

MILITARY AND NAVAL ACTIVITY BETWEEN CAIRO AND COLUMBUS

By ROBERT D. WHITESELL

THIS PAPER deals primarily with an eighteen-mile stretch of the Mississippi River. Today this area is hardly noteworthy of comment, there are no industries, resources, or cities of any importance—it is just eighteen miles of river bank. However, during the year of 1861 it was very much in the eyes of two nations, the Confederate States of America and the United States of America.

In the early fall and winter of 1861, these two nations, the first fighting for her life and existence, the second fighting for her unity, used this stretch of river as their battleground. At the northern end of this sector was Cairo, Illinois, the Union Headquarters for the Western Department; at the southern extremity was Columbus, Kentucky, serving as Headquarters for the First Division, the Confederate Western Department.

This region, though history books customarily give it little and in most instances no coverage, saw the beginning of the rise and fall of two stars—the rise of U. S. Grant and the fall of the Confederate States. In this and the surrounding vicinity, Grant established his reputation as a general. And with the fall of Columbus, the Mississippi Valley was opened to invasion by the Union gunboats and armies.

In this report, special emphasis is placed upon naval operations which history has tended to forget since the naval phase was not of major proportions.

There were two enterprises which the Federal government proposed to undertake at the very beginning of the Civil War, which were followed tenaciously to a conclusion, and which together insured the final collapse of the Confederacy, regardless of the movement of the armies—the blockade of the East Coast and the conquest of the Mississippi River.

In the first few months of war, operations in the Mississippi Valley were hampered by the neutrality of Kentucky and Missouri. Both the Union and Confederate governments were reluctant to

take any overt action in either state for it was well known that their neutrality was a very frail and fragile thing. Each of the states was about equally divided on the slave question, but the mode of life of each was predominantly southern. Both the North and the South hesitated to make any definite move for fear of driving the border states into the arms of the other belligerent.

Before long, however, guerrilla warfare had broken out within each state among the two factions, and the Union and Confederate governments rushed into the field to "protect" their people from the ravages of the savage and ruthless enemy. Strangely enough, their greatest rush seemed to be toward strong points along the Mississippi River. The first move by the Union forces was their occupation of Birds Point, Missouri, across the river from Cairo, Illinois. The next Union move was the setting up of a camp at Belmont, Missouri, on the 2nd of September, 1861, some eighteen miles down river from Cairo¹. General Leonidas Polk of the Confederacy immediately put an army into Missouri in order to divert the Yankee forces and to allow him to fortify the Mississippi River. This diversion apparently worked as planned, for on the 4th of September the Union camp at Belmont pulled stakes and marched overland to Birds Point. The very next day, General Polk ordered the Army of Tennessee under Major General Gideon J. Pillow to occupy Belmont and the bluffs across the river at Columbus, Kentucky.² General John C. Fremont, in command of the Western Department, immediately ordered General U. S. Grant at Cairo to take counter measures, since there was now no legal reason to respect Kentucky's neutrality. Grant immediately occupied Fort Holt (actually, the site was seized, and the fort constructed), Paducah, and Smithland, all in the State of Kentucky. These seizures were made just a few hours ahead of Confederate forces sent to occupy these points.³ Several days later, on the 8th and 16th respectively, Union forces moved into Norfolk, Missouri, and Fort Jefferson, Kentucky. Fort Holt, Birds Point, and Cairo formed a triangle at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Fort Jefferson was some five miles down river from Fort Holt. (Since the Confederate forces had invaded

¹A. L. Conger, *The Rise of U. S. Grant* (New York, 1931), p. 54. Hereafter cited as Conger, *Grant*.

²*Ibid.*, p. 55. However, there is considerable evidence that Confederate troops entered Columbus as early as September 3.

³William C. Church, *Ulysses S. Grant* (New York, London, 1897), p. 87. Hereafter cited as Church, *Grant*.

