

Vicksburg Campaign Naval Operations January-March 1863

“There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans, through which the produce of three eighths of our territory must pass to market, and from its fertility it will ere long yield more than half of our whole produce and contain more than half our inhabitants.”

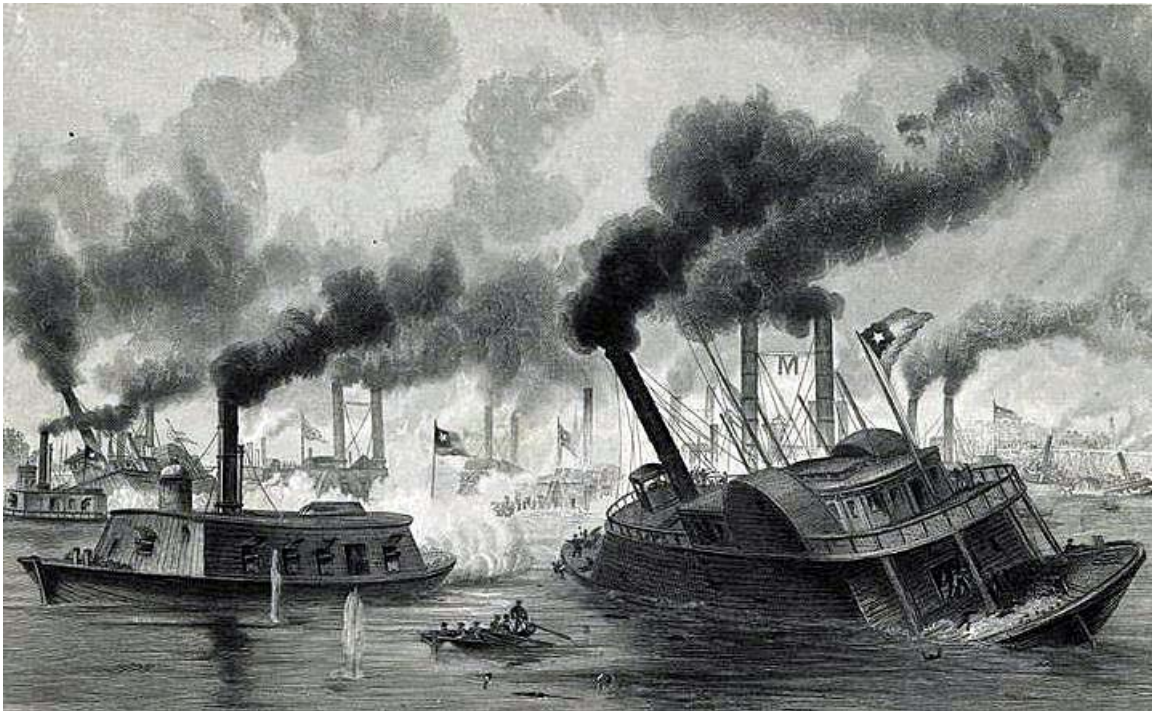
-Thomas Jefferson 1802



Running the guns at Forts Jackson and St. Philip on the Mississippi River April 1862



Capture of New Orleans by Admiral David G. Farragut, April 1862

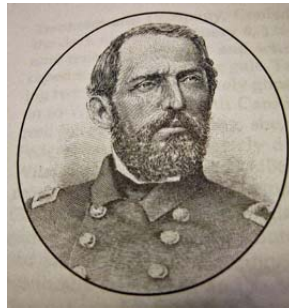


Memphis, Tennessee, June 1862

THE CONFEDERATES STRIKE BACK

Construction began in October 1861 at Memphis, Tennessee of the Confederate ironclad *Arkansas*. Once it became apparent that the Union was to threaten Memphis, the ironclad was moved to Yazoo City on the Yazoo River in April 1862 for completion.

The *Arkansas* was 165 feet beam to stern and 35 feet wide. She drew 14 feet of water with ten guns, three per side and 2 fore and aft. Both her starboard and port guns consisted of a 9 inch Dahlgren, a 6 inch rifle and a 32 pounder. Her bow was armed with two 8 inch Columbaids and the stern had two 6 inch rifles. Still water speed was 8 knots propelled by two engines and the bow had an iron ram installed. Her 200 man crew was commanded by Lt. Isaac Brown.



By July, 1862 Rear Admiral David Glasgow Farragut's blue water fleet at Vicksburg consisted of 18 heavy sloops-of-war while Navy Captain Charles Henry Davis' brown water fleet had a mixture of 30 ironclads and tinclads plus 6 rams.

