

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
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**Fog of War; Cloud of Memory:
The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry's Shiloh Story**

A Dissertation Submitted

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Abstract

The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was created on September 6, 1861. Men throughout the southern counties of Ohio flocked to Jackson, Ohio to join the new regiment. Poor leadership, supply issues, and inexperience immediately plagued the Fifty-Third Ohio. The Ohioans first experienced enemy fire on the morning of April 6, 1862 at the Battle of Shiloh. Throughout the war, the Fifty-Third Ohio fought at many battles including Vicksburg, Chattanooga, and Atlanta. More than any other conflict, the regiment's first combat experience remained linked to its reputation and honor. During the opening fight at Shiloh, the regiment was ordered to retreat by its commanding officer, Colonel J.J. Appler. However, two companies remained on the line and order was restored to the majority of the regiment through the efforts of Ephraim C. Dawes, James Percy, Wells S. Jones, and others. Even though the regiment remained heavily engaged in the fight, and continued to engage the enemy the following day, it was publicly berated for cowardice by its division commander, General William Tecumseh Sherman. Union leadership's desire to clear themselves from the accusation of surprise at Shiloh created scapegoats out of regiments like the Fifty-Third Ohio. Due in large part to the concepts of honor and manhood during the Civil War Era, the men of the regiment sought to clear their individual honor and collective reputation from the perceived stain of Shiloh. Newspapers and Union leadership initially derided the regiment for Shiloh. Even after the blame for the early withdraw was attached directly to Appler, the Fifty-Third Ohio was not entirely free from the accusations and innuendos of Shiloh. The regiment's successful service later in the war was unjustly tainted by the lingering perceptions of its first combat experience at Shiloh. Unfortunately, the reputation of the Fifty-Third Ohio remained frozen in negativity due to the lack of major scholarly interpretations on Shiloh during the first half of the Twentieth Century.

Contents

Chapter 1: Historiography and Methodology.....	1
Chapter 2: The Formation of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry.....	26
Chapter 3: From Jackson, Ohio to Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee.....	53
Chapter 4: The Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh.....	79
Chapter 5: The Fifty-Third Ohio's "White Feather" at Shiloh.....	117
Chapter 6: History, Historians, and the Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh.....	150
Conclusion.....	188
Bibliography.....	190

Chapter 1

Historiography and Methodology

The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry first encountered hostile fire on the morning of April 6, 1862 at the Battle of Shiloh. The regiment arrived on the banks of the Tennessee River as a part of the Union preparation to strike the heart of the western Confederacy at Corinth, Mississippi. Although attached to the command of General William Tecumseh Sherman, the regiment was under the direct leadership of the untested Colonel Jesse Appler. Union leadership ordered the Fifty-Third Ohio to construct camp near the Shiloh Church in a dangerously exposed position.¹ An order not to construct defensive entrenchments soon followed. When the Rebel forces attacked, the Fifty-Third Ohio was among the first Union regiments to meet the challenge. The regiment fired a few devastating rounds before abandoning its position for safety upon the order of its colonel.

Following the Battle of Shiloh, the Fifty-Third Ohio suddenly found itself in the role of scapegoat for commanders searching to cover their own shortcomings and failures. First, Sherman unjustly rebuked the regiment. This was followed by a series of unfortunate and negative newspaper articles criticizing the Ohioans. Later, the newspapers turned their attention to retreat of Colonel Appler without totally freeing the rest of the regiment from the stain of Shiloh. Due to the volume of negativity, and its often-prestigious authors, the Fifty-Third Ohio was stuck in a negative historiographical interpretation. However, these portrayals were inaccurate and unjust. The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was wrongfully criticized for its perceived failure at Shiloh, and became the subject of unjustly critical historiography that failed

¹ E. C. Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1890-1896, Volume IV*, ed. W.H. Chamberlin (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1896), 2.

to take into account poor leadership, inadequate training, supply-chain issues, and General Sherman's scapegoating of the regiment.

In reality, the Fifty-Third Ohio's contribution to Shiloh's first day did not end with Appler's order to retreat. Several men from the regiment either ignored the order, or joined other regiments to continue the fight. Companies A and F of the Fifty-Third Ohio held their ground in spite of Appler's order and the fierce Rebel fire. They eventually joined the Seventeenth Illinois in defense of the Union's left flank.² Among the men who stayed on the frontlines was Wells S. Jones. In contrast to Appler, Jones won the admiration of the regiment for his heroism at Shiloh and was rewarded with command of the regiment.³ Jones acted as the Fifty-Third's commander for the majority of the war, earned the respect of his men through his heroism, and spearheaded many of the regiment's postwar reunions.⁴

The difference in the actions of Jones and Appler not only represented how the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio responded to their first combat experience, but reflected the overall inexperience of the soldiers at Shiloh. Shiloh horrified the civilian and military populations on both sides after the number of dead and wounded were calculated.⁵ The stories that emerged from Shiloh were a mixture of heroic tales and embarrassing cowardice. Like Wells S. Jones, the Fifty-Third Ohio's Regimental Adjunct Ephraim C. Dawes assisted in repulsing Confederate

² Robert N. Scott, ed., *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I: Volume X, Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 265.

³ John K. Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (Portsmouth: The Blade Printing Company, 1900), 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁵ Ulysses S. Grant, *My Dearest Julia: The Wartime Letters of Ulysses S. Grant to His Wife* (New York: Library of America, 2018), 108.

advances on the Union left flank after Appler's retreat.⁶ However, other eyewitnesses claimed to see the majority of the Fifty-Third flee without firing a shot.⁷ The battlefield was filled with untested men who learned the nature of their personal courage on the morning of April 6, 1862.⁸

In the years following the Battle of Shiloh, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry received criticism for its performance during the battle's opening round. For generations, the historiography of the regiment's performance during the Battle of Shiloh is almost unanimous in its condemnation. In the immediate aftermath of the battle, General Sherman openly rebuked the regiment for breaking in the face of the enemy.⁹ Fellow Union commander Don Carlos Buell supported Sherman's criticism by claiming the Fifty-Third Ohio "disappeared" from the field.¹⁰ However, Sherman was responsible for a major portion of the regiment's failure. Overall, the regiment repulsed the Confederate forces before falling victim to the order against constructing fortifications and repeatedly alerted Union commanders to the presence of Rebel forces advancing toward the Union line.¹¹ Even though Colonel Jesse Appler ordered an unnecessary and hasty retreat, members of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry continued the fight and the regiment was the recipient of unwarranted criticism.

⁶ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh" in *Sketches of War History, Volume IV*, ed., W.H. Chamberlain, 13.

⁷ Lucius W. Barber, *Army Memoirs* (Chicago: The J.M.W. Jones Stationery and Printing Co., 1894), 53.

⁸ Leander Stillwell, *The Story of the Common Soldier* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1920), 55-57.

⁹ Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 242-245.

¹⁰ Don Carlos Buell, "Shiloh Revisited," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Volume I*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: The Century Company, 1887), 500.

¹¹ Edward O. Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862* ed. Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith (New York: Savas Beattie LLC, 2009), 129-141.

Finding the truth about the Fifty-Third Ohio's Shiloh story lies in a series of questions split between examining the events of the battle and the post-war debate over who really failed on Shiloh's first day. First, how did the Fifty-Third's leader, Colonel Jesse Appler, contribute to the regiment's collapse on April 6, 1862? Furthermore, in what ways were General Sherman and the Union leadership responsible for the Fifty-Third failing to hold its line? After examining these initial questions, combined with the regiment's actions, it is possible to determine the true cause of the regiment's collapse.

Additionally, why did Sherman single out the Fifty-Third Ohio for harsh criticism? Sherman never hesitated to rebuke the performance of the regiment. The general saved his most critical remarks for the actions of Colonel Appler. While it is true that Appler ordered a retreat after the regiment fired only two collective rounds, it is important to ask how the larger context of the battle and the politics that followed impacted Sherman's vicious rebukes of the regiment. How did the criticism affect the men of the Fifty-Third O.V.I.? Moreover, it is important to ask how the men of the Fifty-Third viewed the claims of their critics. How did the importance of regimental reputation motivate the men to answer their critics? Furthermore, understanding how the stain of Shiloh motivated the men to clear their regiment's name from the slander of Shiloh during the remainder of the war provides interesting insight into era's concept of honor.

Next, the question of how the Fifty-Third Ohio Infantry responded collectively and individually to the accusation of fleeing in the face of the enemy is an important aspect of the overall story. During the era of the Civil War, honor was an important part of a person's identity.¹² This was especially true when it came to the perception of a soldier's performance on

¹² The concepts of honor, duty, courage, and manhood will be a reoccurring subject in the following chapters. Among others, Peter S. Carmichael's *The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies*, Lorien Foote's *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army*, and James M. McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* provide the

the battlefield. The debate over whether the regiment underperformed, or was the victim of Sherman leaving himself open to a surprise attack, filled the newspapers of southern Ohio and the pages of *National Tribune* following the war. According to Sherman, the Battle of Shiloh resulted in reports and accusations that were damaging to the personal character of the battle's veterans.¹³ However, this did not hinder Sherman from painting the Fifty-Third Ohio as a failed regiment at Shiloh. The stain of breaking at Shiloh and the weight of Sherman's rebuke emerged as a major part of the regiment's story.

Despite the debate over Shiloh, the Fifty-Third Ohio regained the trust and respect of General Sherman by the war's conclusion. Examining how the regiment changed Sherman's perception is a question that concludes the story of the regiment at the Battle of Shiloh. Wells S. Jones, the Fifty-Third's commanding officer following the removal of Jesse Appler, wrote a glowing newspaper article praising Sherman following the general's death. Jones even led a memorial service for his old commander.¹⁴ In addition, Sherman praised the regiment's performance for the remainder of the war and wrote about the courage of the Fifty-Third Ohio at other key conflicts. The events behind this reconciliation deserve an investigation. Even though Sherman reversed his opinion of the regiment, his rebuke of its performance at Shiloh persisted.

context for these concepts in the following chapters. Specifically, chapter two explains how honor motivated the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio to enlist while chapters five and six explain the role of honor and manhood in the context of the regiment's efforts to clear its name from the accusations of cowardice at Shiloh. In this regard, McPherson approaches honor through the definitions of the Civil War Era and the influence of Victorian principles. Foote argues that honor was an important factor in a soldier's acquisition of the title of "man" during the antebellum and Civil War periods. In addition, Carmichael explains that duty and codes of conducts influenced the creation of armies and societies relying on the citizen-soldier. Overall, the concepts of honor, duty, courage, and manhood were inescapably linked to service in Civil War armies.

¹³ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 2005), 229.

¹⁴ Wells S. Jones, "Honors to the Dead Hero," *Waverly Watchman*, February 2, 1891, 2.

Overall, the early Union war effort was plagued by supply issues and the failure to properly prepare troops for combat. In this regard, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry arrived on the fields near the Shiloh Meeting House ill-prepared for its first Civil War battle. A history of the Fifty-Third Ohio should examine how the regiment reflected the general problems of the Union Army. The Civil War was the largest logistical challenge the United States had addressed to that point in its history. Inevitably, there were major gaps in supplying weapons, clothing, and food to U.S. soldiers. The problems facing the ill-trained and underequipped Fifty-Third Ohio were not unique, but reflective of the Union war effort as a whole.¹⁵

The Fifty-Third Ohio is not a well-known regiment in Civil War history, but its story is an important piece in constructing a complete history of the conflict. The regiment travelled with Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman and fought in some of the Western Theater's most famous battles. Unfortunately, little work on the regiment exists outside of a memoir and regimental history from John K. Duke of Company F in 1900.¹⁶ In addition, the men of the regiment left extensive newspaper writings behind as a part of its debate over who was to blame for the Union failure on Shiloh's first day. While the regiment's story is unique to the men who served under its flag, it is also reflective of the larger Union war effort.

The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry's Civil War story began near the banks of the Tennessee River in the Spring of 1862. Regrettably for the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio, their initial encounter with combat was derided as a failure. The regiment's actions at the Battle of

¹⁵ Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Logistics: A Study of Civil War Transportation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 17-19; Specifically, Hess argues that the Civil War was the greatest logistical undertaking in American history to that point. The size and scope of raising, training, supplying, and transporting armies on the scale of the Civil War was beyond anything previously attempted. Inevitably, supply-chain issues plagued the United States government.

