

22.6 Vicksburg: A Besieged City

The Civil War was a war of many technological firsts. It was the first American war to use railroads to move troops and to keep them supplied. It was the first war in which telegraphs were used to communicate with distant armies. It was the first conflict to be recorded in photographs. It was also the first to see combat between armor-plated steamships.

The *Merrimac* and the *Monitor* Early in the war, Union forces withdrew from the navy yard in Norfolk, Virginia. They left behind a warship named the *Merrimac*. The Confederacy began the war with no navy. They covered the wooden *Merrimac* with iron plates and added a powerful ram to its prow.

In response, the U.S. Navy built its own ironclad ship. Completed in less than 100 days, the *Monitor* had a flat deck and two heavy guns in a revolving turret. It was said to resemble a “cheese box on a raft.”

In March 1862, the *Merrimac*, which the Confederates had renamed the *Virginia*, steamed into Chesapeake Bay. With cannonballs harmlessly bouncing off its sides, the iron monster destroyed three wooden ships and threatened the entire blockade fleet.

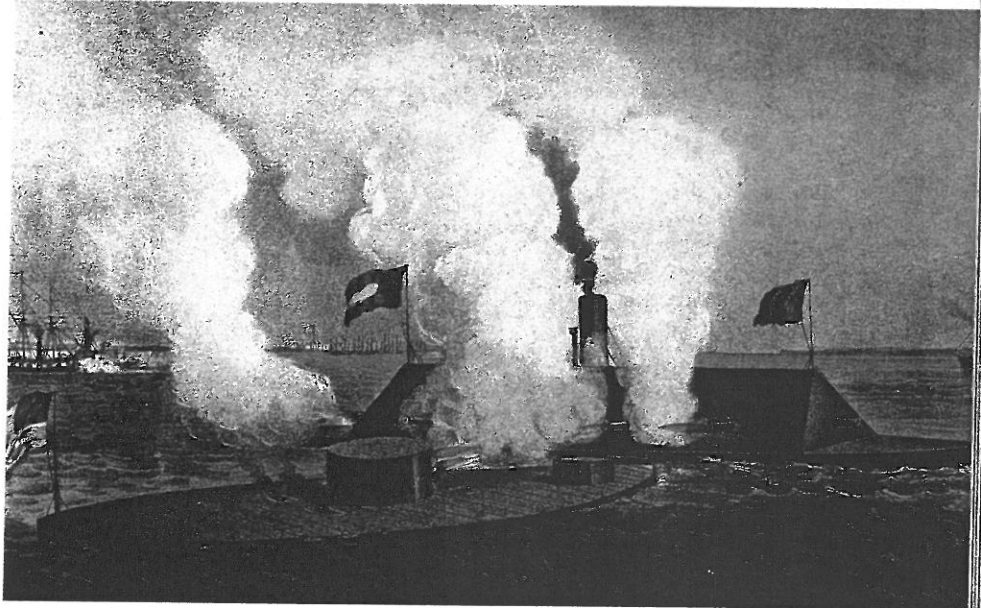
The next morning, the *Virginia* was met by the *Monitor*. The two ironclads exchanged shots for four hours before withdrawing. Neither could claim victory, and neither was harmed.

The battle of the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor* proved that “wooden vessels cannot contend with iron-clad ones.” After that, both sides added ironclads to their navies. But the South was never able to build enough ships to threaten the Union blockade of southern harbors.

Control of the Mississippi Ironclads were also part of the Union’s campaign to divide the South by taking control of the Mississippi River. After seizing New Orleans in 1862, Admiral Farragut moved up the Mississippi to capture Baton Rouge and Natchez. At the same time, other Union ships gained control of Memphis, Tennessee.

The Union now controlled both ends of the Mississippi. The South could no longer move men or material up and down the river. But neither could the North as long as the Confederates continued to control one key location—Vicksburg, Mississippi.

The Granger Collection, New York



In 1862, the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac*, two ironclad ships, fought to a standstill. Nevertheless, the battle between the two signaled the end of wooden warships.