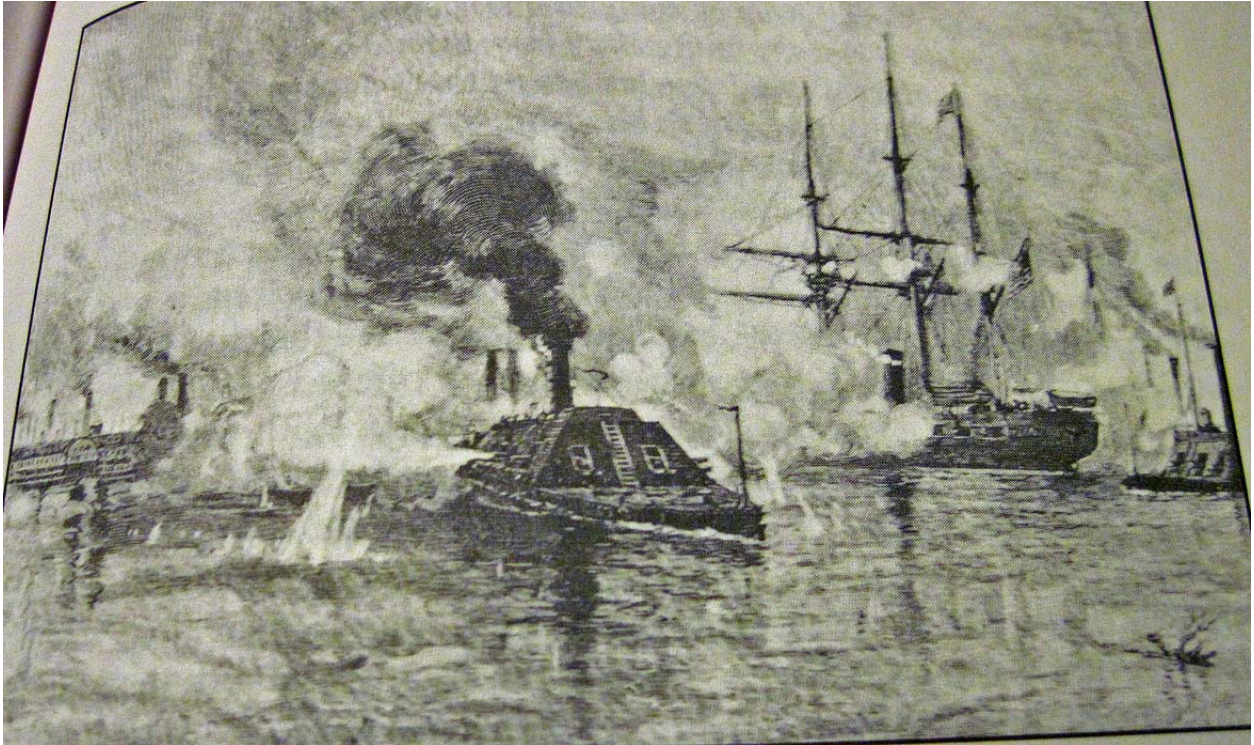
On July 13, the *CSS Arkansas* was ready for combat and starts her journey down the Yazoo River. A problem the next day with the engine steam exhaust having dampened the gun powder supply, forces a rest to dry out the powder at Haynes Bluff. Finally on July 15th as the ironclad moves by 'Old River', 8 miles from the Mississippi River, Lt. Brown encounters three Union boats blocking the river; the *Carondelet*, a 12 gun 'turtle' ironclad, the *Tyler* with 8 guns and the ram *Queen of the West*.

The *Arkansas* with full steam attacks disabling and grounding the *Carondelet*, batters both the *Tyler* and *Queen of the West* as they retreat back down the Yazoo River in an attempt to warn Porter above Vicksburg where the rest of the Union fleet is stationed. The Rebel ironclad has withstood with light damage, first combat with the enemy.

Arkansas' troublesome engines cause the steam pressure to drop to only 20% of normal as the ironclad glided downstream to the Mississippi River. Shortly Lt. Brown spots Farragut's fleet of 10 armed ships, rams, paddle steamers and mortar boats and writes, "Aided by the current of the Mississippi, we soon approached the Federal fleet; a forest of masts and smoke-stacks, rams, iron-clads, and other gun-boats on the left side, and ordinary river steamers and bomb-vessels along the right. It seemed at a glance as if the whole navy had come to keep me away from the heroic city."