Kentucky first, Governor Magoffin issued a proclamation ordering them off state soil. His demand was not complied with and on September 12, 1861, Kentucky entered the war on the side of the Union, thereby helping to doom the South to a hopelessly unequal struggle.)⁴

By seizure, occupation, and fortification of strong points along the Mississippi banks nearly up to the Ohio River, the Confederate nation secured a most important means of communication with the Southwestern states and inflicted serious damage upon the North by closing the natural channel by which its agricultural products found passage to the sea. There is reason to believe that the early plans for opening the Mississippi were almost exclusively of a military (i.e., army) nature. However, it soon became evident that a navy was to be necessary if the various strong points were to be taken. It also became apparent that to gain control of the Mississippi "would be to divide the Confederacy, to deprive it of a most important and immediate subsistence for its armies in the resources of Arkansas and Texas."⁵

On May 16, 1861, the War Department called upon Commander John Rodgers, U.S.N., to go to Cincinnati and supervise the purchase and conversion of three small wooden steamers, the *Tyler*, *Connestoga*, and *Lexington*.⁶ These gunboats carried their original names throughout their service career and formed the first units of the Western navy, called the Western Flotilla by the Army. They arrived at Cairo, Illinois, on the 16th of August, 1861. By the time these three boats had been converted, James B. Eads, a brilliant engineer who had built the first bridge across the Mississippi at St. Louis, began the construction of seven ironclad gunboats at Carondelet, Missouri, a small town on the outskirts of St. Louis. Eads completed these boats in one hundred days from date of contract. The U.S.S. *St. Louis* was launched on the 12th of October, 1861, and the *Carondelet*, *Cincinnati*, *Louisville*, *Mounds City*, *Cairo*, and *Pittsburg* followed in respective order.⁷ In brief, their specifications were: 6-foot draft, 512-ton displacement, 175-feet in length, 51.5-foot beam, and an armament of six 32-pounders,

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵E. A. Duyckinck, *War for the Union* (New York, 1861-65), p. 271. Hereafter cited as Duyckinck, *War*.

⁶U. S. Navy Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 20 volumes (Washington, 1894-1922), Series 1, Vol. XXII, p. 280. Hereafter cited as O. R. Navies.

⁷*Century Magazine* VII (1885), 420.

three 8-inch, four 42-pounders, and one 12-pounder. They were constructed of 20-inch oak beams and had 2.5 inch armor on their sides, which sloped at 35 degrees.⁸ Eads also completed two 1000-ton boats, the *Benton*, an old converted snag boat, and the new *Essex*. These two boats carried 3-inch armor with two 9-inch, seven 42-pounders, and seven 32-pounders. The *Benton*, though slower than the smaller ironclads, proved to be the work horse of the fleet. Eads also built thirty-eight mortar boats for use in the western waters. These mortar boats were actually rafts with built-up sides, each carrying a single 13-inch mortar.

There should now follow a discussion of the Confederate Navy, the only trouble is that there is practically nothing to discuss. The Rebels had not a single vessel on this end of the Mississippi that had been built after the war began. All except one were "river-steamer" types. This one exception, the *Little Rebel*, was a screw type, converted from a small ocean-going vessel. These steamers were "armored" with bales of cotton or hay and were jokingly referred to by their crews as "cotton-clads" or "hay-plated." Their ordnance came chiefly from the vast stock of guns captured from the Union when the Norfolk, Virginia, navy yards fell into the hands of the Confederacy. While they made nearly twelve knots through the water as opposed to the six knot speed of the Union Navy, this advantage was offset by their twelve foot draft as compared with an average six foot draft for the Union gunboats. A shallow draft is much to be desired on a river, and particularly one as abundantly filled with sand and mud bars as the Mississippi.

However much the two navies differed in strength, they did have one quality in common—lack of unified organization. Each was under army control, and both were at one time or another partially manned by army personnel.¹⁰ The "River Defense Fleet" of the South was even more handicapped, for their ships' companies consisted of civilians from beginning to end.¹¹ River pilots became captains in this fleet and, as General A. S. Johnston, C.S.A., once remarked, "Mississippi captains and pilots would never agree upon anything after they had gotten under way." Each captain armed and outfitted his boat as he saw fit. There was never any connec-

⁸H. Allen Gosnell, *Guns on the Western Waters* (Baton Rouge, 1949), p. 16.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 19.

tion between the C. S. Navy and the "River Defense Fleet," for the captains "had entered the service with the distinct understanding or condition that they were not to be placed under the orders of naval officers." It is no small wonder that "Commodore" Montgomery was able to organize any kind of a naval force for the defense of the Mississippi Valley.

