

# The Battle of Milliken's Bend - The Central Role of Black Troops in the Siege of Vicksburg

By Ernest McBride

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The story of the Civil War in Mississippi is well documented in the military annals, but it is not so well known in the real world.? The battles that took place in central Mississippi such as the battles of Bruinsburg, Port Gibson, Raymond, Jackson, Champion's Hill and ultimately the "big" one at Vicksburg were all winners for a victory-hungry United States in its battle to the death with the Confederacy.? Certainly, the hard-fought victories of Generals U. S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman from Corinth to Grand Gulf and from Vicksburg to Meridian are enough to stir the blood of even the most lethargic American, black or white.? Admiral David D. Porter's running of the batteries on the Mississippi below Vicksburg is as memorable and exciting as David Farragut's spirited cry at Mobile Bay:?"Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead."

Great battles gave rise to great fighting men. And some of these men were so daring and courageous that even today we readily identify their battlefield actions with the depth of their character: Grant, the Bulldog! "War is Hell" Sherman. Hooker's feminist legacy, Ben Butler's "Contraband of War." Grierson, the raider. Great names, great generals all.

Absent from the schoolbooks and television miniseries about the Civil War, however, are those truly great battles fought and won by the Black volunteers in Mississippi and Louisiana and elsewhere in the South. In most cases, these Black troops were allowed only two to three weeks of military training before being thrown into battle against the war-tested Confederate veterans and their vicious and spiteful commanders.

While we do see occasional references to the slaughter of the poorly trained Black Soldiers at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, in 1864, there is seldom a reference to the Black Troops who won the Battle of Milliken's Bend, the best example of brave black men in combat during the Civil War. There is cause to believe that the United States Government, through its agency the National Park Service, has deliberately slighted the black troops who gave their all and gained a victory in one of the most important struggles of the entire Civil War---the siege of Vicksburg. The National Military Park at Vicksburg once held two monuments dedicated to the bravery and VICTORY of the Black troops of Port Hudson and Milliken's Bend---reputedly the two longest-lasting close-order battles of the Civil War. Those two monuments were melted down during the shortage of useful metals in the early stages of World War II. Many other monuments were also used for their metal content during the last Great War. But they have long since been replaced. The National Park directors, however, have not seen fit to replace the mementos dedicated to the valor of the African American men of Milliken's Bend and Port Hudson, the other crucial Confederate strongpoint on the Mississippi.

Even though they were eventually accorded the full status of soldiers in the U. S. Army, still the black men faced a peril unknown to their white comrades on the Union side. Slaves one day, soldiers fighting against their former masters the next, these black men excited the wrath and contempt of the vicious Confederate generals like Ku Klux Klan founder Nathan Bedford Forrest and Pierre Beauregard, the man who started the war at Fort Sumter, South Carolina on April 15, 1861. Black men falling into the hands of

such generals were either put to death immediately or returned to slavery, rather than being accorded the status of prisoners of war.

Grant's undisputed victory at Fort Donelson, Tennessee, on February 16, 1862, was the major turning point for a frustrated United States military. His commander in chief, Abraham Lincoln, was overjoyed at Grant's achievement. But the general's immediate superiors, Halleck and McClellan were envious of his success and tried to box him in. Abraham Lincoln, nevertheless, had an immediate goal---full Union control of the Mississippi---and he learned that Grant had a plan that just might succeed. Because of Lincoln's wisdom about the reckless nature of the people around him, he would eventually appoint Grant as the commanding General of the entire Union Army.

"Vicksburg is the key," Lincoln told his closest advisers. And he informed them that he wanted that key in his pocket. Grant, too, understood the vast importance of this small town that rose so high above the Mississippi and shielded by two other rivers and impassable wildernesses on two beyond the waterways. "The fate of the Confederacy was sealed when Vicksburg fell," Grant wrote after the battle.

To accommodate Lincoln, Grant moved South after a number of skirmishes in northeastern and central Mississippi and in southern Arkansas. On January 29, 1863, he took direct command of all the troops that had set up camp at Young's Point and at the small town of Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, about 12 miles northwest of Vicksburg. Realizing the difficulty of fighting his way into Vicksburg, Grant at first sought to divert the Mississippi River by digging a bypass canal around the city. That proved to be a horrendous task for him and his troops, so he came up with one of the most brilliant strategies in military history. First, secure his rear at Milliken's Bend. Then, move the mass of his troops out to knock out all possible supply and access routes to the target city and then to hopefully starve them into surrendering. On April 20th, Grant was ready to move further south, contrary to what was expected of him.

"The strategical way according to the rule," Grant wrote in his Memoirs after the war, "would have been to go back to Memphis, establish that as a base of supplies, fortify it and move from there along the lines of railroad. "It was my judgment at the time," Grant continued, "that to make a backward movement as long as that from Vicksburg to Memphis, would be interpreted by many as a defeat.