¹⁶ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, i-ii.

Shiloh represents an under-researched portion of Civil War history. The proper telling of their story falls under the category of military history. However, this does not mean that the story is strictly based on military maneuvers and battlefield tactics.¹⁷ The full story of the Fifty-Third Ohio is a story of political, social, and cultural history.

To adequately tell the complete story of any Civil War regiment, a comprehensive examination of the men who served, their communities, and the regiment's place in the larger context of the conflict is essential.¹⁸ The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry were the product of the time and place they lived. Their opinions, worldviews, and political persuasions were molded by their era and the people around them. Unlike a traditional military history, the story of the Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh must go beyond the battlefield. The story of the regiment at Shiloh does not begin with the first shot of the battle. In the same regard, the story does not end the moment the Union victory is secured.

Employing the approach to military history that emphasizes a regiment's backstory as much as its battlefield action further entrenches the story of the Fifty-Third Ohio into the broader context of the Civil War.¹⁹ The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio were farmers, lumber workers, shopkeepers, merchants, and pastors before their lives were interrupted by the major political debate of the time. More importantly, they were sons, husbands, brothers, uncles, friends, and members of religious congregations. The story of the Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh is not just

¹⁷ John A. Lynn, "Breaching the Walls of Academe: The Purpose, Problems, and Prospects of Military History," *Academic Questions* 21, no. 1 (2018): 23-26.

¹⁸ Robert M. Citino, "Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction," *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (October 2007): 1070-1090.

¹⁹ Earl J. Hess, "Revitalizing Traditional Military History in the Current Age of Civil War Studies," in *Upon Fields of Battle: Essays on the Military History of America's Civil War*, ed. Andrew S. Bledsoe and Andrew F. Lang (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 28.

about the men who faced ferocious enemy fire for the first time on April 6, 1862. The story is also about the community, relatives, and friends who were left behind following the firing on Fort Sumter. In this respect, the story of the regiment is not a traditional military history, but a new style of military history that strives to tell the whole story of a military unit and its background.²⁰

Any attempt to accurately construct the history of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh should be rooted in the words of the regiment's soldiers and their Union comrades. Arguably, John K. Duke's regimental memoir provides the foundation for the Fifty-Third Ohio's Shiloh story. Also, Ephraim C. Dawes wrote extensively about the regiment until his death in 1895. His essays about the regiment's service during the Battle of Shiloh were printed for the Ohio Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States and in the *Grand Army of the Republic War Papers*. Several members of the regiment left extensive accounts of the battle, and provided detailed defenses of the unit's actions at Shiloh, in the newspapers of southern Ohio. It was in the Ohio newspapers, the *National Tribune*, and articles for *Century Magazine* that the debate over who really failed during the opening moments of Shiloh emerged.

Along with the direct writings of the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio, the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman provide valuable insight into Shiloh's tactics and maneuvers. Sherman's memoir, along with an edited collection of his wartime letters, provide an understanding of the general's opinion of the Fifty-Third Ohio in relation to April 6, 1862. Letters housed in various historical societies and libraries assist in accurately reconstructing the overall history. Chicago's Newberry Library, The State Historical Society of Missouri, the Ohio

²⁰ Andrew S. Bledsoe and Andrew F. Lang, "Military History and the American Civil War," in *Upon the Fields of Battle: Essays on the Military History of America's Civil War*, ed. Andrew S. Bledsoe and Andrew F. Lang (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 5-9.

History Connection, and the Ohio University Library house essential letters and writings that form the basis of the following chapters' conclusions.

This history of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry at Shiloh experienced a few slight shifts in interpretation during the past 100 years. The regiment's portrayal ranged from being a detriment to Sherman's attempts to hold his line near the Shiloh Meetinghouse, to being the unit that properly alerted Union commanders to an eminent Rebel assault before wilting under enemy fire. Even as the more complex interpretations arose, historians viewed the Fifty-Third Ohio's actions in a negative light. Inevitably, as Sherman's value among historians rose, the Fifty-Third Ohio's reputation suffered in relation to the Battle of Shiloh.

No full historical work with exclusive focus on the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh exists. However, books about Sherman, Grant, and the whole Battle of Shiloh feature chapters and small selections on the regiment. This placed the Fifty-Third Ohio's Shiloh story at the mercy of the battle's military historians and Sherman biographers. A 1903 publication by the Ohio Shiloh Battlefield Commission stated the Fifty-Third Ohio was unprepared for the battle and led by a "coward."²¹ The regiment's story remained frozen in negative portrayals due to a dearth of rehabilitation opportunities. As Civil War historian Timothy B. Smith noted in his collection of essays *Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory*, the Battle of Shiloh, and therefore the Fifty-Third Ohio's role, remained a neglected area of Civil War history until the second half of the Twentieth Century.²²

²¹ T.J. Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh; Report of the Commission* (Cincinnati: C. J. Krehbiel & Co., 1903), 23-24.

²² Timothy B. Smith, *Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013), xi.

Examining the Fifty-Third Ohio's Shiloh story provides an opportunity to not only better understand the opening moments of the Battle of Shiloh, but to revisit the charges of cowardice directed at the regiment. The Fifty-Third Ohio's status as a failed regiment on April 6, 1862 does not withstand an in-depth academic examination. Researching the regiment's background, and the personalities in its ranks, places the Fifty-Third Ohio into the larger context of the war. In addition, after examining the overall debate between General Sherman's popular version of events and the accounts of the soldiers under his command, evidence arises that exonerates the Fifty-Third Ohio. The chapters that follow will present the regiment in a new light. The Fifty-Third Ohio is presented as a small piece of the larger problems facing the Union war effort in the Western Theater in 1862. Poor supply lines, inadequate training, the failures of the Union high command, and the need for a scapegoat in the aftermath of Shiloh were the real causes behind the regiment's perceived failure on the battle's first day.

Shiloh, and the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry, were originally interpreted by the biographers of William Tecumseh Sherman. Overall, early Civil War history was dominated by the words and opinions of the conflict's greatest, and most popular, leaders. General Sherman emerged from the Civil War as one of the most popular figures above the Mason-Dixon Line. His revolutionary tactics that broke the Rebel resistance in the deep South transformed Sherman into a Union hero. However, Sherman's popularity in the war's immediate aftermath hindered the Fifty-Third Ohio's chance of rehabilitating the perception of its performance at Shiloh. This is evident in the work of the early Sherman biographer, W. Fletcher Johnson. He firmly blamed the "panic-stricken" soldiers serving under Sherman for the Union's initial failure on April 6, 1862 in the book, *Life of Wm. Tecumseh Sherman: Late Retired General, U.S.A.* (1891).²³

²³ W. Fletcher Johnson, *Life of Wm. Tecumseh Sherman: Late Retired General, U.S.A.* (Philadelphia: Edgewood Publishing Company, 1891), 122.

Specifically, Johnson called out the Fifty-Third Ohio for prematurely exiting the fight in a chapter devoted to reprinting Sherman's official report on the Battle of Shiloh.²⁴

In 1932, Lloyd Lewis published his Sherman biography, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet*. Lewis wrote several books on the key figures of the Civil War during the first part of the Twentieth Century. Similarly to Johnson, Lewis features the Fifty-Third Ohio in his chapter on the Battle of Shiloh. Unlike Johnson's book, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* heavily relies on the Fifty-Third Ohio to explain the opening round of the battle. While Lewis does portray the overall effort of the regiment in a negative manner, his interpretation argued that several members of the regiment continued fighting following Appler's call to retreat.²⁵ Appler is again defined as uneasy and failing to properly prepare his men for combat.²⁶ While Lewis does argue that a few members of the Fifty-Third showed bravery at Shiloh, the collective regiment is again portrayed as failing to hold its position, and at least partly responsible for ineffectiveness of Sherman's left flank.²⁷

John F. Marszalek's 1993 biography of Sherman focuses on the actions of Appler as the source of the Fifty-Third Ohio's failures. While acknowledging that Sherman ignored the warnings about the approaching Rebels, Marszalek justifies the general's response by insinuating that Appler was an unreliable source.²⁸ Specifically, he writes that "Sherman ignored the

²⁴ Ibid., 130.

²⁵ Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 119-221.

²⁶ Ibid., 220.

²⁷ Ibid., 199-221.

²⁸ John F. Marazalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 177.

warning, considering the source.”²⁹ However, Marszalek connects the actions of the Fifty-Third Ohio to its colonel without giving the regiment proper context. No mention of the soldiers from the Fifty-Third who refused to follow Appler’s retreat, or the fact that the regiment remained in the fight for the duration of the battle, is found in the book. Marszalek simply states that “within the hour, many men in Appler’s regiment, led by the colonel himself, had broken ranks and were rushing to the rear.”³⁰

As stated earlier, the Battle of Shiloh remained a surprisingly overlooked aspect of Civil War history for several decades. The majority of the battle’s early histories were firsthand accounts of soldiers and regiments that were engaged in the battle.³¹ However, these sources influenced the works of later historians and were mostly categorized as memoirs rather than historical interpretations. Works related to the Battle of Shiloh and its main participants were published in the first half of the Twentieth Century but were small in number. Writings that exclusively focused on the battle were in short supply in the late 1800s and early 1900s, but the Battle of Shiloh increased in popularity following World War II.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Leander Stillwell, *The Story of a Common Soldier* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Co., 1920); Lucius Barber, *Army Memoirs* (Chicago: The J.M.W. Jones Stationery and Printing Co., 1894); Charles B. Kimbell, *History of Battery “A,” First Light Artillery Volunteers* (Chicago: Cushing Printing Company, 1899); John A. Bering and Thomas Montgomery, *History of the Forty-Eighth Ohio Vet. Vol. Inf: From its Organization at Camp Dennison, O., in October, 1861, to the Close of the War, and its Final Muster-out, May 10, 1866* (Hillsboro: The Highland News Office, 1880); John A. Cockerill, “A Boy at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1903-1908, Volume IV*, ed. Theodore F. Allen, Edward S. McKee, and J. Gordon Taylor (Cincinnati: Monfort & Company, 1908); William Preston Johnston, *The Life of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston: Embracing His Services in the Armies of the United States, the Republic of Texas, and the Confederate States* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878); Basil W. Duke, *History of Morgan’s Cavalry* (Cincinnati: Miami Printing and Publishing Company, 1867); W.H. Chamberlain, *History of the 81st Regiment Ohio Infantry Volunteers during the War of the Rebellion* (Cincinnati: Gazette Steam Printing House, 1865); E. C. Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1890-1896, Volume IV*, ed. W.H. Chamberlin (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1896).

Bruce Catton's *This Hallowed Ground*, a one-volume history of the Civil War, was originally published in 1955. Catton was a journalist and historian who molded the public's understanding of the Civil War during the 1950s and 1960s. He briefly mentioned the Fifty-Third Ohio in his Shiloh section without any background information on the regiment. His concise portrayal of the regiment mostly presented the Ohioans in a negative manner. Similar to later historians, Catton presented Colonel Jesse Appler as a failed commander overcome by fear.³² Catton argued that most of Appler's men followed him off the battlefield as the regiment willingly removed itself from the fighting.³³

Two major works on the Battle of Shiloh were printed at roughly the same time breaking the historical drought on works dedicated specifically to the battle. Wiley Sword's *Shiloh: Bloody April* and James Lee McDonough's *Shiloh: In Hell before Night* were originally published in 1974 and 1977 respectively. Sword, a Civil War historian and collector, painted a negative picture of the Fifty-Third Ohio. *Shiloh: Bloody April* argued that the regiment was a "source of trouble" for General Sherman.³⁴ In addition, Sword portrayed the regiment's leader, Colonel Jesse Appler, as unfit for command of the Fifty-Third due to his status as an amateur soldier.³⁵ The book set the tone for how future generations viewed the regiment. No gallantry, or even the benefit of a doubt, was extended to the Fifty-Third Ohio. Instead, Sword claimed it was a regiment in "turmoil" led by a "bewildered" Colonel Appler who was the rightful recipient of Sherman's harassment.³⁶

³² Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2012), 114.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Wiley Sword, *Shiloh: Bloody April* (Dayton: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1988), 127.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 171-173.