Only Farragut's rams had begun to get their steam up, though all his guns were loaded and ready for action. Lt Brown makes the decision under limited power to steer toward the line of rams preventing them from gaining distance and speed to attack the *Arkansas*. Running the gauntlet of Union guns, Brown and his well trained crew, deliver a

punishing blow to Farragut's fleet causing 42 killed and 69 wounded among the Union crews. This second fight had caused more damage to the *Arkansas* as Union shot penetrated her iron sides, causing casualties within, knocking her engines loose and injuring Lt. Brown with a serious head wound.



Loud cheers arise from the cliffs above Vicksburg as the *Arkansas* floated into view from the fire and smoke of the battle upriver.

Furious that he had been caught unprepared, Farragut orders a night attack against the moored Confederate ironclad at Vicksburg. This attack produces unsatisfactory results. Farragut then orders Porter's mortar boats to lob shot at the *Arkansas* for the next seven days. Not a single hit is recorded as the ironclad undergoes repair and crew replacement. Meanwhile on July 18th the ironclad attempts to attack the harassing mortar boats, but engine failure forces her back to Vicksburg.

On July 24th Farragut sends two rams against the *Arkansas* again only to fail in sinking her once more. July 25th, Farragut short on coal, retires with his fleet downriver towards New Orleans. Six days later Davis retires upriver with his ironclads and rams.

Lt. Brown takes a leave of absence to recover from his wounds. On August 4th Confederate General Van Dorn in charge of the forces at Vicksburg orders the *Arkansas* to support an infantry attack to recapture Baton Rouge. Also missing from the ironclad is the chief engineer due to sickness. 5 miles upriver from the Baton Rouge, the ironclad's engines break down, forcing her to be beached. Unable to repair the engines and with Union ironclads approaching, the *Arkansas* is set afire and destroyed, ending its short but brilliant career.

1863

As the new year unfolds, Commander David Dixon Porter has replaced the less aggressive Davis as head of the Upper Mississippi Squadron, while Farragut commands the Lower Mississippi Squadron and the blockade along the coast of Texas.

Set backs in late 1862 at Chickasaw Bluffs with Sherman and Grant's failed invasion in Mississippi from La Grange, Tennessee leads Grant to rethink his plans.

Finding that "fighting the river was a slow, discouraging, unrewarding business", Grant wonders if the correct strategy would be to go back to Memphis, solidify it as his supply base and move again along the railroads to Jackson, Mississippi, then turning west against Vicksburg. Yet he knows this strategy would be interpreted by many as a defeat.

While Grant is still away in December 1862, General John McClernard arrives at Milliken's Bend. Outranking Sherman, McClernard takes command and forms an expedition (Sherman's idea) to recapture the steamer *Blue Wing* full of ammo and mail, which has been taken to Arkansas Post on the Arkansas River.

On January 5, 1863, McClernard, Sherman and Porter, plus 30,000 soldiers, 50 transports and 13 warships steam upriver. Two days later the flotilla enters the Arkansas River. About 60 miles up the river the rebels have built Ft. Hindman (11 guns) across from Arkansas Post with 5000 Confederates manning both positions. January 11, Sherman deploys his troops on both banks of the river. The Navy starts its bombardment in the evening and by noon the next day the rebels raise a white flag over the fort, surrendering the entire garrisons of both the fort and Arkansas Post. Upon arriving at Young's Point, Grant considers the expedition a wild goose chase and shortly consolidates McClernard command into the Army of the Tennessee.

Sherman now goes back to the continuing attempt to expand the canal below Vicksburg started in early 1862. By late March the rising waters of the Mississippi will doom this attempt to failure.

As the digging at 'Grant's Canal' progresses, another plan to get at Vicksburg is put into play. Fifty miles or so above Vicksburg is Lake Providence, located just west of the Mississippi River. Once a channel of the river, Lake Providence is part of a passage of bayous and old river channels stretching over 470 miles below Grand Gulf on the Mississippi River. By destroying levees, this long winding passage could be opened to move Grant's army by boat below Vicksburg. As the expedition, under the command of General James McPherson, got under way on January 30, it soon became evident that the passage was "narrow and torturous," and the banks are covered with dense forests overhanging the channel. They were also filled with fallen timber, the accumulation of years." Success in this plan was impossible, but Grant "let the work go on, believing employment was better than idleness for the men."

