

PRELUDE TO DONELSON GRANT'S JANUARY, 1862, MARCH INTO KENTUCKY

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IN EARLY JANUARY, 1862, the mid-western troops stationed at Cairo, Illinois, had seen little of the war. Some 3,000 volunteers had accompanied U. S. Grant to Belmont, Missouri, for a small engagement in November, 1861, but the realities and physical hardships of the war were still unknown to most of the men. Their daily life consisted of drill, guard duty, parades and other mundane activities which only increased their desire for action.

Perhaps the troops were unaware that they were passing through a phase of the loose, unstructured military training of the Civil War era — they were becoming acquainted with military life, its discipline, rules and regulations. The next phase on the training schedule would be neither mundane nor boring. In it they would experience the physical hardships of a forced march in snow, freezing rain, mud, and hot sun without proper equipment or adequate provisions. The training ground was western Kentucky in January, 1862.

As the new year approached, Cairo commander U. S. Grant had plans for the volunteers which would initiate the new training phase. On January 6, Major General Henry W. Halleck, newly appointed commander of the Department of Missouri, ordered Grant to ready his forces for a demonstration into Kentucky. Union troops under the command of Don Carlos Buell were preparing to strike S. B. Buckner's forces at Bowling Green in an attempt to break the Confederate line of defense in Kentucky and Tennessee. Grant's job was to see that no reinforcements were sent to aid Buckner from Forts Henry and Heiman on the Tennessee River, from Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River, or from Columbus on the Mississippi River.

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Characteristically Halleck's orders to Grant were clothed in caution. The expedition was to be kept a secret, but once started he was to make it known that twenty to thirty thousand more troops were expected from St. Louis. The advance was to appear as part of a larger movement, but Grant was ordered to stay close enough to camp so his flanks would not be exposed to attack from Columbus. Any serious engagement was to be avoided, but Halleck suggested a little skirmishing would be good experience for the men.¹

Grant's plan was simple. C. F. Smith was to proceed south from Paducah, Kentucky, down the west bank of the Tennessee River to threaten Forts Heiman and Henry. John A. McClernand was to divide his Cairo forces, march east into Kentucky, and then march in parallel columns south toward Columbus. He was to keep the enemy in doubt as to whether his purpose was an attack on Columbus, an assault on a smaller Confederate camp, or the destruction of the railroad to Columbus. Generally he was "to awaken apprehension for the safety of each."²

Marching orders for the expedition were detailed. Company officers were responsible for keeping the men in orderly formation. Firing of weapons in or out of camp was prohibited unless necessary. Men were to be kept in their own regimental areas to avoid mixing and confusion in the ranks. Any person found guilty of destruction of private property would receive the "heaviest punishment" allowed. The men were warned that "every stranger met is our enemy."³ The content of these orders gives an indication of the extent to which the march was a training exercise as well as a defensive-offensive demonstration.

Rumors and speculation concerning the expedition were varied and numerous. The most ambitious proposition was that the Cairo troops would assault Columbus from the Mis-

¹ U. S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (2 vols. N.Y.: 1885), I, 284-85; U.S. Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (129 vols. Washington, D.C.: 1880-1901), Series 1, Volume VII, 533-34. Hereinafter cited O. R., Ser. 1, VII. Halleck's plan involved the use of twenty to thirty thousand more troops, but due to bad weather they never reached Cairo.

² O. R., Ser. 1, VII, 70.

³ Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 286; *Cairo City Gazette*, January 23, 1862.

Mississippi River while Halleck attacked from the rear through Tennessee. Another proposed that Grant would march to Union City, Tennessee, to hold the Mobile and Ohio Railroad that ran to Columbus. Some felt the men were to act in concert with Buell in an attack on Bowling Green. Occasionally the true purpose of the expedition was mentioned, but for the most part Grant was successful in keeping his objectives secret.⁴

McClelland's force of 7,000 men received orders during the evening of January 8, 1862, to be ready to march at noon the next day. Before dawn on January 9, the men were striking their tents and loading company wagons in an atmosphere of "great excitement and bustle." Even Cairo's soft clay mud which oozed around the calves of the men as they worked did not dampen their spirits. "Burning with zeal," they prepared for the march with efficiency under the direction of regimental colonels. By 9 A.M. the men were ready to move, and an hour later they marched to the Cairo landing in a heavy fog. Their haversacks carried five days' rations and eight rounds of ammunition. Despite a good deal of confusion, the steamers were loaded with good progress, but the heavy fog prevented departure. Finally the force received word to disembark, and at 4 P.M. the tired and disappointed volunteers marched back to the Cairo camps.⁵