James Lee McDonough's 1977 *Shiloh: In Hell before Midnight* echoed several of the Sword's claims. During his long career as a professor and a writer, historian James Lee McDonough focused on the Civil War's Western Theater. McDonough's *Shiloh* presented the Fifty-Third Ohio in mostly a negative manner. Similar to Sword, McDonough placed blame on the regiment for failing to hold the Union line near the Shiloh Church. He also interpreted the Fifty-Third as the victim of poor regimental leadership. McDonough argued that Appler, "possessed no knowledge of drill or regulations and would flee from the front lines soon after the battle began."³⁷

McDonough's 1977 work was not the last time he presented the Fifty-Third Ohio in an undesirable manner. In his biography of General Sherman, *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country, A Life* (2016), he claimed that Sherman's Shiloh Church line collapsed due to the failure of the Fifty-Third Ohio.³⁸ In the works of McDonough and Sword, the Fifty-Third Ohio's actions on April 6, 1862 are viewed as a disaster. Both historians argued that the regiment's leader was responsible for the collapse of Sherman's left flank. In part, Colonel Appler's lack of training and status as an amateur soldier contributed to the regiment's lack of success. However, neither historian placed any significant blame on the commanders above Appler and the Fifty-Third for their men being ill-prepared to face enemy fire.

Larry J. Daniel assisted in introducing the next step in the historiography of the Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh. As a historian, Daniel is a leading voice of the war's Western Theater. He has authored several books about the Union and Confederate soldiers fighting in the

³⁷ James Lee McDonough, *Shiloh: In Hell before Night* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 91.

³⁸ James Lee McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country, A Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 11.

Mississippi region. His approach to the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh differed from McDonough and Sword. Whereas the initial portrayal of the regiment was one of complete failure as a unit only viewed through its actions on April 6, 1862, Daniel presented a more complete picture of the Fifty-Third. In his book *Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War* (1997), the first major background information of Colonel Appler and the regiment appeared.³⁹

In the works of McDonough and Sword, Colonel Jesse Appler and the Fifty-Third's Civil War story begins with the Battle of Shiloh. Very little background on the regiment is present until Daniel's 1997 work. Arguably, Daniel's greatest contribution to the historiography of the regiment was his argument that Appler and the regiment had previously won the praise of Sherman following their first face-to-face meeting.⁴⁰ In addition, Daniel argued that Appler's role in the pre-war Ohio Militia was one of the main recruiting draws of the regiment.⁴¹ Daniel attacked the previous historiography that stated Sherman's anger toward Appler's intelligence reports stemmed from Sherman's distrust of Appler's amateur status. Furthermore, Daniel's work on the battle was among the first to acknowledge that Sherman's ignoring of Appler's intelligence reports resulted in Sherman being painted in a negative manner in Civil War newspapers.⁴² Even though the portrayal of the Fifty-Third as a regiment who failed to hold its position against the enemy remained, Larry J. Daniel's 1997 work presented a more complete picture of Colonel Appler, the Fifty-Third Ohio, and General Sherman.

³⁹ Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 137.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 157.

In 2007, James Bissland advanced Daniel's approach in his book, *Blood, Tears, and Glory: How Ohioans Won the Civil War*. At the time of the book's publication, Dr. Bissland focused his writings on the history of Ohio among other projects. Bissland's portrayal of the regiment's role at Shiloh reflected the work of Daniel. Bissland furthered the argument that Appler was viewed as a solid and capable leader before Shiloh.⁴³ Similar to Daniel, Bissland portrayed the actions of the Fifty-Third as honorable and appropriate in the buildup to battle. While his history of the Fifty-Third at Shiloh only occupied three pages, Bissland clearly placed blame on Sherman for the Union's failure on the battle's first day. Bissland described Sherman as, "brushing off warning signs" about the pending Confederate attack.⁴⁴ Like Daniel, Bissland blamed Appler for the regiment's failures under fire, but argued that the failure to prepare for the enemy's attack rests firmly on General Sherman.

Arguably, no historians have written more about the battle of Shiloh and the overall war in the Western Theater than Steven E. Woodworth and Timothy B. Smith. As historians of the Battle of Shiloh, both continued to move the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry toward a well-rounded interpretation. Neither historian has written a full book or scholarly article exclusively on the regiment, but both have produced multiple works that feature the Fifty-Third Ohio during Shiloh's first day. The works of these historians placed the Ohio regiment into the greater context of the battle and the war's earliest days. In this regard, their works resembled the interpretations of Larry J. Daniel and James Bissland more than James L. McDonough and Wiley Sword.

⁴³ James Bissland, *Blood, Tears, and Glory: How Ohioans Won the Civil War* (Wilmington: Orange Frazer Press, 2007), 170-172.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

Steven E. Woodworth not only published several works on the battle of Shiloh, but he also wrote on the military career of General William Tecumseh Sherman. As a historian and a professor at Texas Christian University, Woodworth published *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* in 2005. The book chronicled the entirety of the Army of the Tennessee's Civil War service. His assessment of the Fifty-Third Ohio's performance at Shiloh presented a more balanced history than Sherman biographers, such as McDonough, and early historians of the battle. Woodworth argued that the Fifty-Third Ohio repeatedly tried to bring the enemy presence to Sherman's attention before the first official shots of the battle were fired.⁴⁵ While the attempts to alert Sherman to an enemy presence is consistently found in all scholarly works on Shiloh, the idea that Sherman shared a major portion of the blame for the battle's first day emerged during the late 1900s and early 2000s.

Woodworth's interpretation of the buildup to the Battle of Shiloh placed the Fifty-Third Ohio into the larger context of the fight and the debates that followed. In *Nothing but Victory*, Woodworth portrayed Colonel Appler as a competent, although nervous, commander in the buildup to battle in a manner reminiscent of Bissland and Daniel.⁴⁶ The book furthered the argument that Sherman was taken by surprise by the presence of Rebel soldiers on the morning of April 6th. Woodworth removed the entirety of the blame for the Union's early failures from the Fifty-Third Ohio and implicated Sherman by writing, "for the past few days he had played the fool," in reference to Sherman's unwillingness to believe Appler's reports.⁴⁷ However, Woodworth somewhat exonerates Sherman and the Union leadership in 2009's *The Shiloh*

⁴⁵ Steven E. Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (New York: Civil War Vintage Library, 2005), 152-156.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

Campaign by stating that no defensive entrenchments were employed by either side in the war's earliest days.⁴⁸ Overall, Woodworth's works presented a more balanced interpretation to the argument between the Fifty-Third Ohio and General Sherman over who failed during the battle's opening moment.

In 2006's *Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide* published by the Southern Illinois Press, Woodworth continued the rehabilitation of the Fifty-Third Ohio with another balanced approach. Cowriting with Mark Grimsley of Ohio State University, the book stated that the regiment initially sent devastating fire into the line of the Sixth Mississippi.⁴⁹ Woodworth and Grimsley reiterated the claim that Appler's original actions were appropriate before his nerves overwhelmed his judgement. In addition, the book continued the trend of placing more blame on Sherman for the April 6th failures.⁵⁰ Woodworth and Grimsley stated that Sherman's ability to process the intelligence reports was clouded by his preconceived idea that the Confederates were too demoralized to launch a major attack after Fort Donelson and Fort Henry.⁵¹ *Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide* listed this failure as the, "lowest ebb of Sherman's career."⁵²

Timothy B. Smith somewhat returned to the negative portrayal of the regiment and Colonel Appler in *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* (2014). Again, Appler's nervousness and lack of professional military training was brought to the foreground.⁵³ However, Smith continued the

⁴⁸ Steven E. Woodworth, ed., *The Shiloh Campaign* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2009), 5.

⁴⁹ Mark Grimsley and Steven E. Woodworth, *Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 78.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Timothy B. Smith, *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* (Lawrence: University of Press of Kansas, 2014), 98.

historiographical shift toward the complete picture approach. Smith was among the first historians to connect, although briefly, Sherman to the Fifty-Third Ohio in the debate over who was to blame for the Union's early collapse.⁵⁴ Similar accounts appear in Smith's other works on the battle of Shiloh. *The Untold Story of Shiloh: The Battle and the Battlefield* and *Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory* interpret the battle, Sherman, and the Fifty-Third in the same manner.

Arguably, no one brought the Fifty-Third Ohio closer to a full rehabilitation through a major historiographical shift than historian Ed Bearss. Working in the capacity as Historian Emeritus of the U.S. National Park Service at the time *In Fields of Honor: Pivotal Battles of the Civil War* (2006) was published, Bearss placed the regiment into a more complete interpretation between the roles of Sherman and the regiment at Shiloh. He stated that the regiment was more successful in its duties than most historians have noticed.⁵⁵ Specifically, Bearss stated, "the 53rd Ohio puts up a good fight-not as feeble as many writers report."⁵⁶ In addition, Bearss advanced the idea that Sherman bore the majority of the blame for the battle's poor start by writing that Sherman was unalarmed and unconcerned about the reports of approaching Rebels.⁵⁷

Winston Groom's 2013 book *Shiloh, 1862* again presented the complete picture of the Fifty-Third Ohio, Sherman, and Shiloh's opening round. Arguably, no historian has dedicated as many pages to the regiment as Groom. As a historian and writer, Groom previously wrote about the Army of the Tennessee in *Vicksburg, 1863*. Although written more for a popular than academic audience, his portrayal of the regiment was consistent with historiographical trend of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 413.

⁵⁵ Ed Bearss, *Fields of Honor: Pivotal Battles of the Civil War* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Partners, LLC, 2006), 78.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 77-79.

his contemporaries. Groom argued that Appler sent the intelligence reports to a dismissive Sherman who failed to appreciate their seriousness.⁵⁸ Again, Appler and the Fifty-Third are presented as a mixture of courageous and disastrous. However, like the other works on Shiloh, Grooms does not attempt to fully answer who was to blame for the Union's failures on April 6, 1862.

In 2019's *Attack at Daylight and Whip Them: The Battle of Shiloh, April 6-7, 1862* by Gregory A Mertz, the trend of presenting the Fifty-Third as the focal point of a complex story continued. Mertz, a historian and preservationist who worked for the National Parks Service, argued that the regiment and Colonel Appler acted appropriately in their response to the enemy presence.⁵⁹ While the book does place Appler and the regiment's failures at the forefront of its chapter on the Fifty-Third Ohio, Mertz stops short of a complete condemnation. He follows the historiographical shift of Daniel, Bissland, Woodworth, and Smith by arguing that the regiment was placed in an unwinnable situation by its commanders.⁶⁰ Even though Mertz does not implicate Sherman as much as other historians, his book does reflect the growing trend of showing a complete picture of the events of April 6, 1862.

While the story of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry at Shiloh exists in the pages of books on the Battle of Shiloh and biographies of William Tecumseh Sherman, the most obvious gap in the historiography is the fact that no full-length book has been published on the topic. The regiment's story is only told as a part of the larger story. However, these works still do not adequately place the regiment into the larger context of the war. The Fifty-Third Ohio usually

⁵⁸ Winston Groom, *Shiloh, 1862* (Washington DC: National Geographic, 2013), 64-65.

⁵⁹ Gregory A. Mertz, *Attack at Daylight and Whip Them: The Battle of Shiloh, April 6-7, 1862* (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 2019), 41-42.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

appears to explain the start of the battle and then disappears following the initial collapse of Sherman's line. In this regard, a thorough history of the regiment's birth through the debate over who was to blame for the Union initial failures is needed. To date, the only book that exclusively focuses on the regiment is the regimental memoir *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* by John K. Duke (1900).⁶¹

The lack of works placing the regiment into the larger context of the battle and the debate that followed is evident in where its story does not appear. Even though the regiment is featured prominently in the biographies of General Sherman, the Fifty-Third Ohio is absent in the recent biographies of General Grant. Ron Chernow, H.W. Brands, and Ronald C. White do not mention the regiment as a part of the buildup to the Battle of Shiloh, or as a factor in the battle's earliest clash. The Fifty-Third Ohio as a reflection of the larger war is a valuable and needed addition to the historiography of the regiment and the war.

