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“Successful in an eminent degree”: Sherman’s 1864 Meridian Expedition

Jim Woodrick

On March 7, 1864, Union Major General William Tecumseh Sherman reported on a recently conducted expedition into east Mississippi. Essentially a raid, the campaign’s objective was the Confederate rail center at Meridian. While Meridian itself had few permanent inhabitants, it was located at the junction of the Southern Railroad and the Mobile and Ohio Railroad and was thus of strategic value to both the Union and the Confederate armies. Arriving in Vicksburg the day before, Sherman bragged about the campaign’s success. “For five days,” he wrote, “10,000 men worked hard and with a will in that work of destruction, with axes, crowbars, sledges, clawbars, and with fire, and I have no hesitation in pronouncing the work as well done. Meridian,” he concluded, “with its depots, store-houses, arsenal, hospitals, offices, hotels, and cantonments, no longer exists.”¹ Though not all components of the expedition were as successful as he might have hoped, Sherman had fulfilled a goal that had been in the works since the previous summer.

Following the surrender of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston and his “Army of Relief” fell back to Jackson from the Big Black River. Within days, Sherman pursued Johnston’s army and quickly established siege lines around Jackson. Johnston held on for one week before abandoning Jackson for the second time on July 17. Although a portion of Sherman’s force followed as far as Brandon, the excessive heat and hardship of the campaign prevented him from moving any farther, and he returned to Vicksburg. Sherman’s corps was subsequently moved to Chattanooga to assist Grant in defeating Braxton Bragg’s Army of Tennessee.²

¹ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861–1865*, series 1, vol. 32, 176. Hereafter cited as *OR*.

² Michael B. Ballard, *The Civil War in Mississippi: Major Campaigns and Battles* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 171–72.

Anxious to return to Mississippi, Sherman convinced Grant to allow him to complete the task of smashing the railroad network at Meridian. Arriving in Memphis on January 10, 1864, Sherman ordered Major General Stephen Hurlbut to bring two divisions to Vicksburg. At the same time, Brigadier General William Sooy Smith was ordered to take his cavalry, totaling approximately 7,000 men, on a raid down the Mobile and Ohio to join Sherman's main force at Meridian. In Vicksburg, Major General James B. McPherson's XVII Corps added the other half of the main column. In all, Sherman would have more than 23,000 men available for the march to Meridian.³ In addition, a smaller force would move up the Yazoo River with orders to confiscate cotton and occupy the attention of Confederate cavalry in the region. As a final piece of the wide-ranging plan, Nathaniel Banks, the Union commander of the Department of the Gulf, was asked to give the appearance that Union forces were planning an attack on Mobile. In doing so, Sherman hoped to divert Confederate resources to the defense of that city.

Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk, who had recently been appointed commander of the Department of Alabama, Mississippi and East Louisiana, opposed Sherman's advance in Mississippi. Polk was responsible for the defense of a huge geographic region, and although he had approximately 22,000 men under his command, they were widely scattered.⁴ As a result, he had relatively few resources to counter the various Federal threats, especially the main force in central Mississippi. To counter Sherman, Polk had two small infantry divisions under William W. Loring and Samuel French, plus several brigades of cavalry.⁵ Although these troops were hardened veterans, there were simply too few men available to do anything other than slow Sherman's progress. To make matters worse, Polk, who was convinced that Mobile was the target, just as Sherman had intended, diverted the bulk of reinforcements sent to the region to protect Mobile.⁶

The expedition departed Vicksburg on February 3, moving toward Jackson in two columns. Hurlbut's XVI Corps crossed the Big Black at Messenger's Ferry and advanced on a road north of the railroad, while

³OR, series 1, vol. 32, part 1, 179–82; Margie Riddle Bearss, *Sherman's Forgotten Expedition* (Baltimore, MD: Gateway Press, Inc., 1987), 35.

⁴Ballard, *The Civil War in Mississippi*, 176.

⁵Buck T. Foster, *Sherman's Mississippi Campaign* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 35.

⁶Herman Hattaway, *General Stephen D. Lee* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1976), 109.