"There was nothing left to be done but to go forward to a decisive victory." Left behind at Milliken's Bend were 1410 soldiers, only 160 of them white (i.e., the 23rd Iowa regiment). The rest were three newly recruited Black Regiments---The First Mississippi (African Descent) and the Ninth and Eleventh Louisiana (Corps d Afrique, or African Corps).

## II

"Today Milliken's Bend lies largely forgotten," Mississippi College History Professor Martha M. Bigelow wrote in her 1960 article in the Journal of Negro History. She highlighted the date June 7, 1863 as one charged with electricity. Grant had already settled in for his siege on the south and east sides of Vicksburg. And thinking himself as being aided by the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers on the west and north, he gave little thought to his earlier outposts on the Louisiana side of the Mississippi.

"The little garrison at Milliken's Bend, fifteen miles above Vicksburg," Professor Bigelow said, "was composed of raw recruits. There was little to distinguish them except the fact that most of them were

Black---ex-slaves inducted into the Union Army, primarily for garrison duty. This day, June 7, 1863, they were to perform a service for their race and to write the name of Milliken's Bend into history."

Neither Grant nor Sherman gave Milliken's Bend much attention in their autobiographies. Grant gave perfunctory acknowledgement to the black troops in saying that this was the first real test of black troops in combat. And that they had passed the test quite admirably. Yet, only six-months before Grant's crossing of the River south of Vicksburg, near Port Gibson, Milliken's Bend had served as his main base of operations. As late as January 20, 1863, he had tried to launch an assault against Vicksburg from Milliken's Bend and Young's Point, 11 miles to the south, but his forces were repulsed savagely at Chickasaw Bayou north of Vicksburg.

After Admiral Porter ran his ships past the Confederate batteries south of Vicksburg, Grant decided to abandon his supply base at Milliken's Bend and take a chance of living off the land on the east side of the Mississippi. Some of the other generals, Union and Confederate, thought that both Grant and Sherman had gone crazy. But Lincoln liked their spirit, even offered to buy Grant a case of whatever it was that he was drinking. And when they kept winning battle after battle, Grant became Lincoln's favorite general, soon to be put in charge of all military operations.

Black historian Benjamin Quarles was one of the first scholars to record the events that developed after Grant left his base at Milliken's Bend. He included a vivid account of the action at Milliken's Bend in his 1953 work, titled *The Negro in the Civil War*.

"In the late spring of 1863," Quarles pointed out, "Milliken's Bend had been left with a detachment of 1410, of whom 160 were whites, the 23rd Iowa, and the remainder were ex-slaves from Louisiana and Mississippi, organized into three incomplete regiments, the Ninth Louisiana, the Eleventh Louisiana and the First Mississippi. These 1250 contrabands had been mustered in at Milliken's Bend on May 22, 1863, according to Lieutenant Colonel Cyrus Sears, one of their officers. The Black volunteers were destined to go into battle exactly sixteen days later." Unknown to Grant and Sherman was the Confederate strategy from providing a back-door exit for Gen. J. C. Pemberton's forces, Quarles wrote, "if he found it necessary to move them out of the city and across the river."

Thanks to the persistence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, the man who coined the term "contraband of war" to characterize the Black slaves set free by his men, Black soldiers and officers were mustered into the U. S. fighting machine, though not given official recognition back in Washington initially. The man who ultimately convinced Lincoln of the great importance of recruiting Black soldiers was Gen. Lorenzo Thomas, Adjutant General of the Army. Urging Lincoln to lease the liberated plantations in the Mississippi Valley over to the former slaves and to recruit Black natives of the region as soldiers. Thomas set up the model for what became known as the Freedman's Bureau, an organization critical to Black economic survival during Reconstruction.

"The policy of using the Negro as a soldier had been instituted with hesitation, confusion, indecision, and doubt," said historian Bigelow. "There had been abortive attempts under David Hunter in South Carolina in 1862, and General Butler in the Department of the Gulf had formed regiments of African descent; but they were composed largely of free men of color. By the spring of 1863, however, the government had definitely decided to use the Negro in all cases whatsoever for the benefit of the Union Army, most of them concentrated in the Mississippi Valley. And it was at Milliken's Bend, said Bigelow, "that the ex-slaves got their first baptism of fire---the first real chance of ex-slaves to prove whether they would fight or not!"

Analyzing the rebel strategy in much the same was as Quarles, Bigelow also pointed out what would have happened if the Confederates had retaken the west bank of the Mississippi: "They (the Confederates) could get in contact with Vicksburg and drive beef cattle across the river to the beleaguered garrison. Then if General Grant's position on the Yazoo should be taken or broken by General (Thomas Eggleston) Johnston, the force west of the River would be ready to cooperate with the Vicksburg Garrison."