Captain A. H. Foote, U.S.N., a boyhood friend of the Secretary of the Navy, was ordered to replace Commander John Rodgers, U.S.N., as Commanding Officer of the Western Flotilla.¹² His orders, dated August 30, 1861, went further to state, "Requisitions must be made upon the War Department through General Fremont, and whatever the army cannot furnish, the navy will endeavor to supply, having due regard to operations on the coast."¹³ Foote did not reach Cairo and actually take command until September 6, 1861.¹⁴ This flotilla remained under army command until October 1, the following year, when it became the Mississippi Squadron.

Cairo, Illinois, the headquarters for the Union army in the Western Department, also served as headquarters for the navy. Well suited it was to the navy, for "bounded on the west and south by the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, it was in its power to control the vast supplies furnished to the South by these mighty channels of trade. Cairo, at the junction of these two streams was the key to the Northwest."¹⁵ It had long been famous as a river port due to its strategic location. The Halliday Hotel, (well known not only for once having played host to Charles Dickens, but also for its bar room floor tiled with silver dollars) appropriately served as quarters for the Union officers. Cairo was the key to the Mississippi Valley and terminus of the Illinois Central Railroad, which put it in direct communication with the railroad system of the North.

Columbus, Kentucky, "an evil smelling, whiskey-drinking town," located eighteen miles down the river was the Southern Headquarters for this section. Immediately behind the town and rising almost vertically above the river are the "Iron Bluffs." Over two-hundred feet in height, these bluffs are part of a ridge that borders the river from Hickman to Paducah, Kentucky. These

¹²J. D. Hill, *Sea Dogs of the Sixties* (Minneapolis, 1935), p. 166.

¹³O. R. Navies, Vol. XXII, p. 307. Welles to Foote.

¹⁴F. T. Miller, *Photographic History of the Civil War* (New York, 1911), VI, 191.

¹⁵Duyckinck, *War*, p. 71.

fortifications commanded the river for five miles on either side of the town. The Southerners had mounted one hundred and forty cannon in tiers of batteries along the water front and upon the tops of the bluffs. On the land side, a strong parapet, covered by a thick abatis, and lines of trenches, prevented surprise from that quarter. These works extended for four miles, and were designed to repel an invader on the northern, southern, and eastern sides. This site presented such a natural fort that General Polk, C.S.A., was once prompted to say that, "He could hold it against any force as long as his supplies held out." For these defensive reasons as well as its strategic features, it was known in both the North and South as "The Gibraltar of the West." As a means of obstructing the passage of advancing gunboats, a hugh chain was eventually stretched across the river and held by large anchors on each shore. A great quantity of torpedoes was also planted as a defense against enemy gunboats.¹⁶

Columbus formed the western anchor of the Confederate line of defense. From there the line ran to Bowling Green, Kentucky, through the middle of the state to Cumberland Gap. However, as early as September 13th, General Simon Bolivar Buckner, C.S.A., had written to Richmond saying, "Our possession at Columbus is already neutralized by that of Paducah."¹⁷

The first naval action that took place on the Mississippi River occurred on September 2, 1861. (This incident also, reputedly, constitutes the first "shots in anger" fired at each other in Kentucky by the regular forces of the two nations." The U.S.S. *Tyler* and *Lexington* had accompanied the transports *Belmont* and *Graham* which disembarked troops under Col. Wagner at Belmont. Later the boats, under command of Commander John Rodgers and Commander R. N. Stembel, respectively, went down the river for reconnaissance purposes toward Hickman, some eighteen miles away. Rodgers states in a letter to Gideon Welles, Secretary of Navy:

When we arrived in sight of Hickman we discovered a Rebel gunboat, with the Confederate flag flying, off that town. The boat fired a shot at us, to which we replied.

A number of tents extending for half a mile were upon the shore fronting the river.

When three or four shots had been exchanged, a battery on shore fired

¹⁶W. A. Crafts, *Southern Rebellion* (Boston, 1862), p. 491.

¹⁷Church, *Grant*, p. 88.

several guns, then another battery opened up on us. The *Lexington* and this vessel fired some twenty shots, when, finding the current just setting us down upon their batteries, with which we were in no condition to cope, having little powder on board and only half enough gun tackles for working the battery, we returned. Upon passing Columbus and the chalk bluffs, we were fired upon by the Rebels with muskets principally, but also by two great guns.¹⁸

The above mentioned Rebel boat was the C.S.S. *Yankee*, a converted tug boat covered with railroad iron. Outside of shells thrown into the Southern camp, neither side scored any hits.

