

# War of the Rebellion

## OPENING OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

By JOHN MCELROY.

### CHAPTER XLIV.

#### PUSHING THE SIEGE OF PORT HUDSON.

Ravages of the Climate Upon the Besiegers—Indomitable Yankee Pluck and Perseverance—Skillful Defenses—Conditions Inside Port Hudson—Inaugural Expedients.

The matchless courage and determination of the American soldier were never better illustrated than in the grim resolution with which the men under Gen. Banks pushed forward the siege after the shocking losses in the assaults of May 27 and June 14. Never had men more to discourage them. More than half of them were green troops, enlisted the previous October, for nine months' service, and brought at once from the health-breathing uplands of New England to the miasmatic lowlands of Louisiana, where the semitropical sun was like a furnace, where every breath of air was fever-laden and every drop of water germ-laden. The trees and vegetation, so different from the kindly wholesomeness of their mountain forests and fields, seemed as rankly malarious as the earth and water. The stately magnolias exhaled a strong, rank odor from their great, white flowers, which seemed positively baleful, when compared with the balsamic breath of their native pines and the sweet odors of oaks and beeches. The weird, shadowy wreaths of Spanish moss had the look of funeral drapings.

To fall sick seemed certain death, and every one was more or less ill, and daily becoming worse. To the jungle-fevers was added that worst of all—dysentery—home-sickness, plain, home-keeping, home-loving men had been sharply separated from the thoughtful, sympathetic family circle and carried thousands of miles away to what then seemed the uttermost verge of the earth. There was absolutely nothing home-like—New England-like—anywhere. Even the faces of their comrades had the appearance of being tortured by disease out of all likeness to their former companions. Many of the negroes and whites spoke a French or Spanish jargon as foreign and uncanny to their ears as the festering moccasins were to their eyes.

Worst of all was a profound distrust of their commanding general. Not an enlisted man was so great a coward that both assaults had been horribly mismanaged and men had been slaughtered to no purpose. There was not a ray of hope that future operations would be better conducted.

Daily the climatic conditions became worse. The hot sun rose earlier, burned more fiercely, and staid longer on the horizon longer. In the close trenches the heat was insupportable, and yet they must stay there, musket in hand, watching the enemy's lines with lynx-like attentiveness. Or they must march with the pick and shovel and push forward their sap-rollers under the deadly sharpshooters of their enemies, where a single misstep would mean a certain death, or a wound that would fester into gangrene. The stench of the camps, held close under the protection of the works, added to the horrors. The cracks and springs dried up, the river fell and exposed a broad expanse of pestilential swamps to breed countless millions more musketeers to add to the number already there.

The enemy's fire was so searching that it swept off every blade of grass on exposed knolls as cleanly as if the ground had been industriously hoed.

Intolerable labor. In the very beginning the force was much too small for such an extended line of investment. The front was seven miles long, and where the Europeans prescribe 100 men to the front every mile, there were never more than 12,000 for the whole line, and toward the end of the siege there were fewer than 9,000. From first to last, Banks had about 20,000 men around Port Hudson, but such were the ravages of disease and the assaults that he could not afford to have even had more than half that number available. He had to maintain and guard that whole line, and, beside, furnish working parties to carry on the severe labor of making the approaches. On that day of the 14th every man would have been on the sick list, but that pride and sense of duty took him out to the trenches. The need of men was so great that when Gen. Emory ransacking the hospitals to find a company or two at a time of men that might be regarded as well enough for duty and sent them forward. This, too, at a time when Emory's own force was reduced to 400 men to hold down New Orleans against the rumors of Dick Taylor's approach. All of the sick and wounded were sent to the river, either to add to the weight of fire upon the enemy or to patrol the river against the batteries which Dick Taylor was pushing up the communication with New Orleans.

Progress of the Siege. In his "History of the Nineteenth Corps," Col. Irwin gives this account of the progress of the siege which is invaluable, as in some instances the full reports of commanding officers have disappeared from the files of the War Department, and Col. Irwin's observations, as an Assistant Adjutant-General, are about all the material that we have.

