

General Grant's Capture of Vicksburg – 4th July 1863

July 4th 2013 marks the 150th anniversary of the capture of Vicksburg by U. S. Grant – the great grandson of an Ulster immigrant who would go on to become the supreme commander of the Union forces and the 18th President of the United States.

Grant's success at Vicksburg was perhaps the turning point in the American Civil War and gave the Union control of the Mississippi River, split the Confederacy in two, and opened the way for further Union victories. Furthermore, the capture of Vicksburg was an important factor in convincing President Lincoln to bring Grant east to confront Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia.

Born Hiram Ulysses Grant, the son of a tanner, in Point Pleasant, Ohio, on 27 April 1822, Grant had no wish to be a soldier and only followed a career in the army through family pressure. History knows him as Ulysses S. Grant because Congressman Thomas L. Hamer registered him as Ulysses Simpson Grant as a replacement for a West Point cadet who had dropped out. Simpson was the surname of name of Grant's Ulster ancestors from Ballygawley (Co.Tyrone).

At West Point his fellow cadets facetiously decided that Grant's newly acquired-initials – 'U. S.' rather than 'H. U.' – stood for 'Uncle Sam', and throughout the Army he became known as 'Sam' Grant.

West Point then offered its students a training unrivalled in the western hemisphere in mathematics, science and technology. As Grant possessed a formidable intellect, the syllabus presented the young Grant with no difficulties. He boasted that he never revised for examinations. He graduated from West Point in 1843, coming 21st out of a class of 39. If he had applied himself and taken his studies rather more seriously, he would have easily been in the top six.

Although an excellent horseman, he was sent to serve in the infantry rather than the cavalry. Promotion in an army the size of the US Army was painfully slow but he distinguished himself in the Mexican War, a conflict which he believed to be immoral, and attained the rank of captain.

A mind-numbing posting to California and a painful separation from Julia Dent, his wife, and their four children, drove Grant to take refuge in binge drinking. In 1854, in order to avoid the threat of court martial, he resigned his commission. Although Grant was not an alcoholic, he would turn to drink when separated from his wife or under severe strain. Happily, he could cope with a great deal of strain and normally was perfectly sober.

In civilian life Grant was an abject failure. He had failed as a farmer and in commerce and had ended up working as a clerk in his father's tannery, a humiliating reversal of fortune for him.

The outbreak of the Civil War gave him a second chance and was to demonstrate that military command in war was his true vocation. Within three years this obscure clerk in Galena, Illinois, rose to command of the Union's armies, and just over a year later secured the defeat of the Confederacy.

Grant's initial contribution to the cause of the Union was to raise and train a volunteer unit in his home town. For this, the state governor made him colonel of the 21st Illinois Regiment. Six months later he was a brigadier general and had successfully engaged Confederate forces near Cairo, Illinois.

Grant spent the first half of the conflict serving in the war's Western Theatre, where he acquired a reputation as a conspicuously aggressive general. On 6 February 1862 Grant captured Fort Henry, which opened the Tennessee River to Union traffic. Grant then turned his attention to Fort Donelson, capture of which on 15 February opened up the Cumberland River as an avenue for the invasion

of the South. Confederate commander at Fort Donelson was Simon Bolivar Buckner, who had been at West Point with Grant (and indeed had lent him money). Buckner sought to open negotiations for surrender, suggesting an armistice as a preliminary step. Buckner received the following response:

Sir: Yours of this date proposing Armistice, and appointment of Commissioners, to settle terms of Capitulation is just received. No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted.

I propose to move immediately upon your works.

I am Sir: very respectfully

Your obedient servant

U.S. Grant

Brigadier General

Although dismayed by Grant's 'ungenerous and unchivalrous terms', Buckner surrendered his garrison (11,500 men, 40 cannon and much equipment), the first of three Confederate armies that would surrender to Grant in the course of the conflict. The terms he offered the Rebels gained him another nickname:

'Unconditional Surrender' Grant.

Although he was criticised for his conduct of the Union Forces at Shiloh (or Pittsburg Landing), Tennessee, on 6-7 April 1862, Grant gave the Union its first major victory in the field. In the immediate aftermath of the battle, Northern newspapers vilified Grant for his performance on the first day of the battle. It was falsely alleged that Grant had been drunk, and that this had contributed to many of his men being bayoneted in their tents because of Grant's lack of defensive preparedness. Much of this criticism was fuelled by the professional jealousy of less talented colleagues who resented Grant's success. Some of it was also shaped by the heavy casualties sustained. Shiloh was the first seriously bloody battle of the Civil War: Union casualties were 13,047 (1,754 killed,

8,408 wounded, and 2,885 missing) and Confederate casualties were 10,699 (1,728 killed, 8,012 wounded, and 959 missing or captured).

In the words of the historian Allen C. Guelzo: ‘Caught in a limbo between fame and disgrace, Grant was given what amounted to occupation duties in northern Mississippi for several months until he finally gained approval for an operation that would move overland against Vicksburg – and thereby redeem himself’.

Lincoln thought Vicksburg, Mississippi, was impregnable. The failure of two major assaults (on 19 May and 22 May 1863), which were repulsed with heavy casualties, went a long way in vindicating Lincoln’s view. Lincoln believed that Grant should bypass the city and secure the remainder of the Mississippi down to Orleans.

Nevertheless, before the end of May Grant succeeded in landing troops just below the city, pinning its defenders into a siege, and compelling their surrender on the Fourth of July, the day after Robert E. Lee’s defeat at Gettysburg. It is alleged that Independence Day was not celebrated again in Vicksburg until 1945. The capture of Vicksburg gave the Union control of the Mississippi River, split the Confederacy in two, and opened the way for further Union victories. Lincoln responded to Grant’s telegraph informing him of the capture of Vicksburg by mildly observing: ‘The Father of Waters [the name by which Native Americans referred to the Mississippi] again goes unvexed to the sea.’

In September General William S. Rosecrans led a Union army into a Confederate trap at Chickamauga, in northern Georgia, and sustained one of the worst Union defeats of the war in the west (19-20 September 1863). Rosecrans’ Army of the Cumberland lost a total of 16,170 out of 56,965 men.

Furthermore, the remainder of Rosecrans’s army was besieged in the Tennessee River town of Chattanooga. It looked as if the Confederacy was on the brink of

pulling off a Vicksburg in reverse. However, Grant retrieved the situation by forcing open a supply line to Chattanooga along Tennessee River. Grant's success earned him the gratitude of Abraham Lincoln.

In November Grant, having been given overall command of the Union forces in the Western Theatre the previous month, drove the besieging Confederate force away from Chattanooga in a great battle waged along Missionary Ridge.

Lincoln had long been toying with idea of bringing Grant east to take on Robert E. Lee. Grant's capture of Vicksburg and his relief of Chattanooga within a year essentially made Lincoln's decision for him and assisted him overcome his instinctive wariness of those with a reputation of being fond of the bottle.

In December Congress revived the rank of lieutenant general (previously created only for George Washington) and in the spring of 1864 Grant came to Washington to receive his commission and to assume supreme command over all US armies.