McPherson's wing crossed at Big Black River Bridge. Although they met only token resistance from Confederate cavalry, the fighting at times was fierce, with skirmishing near the old battlefield at Champion Hill and the plantation of Joseph Davis, the oldest brother of the Confederate president. The heavily outnumbered Confederates continued to harass Sherman's column through Clinton and into the outskirts of Jackson. Although unable to do much damage, the action provided enough time for Loring's division at Canton and French's division at Jackson to withdraw safely across the Pearl River. Thus abandoned by Confederate forces, Jackson was occupied on February 5. After just three days, the Federals had moved half way across Mississippi with only minor losses and had captured the capital city for a third time, a feat Sherman described as "successful in an eminent degree."⁷ As with previous occupations of Jackson, several businesses went up in flames and some residences were ransacked and burned, leading one Union soldier to describe Jackson as "a heap of ruins."⁸

While Sherman marched swiftly to Jackson, William Sooy Smith's cavalry made no progress whatsoever. In light of Smith's orders to move from Collierville, Tennessee, to Okolona and then down the Mobile & Ohio to "consume or destroy the resources of the enemy along that road," Sherman anticipated that Smith would reach Meridian at about the same time as the main force. Once the Union forces combined, Sherman would have the ability to move farther east, possibly as far as Selma, Alabama. Although Sherman wrote Smith on January 27 that the movement "will call for great energy of action on your part," Smith had in fact not yet departed by the time Jackson was reoccupied.⁹ Meanwhile, the force ascending the Yazoo River departed on schedule. On February 1, the naval task force under Lieutenant Commander Elias K. Owen moved upriver, loaded with infantry and cavalry. Owen had been ordered to "Impress on the people along the Yazoo and Sunflower that we intend to hold them responsible for all acts of hostility to the river commerce . . . ," and to take anything of value, including cotton, corn, and horses.¹⁰

⁷ *OR*, series 1, vol. 32, part 1, 175.

⁸ H. Grady Howell, Jr., *Chimneyville: "Likenesses" Of Early Days in Jackson, Mississippi* (Madison, MS: Chickasaw Bayou Press, 2007), 65.

⁹ *OR*, series 1, vol. 32, part 1, 181.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

The expedition's infantry component, which included several regiments of United States Colored Troops, was commanded by Colonel James H. Coates, a native of Pennsylvania. After landing at Liverpool, Coates's infantry was repulsed by elements of Lawrence "Sul" Ross's Texas brigade, which had ridden north to protect the Yazoo River area. Confident the crisis had passed, Ross moved back east to help fight Sherman. While the Texans were gone, the expedition went back upriver and occupied Yazoo City on February 9. From there, the boats continued as far as Greenwood, where they found few inhabitants. Before heading back downriver, Coates sent an all-black cavalry unit, later designated the 3rd United States Colored Cavalry, on a foray toward Grenada. Though unsuccessful in reaching the railroad, the threat of an all-black cavalry regiment roaming through the countryside alarmed the Confederates, and as a result, Robert V. Richardson's brigade of Tennesseans rode hard in pursuit. By February 28, the black cavalrymen rejoined Coates's force at Yazoo City, where the Federals prepared defenses east of town.¹¹

By the time Coates's troops first took possession of Yazoo City, Sherman had crossed the Pearl River at Jackson and moved to Brandon, a town still largely in ruins from the previous summer, when troops under Union Major General Frederick Steele had burned most of the business district. Sherman's men finished the job, setting fire to several buildings and ransacking others, including the office of the Brandon *Republican* newspaper. They also tore up sections of the railroad and burned a bridge, turntable, and trestle works, a routine that would be repeated often in the coming days.¹² Meanwhile, Leonidas Polk finally began concentrating what troops he had at Morton. In addition to Loring's and French's divisions, Polk hurriedly shuttled reinforcements by rail. Arriving in the early hours of February 8 were Francis M. Cockrell's hard-fighting Missourians and William A. Quarles's mostly Tennessee brigade. According to one of the Missourians, the train trip to Morton was miserable. "The men on the flat-cars suffered considerably from cold," he wrote, "the night air when the train was in motion cutting like a knife."¹³ Upon arrival, the reinforcements took

¹¹ Bearss, *Sherman's Forgotten Expedition*, 247–71.

¹² *Ibid.*, 90–92.