Rushing the Approaches. "After the 14th of June the siege progressed steadily without further attempt at an assault. This was now the 21st day, and the approaches were a system of comparatively regular approaches was begun, and upon these labor was carried on incessantly, light and day; indeed, as is usual with works of this character, the greatest progress was made in the short hours of the June nights. The main approach from Duryea's Battery, No. 12 toward the river, was the first, and the findings of the ravines and the contour of the hill. When at last the sap had, with great toil and danger, been carried to the crest facing the breast-work, and only a few yards distant, the trench was rapidly and with comparative ease extended toward the left, in a line parallel with the general direction of the defenses. The least distance from this line to the river was called by an easy stretch of the language, to the enemy's parapet was about 20 yards, the greatest about 45.



Edmund H. Russell, of the 9th Pa. Reserves, Acting Signal Officer.

"Then the officers and men quietly prepared themselves for the storm which was expected of them. Those that had anything to leave made their wills in the manner sanctioned by the custom of arms, and the last words to the hands of comrades the last words for their families or their friends."

#### Taylor's Movements.

"Meanwhile an event took place, trifling in itself, yet accentuating sharply some of the more serious reasons that had, in the first instance, led Banks to resist the repeated urging of the Government to join Grant with his whole force, and afterward had formed powerful factors in determining him to deliver and to renew the assault. Early on the morning of the 18th of June a detachment of Confederate cavalry rode into the village of Plaquemine, surprised the provost-guard, captured Lieut. C. H. Witham and 22 men of the 28th Me., and burned three steamers lying in the bayou, made their escape to the American and Belfast. Capt. Albert Stearns, of the 131st N. Y., who was stationed at Plaquemine as Provost-Marshal of the Parish, made his escape with 13 men of the guard. The Confederates were fired upon by the guard and lost one man killed and two wounded. In their turn they fired upon the steamboats, and wounded one of them. Three hours later the gunboat Winona, Capt. Weaver, came down from Baton Rouge, and, shelling the enemy, hastened to the river. In the evening of greater event little notice was taken at the moment of this incident; yet it was not long before it was discovered that the raiders were in advance of the little army with which Taylor was about to invade La Fourche, intent upon the bold design of raising the siege of Port Hudson by blockading the river and threatening New Orleans."

#### Banks's Dilemma.

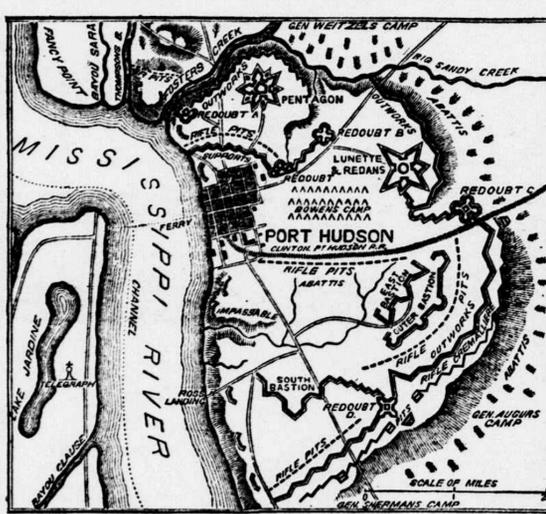
"Thus Banks was brought face to face with the condition described in his letter of the 4th of June to Halleck: 'The course to be pursued here gives me great anxiety. It abated the siege of Hudson, I leave its garrison, some 6,000 or 7,000 men, the force under Moulton and Sibley, now threatening Brashear City and the Army of Mobile, or small, or threatened by New Orleans. If I detach from my command in the field a sufficient force to defend that city, which ought not to be less than 8,000 or 10,000, in the opinion of Gen. Grant is unimportant, and I leave an equal or larger number of the enemy to reinforce Johnston. If I defend New Orleans, I leave the siege of Port Hudson, and the enemy will go against Grant. If I go with a force sufficient to aid him, my rear will be seriously threatened. My force is not large enough to do both. Under these circumstances my only course seems to be to carry this post as soon as possible, and then to join Gen. Grant. If I abandon it I cannot materially aid him.'