Next, on the morning of the 8th, Colonel Wagner went aboard the *Lexington* to reconnoiter. The boat went down as far as Lucas Bend where two land batteries opened up on it. The *Lexington* did not answer but turned around and went back to Cairo. That afternoon Colonel Wagner and troops moved into Norfolk, Missouri, some eight miles below Cairo.

Again, on the 10th of September, the U.S.S. *Lexington* under command of Commander Stembel and the U.S.S. *Conestoga* commanded by Lieutenant Phelps were ordered by Captain Foote to proceed down the river and work in conjunction with Colonel Wagner's regiment, advancing down the Missouri side of the river from Norfolk. Wagner moved his force of one regiment of men, twenty cavalry, and five light pieces of artillery as far as Beckwith's farm, about six miles below Norfolk, before Rebel pickets forced him to return to Norfolk. The wooden gunboats went several miles farther down stream to Lucas Bend, where, as had happened two days before, the Southern batteries opened fire on the boats with no effect. These batteries were composed of fifteen horse-drawn cannon and one mounted heavy cannon. The mobile cannon would fire several rounds from one spot and then "gallop to some other point" and fire a few more rounds.¹⁹

By noon the gunboats had succeeded in silencing these batteries. The gunboats then retired up river a few miles, hoping to lead the enemy toward Wagner's force. Two Southern boats, one the gunboat *Yankee*, came up from Columbus, and the Union gunboats dropped downstream at two o'clock to engage them. The first shot from the *Conestoga* fell short but ricocheted into the *Yankee's* hull. This damage was enough to cause the gunboat to turn and follow her companion back to the protection of the Columbus batteries. However, the *Lexington* fired an eight inch

¹⁸O. R. *Navies*, Vol. XXII, p. 309. Rodgers to Welles.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 324. Phelps to Foote.

shell after her, at a distance of two and a half miles, which was seen to explode upon the wheelhouse and side of the gunboat.²⁰ The boat was last seen drifting sidewise down the river toward Columbus. The Union gunboats retired to Cairo at five in the afternoon after driving the Southern batteries from the shore and heavily damaging the Rebel gunboat. However, as they were returning, they encountered for the first time a type of warfare that was to prove to be a deadly nuisance to the Yankee forces for the remainder of the river campaign. This was the plague of musketry from Confederate snipers hidden along the river bank. The only casualty of the day occurred during this time. "The opening fight was little more than a skirmish; but it proved the superiority of the gunboats over a land force for the purpose of opening the river."²¹

The effectiveness of the Union gunboats in neutralizing the batteries at Lucas Bend must have made an impression on the Confederate commander at Columbus. A letter written by Polk on the 25th stated: "The gunboats the enemy have now on the Mississippi River are giving us most serious annoyance and I find it indispensable, to check their movements and protect our transports, to have an armed boat under my command."²²

From September 10th until November 4th there was no major activity by either land or naval forces in this part of the country. The first of the Eads gunboats had arrived at Cairo and were being incorporated into the Western Flotilla, while down the river the Confederates were strengthening their defenses at Columbus and across the river at Belmont.

During this period, it seems that General Grant was waging a private little war against a plantation owner named Hunter. In a letter to General Fremont, he said, "I sent gunboats down near Columbus not so much for the purpose or reconnoitering as to protect a steamer sent after wood belonging to Hunter, who is with the Southern Army. About 100 cords were brought up."²³ Later on, an excerpt from the log of the U.S.S. *Tyler*, dated 19 October, indicates further offensive action against Hunter: "opposite 3 and 4 islands fired one shot in the cornfield on Beckwith's farm, another at Hunter's plantation."²⁴ The Hunters were to be

²⁰Duyckinck, *War*, p. 74.

²¹Willis J. Abbott, *Blue Jackets of '61* (New York, 1886), p. 160.

²²Conger, *Grant*, p. 80.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁴*O. R. Navies*, XXIII, 772. Log of the *Tyler*.

assured that the war was not over. Grant would later land at Hunter's Point and march his troops across the farm on the way to the engagement at Belmont.²⁵

"The Battle of Belmont was the initial battle of the great campaign in the Mississippi Valley."²⁶ There still remains no little mystery as to why it was fought. Some accounts seem to indicate that Grant's landing at Belmont was only one part of a simultaneous three-pronged attack on Columbus. The other two attacks were to be made from the Kentucky side. Supposedly the time table was confused, and Grant was the only one who carried out his part of the battle plans. However, the greater amount of evidence supports the theory that the Kentucky feints were made to prevent Polk from concentrating his forces against Grant on the Missouri side.

