



Meeting the Enemy in Louisiana: The Red River Campaign

by Scott Sosebee

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(Aug 21, 2022) Virginia and Tennessee saw the most vigorous action during the Civil War, and it was from those theaters that the Union launched most of the attacks aimed at the heart of the Confederacy. Louisiana and Texas were two exceptions to such a pattern. As part of the campaign to blockade the Confederate coast and disrupt Southern commerce, the United States Navy, along with Army troops, took the offensive against New Orleans in 1862, eventually capturing the key port at the mouth of the Mississippi. After taking Louisiana, Union forces had secured most of southern Louisiana by 1863, but attempts to take northern Louisiana and any parts of Texas had proven more difficult. Union offensives designed to take Galveston and Sabine Pass had already failed, and incursions against the lower Texas Gulf Coast were largely ineffectual. As for moving into northern Louisiana and attacking Texas, and shutting off its vital supply of cotton, Union efforts to do so had stalled any farther north than Iberia Parish and Lafayette. Such a scenario meant that Texas remained unoccupied and largely intact as an effective form of commerce for the Confederacy.

Gaining hold of northern Louisiana and/or Texas took a backseat to other Union efforts in 1862-1863. The war in the West, as conceived by Union commanders and executed by General Ulysses S. Grant began to concentrate on securing control of the Mississippi above Louisiana. But, after the Union had taken Vicksburg, MS and Port Hudson, LA, and thus further secured control of the Mississippi, strategic thought turned once again back to invading northern Louisiana and then moving into Texas in an attempt to interrupt the major supply route from the area to the more easterly Confederate states. General in Chief Henry W. Halleck favored an invasion against the temporary Confederate capital at Shreveport, and then a push into the heart of Texas' plantations, but western commander Ulysses S. Grant and Department of the Gulf chief Nathaniel P. Banks preferred to continue operations against Texas' Gulf Coast. In the end, President Lincoln approved

Halleck's plan, and the General then ordered Banks to launch a campaign along the Red River to Shreveport, which would allow the Union to initiate an attack into Texas.

Banks gathered more than 15,000 troops in South Louisiana and prepared to march to Alexandria to join 10,000 more soldiers sent from William Sherman's detachment in Mississippi. Meanwhile, another 10,000-man unit under the command of General Andrew Smith from Sherman's Army of Tennessee was to go up the Red River on a fleet of ironclads and gunboats with the intention of taking Alexandria before the other troops arrived. Smith occupied Alexandria in March 1864, and Banks got there a week later. The Mississippi detachment, however, was delayed and did not take part in the remainder of the campaign. The combined Union forces then began to move up the Red River, but absent those Mississippi soldiers, which would prove a key to the Union's lack of success.

As the Union troops advanced, Confederate forces under General Richard Taylor fell back, all the while waiting for reinforcements from Texas. Taylor retreated to Mansfield, and Brigadier General Thomas Green's Texas cavalry guarded his rear from Pleasant Hill. The Union forces reached Natchitoches on April 2, and then turned toward Shreveport on a road that led to Mansfield. General Green's Confederate forces, guarding Taylor's rear, skirmished with Union troops on April 7. The Confederates routed the Union troops in the field and by April 8 the bluecoats were disorganized and strung out. This was the opportunity General Taylor had waited for, so he ordered his main column to launch an attack three miles north of Mansfield. The ensuing Battle of Mansfield was one of the most decisive of the whole Civil War, a terrible defeat for the Union. Taylor's men routed the federals and sent them scurrying back to the south, and although the Confederates gained victory it was at a great cost with more than 1,000 casualties. The Southern forces continued to harass the federals as they made their retreat back down the river, but did so at the expense of General Green, who died from wounds on April 12 at Blair's Plantation.

The Red River campaign, combined with the earlier defeats at Galveston and Sabine Pass virtually ended the Union's ideas of invading the heart of Texas. Union forces did continue to skirmish and make landings along Texas' southern Gulf Coast, but the federal loss at the Battle of Mansfield meant that Texas would not yield any of its territory to Union control throughout the war and Texas would be the only southern state at the end of the Civil War that was not occupied by at least some United States troops.

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