

*ABSTRACT: PORT HUDSON
LIBERTY CORRIDOR – Chapter 9, IIA.*

By the fall of 1862 General Nathaniel P. Banks received orders to gain control of the Mississippi River and to occupy the Red River Country in Louisiana for operations against Texas. To aid in this mission, New York's 91st Regiment (The Albany County Regiment) would be included in Banks' command. The 91st Regiment became involved in the longest siege in American military history at Port Hudson on the Mississippi.

Company C of the 91st, recruited first in Redford, Clinton County, with three officers and forty-three enlisted men, would have the most casualties in its service at Port Hudson. Captain John G. McDermott and 1st Lieutenant William L. Herworth would be counted among the wounded with 2nd Lieutenant Sylvester B. Shephard killed in the action. Battles and casualties of the 91st Regiment may be found at www.dmna.state.ny.us.

PORT HUDSON

From September to December 1861, recruiters, in organizing the 91st Regiment (The Albany County Regiment) in upstate New York areas, signed men up into companies as follows: Company A, B, D, F and K at Albany; Company C at Albany and Redford in Clinton County; Company E in Albany and Hudson in Columbia County; Company G at Schenectady; Company H at Albany and Hillsdale in Columbia County; and Company I at Albany and Castleton (Rensselaer Co.), Chatham and Hudson (Columbia Co.). CPT John G. McDermott's company of Redford included 44 volunteers "all sharp shooters". They were mustered in the service of the United States for three years. On December 16, 1861, the companies were organized into the 91st.

On 9 January 1862 the 91st Regiment left New York for Washington, DC, continuing on to Fort Pitkins, Pensacola, Florida. They were then attached to John Brennan's Command, District of Florida, located at Fort Taylor, Key West, to March 1862; District of Key West, Florida, Department of the South, to August, 1862; District of West Florida, Department of the Gulf, to December, 1862.

From January, 1862, to December, 1862, two companies of the 91st, Companies E and K, served at the Key West Barracks at Fort Taylor. Fort Taylor, along with Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas and Fort Pitkins in Pensacola, were to be held by Union forces throughout the Civil War. The main role of Fort Taylor was to serve as headquarters for the Union Navy East Gulf Coast Blockading Squadron. Close to 300 vessels were captured by the squadron and forced to anchor in front of Fort Taylor.

On 7 – 10 August 1862 at Pensacola the 91st Regiment went on an expedition to Bagdad and Milton, Florida. Again, on 27 October 1862 the 91st entered into action at Gonzales, Florida.

In December of 1862 the 91st Regiment received orders to New Orleans, Louisiana. They would be assigned to Grover's Division, Department of the Gulf, which became part of the 1st Brigade, 3rd Division, 19th Army Corps, Department of the Gulf, to January 1863. The regiment would now become part of Major General Nathaniel P. Banks' 1862-1863 expedition.

In the beginning months of the Civil War, the Federal blockade of Southern ports had an increasing effect on the textile industry of the Northeast, shutting down mills and factories because of a lack of cotton. By July 1862, three-fourths of all the cotton spindles in New England factories were idle. In desperation, delegations of New York and New England businessmen and political leaders pleaded for an expedition to seize the huge cotton-growing area of eastern Texas. Moreover, it was pointed out that severing Texas from the Confederacy would put an end to the South's use of that state's border with Mexico as its last open avenue of supplies from Europe.

By the fall of 1862 instructions from Washington, DC, ordered Major General Nathaniel P. Banks to clear the Mississippi River of Confederates, also to occupy the Red River country as a protection for Louisiana and Arkansas and as a basis for future operations against Texas. Banks established his headquarters in New York to organize the coming expedition, and all available troops in the New York and New England states were being placed in his command.

With considerable pressure on the Federal government, the governors of New York and New England, uninformed about Banks' true mission, had new regiments quickly raised and hastily trained for the expedition. Excited merchants and speculators scrambled to find ways to go along with the transports. The railroad and shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt arranged a profitable transportation for the troop movement to the South; and on 4 December 1862 troops left New York and Hampton Roads on transports of which many were old and rotten.

On 14 December General Banks reached the Mississippi River with his true mission being revealed of regaining full control of the river. A revelation of utter dismay to those who thought they were on their way to regaining Texas for the Union. Banks arrived at New Orleans with about 20,000 men, and was surprised to learn that the Confederates held Port Hudson with 21 heavy guns on bluffs rising 75 to 90 feet above and along a three mile stretch of the river. The Confederate garrison at Port Hudson reported as numbering from 12,000 to 16,000 with Major General Franklin Gardner, a New Yorker by birth, commanding. In reality the strength level of the Confederates was at 6800.

General Banks, on the 18th of December, sent General Grover, with a division of 18,000 men and some artillery, to occupy Louisiana's state capital, Baton Rouge, 25 miles south of Port Hudson, which was accomplished without opposition, and was the first step in the reduction of Port Hudson.

With the exaggerated reports of the strength of the Confederates at Port Hudson, Banks now endeavored to turn it on the west and reach Vicksburg by means of the Teche-Atchafalaya system, various bayous connecting with the Mississippi, and the mouth of the Red River. It was a roundabout way of opening the Mississippi. The army would move in a circuitous route up through the tortuous bayous of the system in central Louisiana, but the endeavor was unsuccessful, and he turned his attention to a movement from Berwick Bay to the Atchafalaya.