¹³ Robert S. Bevier, *History of the First and Second Missouri Brigades, 1861–1865* (St. Louis, MO: Bryan, Brand & Co., 1879), 229.

position in earthworks west of town overlooking Line Creek. There, the Confederates hoped to delay or defeat Sherman's thus far unbloodied column. By that evening, however, Loring, who commanded the troops at Morton, decided that the enemy was simply too powerful. Writing Polk, who was at Lake Station, Loring recommended that Polk return to Newton, as Sherman's force was "so much larger than ours."¹⁴

Many Confederate soldiers, including William Pitt Chambers of the 46th Mississippi, were disheartened that no stand was made at Morton. "We knew that our forces in his front were steadily falling back," he wrote, "but now the whole state was to be abandoned without a single blow. No wonder the hearts of her sons burned within them; and no wonder if they learned to distrust the policy that gave their homes to the torch and their families to the tender mercies of the foe." Later that evening, Union scouts discovered that the Confederates had pulled out, and Morton was occupied the next morning. After capturing the post and telegraph offices, details from the infantry and pioneer corps tore up the railroads on either side of town.¹⁵

Since the beginning of the campaign, McPherson's and Hurlbut's two corps had advanced on parallel roads. At Morton, however, both columns would march together, with Hurlbut's taking the lead. To protect his flanks from Confederate cavalry attacks, Sherman kept his force bunched up, making it difficult to isolate any portion of his column. From Morton, the Federals left the line of the railroad and moved to Hillsborough, where several shots were fired from homes in the village. In retribution, Sherman's forces set the town ablaze.¹⁶

As the Union forces continued marching east across a morass of swamps and swollen streams, they encountered little resistance from the Confederates, although Sherman himself narrowly avoided capture at Decatur. On February 12, Sherman decided to spend the night in a "double log-house." After lying down to sleep, Sherman awoke to the sounds of "shouts and hallooing, and then heard pistol-shots close to the house." By some mix-up, an infantry regiment detailed to guard the house had moved down the road a bit, and Sherman was alarmed to find the house almost surrounded by Confederate cavalry. Quickly

¹⁴ *OR*, series 1, vol. 32, part 2, 693.

¹⁵ Richard A. Baumgartner, ed., *Blood & Sacrifice: The Civil War Journal of a Confederate Soldier* (Huntington, WV: Blue Acorn Press, 1994), 116.

¹⁶ *OR*, series 1, vol. 32, part 1, 175.

gathering a few orderlies, Sherman made preparations to take refuge in a corn-crib when the infantry returned and drove off the southern horsemen. Unbeknownst to the Confederates, an opportunity to kill or capture William T. Sherman had just slipped away. What effect his death or capture might have had on the outcome of the Civil War is, of course, a matter of conjecture.¹⁷

The next day, as the column moved toward Meridian from Decatur, more houses and buildings went up in flames. Lake Station and Chunky Station, both located on the Southern Railroad, were also torched. Both were targets of raiding parties dispatched by Sherman. At Lake, Signal Officer Lucius M. Rose wryly reported that “the Signal Corps went through the town like a dose of salts, and just as we were leaving I noticed a man hunting around to get someone to make an affidavit that there had been a town there.” At Chunky, a combined force of infantry and cavalry under the command of General Manning Force scattered several Confederate horsemen and then destroyed a railroad bridge and tracks and burned several wagons and a warehouse.¹⁸

The next day, February 14, Sherman’s expedition finally entered Meridian. Ahead of him, Loring’s and French’s men frantically loaded supplies destined for Demopolis and Selma, where Polk hoped to gather enough men to finally halt Sherman if he advanced into Alabama. Polk had stripped Meridian as much as possible of anything of military value, including much of the rolling stock. In a dispatch to General Dabney Maury in Mobile on February 13, Polk reported that he had removed “all my hospitals, commissary, and quartermaster’s stores from all my depots,” including 100,000 pounds of bacon, flour and wheat.¹⁹ Thus, when Sherman’s men entered Meridian, they found most of the supplies gone. The city, however, was still a rich target. After resting on February 15, the army began a “systematic and thorough destruction of the railroads centering at Meridian.” According to Sherman, “The immense depots, warehouses, and length of sidetrack demonstrated the importance to the enemy of that place.” For the next five days, the Federals not only wrecked the rail facilities but torched most of the town’s businesses and dwellings as well. In

¹⁷ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General W.T. Sherman* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 419–20.

¹⁸ OR, series 1, vol. 32, part 1, 222; Bearss, *Sherman’s Forgotten Expedition*, 171–73.

