

THE BATTLE OF PLEASANT HILL

Pleasant Hill, Sabine Parish, Louisiana

April 8-9 1864

On the ninth of March, 1864, U. S. Grant was made lieutenant general and given command of all the Union armies, and the hitherto insoluble military problem of the Federal government was at last on its way to solution. President Lincoln had learned that it took a soldier to do a soldier's job, and he had at last found the soldier who was capable of it; a direct, straightforward man who would leave high policy in the civilian government and devote himself with unflagging energy to the task of putting Confederate armies out of action. There would be no more sideshows: from now on the whole width of Northern power would be applied remorselessly with concentrated force.

There had been a number of sideshows during the last year, and the net result of all of them had been to detract for the general effectiveness of the Union war effort. An army and navy expedition had tried throughout the preceding summer to hammer its way into Charleston, S.C. It had reduced Fort Sumter to a shapeless heap of rubble, but it had cost the North.

General Banks was trying to move into Texas, partly for the sake of the cotton that could be picked up along the way and partly because the government believed that Napoleon III would give up his Mexican adventure if a Northern army occupied Texas and went to the Rio Grande. The belief may have been justified, but Banks never came close, and his campaign was coming to grief this spring. Early in April he was beaten at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill, Louisiana, far up the Red River. Banks was leading a Federal expedition north through Louisiana in an effort to capture Shreveport, a goal his forces would never attain due to Confederate resistance. He retreated with such panicky haste that Admiral Porter's accompanying fleet of gunboats narrowly escaped complete destruction. The water level in the Red River was falling, and for a time it seemed that the gunboats could never get out; they were saved at the last when a backwoods colonel in the Union army took a regiment of lumbermen and built dams that temporarily made the water deep enough for escape.

The Battle of Pleasant Hill took place in April, 1864 between the forces of Federal Major-General Nathaniel P. Banks and Confederate Lieutenant-General Richard Taylor.

The battle was part of a two day fight that began at Sabine Crossroads and worked its way south to Pleasant Hill following a Federal withdrawal. While the Battle of Pleasant Hill was not as bloody as some of the larger actions fought during the war, the human cost was still very high. Between the engagements at Sabine Crossroads and Pleasant Hill, Bank's Federal army lost 300 men killed, 1600 wounded, and 2100 missing or captured while Taylor's Confederate force lost 600 men killed, 2400 wounded, and 500 missing or captured.

What took place during the Battle of Pleasant Hill is well described by this eye-witness account: "This fighting was terrific - old soldiers say it was never surpassed for desperation. Notwithstanding the terrible havoc in their ranks, the enemy pressed fiercely on, slowly pushing the men of the Nineteenth Corps (Federal troops) back up the hill, but not breaking their line of battle. A sudden and bold dash of the rebels on the right gave them possession of Taylor's battery, and forced our line further back.

The Nineteenth, on arriving at the top of the hill, suddenly filed off over the hill and passed through the lines of General Smith. The rebels were now in but two lines of battle, the first having been almost annihilated by General Emory, what remained being forced back into the second line. But these two lines came on exultant and sure of victory. The first passed over the knoll, and, all heedless of the long line of cannons and crouching forms of brave men as ever trod Mother Earth, pressed on. The second line appeared on the crest, and the death-signal was sounded.

Words cannot describe the awful effect of this discharge. Seven thousand rifles, and several batteries of artillery, each gun loaded to the muzzle with grape and canister, were fired simultaneously, and the whole center of the rebel line was crushed down as a field of ripe wheat through which a tornado has passed. It is estimated that one thousand men were hurried into eternity of frightfully mangled by this one discharge. No time was given them to recover their good order, but General Smith ordered a charge, and his men dashed rapidly forward, the boys of the Nineteenth joining in. The rebels fought boldly and desperately back to the timber, on reaching which, a large portion broke and fled, fully two thousand throwing aside their arms."

Transcribed by Gaytha Thomps

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