Furthermore, the lack of works focused on the debate between the regiment and General Sherman on who failed to secure his left flank represent a monument gap in the topic's historiography. The men of the Fifty-Third wrote numerous newspaper articles in an attempt to clear the regiment's name from the charge of cowardice. In addition, Sherman was haunted by the accusation of being caught off guard and surprised by the Rebel attack. Sherman often used the regiments under him, especially the Fifty-Third Ohio, as a scapegoat. Exploring how the men

⁶¹ John K. Duke became the self-appointed historian of the regiment with the blessing of his fellow veterans following the deaths of James R. Percy, R.H. Brewster, and E.C. Dawes. Most of the regiment believed Percy would chronicle the Fifty-Third Ohio's war service due to his background as a teacher and his thorough journaling during the war. However, Percy was killed in action on August 18, 1862. Following the war, Brewster and Dawes both attempted to write the regiment's history until their deaths. Arguably, no one wrote more about the Fifty-Third Ohio than Dawes. He published several writings for veteran publications on the regiment with many of his writing focusing specifically on the Battle of Shiloh. Duke's *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion* relied heavily on the writings of his predecessors. The story of the creation of the regimental history will be a topic in future chapters.

felt about this issue, as well as the reasons behind why they chose to respond, is a glaring omission in the historiography of the Fifty-Third Ohio and the Battle of Shiloh.

To address the gaps in the regiment's historiography at the Battle of Shiloh, the following chapters are based on a series of research questions. The second chapter's goal is to place the Fifty-Third Ohio into the context of the time and place. Coming from a state considered to be a part of the "west," the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio were molded by their experiences on the edges of American civilization. The regiment's home counties were politically complex. The southern portion of Ohio did not overwhelmingly support Abraham Lincoln during the 1860 president election, but a sizable portion of the region's male population joined the Union army without hesitation. Chapter two examines these complexities during the early stages of the Civil War in Ohio.

Chapter two is built on asking three key questions. First, the chapter intends to answer how the overall population of Ohio responded to the outbreak of war and Lincoln's call for volunteers. In addition, why did Ohioans vote the way they did in the 1860s election is a key question in the chapter. Finally, the chapter asks how Ohioans viewed slavery and the debate that surrounded it. Even though the Federal goals in the early days of the Civil War were only to find ways to preserve the Union, Ohio had been on the front lines of the fugitive slave debate. The state, especially the southern portion where the Fifty-Third Ohio originated, bordered a slave state and became a central piece of the Underground Railroad. How did the issue of slavery impact the politics of Ohio and its citizens' view of the rebellion? Overall, how did the political and social conditions in Ohio create regiments like the Fifty-Third Ohio?

Chapter two also focuses on the origins of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Another of the chapter's key questions focuses on why the men of southern Ohio joined the

regiment. How did the regiment's leadership convince men to leave their farms, shops, mills, friends, and families to join a war that would take them away from their homes? Chapter two also asks how the conditions of the regiment's training camp in Jackson, Ohio impacted the men's opinion of the war. Finally, the chapter examines if the men were adequately prepared for the war they would be joining at the Battle of Shiloh. The carnage of the Civil War appeared to surprise everyone involved including the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio.

Chapter three examines the regiment's journey from Jackson, Ohio to Paducah, Kentucky before ending with the Ohioans setting up camp in Rea Field near the Shiloh Meetinghouse. The chapter explores the initial meeting between General William Tecumseh Sherman and the Fifty-Third Ohio. Then, the chapter asks why the regiment came to Pittsburg Landing and what events placed them in the direct path of the Battle of Shiloh. Furthermore, chapter three examines the preparedness of the regiment for Civil War combat and how Union command viewed the growing threat of a possible Confederate attack. The factors that led to the regiment being undermanned and ill-prepared for the clash are also examined. Finally, the chapter concludes by asking why the Fifty-Third Ohio, a regiment without prior combat experience, was placed so far from the Tennessee River base without any defensive fortifications.

The events of the Shiloh battlefield are the subject of the fourth chapter. This chapter attempts to examine the events of the Battle of Shiloh as well as the proceedings that led to the clash. The most important question is how the actions of the Fifty-Third Ohio during the buildup to the battle effected the Union army on April 6, 1862. Asking how the Fifty-Third Ohio performed in its reconnaissance duties and battle preparations sets the stage for this chapter and those that follow. Asking why General Sherman refused to believe the reports of Colonel Appler before the Confederate assault places the Fifty-Third into the larger context of the battle and

historiographical debates. Why did Union leadership wait until the Confederates attacked to recognize the seriousness of the pickets' reports? Furthermore, how did the Fifty-Third Ohio's decision to place its camp closer to fresh water impact the early rounds of the battle?

The next chapter heavily builds on the previous chapter by investigating the debate that followed the battle of Shiloh. As previously stated, General Sherman criticized the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry for failing to hold its line on the morning of April 6, 1862. However, the Fifty-Third was not the only regiment that failed to confront the Confederate attack. In this chapter, the question of why Sherman strongly condemned the regiment and Colonel Jesse Appler is addressed. How did the political and military rivalries of the time impact the debate over who was to blame for the Union's initial failures at Shiloh assists in placing the Fifty-Third Ohio, General Sherman, and the Battle of Shiloh into the larger context of the 1862 America and the Civil War.

In response to Sherman's words, chapter five continues by asking how did the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio address the accusation of cowardice? The Fifty-Third was not the only focus of criticism following the Battle of Shiloh. Americans were shocked by the slaughter of the battle and a search for who was to blame ensued.⁶² General Sherman was also the target for newspaper criticism following the battle. He, along with General Ulysses S. Grant, was accused of being taken by surprise and failing to prepare the Union forces. Chapter five also examines how Sherman's critics pushed him to create a scapegoat for his own failings.

By the end of the war, the Fifty-Third Ohio had regained the trust of General Sherman. Sherman still blamed the regiment for the Union debacle on the first day of the Battle of Shiloh, but he praised the Fifty-Third's subsequent war record. The conclusion of chapter six is centered

⁶² Sherman, *Memoirs*, 229.

on how the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry regained the trust of General Sherman. How did the replacing of Colonel Appler as the regiment's leader impact the way Sherman viewed the unit? Chapter six also explores why Sherman and the Fifty-Third reconciled in spite of being at odds over the interpretation of the Battle of Shiloh.

The Battle of Shiloh, like most monumental Civil War events, is shrouded in legend and mythology. Albert Sidney Johnston's proclamation that his army's horses would be watered in the Tennessee River on the evening of April 6, 1862, as well as Grant's determination to "lick" the Confederates forces the next morning, have seemingly never left the collective historical conscience of the American public. On the other hand, the stories of individual regiments appear to be overlooked by history. These are the records that reconstruct the ground-level of the Shiloh story. The role of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry is one of those accounts. It is a tale clouded by politics and overshadowed by larger-than-life military heroes. For these reasons, and many others, the Fifty-Third Ohio deserves to be reexamined.

Chapter 2

The Formation of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry

Introduction

The unity and sectional compromise that created the United States were in peril at the midway point of the nineteenth century. Slavery, and the sectional problems associated with the institution, threatened to destroy the world's largest and most recent attempt at self-government. While the northern half of the nation moved toward an industrialized economy based on free labor, the south strengthened its resolve to protect slave labor. Both sides were economically tied to the institution, but white southerners lived in a world of social hierarchy based on race. As the southern population perceived increased attacks on their social and economic structure, the drums of war grew louder.¹

Efforts to prevent a civil war only delayed the violence. The Fugitive Slave Act, Dred Scott Decision, the birth of the Republican Party, the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and other factors clearly signaled the threat that slavery posed to the sectionally unified republic. When the republican candidate Abraham Lincoln won the election of 1860 without any real support below the Ohio River, many white southerners believed the nation reached a breaking point. Several southern states moved toward secession as Lincoln's inauguration approached. The crisis grew even more perilous as South Carolina officially left the Union approximately one month after the election.² The experiment known as the United States of America was unraveling.

¹ David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis: America before the Civil War, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 18-50.

² Sidney Blumenthal, *All the Powers of Earth: The Political Life of Abraham Lincoln, 1856-1860* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 628.

Abraham Lincoln addressed the fractured nation for the first time as president on March 4, 1861. Doing his best to relieve southern fears, Lincoln directly declared slavery the cause of the sectional crisis stating, “One section of our country believes slavery is *right* and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is *wrong* and ought not to be extended.”³ Speaking from the shadow of the heavily guarded Capitol, Lincoln urged the nation to pursue a peaceful solution to the pending violence.⁴ Unfortunately, the newly inaugurated president’s poetic words were not enough to keep Americans from waging war on their fellow countrymen. The United States was on the brink of civil war.

The sectional crisis reached its climax with the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. Confederate cannonballs smashed into the U.S. stronghold off the coast of South Carolina before sunrise. This violent act of rebellion finally ignited the divided nation’s long-simmering political contentions into the horrors of combat.⁵ In Washington, President Lincoln promptly responded by requesting that the states still loyal to the Union muster the necessary men into military service to squash the rebellion. For many in the Union, the president’s April 15th call for 75,000 men brought the previously distant crisis into their cabins, shops, farms, and homesteads.⁶ The men who would serve in the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry, and citizens throughout the Union, suddenly found their personal lives upended by the call for national service.

³ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cleveland: Da Capo Press, 2001), 586.

⁴ Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life Volume II* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 59.

⁵ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 273-274.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 274-275.

The state of Ohio quickly answered Lincoln's call for military manpower. On April 23, 1861, Ohio's General Assembly passed "An Act to Provide for the Rapid Organization of the Militia of Ohio" to expedite the surge of expected volunteers.⁷ The call to arms was well received by Unionists and met with enthusiasm from the Ohio River to Lake Erie.⁸ Men throughout Ohio eagerly joined the war effort in such numbers that the state easily surpassed Lincoln's request for soldiers.⁹ As was the case throughout the Midwestern states, a significant number of Ohioans were fully dedicated to the restoration of Union.

However, the Fifty-Third Ohio was not immediately formed following the president's call for volunteers. The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was not officially formed until an order from Governor William Dennison, Jr. created the regiment on September 6, 1861.¹⁰ Broadsides and posters alerting men of the creation of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry littered the walls of barns, postal offices, and stores throughout Pike, Jackson, Scioto, Lawrence, and other southern Ohio counties. Patriotic and adventurous men were encouraged to descend on Jackson, Ohio to start their service in the Union Army.¹¹ A combination of national loyalty and

⁷ Curt Brown, ed., *Leaving Home in Dark Blue: Chronicling Ohio's Civil War Experience Through Primary Sources & Literature* (Akron: Buchtel Books, 2012), 7-8.

⁸ Historian Andrew R.L. Cayton states that 346,326 Ohioans had served the Union cause as of December 1, 1864 in his book, *Ohio: The History of a People*. Furthermore, Cayton argues that more Ohioans served in Civil War combat than any other Northern state in proportion to population is considered. George W. Knepper's *Ohio and its People: Bicentennial Edition* does not list the overall number of Ohioans in combat, but corroborates Cayton's overall argument that Ohio overwhelmingly answered President Lincoln's calls for enlistment. Furthermore, Knepper lists the total number of Ohio Civil War dead at 34,591 with 11,237 dying in battle and 23,354 dying from disease. Both Cayton and Knepper claim that Governor Dennison's belief that "Ohio must lead" the Union war effort was a major factor in the large recruitment numbers from the state.

⁹ James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16-17.

¹⁰ John K. Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion 1861-1865* (Portsmouth: The Blade Printing Company, 1900), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

naivety of the true nature of the conflict kept the recruiting officers busy with a steady flow of recruits.

To understand why the Fifty-Third Ohio was created, and how men were convinced to join the regiment, it is important to examine what motivated Ohioans to join the Union war effort. Specifically, why were men willing to leave their careers, family, and friends behind to risk their lives to subdue the rebellion? The conditions and effectiveness of the regiment's training are also important factors in understanding the origins of the Fifty-Third Ohio. Even though the men of the regiment readily enlisted to fight due to many motivating factors, the lack of training and poor leadership practices placed the Fifty-Third Ohio at a disadvantage at the battle of Shiloh and impacted its legacy into the 1900s.