The following day the troops were ready to move at 9 A.M. as ordered. They were not again disappointed. By noon the steamers were loaded, and despite the fog, they left Cairo. After moving eight miles down the Mississippi River, the men disembarked on the Kentucky side at the mouth of Mayfield Creek. Camp was made on the high, dry ground overlooking the river. Tents were set up, and the men ate and went to bed in good spirits. The next day, January 11, was spent in the new camp, called Fort Jefferson. The troops were kept busy organizing the camp and receiving the company wagons filled with equipment and supplies. A general

⁴ *Cairo City Gazette*, December 12, 1861, January 16, 1862; *Chicago Tribune*, January 13, 1862; *Salem Advocate*, January 16, 1862.

⁵ *Cairo City Gazette*, January 16, 1862; *Chicago Tribune*, January 12, 1862; *Civil War Journal of Daniel Harmon Brush*, January 9, 1862, Daniel Harmon Brush MS. Illinois State Historical Society Library, Springfield, Illinois.

feeling prevailed that they might spend some time in the field.⁶

Sunday, January 12, was a warm, clear day in Ballard County, Kentucky. The men had little to do until 11 A.M. when they were ordered to "put dinners in their haversacks" and be ready to move. A half hour later the tap of the drum brought the men into formation, and they moved out. Four miles were covered before the column halted at an abandoned rebel camp ten miles north of Columbus. After a short rest they returned to Fort Jefferson without incident. As directed by Grant, McClelland was beginning a series of marches and countermarches designed to confuse the Confederates. But if the rebels were to be confused, the Union troops in the ranks were to pay for it. Late in the afternoon of the 12th the wind shifted from the south to the north, and it began to turn cold. On the 13th the infantry stayed in Fort Jefferson, but a turn in the weather hampered any chances for rest. The strong, cold north wind brought a severe snow storm and a sharp drop in the temperature. Many of the men had left blankets and overcoats in Cairo and suffered as a result. Few of them would repeat the mistake in the future.⁷

The weather was moderate the next day, and McClelland divided his troops into two columns and moved inland by parallel roads along Mayfield Creek toward Blandville. Lines were formed at 7 A.M. and the day's march began. The snowing had stopped, but a good deal of snow covered the ground. As the sun rose and became warmer, it melted the snow and joined the foot soldiers in turning the dirt roads into ankle-deep mud. By noon the temperature had risen sufficiently to allow a cold, drizzling rain to fall. After marching eight and one half miles into Kentucky, the columns

⁶ Brush, Civil War Journal, January 10, 11, 1862, Brush MS.; O. R., Ser. 1, VII, 541.

⁷ Brush, Civil War Journal, January 12, 13, 1862, Brush MS.; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, January 25, 1862. Many of the soldiers would suffer during the war from discarding blankets and coats during a battle, but they seldom simply left them in camp.

camped for the night beside Mayfield Creek outside Blandville. They guarded the two approaches to Columbus.⁸

According to orders, McClernand left Blandville at 10 A.M. on the 15th and turned south toward Columbus. After marching two miles, a fork in the road was approached. A sign indicated that sixteen miles along the road to the right lay Columbus. As the road to the right was taken, shouts and cheers rolled down the column in waves. Because Columbus was the northernmost Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River, the western troops considered it second in importance only to Washington, D.C. Their objective in the war was to end the blockade of the Mississippi River that was "of such immense importance to the states of the Northwest."⁹

As the troops moved along the road, "frightened and uneasy" women and children appeared at the doors and windows of cabins. Few men could be seen, and every woman that was approached claimed to be a widow who would starve if her stock were taken. No rebels were encountered. Mud, rain, and caution kept the men moving at a slow pace until they stopped for the day at 2 P.M. Despite the weather and hard marching, joking, singing, and storytelling permeated the camp. The men were in good spirits as they bedded down in line of battle for the night only ten miles from Columbus. The heavy concentration of troops further convinced them that Columbus was their objective.¹⁰

Early in the morning of the 16th Grant, who had joined the column the day before, accompanied the 4th Illinois Cavalry on a forty mile sweep of the area. They encountered no rebels but obtained information concerning terrain, routes, and roads that proved valuable later. The infantry was on the move by 7 A.M., but to their disappointment they headed southeast toward Milburn, not south toward Columbus. Realizing that there probably would be no battle, the men became despondent and began complaining. The weather turned cold again, and the roads were icy. The five days'

⁸ Freeport *Bulletin*, January 23, 1862; *O. R.*, Ser. 1, VII, 68; Brush, *Civil War Journal*, January 14, 1862, Brush MS.

⁹ Brush, *Civil War Journal*, January 15, 1862, Brush MS.

