however, have no idea of leading their men into ambush, and as a precautionary move have ordered heavy fatigue parties from every regiment to cut away the underbrush and small timber.” No sooner was one position made strong then the line was moved forward again. On May 21 these earthworks were abandoned and a new line established beyond Bridge Creek.



1862 map of the Union earthworks

Visiting the site



For more information see Corinth Stop 5 on the Shiloh Battle App.

Time has taken a toll on these earthworks and the gentle mounds and trenches bear little resemblance to their war-time appearance. The hardwood trees growing on and near the works have helped protect them from damaging erosion. You can do your part by viewing the works from a discreet distance refraining from climbing onto them. Digging for artifacts, with or without the use of a metal detector, is strictly prohibited and any trash brought to the site should be taken out with you.

With just a little effort we can all do our part to ensure these American treasures are here for generations to come.