Origins of the Fifty-Third Ohio

The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry began its war service at Camp Diamond in Jackson, Ohio under the leadership of Colonel J.J. (Jesse) Appler.¹² As a citizen and an entrepreneur, Appler was well respected in his local community and the surrounding area.¹³ He previously served in the Ohio militia and brought minor military experience to the Fifty-Third Ohio.¹⁴ Despite his later failures on the battlefield at Shiloh, many of his men and members of the larger community perceived Appler to be an able commander.¹⁵ On paper, and in the minds

¹² Anonymous, "Number and Location of Ohio Regiments," *Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph*, October 18, 1861, 4.

¹³ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the War of the Rebellion*, 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹⁵ Anonymous, "For the Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph: Salem, October 27, 1861," *Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph*, November 1, 1861, 1.

of many of his fellow-citizens, J.J. Appler possessed the necessary qualities for battlefield success.

Appler came to Camp Diamond with long and successful career as a public servant and office holder. He gained minor notoriety by serving as probate judge in Scioto County before the war.¹⁶ Appler even continued to serve the Portsmouth, Ohio area following the Civil War as a commissioner in various offices in local government.¹⁷ However, he was not without his detractors. Ephraim C. Dawes who served as Appler's adjunct during the Battle of Shiloh wrote that some parents in southern Ohio were unwilling to allow their sons to enlist in Appler's regiment due to his reputation for "desperate courage."¹⁸ Appler gained a modest reputation for unsteady leadership that could potentially place his men in harm's way during his brief military career before the creation of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry.¹⁹

However, Dawes' criticism of Appler's qualifications should be viewed in the proper context. His words were written approximately three decades after the war when Appler's battlefield reputation was thoroughly destroyed following the Battle of Shiloh. In addition, Dawes offered no further explanation on his charge of Appler demonstrating "desperate courage." By the time Dawes presented this assessment of Appler, the former colonel of the Fifty-Third Ohio was widely derided as a poor military commander. It is possible that Dawes'

¹⁶ J.J. Appler, "Peter Fisher's Estate," *Portsmouth Daily Times*, December 15, 1854, 4.

¹⁷ Anonymous, "Local Department," *Portsmouth Daily Times*, September 24, 1870, 3; J.J. Appler, Chris A. Barton, and Albert Cramer, "Notice to Water Consumers," *Portsmouth Daily Times*, April 28, 1877, 2.

¹⁸ Ephraim C. Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga, 1862-1864*, ed. The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1908), 125.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

assessment of Appler was entirely based on later events and not an accurate reflection of his reputation in 1861.

Despite the debate over Appler's merits as a commander, men from southern Ohio readily joined the regiment and cheerfully reported for military service at Camp Diamond. Originally marketed as a mounted regiment, the Fifty-Third Ohio was transformed into a traditional infantry regiment during its stay in Jackson. Newspapers reported the arrival of soldiers to Camp Diamond to keep a curious public informed about the activities of their local heroes. Like many papers, *The Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph* informed its readers that a "company of about fifty" from the local community safely entered camp on October 17, 1861.²⁰ Often, the boys received joyous sendoffs from their local communities as they embarked on a military life in the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry.²¹ Bands, banners, and parades illustrated the pride local communities felt for their citizens leaving to answer their country's call at Camp Diamond. No one foresaw the trial by fire, and the magnitude of the carnage, that awaited the men of the regiment on the battlefield at Shiloh.

Camp Diamond occupied an old Diamond Furnace slightly to the north of the town of Jackson, Ohio. Known for its contributions to the iron industry, the old manufacturing site was perfect for a hastily assembled military camp. The necessary buildings and infrastructure for a nineteenth century military post were already in place as the Fifty-Third Ohio started its residency. Several small buildings throughout the grounds provided housing for the soldiers while officers made use of the former Furnace Company's store and warehouse building. The

²⁰ Anonymous, "For the Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph," *Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph*, November 1, 1861, 2.

²¹ W. Spence, "Headquarters 53d Reg't O.V.U.S.A.," *Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph*, December 20, 1861, 2.

quartermaster set up shop in another large building on the grounds. The old Diamond Furnace site quickly became a suitable habitation for the regiment.²²

The first group of soldiers to arrive at Camp Diamond were from Athens County, Ohio. Although not a full and completely assembled company, the men from Athens walked into the Fifty-Third Ohio's camp on September 16, 1861.²³ The first full company arrived on the heels of the Athens men after making the journey to Jackson from Pike County, Ohio. The Pike Countians entered neighboring Jackson County under the leadership of Wells S. Jones whose military accolades would soon surpass almost every man in the regiment. Mostly due to their role as the first unit to meet its quota to officially qualify as a company, Jones' Pike County boys were labeled as Company A for the duration of the war.²⁴ Jones later commanded the regiment, but he entered Camp Diamond as raw as any of the other recruits in the Fifty-Third Ohio. Like many men in the regiment, Jones' response to the first day's fighting at Shiloh would play a major factor in his rising rank.

Along with Company A, Company F played a key role in the regiment's Shiloh story. Company F consisted of men from Pike, Ross, and Jackson Counties. These men entered the Union army under the company leadership of Captain James R. Percy.²⁵ Among the most educated men in the regiment, Percy was teaching in Piketon, Ohio when he enlisted in the Fifty-Third Ohio.²⁶ Percy was remembered by his comrades as a colorful character who, among his

²² Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the War of the Rebellion*, 2-3.

²³ Anonymous, "Fifty-Third! A Pleasant Time with the Old Veterans! After Twenty-Three Years They Again Enjoy Jackson Hospitality!" *The Jackson Standard*, April 16, 1885, 1.

²⁴ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the War of the Rebellion*, 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

other idiosyncrasies and bizarre exploits, once waded a river completely nude under Rebel fire to find a suitable crossing for the Fifty-Third Ohio. The stunned Confederates held their fire to better observe his shocking adventure.²⁷ Even with his peculiarities, Percy was later well respected and loved by his men due to his abilities as a captain and his courage under fire during the Battle of Shiloh.

By all accounts, the soldiers were treated with kindness by the Jackson, Ohio local population and provided with all the necessary equipment for a comfortable entrance into military life.²⁸ But what motivated the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio to leave their homes, families, farms, and occupations to join a hastily assembled army in what would become the deadliest war in American history? Accurately discerning the motives of an entire regiment filled with men of differing backgrounds is an impossible task for any historian. Each man carried his own concerns and sense of duty into his personal military service. Historian Peter S. Carmichael summarized the complex reasons behind the motivation to enlist by writing, “Virtually all historians agree that Civil War soldiers were not apolitical defenders of home and hearth, but complicated beings who were deeply ideological, articulate, and driven to fight and die for high ideals.”²⁹

Most of the personal reasons for enlistment are lost to history due to a lack of written evidence or the destruction of letters during the postbellum decades. However, insights into why

²⁶ E.C. Dawes, “A Hero of the War,” in *G.A.R. Papers: Papers Read before Fred C. Jones Post, No. 401, Department of Ohio, G.A.R.*, ed. E.R. Monfort, H.B. Furness, and Fred H. Alms (Cincinnati: Elm Street Printing Co., 1891), 293.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 294-296.

²⁸ Ephraim Dawes to William Stephenson, October 28, 1861, series 1, box 1, folder 43, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

²⁹ Peter S. Carmichael, *The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 10.

the men joined the regiment remain in the surviving letters and the official memoir/history of the unit written by Fifty-Third Ohio veteran, John K. Duke. After examining the enduring literature of the regiment and other documents of the Civil War Era, it is clear that the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry were products of their time and motivated by the values and politics of the era to serve in the bloodiest war in American history. Patriotic duty, Victorian-Era honor, economic stability, passionate political beliefs, and religion factored into the men's motivation to enlist.³⁰

Unionism

While it is difficult to collectively explain the motives of soldiers who enlisted in the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry, patriotism and the preservation of the Union ranked high as motivating factors for many soldiers. Even though the Civil War was ignited over a political struggle related to the institution of slavery and eventually became a war to end human bondage, many of the war's early enlistees simply wanted to preserve the Union.³¹ From its creation through the Battle of Shiloh in 1862, the Fifty-Third Ohio mostly exhibited this view of the war. The regiment came into existence a year before the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation and well before President Lincoln officially attached his name to the document that transformed the

³⁰ See Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Steven E. Woodworth, *While God is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001); Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Peter S. Carmichael, *The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018). These works, and their contribution to the topic's historiography, provide the basis for my definitions of duty, honor, politics, and religion of the Civil War Era.

³¹ Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1-6.

war into a righteous cause for liberation. Therefore, the men who arrived at Camp Diamond to fight under the leadership of Colonel Appler were outraged by the rebellion and the firmly dedicated to the initial goal of preserving the Union.

The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry's dedication to Union was visible during multiple encounters with the symbols of the Confederate States of America during the war. Two specific events illustrated this view of the rebellion. While entering the town of Lafayette, Tennessee on June 23, 1862, the Fifty-Third Ohio was enraged by the sight of a Confederate flag prominently flying over the town. Given the description in the regimental memoir, this flag was likely the Confederate political flag known as "The Stars and Bars." The Ohioans quickly destroyed the symbol of the rebellion and flew the flag of the United States over the town. After grabbing an ax and chopping down the flagpole, the members of the Fifty-Third tore the Confederate's flag into pieces and sent the remains back to Ohio as souvenirs to be proudly displayed in their homes.³²

A similar event occurred when the regiment entered Jackson, Mississippi following the siege of Vicksburg in 1863. The Ohioans saw the rebel battle flag raised above the town and quickly discussed the best approach to ensure its destruction. According to John K. Duke's memoir, "This hated flag was soon displaced and 'Old Glory' flung to the breeze by the 53rd O.V.I."³³ While most of the regiment would eventually embrace the changing the objectives of the Union cause, and show a surprising acceptance of African-American soldiers into the Union

³² Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 94-95.

³³ *Ibid.*, 109.

Army, it is clear that Unionism motivated the majority of the men to initially enlist in the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry.

Slavery

However, this is not meant to indicate that the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio were untouched and unmotivated by the issue of slavery. The men of the Fifty-Third were uniquely positioned to understand the debate arguably better than most of their Union comrades due to the geographical location of the regiment's origin. The men of the regiment came from the southern Ohio counties that neighbored the boundary between free and slave states. The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio came from the counties of Pike, Athens, Scioto, Lawrence, Jackson, Ross, Meigs, Washington, Gallia, Prebel, and Hamilton.³⁴ While not all of the counties were directly situated on the banks of the Ohio River, all the counties were at most a day's ride from the river. Scioto, Meigs, Washington, Lawrence, Athens, Gallia, and Hamilton counties bordered either Kentucky or Virginia from the north bank of the Ohio River.

Growing up near a geographical line with the monumental political implications of the Ohio River could have factored into the men's mindset. This was no ordinary dividing line, but a location that simmered with the constant possibility of slavery-related hostilities.³⁵ As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in his journeys through antebellum America, slavery caused obvious social, economic, and political differences between Ohio and Kentucky.³⁶ Tocqueville famously

³⁴ Ibid., 3-4.

³⁵ Stephen I. Rockenbach, *War Upon Our Border: Two Ohio Valley Communities Navigate the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 11-12; Robert H. Churchill, *The Underground Railroad and the Geography of Violence in Antebellum America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 56-57; George W. Knepper, *Ohio and its People: Bicentennial Edition* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2003), 196.

³⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 331-333.

wrote, “On the left bank of the Ohio work is blended with the idea of slavery; on the right bank...there it is degraded.”³⁷ The men of the regiment came of age on the geographical front line of the hottest political debate of their era.