### III

The most vivid account of the Milliken's Bend action remains that of Benjamin Quarles. The sympathetic reader can almost feel the bullets and bayonets clashing day and night between Black ex-slaves and their former bosses and social oppressors. "On the night of June 6," Quarles wrote, "four Rebel regiments of Texans---three infantry and one cavalry---left Richmond, Louisiana, for Milliken's Bend, ten miles to the northeast. Marching at night to escape the sun's strong rays, Brigadier General Henry E. McCulloch planned an attack before dawn in order to lessen the amount of assistance the fort's defenders could receive from the gunboats. The Confederates hoped to have driven the Union soldiers into the river by 8 a.m.

"On Sunday morning, June 7, 1863 at 2:30 a.m., when they were within a mile and a half of the fort, the Texas regiments encountered the Union pickets. The Rebel skirmishers pressed forward, driving the enemy pickets in front of them. Half an hour after the pickets were driven in, the Confederates appeared in force, marching on the left in close column. Their advance was slowed up by Black skirmishers, whom they drove back, hedge by hedge, over ground made rough by running briars and tie-vines." When the Rebels finally gained an open space from which to launch their assault on the mostly Black garrison, they all vowed to give the Black troopers and their white cohorts "no quarter."

The Union troops, however, were just as determined to yield not an inch of territory to the Rebels. Their orders were to hold their fire until the Rebels were in close musket range. The first Rebel charge was easily repulsed by the Black defenders of the little town of Milliken's Bend. But because of the faulty construction of many of their weapons and also because of their lack of battlefield experience, some of the Black troops had trouble reloading. In fact, one Black regiment had only gotten their rifles the day before the battle.

"Rushing upon and over the entrenchments and flanking the fort," Quarles continued in his description of the battle, "the Rebels closed in on the defenders of Milliken's Bend. Thereupon ensued a bloody hand-to-hand fight which ranked as one of the most bitter, knock-down-and-drag out struggles during the course of a war famous for its hard-fought actions. It was a contest between enraged men fighting with bayonets and musket butts. "Both sides freely used the bayonet---a rare occurrence in warfare, as General Lorenzo Thomas observed in commenting on the battle, since usually one of the party gives up before coming in contact with steel." In one instance two men lay side by side, each having the other's bayonet in his body. A teenage cook, who had begged for a gun when the enemy was seen approaching, was badly wounded with one gunshot and two bayonet wounds. In one Negro company there were six broken bayonets.

"The scathing ordeal continued all during the morning, each man on his own hook. Until the hour of high noon the rival infantrymen contested the field in the longest bayonet-charge engagement of the war. Broken limbs and mangled bodies were strewn in profusion along the breastworks. Confederate General

McCulloch reported that of the wounds received by his men, "more are severe and fewer slight than I have ever witnessed among the same number in my former military experience."

Right around noon of the second day of battle Admiral Porter sent the Union ship Choctaw into battle. Some of the Union forces were sacrificed under the raging assault of the gunboat, but it took only a half-dozen shells and the 95-degree heat to persuade the Rebels to beat a hasty retreat. "As the Texas regiment retreated," said Quarles, "the Union soldiers, encouraged by the turn of events, followed after them across the open field. The pursuit ceased as the Rebels crossed the outer confines of the fort. Before the retreat had been completed, one Negro took his former master a prisoner and brought him into camp with great gusto."

Because of this tenacity in defending their post, the Black troops at Milliken's Bend proved that even raw Black recruits could hold their own toe-to-toe with the best that the White South could throw at them. Somehow that lesson has been lost to history. With the removal of the commemorative plaques in the Vicksburg National Military Park, few if any Civil War enthusiasts can witness the central role of Mississippi's own Black men in overthrowing the slave power whose presence is still felt nearly everywhere in the state. By shutting close the back door, the brave Black troops made the great Vicksburg victory possible for Grant and Sherman. Without them at Milliken's Bend and without their likewise hardy fights at Port Hudson near Baton Rouge, the South might have been able to negotiate a peace favorable to itself and the preservation of slavery. Only a good psychic can give the answer to this one.

"Milliken's Bend," said Quarles, "was one of the hardest fought encounters in the annals of American military history." Its lesson was not lost on the Union high brass: "The bravery of the Blacks at Milliken's Bend," observed Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana, "completely revolutionized the sentiment of the army with regard to the employment of Negro troops." The reward given to those Black troops and their posterity is a cowardly silence on the part of the National Park Service and the United States military establishment. In short, it is the Federal Government that refuses to give proper thanks to a group of Black men who quite possibly saved its ass at the high point of the Civil War.

*Earnest McBride is a freelance writer formerly of Los Angeles, now in Vicksburg, Mississippi.*

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