On the 1st of November, 1861, General Fremont ordered Grant to make demonstrations on both sides of the Mississippi River. The object of the Union action was to prevent General Polk from sending out reinforcements, via Belmont, to Price's army in Southwest Missouri. Grant's first move was to order Colonels Oglesby and Lew Wallace with two regiments to march toward Sikeston, Missouri, on the 4th. On the Kentucky side, the Fort Holt personnel were ordered toward Elliotts Mills, and twin columns departed from Paducah in southerly directions.²⁷

Grant was informed on the 6th that Confederate troops from Belmont were now being sent toward Sikeston in an effort to surround the forces under Oglesby and Wallace. With this news, he decided to attack Belmont at once in order to destroy the camp and save his forces in Missouri.

On the afternoon of the 6th, 3500 soldiers were loaded on the transports *Chancellor*, *Key Stone*, *Alex Scott* and *Memphis*.²⁸ The gunboats *Tyler* and *Lexington* were sent along to assist in the operation. The expedition went as far down the river as Norfolk and tied up along the bank for the night. The gunboats got under way at three o'clock the next morning with the intention of engaging the enemy at Columbus, "but after going a short distance we were met by such a dense fog as to render any further progress hazardous and impracticable." The boats rounded to and escorted

²⁵B. J. Lossing, *The Civil War in America* (Hartford, 1870), p. 86.

²⁶Southern Historical Society Papers XVI (1888), 82.

²⁷Lt. Colonel R. A. Fletcher, *History of American War* (London, 1865), p. 201.

²⁸*Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, (New York, 1884-1887), I, 348.

the transports down to Hunter's Point where the army was put ashore, some three miles from Belmont. At eight-thirty, when all the men had disembarked, the gunboats went down river to fire on the Columbus batteries. After firing several rounds of shell the boats returned to the transports, and all withdrew to a point beyond range of the Confederate batteries. The gunboats returned twice more during the battle to engage the heavy batteries on the Kentucky bluffs. On the third trip down, at twelve o'clock, a shell struck the *Tyler* taking the head off one man and injuring two others.²⁹ These were the only casualties suffered by the gunboats during the battle.

On land, meanwhile, the Union forces advanced to the Southern camp, which fell with little resistance. However, the great American addiction for souvenir hunting soon turned an army into a mob. All thoughts of war vanished from the minds of officers and men alike, while the disorganized plunder of the Rebel camp continued. Meanwhile, the earlier defeated Southerners rallied in the woods and, with five regiments of reinforcements under General Cheatham, soon outnumbered the Union forces. Across the River, General Polk, seeing the Yankees in possession of the camp, ordered all guns at Columbus trained on that spot.

The Confederate reinforcements were transferred from Columbus to Belmont by the troop steamers, *Prince*, *Charm*, *Hill*, and *Kentucky*. Describing the initial defeat of the Southern army, Captain Trask of the steamer *Charm* stated, "upon landing at 12 noon on the Belmont side, we found the landing obstructed by our own disorganized forces, who endeavored to board and take possession of our boat and at the same time crying, 'Don't land!' 'We are whipped.' 'Go back!'"³⁰ In addition to the hinderance from their own troops, the transports had to run the gauntlet of artillery pieces which Grant had set up along the Belmont shore up river. However, these pieces were soon put out of action by the effective fire of the Columbus batteries.

By 2 p.m., stung by the massed fire of the Kentucky batteries and feeling the pressure of the Rebel reinforcements, the Union force began to retire from the field. The withdrawal "was at best a disorganized retreat." By that time, the Southern forces which had been landed up river had the enemy cut off from his transports. So desperate was the Union plight that Grant ordered his retreat-

²⁹*O. R. Navies*, Series 1, XXIII, 403. Walke to Grant.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 426.

ing commander to cut through the Confederate line and get back to the transports at all costs. This was done and the retreat continued to the river banks where the transports were waiting. The Rebels, close behind, soon set up field pieces that began firing into the concentrated pocket of troops. However, these cannons were of no effect against the armored gunboats, which soon silenced them. Thus, with the retreat of the Union army checked and covered by the gunboats, the transports took on the beaten soldiers and returned to Cairo, after six hours of battle. The Southern army lined the banks for over a mile up river from Hunter's Point and poured small arms fire at the transports.