While it is impossible to know if any of the Fifty-Third Ohio encountered runaway slaves, or if they were even aware of the Underground Railroad, they lived on the direct route self-liberated slaves travelled in their journey to freedom. In addition, at least one free African-Americans served the regiment as a cook at Camp Diamond.³⁸ How this impacted the individual and collective mindset of the regiment is also impossible to estimate. However, the official regimental history indicates an acceptance and compassion for African-Americans among the soldiers of the Fifty-Third Ohio following the first test of African-Americans in combat.³⁹ According to Duke’s official history of the regiment, the initial reaction to emancipation and the use of African-American soldiers was mixed. Like the many in the Union ranks, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry understood emancipation to be a necessary tactic for hastening the end of the war. The men of the regiment, like the population of Ohio, held complex views on African-Americans and equality, but understood slavery to be at the heart of the Civil War.⁴⁰

Often, Union soldiers who had not encountered slavery became its most fervent opponents once their regiments came into direct contact with the institution. As Union armies moved into the agricultural plantation society of the deep south, contact with enslaved men and

³⁷ Ibid., 332.

³⁸ Ephraim Dawes to William B. Stephenson, October 28, 1861, series 1, box 1, folder 43, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

³⁹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the War of the Rebellion*, 102-103

⁴⁰ Ibid.

women was inevitable.⁴¹ The soldiers in blue were seen as a liberating force even before President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The wartime service of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry immediately placed the regiment on a collision course with slavery. Following the Ohioans first combat experience at Shiloh, the regiment marched deeper into the south during the campaigns to take Corinth and Vicksburg. The regiment participated in the march through the slave-dependent state of Georgia with General William T. Sherman during the war's final years.

The complex views of slavery are visible through an examination of the division the Fifty-Third Ohio joined at the outset of its service. The regiment was under the command of General William Tecumseh Sherman. Like the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio, Sherman was a product of the southern Ohio. The abolition of slavery was not the war's primary objective for Sherman. Never an abolitionist, the general only came to accept the end of slavery as a wartime measure necessary to crushing the rebellion.⁴² Sherman clearly defined his opinion on slavery's connection to the rebellion in an 1864 letter: "too much stress has been laid on the Negro. It is used as a touch Stone, a test. It should not be, but treated as any other minor question. The Negro question will solve itself. The Government of the United States is the Issue. Shall it stand or fall?"⁴³

Sherman's view of slavery, African-Americans, equality, and the origins of the Civil War were not unique. Many Westerners shared his opinion. The belief that the war was fought to

⁴¹ Stephen D. Engle, "Shiloh and Corinth," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Civil War*, ed. Lorien Foote and Earl J. Hess (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 215.

⁴² Kristopher A. Teters, *Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 133-134.

⁴³ Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds, *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 613.

simply save the Union was prevalent in Ohio. However, many soldiers, including members of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry, grew into stronger opponents of the institution of slavery for moral and logistical reasons. Opinions throughout the state of Ohio were complex and ever-evolving during the war, but rooted in a dedication to preserving the Union. As historian Kristopher Teters argued about the Sherman and the men under his command: “Ironically, the general who probably least interested in assuming the mantle of liberator led an army that freed thousands.”⁴⁴

On the other hand, the men of the regiment came of age in the same region that molded their commander-in-chief, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln’s opposition to slavery grew from personal experiences working on and near the Ohio River. Lincoln biographer David S. Reynolds wrote of the sixteenth president’s impactful 1841 encounter with slavery: “the sight of chained blacks...seen on the Ohio River steamboat fourteen years earlier haunted him.”⁴⁵ As a man of the West, Lincoln’s life straddled the dividing line between the free and slave states. The firsthand experience with the institution in the Ohio River region assisted in morphing Lincoln into a champion for slavery’s isolation and eventual demise. Twenty years after the sixteenth president’s life-changing encounter with slavery, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was formed by men who lived and traveled the same river. Coming into contact with slavery impacted individual men in uniquely personal ways.

⁴⁴ Teters, *Practical Liberators*, 133.

⁴⁵ David S. Reynolds, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 323.

Politics

In addition, Ohio experienced massive political change during the decade that preceded the Civil War. The state became a microcosm of the larger United States through its shifting political structure in response to its approach to slavery. The Republican Party found almost immediate success throughout Ohio. During the election of 1856, the first election to feature a candidate for president from the new party, many Ohioans gathered for rallies to show their support for the Republican ticket. In a somewhat shocking outcome, the Republican candidate John C. Fremont beat James Buchanan to secure Ohio electoral votes four years before Abraham Lincoln emerged as the new party's first successful presidential candidate.⁴⁶ However, while the rallies in support of Fremont proved the existence of strong Republican support in part of the state, the southern portion of Ohio mostly supported the Democratic ticket.⁴⁷

The southern counties along the Ohio that eventually filled the ranks of the Fifty-Third Ohio were politically diverse. Unlike other parts of Ohio, the southern counties were heavily populated by citizens from the slave states of Virginia and Kentucky. The proximity of these states created an environment that harbored feelings of uneasiness toward radical abolitionists while still understanding the importance of prohibiting slavery in newly acquired territories. It was in this climate that southern Ohio proved slightly more receptive to the 1860 Republican candidacy of Abraham Lincoln. While still not as strongly Republican as other portions of the state, southern Ohio did place more counties into Lincoln's column in 1860 than Fremont's 1856 campaign.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Vernon L. Volpe, "Ohio of Republican Dominance: John C. Fremont's 1856 Victory in Ohio," in *The Pursuit of Public Power: Political Culture in Ohio, 1787-1861*, ed. Jeffrey P. Brown and Andrew R.L. Cayton (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1994), 155-164.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 165-166.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 165-168.

Historian Timothy B. Smith summarized the political culture of this region. Smith claimed that the southern counties in Ohio, “were tied more to the Ohio River and Kentucky slavery than to the free labor industries farther north, there was some fear that those counties might side with the South early in the war...”⁴⁹ The political division that characterized the pivotal state of Kentucky also found its way north of the Ohio River and into the land of the Fifty-Third Ohio. As was common with the northern states known as the “west” during the Civil War Era, the southern counties of Ohio were less enthusiastic about supporting perceived abolitionist candidates than other northern states.⁵⁰

However, the 1857 Dred Scott decision provided a boost to Republican membership as many Ohioans feared the Supreme Court might soon declare slavery legal in their state. Furthermore, Ohio Republicans believed the entire American judicial system was now in the possession of the slave interest. The possibility that slave-owners could be granted property rights on Northern soil suddenly appeared a reality to Ohio Republicans.⁵¹ According to historian Eric Foner: “Many Republicans believed that slavery would be established in the North, not by a direct Supreme Court decision but by a ruling on the right of slaveholders to bring slaves into and out of free states without forfeiting their property rights.”⁵² Regardless of their stance on

⁴⁹ Timothy B. Smith, *Grant Invades Tennessee: The 1862 Battles for Forts Henry and Donelson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 39.

⁵⁰ Christopher Phillips, *The Rivers Ran Backward: The Civil War and the Remaking of the American Middle Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8.

⁵¹ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 96-98.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 97-98.

emancipation and equality, the tradition of Ohio's status as free was not something most Ohioans were willing to lose.

The Dred Scott Decision had a unifying impact on Ohio's population. From Lake Erie to the Ohio River, Ohio citizenship suddenly carried more importance. Even Ohioans who supported slavery in the South and viewed African-Americans as inferior were often swept up in political fervor caused by the decision. For this reason, the issue of slavery dominated Ohio politics during the late antebellum period. Citizens of the state were identifying themselves with the political group that was best equipped to defend Ohio's status as a free state. By the outbreak of the Civil War, the majority of the state had adopted some aspect of the Republican Party's platform.⁵³ Even though many of the Fifty-Third Ohio's soldiers did not embrace the language and ideology of abolition, they were likely impacted by the growing solidarity and dedication to Ohio freedom.

The Fifty-Third Ohio's post-war regimental memoir emphasized a few members' affiliation with the Republican Party. Connections to the party of Lincoln were mentioned in the memoir's section containing biographical sketches of former soldiers, John K. Duke and Wells S. Jones.⁵⁴ It is not clear if these men were Republican Party members before the war, or if the inclusion of their party affiliation was added for reasons related to the publication date of 1900. Duke authored the regimental memoir, but he was not a member of the regiment when it was founded which may decrease the importance of political affiliation as stated in the memoir.⁵⁵

⁵³ Andrew R.L. Cayton, *Ohio: The History of a People* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 107-126.

⁵⁴ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 242-247.

⁵⁵ The Roster Commission, *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865: Volume IV, 37th-53rd Regiments – Infantry* (Akron: The Werner PTG. and MFG. Co., 1887), 693.

Furthermore, Colonel J.J. Appler was an active Democrat at the time of the regiment's formation and remained involved in the party for the remainder of his life.⁵⁶ The Fifty-Third Ohio consisted of republicans and democrats with a variety of opinions on the future of the United States.

Economics

In addition to political concerns, economic considerations were a factor for the men of the regiment. Undoubtedly, the allure of money drew soldiers to enlist. Many men enlisted into the Fifty-Third Ohio for security of steady pay. The majority of the regiment came from economic backgrounds that did not provide consistent paychecks. The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry came from farms, shops, classrooms, and family-owned mills. As stated on the posters calling for volunteers, each soldier was promised \$100 and 160 acres of land for their service.⁵⁷ In addition, the posters assured continuous pay from the day of enlistment, equipment, and well-made clothing.⁵⁸ The enticement of salary not only appeared as the focal point of the official recruitment poster, but was highlighted in newspaper articles in the regiment's recruitment area.⁵⁹ In addition to the one-hundred dollar bounty upon enlistment, the Fifty-Third Ohio's recruiting lieutenants promised a monthly salary of thirteen dollars.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Anonymous, "Scioto Democratic Ticket," *Portsmouth Daily Times*, September 20, 1859, 2.

⁵⁷ "53rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry Recruitment Poster," Ohio History Connection, accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll32/id/18082>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ D.H. Lasley, "Freemen! Stand to your Arms! 'Your Country Yet Remains!' 100 Men Wanted!" *Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph*, November 15, 1861, 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Throughout the war, the men of the regiment wrote to their families in Ohio about their salaries and indicated the positive impact of the income on their family finances.⁶¹ Personal finances were important for the men of the Ohio regiment. Since many of the soldiers in the regiment worked on family farms or other forms of self-employed labor, having the man of the family leave to serve an extended period in military service could be economically devastating. Often, the men were left without wages as the U.S. government struggled to keep up with the massive undertaking of waging a modern war.⁶² As stated in a letter from William McDonald to his wife, the government frequently fell behind in compensating the Fifty-Third Ohio placing a strain on the finances of the soldiers and their families.⁶³

Religion

In addition to the inescapable realities of economics and politics, religion was an ever-present part of life during the Civil War Era. The Civil War occurred in the midst of arguably the most religious period in American history. Historian Timothy L. Wesley defined the Civil War as being “fought by a distinctly pious people in a distinctly pious age.”⁶⁴ Like most antebellum Americans, the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry were products of post-Second Great Awakening America. The religious movement of the early 1800s still had a profound

⁶¹ “Letter from William McDonald to Sarah McDonald, March 12, 1862,” Ohio University Digital Archival Collections, Accessed May 30, 2022, <https://media.library.ohio.edu/digital/collection/p15808coll6/id/3522/rec/7>.

⁶² Ephraim Dawes to Lucy Dawes, July 31, 1862, series 1, box 1, folder 22, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

⁶³ “Letter from William McDonald to Sarah McDonald, January 3, 1863,” Ohio University Digital Archival Collections, Accessed May 30, 2022, <https://media.library.ohio.edu/digital/collection/p15808coll6/id/3539/rec/16>.

⁶⁴ Timothy L. Wesley, “Religion in the Civil War Era,” in *The Cambridge History of the American Civil War Volume III: Affairs of the People*, ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 71.

impact on the American view of religion in the 1860s. Religion influenced almost every aspect of American life, and provided believers with potential answers to complex political and social questions, during an era that historian George C. Rable labeled a “largely pre-Darwinian world.”⁶⁵

On the eve of the Civil War, American churches were filled with an estimated twenty-three million free citizens attending services on a regular basis.⁶⁶ Protestant denominations especially benefitted from travelling evangelists spreading their message throughout the North and South and adding new members to American churches.⁶⁷ Morality in spiritual, political, and patriotic terms on the eve of the Civil War were defined by the teachings of the Second Great Awakening.⁶⁸ How the influence of religion motivated each man to enlist and face enemy fire is purely speculation, but religion based on the Protestant Bible clearly impacted the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry, as it did soldiers on both sides of the conflict.⁶⁹

Not only was the influence of the Second Great Awakening easily observed in American culture on the eve of the Civil War, but the state that produced the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer

⁶⁵ George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen People: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 2.