In Banks' command, the 91st received two further reassignments: (1) On January 12, 1863, to the 3rd Brigade, Grover's Division; and (2) in the month of March to the 1st Brigade, 4th Division, 19th Army Corps.

In the middle of April, Confederates under the command of Major General Richard Taylor, having previously been forced out of the bayou country, reentered the Teche-Atchefalaya system and mounted a counteroffensive against Banks. It was a move to cut off Banks's supply route to New Orleans. Taylor did not succeed in the attempt. He was too late with too little.

On 14 May, after receiving news that General U.S. Grant at Vicksburg would not be able to cooperate with him at Port Hudson, Banks bypassed the Confederate strongpoint of Port Hudson, cut off Port Hudson's supply route, the Red River, and returned to the Mississippi above Port Hudson, to cooperate with the Federal forces that were approaching Vicksburg from the north.

By May 23, General Banks' forces, which numbered between 30,000 and 40,000 men at their strongest, had surrounded the Port Hudson defenses. Beginning with a general assault on the morning of the 27th, Banks entered into a siege of Port Hudson. On 9 July 1863, five days after the fall of Vicksburg, Port Hudson's garrison finally surrendered to Banks, and the Union gained control of the full length of the river, cutting off important states such as Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas. It was one of the longest sieges in American military history, a period of 48 days.

At another location in Louisiana, approximately 70 miles below New Orleans, Fort Jackson held a position of defense against attack from the Gulf. The fort, in possession of the Confederacy until 28 April 1862, now held Federal troops. From July 1863 to October 1864, troops of the 91st Regiment, commanded by Colonel Jonathan Tarbell, took their new assignment at Fort Jackson. They would handle Fort Jackson's heavy artillery, a total of 74 guns mounted on the fort's walls. With the loss of men in previous engagements and the need for manning the guns at Fort Jackson, in the summer of 1864 an active recruitment program in Plattsburgh produced approximately 70 men for Company C and another 30 for Company F.

In the fall of 1864 the 91st Regiment returned to the Eastern Theatre. From October of 1864 to February, 1865, the regiment received as one of its assignments, the 2nd Separate Brigade, 8th Corps, Middle Department, in the defense of Baltimore, Maryland.

In February of 1865 the 91st Regiment's new assignment was in the 1st Brigade, 3rd Division, 5th Army Corps. On 1 March to 2 April 1865, they entered into the siege of Petersburg, Virginia; and from 28 March to 9th April, the Appomattox Campaign.

On 1 April, the 91st Regiment, as a regiment of the 3rd Division, 5th Corps, commanded by Major General Gouverneur Kemble Warren, engaged in the Battle of Five Forks. The battle is the most well-known of the later battles during the siege of Petersburg. Five Forks is a major road intersection about ten miles west-southwest of Petersburg, and about five miles west of where Lee's lines ended. From this position Gen. Philip Sheridan could threaten the rail lines that served Petersburg or the Rebel position itself. Warren's V Corps had the task of maintaining contact between the Federal main lines and Sheridan's cavalry, and of supporting Sheridan's flanking effort.

To better understand this engagement we begin the day before on 31 March in the battle of White Oak Road. This engagement included the movement of the V Corps to turn the White Oak Road Confederate line on its right (the Federal left). It was supposed to occur on 30 March, but heavy rains forced a day's delay. The advance of the V Corps was poorly handled. It became a tempting target for just the kind of counterpunch that Robert E. Lee had made his reputation with. The Union advance became stalled by a crushing

counterattack directed by Major General Bushrod Johnson. A brief combat of 30 minutes allowed a force of three Confederate brigades to rout two divisions of V Corps. Later in the day the Union position stabilized and Warren's soldiers again advanced and closed on a position in front of the main Rebel line. Warren had broken the connection between General Pickett's Confederate troops and Lee.

On the next day, the 1st of April, no commander on either side was entirely aware of the precise situation in time to take complete advantage of it. Both Grant and Lee were sufficiently far from the scene that communication delays often resulted in orders being based on out-of-date information.

Due to a series of baffling orders about sending help to Sheridan, confusion reigned among the Union regiments. Sheridan became greatly upset at what he thought were the continuing delays in Warren getting his troops formed. Even with the confusion the weight of the Federal infantry in its advance overwhelmed Pickett; and forced Pickett's troops to the west, away from the rest of Lee's army.

With authorization from Grant, Sheridan replaced Warren feeling that V Corps would perform better under one of the division commanders. The V Corps command went to Brigadier General Charles Griffin; meanwhile Grant ordered an immediate assault along the lines. On the 9th of April, 1865, the regiment participated in the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his army at Appomattox. .

On 3 July 1865, the 91st Regiment, now a regiment in the 3rd Brigade, 3rd Division, 5th Army Corps, mustered out at Balls Cross Road, Virginia, near Washington, DC. The regiment lost during service 3 officers and 110 enlisted men killed and mortally wounded; and 1 officer and 184 enlisted men by disease. The casualty list totals 298.

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