On January 29, at Milliken's Bend, Grant meets with Admiral Porter and General Sherman to plan the next expedition to attack Vicksburg via an abandoned barge canal called Yazoo Pass upriver near Helena, Arkansas. February 3, Colonel James Wilson is

put in charge of 4500 men in support of the Navy's command under Lt. Commander Watson Smith.

Early in February Porter decides to send warships down past the guns of Vicksburg to destroy any rebel river traffic and disrupt any river crossing of war materials. The armed ram *Queen of the West* – repaired since her fight with the *CSS Arkansas* - successfully gets by Vicksburg with minor damage. Two days later Porter sends a barge full of coal past Vicksburg, allowing the *Queen of the West* enough fuel for a month. After a week or so of very successful raiding and destroying, the ram on February 14, while going up the Red River is grounded on a mud flat at Gordon's Landing, and comes under heavy attack. Helpless to defend, her crew sets the ram on fire.

In the meantime, Porter has sent the ironclad *Indianola* with two attached coal barges past Vicksburg during the night of February 13 to support the *Queen of the West*. To make a long story short, the rebels raise the *Queen of the West*, repaired her and sent her out on the Mississippi River to fight the *Indianola*. The attack starts on February 24 at Davis Bend near Jeff Davis' Brierfield Plantation. The short nasty fight results in the boarding and capture of the *Indianola*, after being rammed. She is hauled to the east bank of the Mississippi River where she sinks in 10 feet of water.

Porter has lost in short order two important warships along with the USS *Cairo* on the Yazoo River two month earlier. Other than a minor victory at Arkansas Post, Porter's accomplishments looked rather shameful. Having no ironclads near Vicksburg at the moment, and needing to delay any Confederate naval movement above Vicksburg, Porter hatches a clever ruse. Constructed in less than a day from an old barge, rafts and canvas, Porter built a dummy ironclad almost identical to the *Indianola*. Painted black and burning barrels filled with tar. The fake ironclad floated by Vicksburg in the dark under heavy attack from the cities batteries, silent and mysterious to the Confederate gunners. After being grounded and pushed back into the current by Union forces below Vicksburg, the fake ironclad *Black Terror* approached the *Indianola* which had been floated and was being repaired. So alarmed at the sudden appearance of another huge Union ironclad, the Confederates set fire and destroyed the *Indianola* without having a shot fired at them. The final joke was when the *Black Terror* was finally boarded by the rebels then found a sign painted "Deluded People Cave In."

Back to Yazoo Pass where Colonel Wilson has blown the levee and waited 4 days for the water levels to stabilize. As the Union Army and Navy force moved south the rebels felled trees in their path. On March 11 working hard to clear the river channel of obstructions, Wilson and Smith came upon Ft. Pemberton and the sunken *Star of the West* which blocks the river. Smith sends two ironclads against the fort only to be driven back again and again. When the Confederates showed no signs of weakness, Wilson and Smith decided to end the expedition, although later, Wilson complained to Grant about the Navy letting a single Confederate cannon stop them.

BTW – you all might remember that the *Star of the West* was the ship that was fired upon when trying to resupply Fort Sumter in 1861.

Next up was Porter idea of getting above Haynes Bluff on the Yazoo River by way of the Steele Bayou. Again a route through old river channels and bayous clogged with debris and canopied by trees. The armada of 5 ironclads, 2 mortar boats and transports for one

of Sherman's division moved successfully from March 16 till March 22, when in single file the lead ironclad got stuck in the muck and the rebels responded with two Wentworth rifled cannons. Sherman asked Porter if he want to continue and received a reply of "no thanks", thus ended the Steele Bayou expedition.

Just above Young's Point, Grant's headquarters, engineers found a promising site for another attempt at digging a channel to redirect the Mississippi River away from Vicksburg, at Duckport. This canal would allow only shallow draft boats down it but would give passage well below Vicksburg. McClernard's men were put to the task, but again the Mississippi River spoiled the effort this time falling.

Recommended reading:

- Southern Thunder* by R. Thomas Campbell
- The Web of Victory* by Earl S. Miers
- Thunder Along the Mississippi* by Jack D. Coombe
- Divided Waters* by Ivan Musicant
- The Beleaguered City* by Shelby Foote
- Shades of Blue and Gray* by Herman Hattawaay
- War on the Waters* – James M. McPherson

Battles in the Operations against Vicksburg, December 1862 – January 1863