⁶⁶ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 55-57; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, “Turning Pews into People: Estimating Nineteenth Century Church Membership,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 25, no. 2 (June 1986): 180-192.

⁶⁷ Kathryn Teresa Long, *The Revival of 1857-1858: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 48; John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 34; David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 66.

⁶⁸ McPherson, *The Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, 8.

⁶⁹ Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 370-372.

Infantry was home to a series of war-time religious revivals.⁷⁰ The spiritual fervor in Ohio spread throughout the countryside and filled the pages of letters from the home front to soldiers on the battlefields.⁷¹ Few institutions influenced American society during the Civil War than the Church.⁷²

The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry's ranks contained men whose pre-war occupation were in church leadership positions. At least two Methodist ministers served as officers in the regiment and others filled the role of chaplains. This religious influence trickled down to the enlisted men. Card playing and drinking, common vices among the era's male population, were strictly prohibited in the Fifty-Third Ohio. Religious services and prayer gatherings were almost nightly occurrences during the regiment's stay at Camp Diamond and even after the regiment entered the field.⁷³ According to one officer, "the spirituality and Christianity of the regiment, certainly could not be surpassed."⁷⁴

The author of the Fifty-Third Ohio's regimental history frequently relied on the spiritual terminology of the era when describing the regiment's wartime service. The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio were not unique in their frequent references to religion, God, and spiritual matters. The armies of the Civil War were some of the most religious in the history of Western Civilization. The regimental history frequently mentioned the Fifty-Third Ohio's observance of

⁷⁰ Steven E. Woodworth, *While God is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 8-9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 253-254.

⁷² Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 27; Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Alter of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 37.

⁷³ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the War of the Rebellion*, 5-6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6

the Sabbath and its author voiced his concern that the Union Army's schedule hindered the Fifty-Third Ohio from properly observe the holy day asking: "Will the God of Nations bless a cause which so flagrantly violates his holy day by deliberately planning for a campaign to commence upon the Sabbath?"⁷⁵ Furthermore, the author described the regiment's homeland just north of the Ohio River as "God's Country."⁷⁶

Honor, Duty, and Manhood

Similar to religion, the era's emphasis on honor and duty drove the members of the Fifty-Third Ohio to enlist. These virtues were of great importance in all of antebellum society, but they were unavoidable merits for the American male population. As historian James McPherson argued, the sense of duty during the Civil War Era was a part of everyday life.⁷⁷ Men were expected to maintain high levels of honesty and never shy from protecting their family, home, or way of life. As McPherson wrote, "The consciousness of duty was pervasive in Victorian America."⁷⁸ Even though the concepts of honor and duty are often associated with Civil War Era southern culture, they were realities for northern men as well.

The official reports of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry throughout the war illustrated the importance of honor. Often, the reports featured specific praise for men who exhibited these virtues on the battlefield. In his official report, the Fifty-Third Ohio's brigade commander, Jesse Hildebrand, specifically mentioned members of the Fifty-Third Ohio as

⁷⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁷⁷ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 22-23.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

properly fulfilling their duty at Shiloh.⁷⁹ In the same report, members of the Fifty-Third Ohio that did not exhibit honor and courage were called out. In 1860s America, a man's courage on the battlefield, and his overall dedication to fulfilling his military duty, were tied to his character and honor.⁸⁰ Soldiers on both sides of the conflict were often urged by their families to face the enemy and to perform honorably on the battlefield.⁸¹ Performing well under fire usually resulted in an official promotion and earning the respect of comrades. As the war continued, several members of the Fifty-Third used this avenue to move up the ranks. Ephraim C. Dawes, Robert Fulton, Wells S. Jones, and other members of the regiment's promotions were reflected by glowing accounts of their bravery and courage in the Fifty-Third Ohio's official reports.⁸²

Honor during the Civil War was also directly tied to the era's definition of manhood. The title of a "man" was not guaranteed to a person born as a biological male.⁸³ Earning the distinction of a Civil War Era "man" required men to perform activities and present themselves with the characteristics associated with the title. For many men, Civil War combat provided the ideal opportunity to prove not only his honor, but his worthiness as a "man." Historian Lorien Foote defined nineteenth century manhood as: "an achievement rather than an innate nature."⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Robert N. Scott, ed., *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume X, Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 264.

⁸⁰ Carmichael, *The War for the Common Soldier*, 3.

⁸¹ O. Edward Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, ed. Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith (New York: Savas Beatie, 2019), 272.

⁸² Redfield Proctor, ed., *A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies Series I, Volume XXXVIII, Part III* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891), 257.

⁸³ Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 1-16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

For the soldiers of the Fifty-Third Ohio, the war placed them on a collision course with the era's definitions of masculine character.

Camp Diamond

Regardless of their motivations for enlisting, this was the collection of men that reported for duty at Camp Diamond in 1861. Little did the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio know that they were prepping for the bloodiest battle in American history to that time. Furthermore, the Union Army was filled with countless commanders who were given their position due to their standing in civilian and political circles more than military merits. Even men with military backgrounds were lacking in their understanding of Civil War-era combat. The training that the Fifty-Third received was severely inadequate. Since the regiment's leader was the mostly inexperienced Jesse Appler, the Fifty-Third Ohio received little drilling that prepared them for the coming fight at Shiloh. Ephraim C. Dawes wrote of Appler, "He had little education, but much general intelligence; good ideas of discipline, but no knowledge of drill nor of army regulation."⁸⁵ Dawes had a similar impression of the regiment's collective leadership and doubted the Fifty-Third Ohio's ability to properly prepare for combat.⁸⁶

Major H.S. Cox was tasked with the job of drilling the Fifty-Third Ohio while in camp in Jackson, Ohio. Cox served under Lew Wallace before the war and came into the regiment with combat experience from the Battle of Bull Run. However, Cox suffered a common fate for Civil War soldiers and fell ill during the regiment's stay at Camp Diamond. Due to the illness, Cox

⁸⁵ E. C. Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1890-1896, Volume IV*, ed. W.H. Chamberlin (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1896), 1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

was unable to adequately fulfill his duties and never led the men in a single military drill. Both Union and Confederacy were still struggling to understand the full scope of the conflict in the war's early years and frequently placed men in harm's way without the proper combat training. In this regard, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was no exception. The regiment completed basic regimental parade drills at Camp Diamond, but the men did not participate in a single battalion drill when they departed Jackson for the field.⁸⁷

During the regiment's stay at Camp Diamond, the men were sometimes distracted by the attractions of the community. This often led to the administering of military punishment. According to Captain Wells S. Jones of Company A: "the guard house at Camp Diamond was well patronized."⁸⁸ However, the offenses were usually related to minor infractions of camp rules. Soldiers overstaying their approved leave in Jackson appear to be the regiment's most widespread crime. In 1885, Jones recalled the regiment's biggest scandal involving two soldiers "eating pie" in January of 1862.⁸⁹ Whether the pie was stolen or eaten against orders, Jones' recollection indicates a raw, but well-mannered, regiment.

Before the regiment left Camp Diamond, an outbreak of measles struck the camp with devastating results. The outbreak was attributed to the lack of clean straw in the camp. According to the regimental memoir, the men often slept on straw during the regiment's residence at Camp Diamond. Over time, the straw decayed and was not properly replaced. This was believed to cause a bacterial outbreak among the men.⁹⁰ Whether this explanation could

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Wells S. Jones, "The Page of Memory! Anecdotes and Incidents of the Brave Old Fifty-Third!" *The Jackson Standard*, April 2, 1885, 1.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 5.

withstand modern medical scrutiny or not, the account highlights the Civil War Era's struggle to properly understand medicine and disease.

Once again, Jackson's local population came to the aid of the regiment. Women from the local community arrived to nurse the sick men back to health.⁹¹ Unfortunately, their best efforts were not enough to save two popular and respected soldiers from the measles epidemic. Austin Crowell and David Anmiller succumbed to the effects of the illness near the end of 1861. Both men were ceremoniously buried in Jackson, Ohio.⁹² As was common among Civil War regiments, the Fifty-Third Ohio lost men to illness before it ever faced the enemy on a battlefield. Illness proved to be a constant companion to the Fifty-Third Ohio during the war. During its first military campaign in Tennessee, limited access to clean water devastated the men with digestive discomfort and severe illness.⁹³

Anxious to "See the Elephant"

The organization of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was completed in January of 1862.⁹⁴ Rumors spread through the Camp Diamond that the regiment would soon depart Jackson, Ohio to join a concentration of Union forces in Paducah, Kentucky.⁹⁵ By the time the regiment left Jackson on February 16, 1862, many of the men were tired of the monotony of military camp

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁴ T.J. Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh; Report of the Commission* (Cincinnati: C.J. Krehbiel & Co., 1903), 23.

⁹⁵ Ephraim Dawes to Lucy Dawes, February 1862, series 1, box 1, folder 22, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

life.⁹⁶ Even Ephraim C. Dawes' early enthusiasm for the Union war effort was replaced with the boredom often associated with Civil War camps. Writing to his sister, Dawes confirmed his desire to leave Camp Diamond and to participate in meaningful action.⁹⁷ However, in spite of the gloomy and muddy Ohio winter, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry numbered 821 men fit for duty by mid-January of 1862.⁹⁸

The Fifty-Third Ohio's creation at Camp Diamond in 1861 occurred in the war's infancy. The men who filled its ranks entered the war as the products of 1861 Northern culture. Soon, the regiment would unexpectedly find itself at the middle of the one of the largest battles of the Civil War. Regardless of their individual reason for enlisting, the soldiers of the Fifty-Third Ohio were about to collectively learn the lessons of combat. The clash that awaited Appler's men on the banks of the Tennessee River altered their shared perception of the war. The Fifty-Third Ohio's lack of training, unqualified leadership, occupation of an exposed position, and the overall failure of the Union command to appreciate the seriousness of the Confederate threat resulted in a day that unrightfully stained the reputation of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry. However, the regiment's Shiloh experience quickly transformed the Fifty-Third Ohio from a collection of green soldiers into hardened veterans of the war's Western Theater.

⁹⁶ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the War of the Rebellion*, 6.

⁹⁷ Ephraim Dawes to Lucy Dawes, January 14, 1862, series 1, box 1, folder 22, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

⁹⁸ Ephraim Dawes to Lucy Dawes, January 12, 1862, series 1, box 1, folder 22, Ephraim C. Dawes Paper, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

Chapter 3

From Jackson, Ohio to Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee

On February 16, 1862, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry departed Jackson, Ohio for Paducah, Kentucky with approximately 950 men in eight companies and two detachments.¹ Leaving its sick behind for proper medical attention, the regiment travelled a short distance by train to Portsmouth, Ohio.² Portsmouth was not only an important river town situated on the northern bank of the Ohio River, it was also the hometown of the regiment's commander, Colonel J.J. Appler. After spending one night in Portsmouth, the Fifty-Third Ohio boarded a steamboat and bid farewell to Ohio.³ For many of the men, this was their first journey outside the buckeye state and their first extended period away from family and friends.

Unfortunately, the regiment's journey toward its first combat experience at Shiloh would be marred by supply issues, illness, the chaos of a fluctuating Union command, Sherman's search for redemption, and the inability of Grant and Sherman to recognize the warning signs of a pending attack. The Fifty-Third Ohio arrived at the Union camp around the Shiloh Meetinghouse unprepared for the coming fight. In order to understand the regiment's level of unpreparedness, it is important to investigate why the Ohioans were placed in such a vulnerable position when they were among the most inexperienced soldiers at the Pittsburg Landing camp. First, how and why the regiment was present at Shiloh is important to contemplate. Next, why was the regiment ill-equipped and poorly prepared for the true nature of Civil War combat?

