The Hornet?s Nest At Shiloh Essay, Research Paper

Shiloh, also called Pittsburg Landing, was a major battle in the war between the states. The fighting along the Hornet?s Nest was the leading cause for the South?s defeat at Shiloh. The Hornet?s Nest was created as a result of the Union retreat after the Confederate surprise attack on the morning of April 6, 1862. At the Nest, the Confederate army wasted valuable time and men trying to capture the Federal position. This part of the line was crucial because it held the entire Northern army together. While the Southern forces tried to take the Nest, Grant was busy regrouping his battered men. The Union army was totally unprepared for the Confederate attack.

Grant believed the Southern forces under Johnston were too rattled and confused after their defeats at Forts Henry and Donelson and completely discounted an attack against his army at Pittsburg Landing, along the Tennessee River (Nevin 104). While Confederate Generals Albert Sydney Johnston and Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard were busy organizing fresh troops from the deep South with veterans from Tennessee (Nevin 106), Union Generals Sherman and Grant were leisurely encamped near the river and had no idea of the massing Southern army only a few miles away at Corinth, Mississippi. Grant thought his army was invincible and failed to order basic precautions such as pickets, sentry lines, or cavalry patrols (Davis 225). With an enemy force nearby, the Union army should have been dug in with entrenchments, breastworks, and rifle pits. Johnston?s army reached the area around a small Methodist church called Shiloh, meaning place of peace, on the fourth of April 1862. The opposing armies spent the fourth and fifth camped as close as a few hundred yards. Finally, Johnston assaulted the surprised Federals while they were eating breakfast on the sixth. Even numerous reports and the sound of fighting did not convince the Northern Generals that they were being attacked. Only after his own tent was overrun by troops from Hardee?s Corp did Sherman realize the seriousness of the fight (Corlew 310). Not until the hungry southerners slowed their advance and looted Union camps for food and Doss 2

valuables did the Federal army have time to organize itself into a defense line. The Federals rallied

quickly and planted their center along a sunken road the Confederates nicknamed the Hornet?s Nest because the bullets zooming through the air sounded like a swarm of hornets (Corlew 310). Around 10:00 a.m., with his left wing destroyed and being flanked on both sides, Sherman withdrew and set up his new line to the right of the Hornet?s Nest (Nevin 119).

The Confederate army spent much of the day and vast amounts of men in a wasteful attempt to force the Yankees out of the Nest. W. H. L. Wallace?s division was on the right of the Nest linking it to Sherman, and Hurlbut commanded the left flank at the Peach Orchard, while General Benjamin Prentiss? division held the center along the Sunken Road. While Hardee was fighting Sherman, the second wave of Southerners under General Braxton Bragg began assaulting the Hornet?s Nest (Nevin 111). At this time, the Federal Army of the Ohio under Don Carlos Buell arrived at Savannah, a few miles to the north. Johnston?s plan of defeating Grant before he could link with Buell was already a failure (Nevin 115). By this time the battlefield became clusters of smaller fights, with no one on either side in control of their men. Most of the battle was fought at the regimental level (Nevin 120). The first assault by the Third C.S. Infantry was totally repulsed around 9:00 a.m. followed by a lull in the fighting caused by an artillery duel. Confederate Major General Benjamin Cheatam launched the next attack against the Nest with only three regiments, a small brigade, across three hundred yards of open field while the Federals hiding behind a fence waited until they were thirty paces away before the Twelfth and Thirteenth Iowa units from W. H. L. Wallace?s division opened fire. The first line of attackers was completely destroyed. Farther to the right of Cheatam?s open field, Confederates came through woods and thick brush to within ten yards of the Union line before having to withdraw under heavy fire (Nevin 121-123). The overall commander of Confederate forces trying to take the Sunken Road, General Bragg, believed in old Napoleonic tactics such as the use of the bayonet and massed frontal assaults against a fortified position, but the rifle musket made these tactics suicidal (Mcdonough 136). Nevertheless, Bragg continued to order his men across the field to attack the Nest and as the struggle went on, he became more and more determined to crush the

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Federals inside the Nest. Confederates missed one of the best chances for success when they failed to break the line before it was fully formed at the Nest. In the first assault around 9:00 a.m., Prentiss? flanks were exposed without the Twenty-third Missouri or the Eighth Iowa, but instead of attacking the flanks, Bragg ordered assaults on the center. He ordered the Fourth, Thirteenth, Nineteenth Louisiana, and the First Arkansas, which were parts of Gibson?s brigade, to assault over the field toward the split-rail fence. At point-blank range the Eighth Iowa fired into the enemy lines while Federal cannon slashed the enemy?s flanks with canister and case shot. The Nineteenth Louisiana lost over a sixth of its men immediately and other regiments suffered similar losses (Nevin 123-124). Bragg was furious with Gibson and ordered him to assault again. The second charge captured the Fifth Ohio Battery, but a counter charge led by the Eighth Iowa retook the cannons. The firing was so thick the undergrowth caught fire, causing the field of wounded to burn to death (Nevin 125-126). By 2:30 p.m., the Confederates had been stalled for more than three hours. Gibson?s brigade, as well as Shaver?s and Anderson?s, had been shattered and not an inch was gained (Mcdonough 149). All along the line, Confederate charges were small; they never attacked in mass along the entire line and always without artillery support. All afternoon, 17,000 men charged the Nest, but never more than 3,700 at once. Although there were only four to five thousand Union defenders, they were in a good defensive position and always outnumbered the attackers. At the heart of their small attacks was the lack of overall leadership. Johnston was personally commanding little assaults to the right at the Peach Orchard, while Beauregard was in the rear sending couriers to