#### Banks's Congratulatory Order.

"On the 15th of June, on the heels of the bloody repulse of the previous day, Banks issued a general order congratulating his troops upon the steady advance made upon the enemy's works, and expressed his confidence in an immediate and triumphant issue of the contest: 'We are at all points on the threshold of his fortifications, the order continues. One more advance, and they are ours.' 'For the last duty that victory imposes, the Commanding General summons the bold men of the corps to the organization of a storming party of a thousand men, to vindicate the flag of the Union, and the memory of its defenders who have fallen! Let them come forward!'

#### The Fortiora Hope.

"Col. Henry W. Birge, of the 13th Corps, at the headquarters to lead the stormers, and although the whole project was disapproved by many of the best officers and men in the corps, partly as unnecessary and partly because they conceived that it implied some reflection upon the conduct of the brave men that had fought and suffered and fallen on the 27th and the 14th, yet so general was the feeling of confidence in Birge that within a few days the ranks of the stormers were more than filled."



FORTIFICATIONS OF PORT HUDSON FROM A SKETCH MADE IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE SURRENDER.

As nearly as can be now ascertained the whole number of officers who volunteered at least 956. Of these 17 officers and 226 men belonged to the 13th Corps. As the different parties offered and were accepted, they were sent into camp in a retired and pleasant spot, in a grove behind the naval battery on the right. On the 25th of June Birge was ordered to divide the column into two battalions, and to drill it for its work. On the 28th this organization was complete. The battalions were then composed of eight companies, but two companies were afterwards added to the first battalion. To Lieut.-Col. Van Petten, of the 160th N. Y., Birge gave the command of the first battalion, and to Lieut.-Col. Bickmore, of the 14th Me., that of the second battalion. On that day 87 of the officers and 826 men—in all, 893—were present for duty in the camp of the stormers. Among those that volunteered for the forlorn hope but were not accepted were 54 non-commissioned officers and privates of the 1st La. Native Guards and 37 of the 3d. From among the officers of the general staff and staff departments that were eager to go, two were selected to accompany the column and keep up the communication with headquarters and with the other troops; these were Capt. Dunbar S. Walker, Assistant Adjutant-General, and Lieut.

"The sap on Gen. Grover's front has been pushed to within 13 feet of the ditch in the re-entrant of the breast-work. The sap-roller rolled into the ditch last night. 'An elite storming party has been organized, made up of about 850 volunteers from the whole force, under the command of Col. H. W. Birge, 13th Conn., who has been engaged some days in preparing the column for its work. 'I have seen a copy of the Port Hudson Herald of the 28th, containing the news of the arrival at that place of an officer from Gen. Johnston with dispatches, Gen. Johnston's orders, general order, of date the 27th, assuring the garrison that Gen. Johnston will soon relieve Vicksburg, and then send the little army back, declaring his purpose to defend the place to the last extremity. 'On the 18th instant a force of the enemy (acted by some of our prisoners) was released on parole, and one regiment of infantry, two of cavalry and a battery of artillery, under the command of Col. James P. Major, nearly our own number, were ordered to burn the steamers Anglo-American and Sykes at Plaquemine, taking 68 prisoners, of whom five were citizens. 'The same force then passed down the river and Bayou La Fourche, and destroyed the steamer St. Louis, Opelousas Railway at Terrebonne Station on the 20th instant, cutting off communication between Brashear City and New Orleans. 'The same day they attacked and were repulsed by our forces at La Fourche Crossing, consisting of the 176th N. Y. and 23d Conn., lacking two companies, which had been ordered to meet the attack, under command of Lieut.-Col. Albert Stickney, 47th Mass. 'The attack was renewed on the afternoon of the 21st, and again repulsed in a manner very creditable to the troops engaged and to their commander. With less than 1,000 men he drove back the greatly superior force of the enemy, who retired, leaving 52 of his dead on the field and 16 prisoners in our hands. Our loss was eight killed and 16 wounded. 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