For more than a month, Union forces bombarded Vicksburg with an average of 2,800 shells a day. Forced to eat horses, mules, dogs, and rats, the defenders finally surrendered.

To survive, they ate horses, mules, and bread made of corn and dried peas. "It had the properties of India rubber," said one Confederate soldier, "and was worse than leather to digest."

Low on food and supplies, Vicksburg surrendered on July 4, 1863. The Mississippi was a Union waterway, and the Confederacy was divided.

Problems on the Confederate Home Front As the war raged on, life in the South became grim. Because of the blockade, imported goods disappeared from stores. What few items were available were extremely expensive.

Unable to sell their tobacco and cotton, farmers planted food crops instead. Still, the South was often hungry. Invading Union armies destroyed crops. They also cut rail lines, making it difficult to move food and supplies to southern cities and army camps.

As clothing wore out, southerners made do with patches and rough, homespun cloth. At the beginning of the war, Mary Boykin Chesnut had written in her journal of well-dressed Confederate troops. By 1863, she was writing of soldiers dressed in "rags and tags."

By 1864, southern troops were receiving letters like this one: "We haven't got nothing in the house to eat but a little bit o' meal. I don't want to you to stop fighting them Yankees...but try and get off and come home and fix us all up some." Many soldiers found it hard to resist such pleas, even if going home meant deserting their units.

Vicksburg The town of Vicksburg was located on a bluff above a hairpin turn in the Mississippi River. The city was easy to defend and difficult to capture. Whoever held Vicksburg could, with a few well-placed cannons, control movement on the Mississippi. But even Farragut had to admit that ships "cannot crawl up hills 300 feet high." An army would be needed to take Vicksburg.

In May 1863, General Grant battled his way to Vicksburg with the needed army. For six weeks, Union gunboats shelled the city from the river while Grant's army bombarded it from land. Slowly but surely, the Union troops burrowed toward the city in trenches and tunnels.

As shells pounded the city, people in Vicksburg dug caves into the hillsides for protection.

22.7 Fort Wagner: African Americans Join the War

Early in the war, abolitionists had urged Congress to recruit African Americans for the army. But at first, most northerners regarded the conflict as “a white man’s war.” Congress finally opened the door to black recruits in 1862. About 186,000 African Americans, many of them former slaves, enlisted in the Union army. Another 30,000 African Americans joined the Union navy.

The Massachusetts 54th Regiment Massachusetts was one of the first states to organize black regiments. The most famous was the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, commanded by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Two of the 54th Infantry’s 1,000 soldiers were sons of Frederick Douglass.

The men of the Massachusetts 54th were paid less than white soldiers. When the black soldiers learned this, they protested the unequal treatment by refusing to accept any pay at all. In a letter to Lincoln, Corporal James Henry Gooding asked, “Are we soldiers or are we laborers?... We have done a soldier’s duty. Why can’t we have a soldier’s pay?” At Lincoln’s urging, Congress finally granted black soldiers equal pay.

After three months of training, the Massachusetts 54th was sent to South Carolina to take part in an attack on Fort Wagner. As they prepared for battle, the men of the 54th faced the usual worries of untested troops. But they also faced the added fear that if captured, they might be sold into slavery.

African Americans at War

The assault on Fort Wagner was an impossible mission. To reach the fort, troops had to cross 200 yards of open, sandy beach. Rifle and cannon fire poured down on them. After losing nearly half of their men, the survivors of the 54th regiment pulled back. But their bravery won them widespread respect.

During the war, 166 African American regiments fought nearly 500 battles. Black soldiers often received little training, poor equipment, and less pay than white soldiers.

They also risked death or enslavement if captured. Still, African Americans fought with great courage to save the Union and to end slavery forever.

African American soldiers demonstrated their courage during their attack on Fort Wagner. The 54th Massachusetts Infantry charged across 200 yards of open beach in their effort to reach the fort. The regiment withdrew after almost half of their men were lost.

