

Siege at Vicksburg Reading Comprehension

Name: _____

The Gibraltar of the Confederacy

By 1863, Union forces had gained control over much of the Mississippi River. President Abraham Lincoln considered control of the nation's largest waterway crucial, but the fortified city of Vicksburg, Mississippi, located above a horseshoe-shaped bend in the river, stood in the way of Union success. As long as Vicksburg was controlled by the Confederacy, the Union could not navigate the river and the Confederacy could ship supplies and send communications between its parts east and west of the river. Located high on the bluffs overlooking the river, Vicksburg was referred to as "the Gibraltar of the Confederacy." Attacking Vicksburg was difficult. It was surrounded by swamps and poor country roads. Furthermore, there was a giant fortress atop the bluffs making a naval assault virtually impossible.

Direct Assault, Impossible. Preparing for a Siege

Prior to the Siege of Vicksburg, Union General Ulysses S. Grant had won control of Mississippi River ports in Louisiana, as well as Mississippi's capital, Jackson. Confederate forces, facing an overwhelming Union assault, were forced to withdraw to the fortifications of Vicksburg. Grant, fully cognizant of the difficulties of taking Vicksburg, ordered an immediate assault on the city before the Confederates could get fully organized and entrenched. Union forces would come under withering fire as they attempted to negotiate steep ravines, deep ditches, and the 17-foot-high walls of what was called the Stockade Redan. Their first assault, on May 19th, under the command of Major Generals William T. Sherman and Francis Blair, were summarily repulsed resulting in crushing casualties as Confederate forces fired on them from above. In a second series of assaults ordered by General Grant on May 22nd, Union forces suffered even greater casualties and made virtually no progress in advancing on the fortifications. Union losses totaled over 3,000 soldiers on May 22, compared to less than 500 in the Confederate ranks. It soon became apparent that Union success would rely on a prolonged siege, something that Grant hoped to avoid.

Misery on the Bluffs

Union forces began to build entrenchments in the hopes of gradually moving closer and closer to the fortifications and trapping Confederate forces and the population of Vicksburg. Over time, Grant moved 77,000 Union soldiers into positions completely encircling Vicksburg and eventually cutting off their supply line. Any chance of a Confederate escape was gone. By the end of June, many Confederate soldiers began suffering from malnutrition and scurvy, a condition which frequently afflicted sailors in the Age of Exploration, caused by an acute lack of Vitamin-C. Others suffered from unsanitary conditions and came down with diarrhea, dehydration, malaria, and dysentery. Confederate forces were forced to eat their horses, dogs, and to steal vegetables from the gardens of Vicksburg residents. Amidst the misery, Union gunboats and cannons continuously bombarded the city and fortifications, destroying suitable shelters. Residents and soldiers would dig over 500 caves into the hillside to escape the bombardment.

Surrender

By July, the situation had grown hopeless for the Confederates. Surrender negotiations began and Grant agreed to parole the remaining Confederate soldiers, rather than having to ship 30,000 to prison camps. On July 4, 1863, a day after Lee's defeat at Gettysburg, surrender terms were finalized and the Union gained total control of the Mississippi River (five days later Fort Hudson, Louisiana fell into Union hands as well). Confederate forces were forced to relinquish 172 cannons and over 50,000 rifles.

The 82 year-long Grudge

For the Confederacy, the Vicksburg defeat, combined with the Gettysburg defeat, is often considered the turning point in the Civil War. July 4th, America's birthday, would not be celebrated in Vicksburg again until World War II.

1. Which of the following best explains why control of the Mississippi River was advantageous for the Union?

- a) The river allowed for the transport of messages and supplies.
- b) It was the nation's largest waterway.
- c) The Confederacy was using the river to invade Union settlements.
- d) It was close to the Confederate capital of Richmond.

2. Which best describes the Union's battle plans at Vicksburg?

- a) Reckless, but isolated
- b) Careful, but unsuccessful
- c) Tactical, but close-minded
- d) Strategic, but flexible

3. Which statement about initial attacks on Vicksburg is supported by the passage?

- a) The first assault was led by only one Union general.
- b) Confederate casualties outweighed the Union ones.
- c) Grant waited too long to order the first attack.
- d) The city's high location gave the Union a disadvantage.

4. Which was not a struggle faced by the Confederates during the Union siege?

- a) Lack of food
- b) Illness
- c) Spies within the ranks
- d) Destruction from Union fire

5. Which statement about Vicksburg is false?

- a) The Confederacy lost cannons and rifles to the Union at the end of the battle.
- b) The battle would have been over more quickly had it been a naval assault.
- c) It ended with a Confederate surrender.
- d) The battle is considered a turning point in the Civil War.

6. Which is the best synonym for the word “parole” as it is used in the passage?

- a) Release
- b) Forgive
- c) Protect
- d) Kill

7. Which general did not fight with the Union at Vicksburg?

- a) William T. Sherman
- b) Francis Blair
- c) Abraham Lincoln
- d) Ulysses S. Grant

-----Key-----

1. (a)
2. (d)
3. (d)
4. (c)
5. (b)
6. (a)
7. (c)