¹⁰ *Cairo City Gazette*, January 23, 1862; *O. R.*, Ser. 1, VII, 69; Brush, *Civil War Journal*, January 15, 1862, Brush MS.

rations they carried from Cairo were nearly exhausted by the 16th, and complaints of hunger began.¹¹

By noon they had covered the eight icy miles to Milburn. The volunteers passed through the town and observed several young women waving handkerchiefs and a blacksmith cheering at the door of his shop. Such enthusiasm for the Union was an exception on the march. The column turned north beyond Milburn and headed toward home by way of Lovelaceville.¹²

Through the 17th and 18th the men marched north to Lovelaceville and then turned east to Blandville and Fort Jefferson. They continued to walk, rest, eat, and sleep in continuous rain and constant mud. With each step the mud seeped over the shoe tops, and in places was calf-deep. For many of the Illinois soldiers the physical act of keeping up with the column was impossible. Literally hundreds of the volunteers could be seen sitting or lying along the road. Many were crying, some from embarrassment, others from exhaustion. To compound matters the food supply had been consumed, and the men had to eat what they could find. In instances herbs and corn stalks were all to be had; the more fortunate had old fat bacon and hard crackers. Upon reaching Lovelaceville, supplies were purchased, but they proved to be insufficient. Hogs and chickens were "confiscated" when available, but few were found. Fence rails and barns were torn apart to provide firewood, and hay stacks were used for beds. Grant's order concerning the destruction of private property was ignored to the point that one soldier wrote, "We . . . ruined every farm we camped on." The night of the 18th was spent one mile from Fort Jefferson.¹³

Early in the morning of the 19th the first troops returned to Fort Jefferson and the Mississippi River. By midafternoon

¹¹ *Chicago Tribune*, January 20, 1862.

¹² *O. R.*, Ser. 1, VII, 69-70; Brush, *Civil War Journal*, January 16, 1862, Brush MS.

¹³ Thomas F. Miller to Benjamin Newton, January 23, 1862, Thomas F. Miller MSS. Illinois State Historical Society Library, Springfield, Illinois; William H. Biddle to Lizzie Simpson, February 6, 1862, Lizzie Simpson MSS. Illinois State Historical Society Library, Springfield, Illinois; Robert McIlrath to Brother and Mother, January 21, 1862, Robert McIlrath MS. A copy is in the author's possession; *Cairo City Gazette*, January 23, 1862.

of the 20th the remainder of the columns and the wagons was in camp, and the steamers began transporting them to Cairo. By 5 P.M. the last of the volunteers had returned to their Cairo barracks.

In the days following their return most of the men were ill with colds and coughs; all were exhausted; several died as a result of the expedition. Despite this, a week later it was reported that most of the men were recovering. Their weapons and equipment were clear of Kentucky mud, and the troops were again ready for service.¹⁴

As a limited contribution to the war effort the expedition was considered a success. Bowling Green was not reinforced. But more significant to Grant was "a splendid reconnaissance of the country over which my army may have to move." This area was around Forts Henry and Heiman on the Tennessee River. As a result of the reconnaissance, Grant was convinced that Fort Heiman could be taken by land troops with little effort. With it in Federal hands and with the aid of gunboats Fort Henry would be easy prey. And with the fall of those two fortifications the Confederate line of defense running from Bowling Green to Columbus would be broken at the center. The ideas behind the Henry-Donelson Campaign were cemented as a result of the expedition into Kentucky.

Equally as significant as the strategic value was the effect of the expedition on the volunteers. Prior to January, 1862, they had been concerned with the rules and regulations of camp life and the fundamentals of military activities. During the Kentucky march they left camp, moved into rebel territory, and learned some of the lessons of living in the field. They were confronted with new problems such as participating in mass troop movements, surviving in enemy territory, and protecting themselves from unexpected variables like the weather. Few of the volunteers would again leave camp lacking adequate provisions and protection from the elements. Thus the Kentucky expedition was yet another stage in the

¹⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, January 24, 1862; James McIlrath to Jane, January 31, 1862, James McIlrath MSS. Copies are in the author's possession; *Cairo City Gazette*, January 30, 1862.

training of the new volunteers who, as the veteran western army, would follow Grant into Vicksburg and W. T. Sherman to the Sea.¹⁵

¹⁵ John A. Logan, *The Volunteer Soldier of America* (Chicago, Illinois: 1887), 628; U. S. Grant to Mary, January 23, 1862, Jesse Grant Cramer, ed., *Letters of U. S. Grant to His Father and Younger Sister* (N.Y.: 1912), 77-78; Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 286.