

Student's Name

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### Truth and Fiction of the Battle of Shiloh

The four-year Civil War that took place between 1861 and 1865 comprises more than ten thousand battles between the Union and the Confederate States of America. The Battle of Shiloh, fought in southwestern Tennessee, is one of the war's deadliest conflicts and first major battle of its Western theater. Simultaneously, it is the most misunderstood and misrepresented battle of this historical period. This paper aims to discuss the preconditions and the course of the Shiloh Battle, as well as look at this event from a logical perspective to separate truth from misconceptions that surround it.

#### **Preconditions of the Fight**

At the beginning of the Civil War, the Union was able to control most of the western and middle Tennessee. Following the victory at Fort Henry on February 16, the Northerners captured Fort Donelson ("Civil War Overview. Fort Donelson"). These victories brought significant damage for the South and opened the remaining Tennessee territories for the further advancement of Union forces. After it, General of the Confederate States of America Albert Sidney Johnston sent his troops to Mississippi for regrouping. The Union forces, assuming that Confederates were retreating from Tennessee, made a camp at Pittsburg Landing to wait for reinforcements from other Northern brigades. They were waiting for General Don Carlos Buell and his twenty thousand soldiers ("Battle of Shiloh"). After gathering the necessary intelligence about Grant's location, Johnston wanted to ambush the Union's forces before their armies could unite. On April 3, 1862, the Southerners launched an attack on the northern soldiers.

## **The Tide of the Conflict**

General Johnston planned the attack on the Union army for April 4. However, due to harsh rains and muddy roads, the Confederate forces were slowed down notably in their movement forward (“Battle of Shiloh”). Early in the morning on April 6, the Confederate army got spotted by the Union patrol a mile away from the camp (“Battle of Shiloh”). Shortly afterward, the South assaulted Grant’s forces.

At the start of the battle, Johnston’s army had more than 40,000 soldiers at his disposal (“Civil War Overview. Shiloh”). The Union forces pushed the northerners to Pittsburgh Landing where the battle line had to be established along the area known as the Sunken Road. The Union’s divisions of Brigadier Generals Benjamin Prentiss, William Hervey Lamme Wallace, and Stephen Hurlbut took positions up a hill from the Eastern Corinth Road to the Peach Orchard (“Battle of Shiloh”). This scene of combat later became known as the Hornet’s Nest due to the severity of the hostilities there.

General Grant ordered Benjamin Prentiss to hold the defensive line at the hilltop at all costs around 10 a.m. (“Civil War Overview. Shiloh”). The Union had a defensive advantage at the Hornet’s Nest position because Johnson's men had to run uphill through the undergrowth and had problems with maintaining battle formations. The Federals were beating back the Confederate attacks through the day. Despite the favourable location, Prentiss's division of around 5,500 people had less than a tenth of the soldiers left by mid-morning. Prentiss was eventually captured and Wallace died during the siege. Nevertheless, the Union divisions at the Hornet’s Nest withstood just enough time for General Buell to arrive by afternoon and organize a counter-attack. By then, the South also had significant losses. General Johnston was gravely wounded in the leg and died from blood loss. The command of the Southern forces has taken over by General P. G. T. Beauregard.

Beauregard did not know that Buell's troops arrived. Upon his arrival, despite large human loss, the Federal forces scored about 40,000 men, while The Confederates had less than 30,000 people left ("Battle of Shiloh"). The siege continued until April 7, when the North launched an offensive, while Beauregard fended off without much success. Ultimately, the South was outnumbered, which led Beauregard to retreat to the Corinth. The battle ended in a victory for the Union, but became the first bloodiest battle of the Civil War. Out of 105,000 soldiers taking part in it, 23,000 lost their lives from both sides.

### **Civil War's Most Misunderstood Battle**

Misconceptions surrounding the Battle of Shiloh still baffle the historians today. As Brigadier General wrote after the Civil War, it was a battle "more persistently misunderstood than any other engagement" during the rebellion ("Battle of Shiloh: Shattering Myths"). For example, its often said that Confederates "launched a surprise attack". However, Federals had the idea that the enemy was nearby. For days, leading up the battle, both sides continuously took prisoners ("Battle of Shiloh: Shattering Myths"). The Confederate army was found out on the morning just before the battle a mile away from the Union camp.

No proper evidence suggests out that during the battle the location known as the Sunken Road was sunken. The name "Sunken Road" first appeared in 1881, some 20 years after the battle actually occurred ("Battle of Shiloh: Shattering Myths"). Therefore, the story about the road near the Hornet's Nest being deep-set was made-up later.

There is a widespread belief that the Confederates would have won the battle if Johnston did not die or if the weather did not stop the Confederates from attacking earlier. However, it is important to note that adverse weather conditions slowed down not only the Northerners army but Buell's forces as well ("Battle of Shiloh"). Also, even if reinforcement came later, Grant's army had enough power to hold their position much longer. In addition to strategic advantages, the Federals had fifty pieces of artillery, as well as USS Lexington and

USS Tyler gunboats that fired on the Southern army from the Tennessee River. Hence, The North had the situation under control and could have thwarted the attacks.

### **Conclusion**

The Battle of Shiloh is one of the key battles in the war that was still far from being over. Numerous rumors and myths that have little to do with the historic records surround this event. As the years go by, the facts about the battle are becoming more and more controversial, making it hard to tell the truth from fiction. Optimistically, the historians looking at this battle from a more fact-based perspective will eventually be able to further explore the truth and shed light on the destiny of people participating in the event.

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