Commander Walke, Captain of the *Lexington*, states in his report:

When nearly all our troops had reembarked and were about ready to start, a sudden attack was made upon the transport vessels by a large Confederate force coming in from above. Our gunboats being in good position, we opened a brisk firing of grape and canister and fine shells, silencing the enemy with great slaughter.³¹ After the transports were safely under way we followed them, throwing a shell occasionally to repel the enemy approaching to the banks. When a few miles up the river, we met one of the transports, *Chancellor*, with Brigadier-General McClernand aboard, who stated that some of their men were left behind, and asked that we might return with our gunboats and see if we could find them. We did so, the *Lexington* accompanying us, and between us succeeded in securing nearly all that were left behind.³²

Naval cooperation in the Battle of Belmont has come under severe criticism, primarily because it is thought that the gunboats should have come closer under the guns of Columbus to prevent the Southern reinforcements from being ferried across the river to Belmont. However, Commander Walke answered this argument very conclusively when he said that, "The destruction of the gunboats would have involved the loss of our Army and our depot at Cairo." It is quite clear that the very accurate supporting fire from the Kentucky batteries not only contributed heavily to the defeat of the Yankee land forces, but they also neutralized the effort of the Yankee naval units. In short, it is a not unreasonable conclusion that they represented the margin of victory in the engagement at Belmont.

While the ability of the Confederates to capture Cairo is open

³¹The "great slaughter" was actually twelve wounded.

³²*O. R. Navies*, Series 1, XXIII, 401.

to debate, the loss of the Union army could be more easily conceivable. In the words of Colonel Dougherty, a brigade commander captured by the Confederates, the Union army had been "routed and whipped like dogs." Captain Foote in his battle report to the Navy Department stated: "I am informed, both by army and navy officers, that the boats by covering the final retreat with well directed fire of grape and canister, mowing down the enemy, prevented our troops from being almost if not entirely cut to pieces."³³

During this engagement, the *Tyler* fired 144 shot, 3 solid, 35 grape and 106 shell. The *Lexington* fired 18 shell and one solid shot.³⁴

The land combat, styled by Jefferson Davis as one of the most stubborn engagements of the war because of its six hours of incessant combat with repeated bayonet charges, was quite costly to both sides from the standpoint of their extremely high casualty rates.³⁵ The Confederates admitted their total loss in killed, wounded, missing, and prisoners to be 642; Union records at the time indicated their loss to be 601. (The reported Union figure has been seriously questioned. In the face of the Federal claim of only 120 killed in action, General Pillow stated that he buried 295 Federals, and that under a flag of truce, the Federals themselves had been similarly engaged "a good part of the day.") As well as leaving nearly all of their dead and wounded upon the field, the Yankees lost some 1000 stands of arms. The actual battle was fought by some 4000 Confederate troops, including the reinforcements which proved decisive, against 3114 Federals. (Approximately 3500 Federals landed, but a portion remained behind and were never committed in the battle proper.) One thousand more Confederates arrived in time to participate in the pursuit of the Federals following their actual defeat on the field.³⁶ Thus, it is apparent from the total numbers involved, and casualties inflicted, that the day was a sanguine one for both sides.

The Union feints on the Kentucky side of the river against Columbus had considerably less disastrous consequences than the Belmont engagement. A detachment of the 7th Illinois Volunteers under Col. John Cook, which had been ordered out from Fort Holt

³³*Ibid.*, p. 398. Trask to Polk.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 772. Log of Tyler.

³⁵Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (New York, 1958), p. 404.

³⁶*Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York, 1887), I, 352-355.

with instructions not to go beyond Elliotts Mills, twelve miles from Columbus, returned "without having met serious resistance." Twin columns sent out from Paducah, one south to Mayfield and the other in a southwesterly direction to Milburn, also failed to lure out Confederate defenders in force. The latter, under General Paine, apparently dissipated their disappointment from not meeting Rebel troops by harassing natives of the area. General C. F. Smith in an order noted that several regiments had straggled back without any semblance of military array, "a mere armed mob," and that the property of civilians had been "wantonly destroyed," and that in some instances "robbery by violence" had been committed.³⁷

Following the battle of Belmont, the Mississippi River was to know peace for almost four months. Union activity was shifted to the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. During this period the Confederate nation poured even more men and supplies into Columbus, since it had become apparent that this spot, so perfectly constructed as a fortress by nature and augmented by man, was the key to the Mississippi Valley.