¹⁹ OR, series 1, vol. 32, part 2, 733–34.

addition, tracks, culverts, and trestles were destroyed as far north as Lauderdale Springs and as far south as Enterprise. In effect, Meridian, as Sherman reported at the end of the campaign, no longer existed.²⁰

Sherman waited for five days in hopes that William Sooy Smith's cavalry would arrive. Without the benefit of communication, he had no clue where Smith might be, and Smith's failure to appear hampered plans for possible movement into Alabama. In fact, Smith had not departed Collierville until three days before Sherman entered Meridian.²¹ On February 20 and 21, Smith's troops skirmished with Confederate cavalry under Nathan Bedford Forrest near West Point. Although he had an overwhelming numerical advantage, Sooy Smith did not wish to fight Forrest in what Smith was convinced was a trap and immediately began a withdrawal. Forrest, now in pursuit, savagely attacked the Federal rear guard at every opportunity. On February 22, an emboldened Forrest charged a portion of the Union column at Okolona, and the withdrawal turned into a rout. What ensued was a six-hour running battle that ended in a final engagement at Ivey's Hill several miles north of Prairie Mount. With just 2,500 men, Forrest had wrecked Smith's cavalry. By February 26, the raiders limped back into Collierville. None of these events, of course, were known to Sherman, who was left wondering what had happened to William Sooy Smith.²²

On February 20, Sherman finally gave up hope that Smith would arrive and began his march back to Vicksburg. Taking a different route in hopes of establishing some sort of communication with Smith and to find ample forage, the two corps moved to the northwest on separate roads. Moving rapidly, the main column again marched through what was left of Hillsborough and then headed toward Canton. Sherman also sent his cavalry chief, Brigadier General Edward F. Winslow, swinging north as far as Louisville and Kosciusko in search of Smith. On February 25, the main column crossed the Pearl River into Madison County and occupied Canton, which had thus far escaped serious damage. Despite the destruction that occurred elsewhere during the campaign, Canton escaped similar treatment, mainly because it served no real military purpose to burn the town. The only fighting

²⁰ *OR*, series 1, vol. 32, part 1, 176.

²¹ Brandon H. Beck, *The Battle of Okolona: Defending the Mississippi Prairie* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2009), 46.

²² Ballard, *The Civil War in Mississippi*, 189–92.

near Canton was at Sharon, where William H. "Red" Jackson's cavalry clashed with some of Winslow's men, who had returned from their unsuccessful excursion north to find Sooy Smith.²³

For his part, Sherman spent only a few hours in Canton, choosing to ride on to Vicksburg to begin planning his next campaign and enjoy a rest. The remainder of the column followed in a few days. In Yazoo City, James H. Coates's troops were attacked by Confederate cavalry under "Sul" Ross and Robert V. Richardson on March 5. Overrunning the Union outposts, the Confederates would have annihilated Coates if not for a lack of ammunition. The Federals barely managed to hold Yazoo City and soon withdrew to the safety of Vicksburg. In hindsight, the raid accomplished little and was mainly a feint. The grim and determined fighting between black and white soldiers, however, was a harbinger of the type of warfare seen in the final months of the Civil War in Mississippi.²⁴

The overall effectiveness of Sherman's march is still a matter of debate. With some justification, both sides claimed victory. From Polk's perspective, his cavalry in north Mississippi had completely routed Sooy Smith, and Polk had saved most of the supplies in Meridian. In addition, although there was significant damage to railroads and military installations, much of it was repaired within a matter of weeks. However, the repairs required the use of valuable resources that were in short supply and that would be needed elsewhere in the Confederacy in the coming year. Perhaps most important was the psychological damage of the expedition on the citizens of Mississippi, who bore the brunt of Sherman's policy of engaging in "total war" by destroying not just military targets, but also the will of the people to continue supporting the Confederate war effort.

Although this type of warfare was certainly not invented by Sherman, the scale of destruction had not been seen prior to the Meridian campaign. When combined with the large number of slaves who followed the Federals to safety in Vicksburg, the psychological effect of the raid cannot be overestimated. Today, the Meridian expedition is remembered primarily as a precursor for the scorched earth policy employed by Sherman during his "March to the Sea." It should also be remembered, however, as a complicated movement with multiple

²³ *OR*, series 1, vol. 32, part 1, 370.

²⁴ Bearss, *Sherman's Forgotten Expedition*, 270–80.

components over a truly vast military landscape. While all of their various adventures did not end successfully, the scope of Union operations in the region, compared with the mostly ineffective Confederate response, served as yet another indicator that the Confederate government was no longer able to protect its territory. In that sense, Sherman's Meridian expedition can be considered "successful in an eminent degree."²⁵

²⁵ *OR*, series 1, vol. 32, part 1, 175.