On November 25th, General Pillow, in a letter to Governor Harris of Tennessee, stated, "We have just about completed our defenses making this place impregnable sustained by gunboat fleet and with forces at Union City." (Tennessee).³⁸

Governor Pettus of Mississippi published a proclamation asking for volunteers, not to exceed 10,000—"offering themselves with arms in their hands to serve in defense of Columbus, Kentucky—double barrelled shot guns or hunting rifles will be considered efficient arms."³⁹ In the middle of December, Grant was informed by a deserter that "militia from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana are flowing into Columbus by every boat and train."

Columbus had become a thorn in the Union side. It soon became evident that as long as Columbus remained in Rebel hands, the river would also remain and maintain the unification between the Eastern and Western Confederacy. Equally evident was the impossibility of capturing the fortification by land assault. Grant on November 24, 1862, informed his superiors in Washington that there were then at Columbus 47 regiments of infantry and cavalry

³⁷U. S. War Department. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 130 volumes, (Washington, 1880-1901), Series 1, Vol. III, pp. 272, 303. Hereafter cited as *O. R. Armies*.

³⁸*Magazine of American History* XIV (1885), 356.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 355.

with light artillery and 8000 more of all arms at Camp Beauregard between Mayfield and Union City.⁴⁰

General Grant was directly involved with Columbus on one more occasion. A reconnaissance in force composed of around 5000 troops, infantry, cavalry, and artillery, under the immediate command of General John McClernand and the overall command of Grant, converged on January 20, 1862, from Forts Holt and Jefferson and moved south toward Milburn, directly east of Columbus. After having been instructed by Grant that "it is a fair inference that every stranger met is our enemy," this group probed the rear area and defenses of Columbus during the most rigorous winter conditions. From Milburn, the main body moved north to Lovelaceville through sleet and over icy roads. Sensing that their presence was beginning to stir the Confederates from the comfort of their campfires, McClernand's troops marched to Fort Jefferson, and there, joined by General Grant, embarked upon boats for the return to Cairo. The last of the troops involved in this demonstration against Columbus were back in Cairo by January 26.⁴¹

While Columbus could not be taken by frontal or direct assault, it was decided that perhaps its formidable presence could be neutralized by passing it. The freedom of movement of Grant's most recent expedition tended to support this theory. So also had two reconnaissance movements from Paducah which had met no substantial opposition. General Lew Wallace, of later *Ben Hur* fame, on December 28 to 31 led 200 men through Mayfield to within six miles of Camp Beauregard. And, during the same period Grant was groping around the country to the rear of Columbus, General C. F. Smith and a force had penetrated south to the vicinity of Forts Heiman and Henry. It became apparent that Columbus could be flanked.⁴² The bypassing of Columbus was effected by means of the combined army-navy operations against Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. By February 16, 1862, both positions had fallen, and Columbus was doomed. The Union now had two other river routes that could serve as carriers for transporting the war deep into the Southland.

Soon after the fall of Fort Donelson, the handwriting on the

⁴⁰O. R. *Armies*, VII, 442.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 68-72, 565-566.

⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 66, 72. See also Hall Allen, *Center of Conflict* (Paducah, 1961), pp. 58-59.

wall became quite evident to the Southern leaders. Western Kentucky could not be defended; it was now a peninsula surrounded by Union forces in Central Kentucky and Missouri.⁴³ Thus, with no alternative, General Beauregard ordered Polk "to evacuate Columbus, and select a defensive position below."⁴⁴

The fort had held the Mississippi Valley from Yankee hands for more than half a year, and its big guns had done their bloody work at Belmont. But General Polk felt no little bit of sorrow at having to give it up without ever having fired one of its cannon in direct defense of the position. He felt that the works should have been held and described "the necessity" compelling its abandonment as a "trying one."

Columbus, Ky., March 2, 1862

The work is done. Columbus gone. Self and staff move in half an hour. Everything secured.

(Signed) L. Polk

Hon. J. P. Benjamin
Secretary of War⁴⁵

⁴³H. Allen Gosnell, *Guns on Western Waters* (Baton Rouge, 1949), p. 69.

⁴⁴F. Moore, *Rebellion Record* (New York, 1864) VI, 471.

⁴⁵O. R. *Navies*, Series 1, XXIII, 654. Polk to Benjamin.