¹ Ephraim Dawes to Lucy Dawes, February 5, 1861, series 1, box, 1, folder 22, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

² Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the Rebellion*, 6.

³ Ibid.

Finally, it is necessary to investigate the relationship between the Fifty-Third Ohio and General William Tecumseh Sherman in the buildup to the Battle of Shiloh with emphasis on the location of the regiment's camp, the lack of fortifications, and the refusal of Union command to grasp the growing Rebel threat.

Paducah and General Sherman

The Fifty-Third Ohio arrived at an unusually damp Paducah, Kentucky on February 23, 1862.⁴ Every inch of Paducah appeared to be drenched with river water adding misery to the regiment's residency.⁵ The recently restored William Tecumseh Sherman commanded the Kentucky camp after serving a brief stint in Missouri.⁶ General Sherman had only been in charge for a week when the Fifty-Third Ohio arrived.⁷ General Henry Halleck, the commander of the Department of the Missouri, entrusted Sherman with command while Halleck worked to orchestrate a strike at the heart of the western Confederacy.⁸ The Western command believed Confederate resistance in the Mississippi River region was teetering on the verge of defeat and expected to crush the Rebels with an assault on the deep South.

Upon arrival, the Fifty-Third Ohio immediately reported to General Sherman. Captain Wells S. Jones recalled that Sherman introduced himself to the regiment by asking a member of

⁴ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁶ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs* (New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 2005), 202-205.

⁷ Ephraim C. Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga, 1862-1864*, ed. The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1908), 106.

⁸ Steven E. Woodworth, *Sherman* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 45.

the Fifty-Third Ohio, “How long do you expect to remain in the service?”⁹ Likely caught off guard by the question, and not wanting to embarrass himself in the general’s presence, the soldier answered for himself and his comrades, “The Regiment has enlisted for three years and expects to serve its time.”¹⁰ The answer pleased General Sherman who was already growing wary of politically ambitious soldiers. Sherman responded approvingly: “Most of you fellows come down here intending to go home and go to Congress in about three weeks.”¹¹ The Kentucky camp was the regiment’s first encounter with William Tecumseh Sherman, but the two would remain connected for the duration of the war.

Not only was Paducah the beginning of the Fifty-Third Ohio’s service outside its home state, it was an opportunity for General Sherman to rebuild his reputation after suffering public embarrassment the previous year. Overseeing the camp provided Sherman with the perfect opening to rehabilitate his public persona from allegations of insanity that wrecked his command. He had been placed on leave, and his mental health questioned, after Northern newspapers attacked his assessment of military affairs in Kentucky.¹² The story of Sherman’s “insanity” appeared in the *Cincinnati Commercial* and quickly spread through Northern newspapers.¹³ The *Cincinnati Commercial* article declared: “General W.T. Sherman, the commander of the Department of the Cumberland, is insane. We learn that he at one time

⁹ Wells S. Jones, “The Page of Memory! Anecdotes and Incidents of the Brave Old Fifty-Third!” *The Jackson Standard*, April 2, 1885, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² James McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country, A Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016), 285-287.

¹³ Anonymous, “General William T. Sherman Insane: From Yesterday’s Cincinnati Commercial,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 12, 1861, 1.

telegraphed to the War Department three times in one day for permission to evacuate Kentucky, and retreat into Indiana.”¹⁴ Although the charges against Sherman’s sanity were certainly overstated, the accusation tainted his reputation and caused him to consider taking his own life.¹⁵ According to biographer Lloyd Lewis, Sherman “let thoughts of suicide dart back and forth through his mind,” as he awaited his return to the army.¹⁶ Sherman entered his role at Paducah a broken man in search of redemption.

Fortunately for Sherman, he was politically well-connected and benefitted from his well-known family. His stepfather was a powerful Ohio politician named Thomas Ewing who orchestrated Sherman’s 1836 acceptance into West Point.¹⁷ Furthermore, his brother, John Sherman, was a sitting United State Senator at the time of the general’s fall from grace.¹⁸ Sherman’s connections not only undoubtedly assisted in his effort to return to active command, they also ensured his version of later events received a large audience. This proved unfortunate for the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the public debate over who truly failed in the initial moments of the Battle of Shiloh. But in the spring of 1862, the untested Fifty-Third Ohio was on the verge of its first combat experience with a division commander seeking redemption.

As men were sent to bolster Grant’s army fighting along the Tennessee River region, the number of Union soldiers at Paducah fluctuated. Action in the Western Theater drastically

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds., *Sherman’s Civil War Letters: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 174.

¹⁶ Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 203.

¹⁷ Robert L. O’Connell, *Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York: Random House, 2014), 3-4.

¹⁸ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 154-155.

outpaced the Eastern Theater during the war's early years. General Ulysses S. Grant required manpower to continue his assault on the Confederate army and relied on Sherman's camp to fill this need. At one point, the Paducah camp contained approximately 40,000 men, but as more men left to partake in the fighting on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, only about 15,000 soldiers remained under Sherman's command. Along with the Fifty-Third Ohio, at least six more Ohio regiments were housed at the Kentucky camp making Ohio the camp's most represented state.¹⁹ Located near the confluence of the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers, Paducah not only provided easy access to drive deeper into Confederate territory, its location protected the southern portions of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio from the threat of Rebel political ideology and military invasion.²⁰

Colonel Appler's men came to Paducah as a part of Union operations in the Western Theater. The Union army was making visible progress in the West due to General Ulysses S. Grant's capture of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson in the early months of 1862. Later, Grant added Paducah to the Union cause by outpacing a Confederate force under the command of Gideon Pillow to the town.²¹ Now, the Confederates faced the impossible task of defending an area of least six states in the Western Theater with rivers that provided ideal avenues of invasion.²² Arguably, no waterway provided better access to the heart of the Western Confederacy, and the

¹⁹ Anonymous, "Letter from the 48th: Camp Sherman, Paducah, Ky., March 3, 1862," *The Highland Weekly News*, March 13, 1862, 1.

²⁰ E.B. Long, "The Paducah Affair: Bloodless Action that Altered the Civil War in the Mississippi Valley," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 70, no. 4 (October 1972): 275-276.

²¹ Brooks D. Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2014), 92-93.

²² Timothy B. Smith, *Grant Invades Tennessee: The 1862 Battles for Forts Henry and Donelson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 1-3.

railroad hub of Corinth, Mississippi, than the Tennessee River. Historian Craig L. Symonds called the Tennessee, “a liquid highway for Federal flotilla”²³ The Union planned to use the river to launch an attack on Rebel forces at railroad town of Corinth, Mississippi that would leave the deep south open to invasion and expedite the end of the war.²⁴ By the time the Fifty-Third left Paducah, the Union clearly possessed the momentum in the West.

Union Supply Chain and Command Issues

During its stay in Kentucky, the Fifty-Third Ohio finally received the weapons it would carry into battle. The army issued Austrian rifles to the regiment due to a shortage of better rifles in the government arsenal.²⁵ Throughout the majority of the war, Union soldiers mostly carried .58 caliber Springfield rifles, but the U.S. government was still trying to learn how to equip its massive armies in the late winter/early spring of 1862.²⁶ Supply issues were not unique to the Fifty-Third Ohio. The other regiments in its brigade, the Seventy-Seventh Ohio and Fifty-Seventh Ohio, also mostly received the Austrian rifle.²⁷ According to Robert Flemming of the Seventy-Seventh Ohio: “They were not considered a desirable arm, and there was bitter disappointment among the men in not getting the Enfield rifle, which was then considered a very

²³ Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 64.

²⁴ Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 195.

²⁵ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the War of the Rebellion*, 6.

²⁶ Winston Groom, *Shiloh: 1862* (Washington: National Geographic Partners, LLC, 2013), 23.

²⁷ Robert H. Flemming, “The Battle of Shiloh as a Private Saw It,” in *Sketches of War History 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, Volume VI*, ed. Theodore F. Allen, Edward S. McKee, and J. Gordon Taylor (Cincinnati: Monfort & Company, 1908), 132-133.

superior gun...They were a very heavy, awkward gun.”²⁸ Around the same time, the Fifty-Third Ohio and the rest of its untested brigade, now known as the Third Brigade, was assigned to Sherman’s Fifth Division.²⁹

The lack of standardized weapons plagued the early Union war effort in the West. The Union Army carried a wide variety of weapons. Armaments were sometimes uniformed within a brigade, but the inconsistent calibers wreaked havoc at the Battle of Shiloh. According to Civil War historian James Lee McDonough, Sherman’s division entered combat with rifles of “six different calibers” spread through the four brigades.³⁰ The Fifty-Third Ohio blamed the supply issues on former President James Buchanan’s Secretary of War who allegedly stole rifles for the Confederate cause and sabotaged of the federal arsenal as the secession crisis deepened.³¹

The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was not the only regiment frustrated with the government’s inability to supply its troops. The Forty-Eighth Ohio entered Paducah without weapons and were forced to rotate outdated muskets among soldiers on picket duty. In spite of the rumor of a pending Rebel assault, the Forty-Eighth Ohio spent approximately two weeks at Paducah without arms. This regiment eventually received the Austrian Rifle and were greatly displeased by the gun’s inability to handle the stress of rapid fire.³² In about a month, the Forty-Eighth Ohio and the Fifty-Third Ohio would stand together to face the Confederate onslaught at

²⁸ Ibid., 132-133.

²⁹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the War of the Rebellion*, 6.

³⁰ James Lee McDonough, *Shiloh: In before Night* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 124-125.

³¹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Regiment during the War of the Rebellion*, 6.

³² John A. Bering and Thomas Montgomery, *History of the Forty-Eighth Ohio Vet. Vol. Inf: From its Organization at Camp Dennison, O., in October, 1861, to the Close of the War, and its Final Muster-out, May 10, 1866* (Hillsboro: The Highland News Office, 1880), 13-14.

the Battle of Shiloh. Both regiments would be forced to rely on undesirable weapons during their first test under fire.

The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry remained in Paducah for only a short time. During that period, the Union command in the West was in fluctuation. Ulysses S. Grant was rewarded for his victories over Fort Henry and Fort Donelson by losing his command. The old accusation of Grant's alcoholism, combined with charges of insubordination, led Halleck to advocate for Grant's removal. Most historians agree that Grant's removal was partially motivated by Halleck's jealousy over the praise his subordinate received in the Union press, but now the hero of the early war in West was without a command.³³ Even though Grant was restored after short period of turning command over to C.F. Smith, the Fifty-Third Ohio entered an army suffering from a revolving door of command and professional jealousy.³⁴

From Paducah to Pittsburg Landing

The Fifty-Third Ohio finally left Paducah on March 7, 1862. Holding their new weapons in their hands, the men were again packed on the deck of the steamship the *Anglo-Saxon* and

³³ Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh: The Battle that Changed the Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 51-52.

³⁴ Grant biographers of Twenty-First Century have usually agreed that the general was the victim of jealousy and misrepresentation at this juncture of his career. Arguably, Brooks D. Simpson's *Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865* is the most academic biography of the general. According to Simpson, General Henry Halleck was disgruntled after the fall of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson due to Grant's rise as a Northern celebrity driving Halleck to sideline Grant in attempt to receive credit for the victories. Simpson argues that Grant was not in Halleck's inner circle and became the victim of professional jealousy. Furthermore, H.W. Brands' *The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses S. Grant in War and Peace* presents a similar argument. Brands states that Grant was a sidelined by Halleck's political maneuvers inside the hierarchy of the U.S. Army. However, Brands also presents the declining relationship between Grant and Halleck as the result of poor communication technology. Ron Chernow also agrees that Halleck felt upstaged by Grant after the fall of the forts and sought Grant's removal in his biography of the general. Chernow is slightly more straightforward in his claim that Halleck used the old accusation of drunkenness against Grant than Brands. In addition, Ronald C. White's *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* corroborates Simpson, Chernow, and Brands by stating that Grant had reached a new pinnacle of Civil War Era celebrity following the fall of Henry and Donelson that made him the target of envy among his superiors. Fortunately for Grant, he was protected by President Abraham Lincoln who approved of the general's assertiveness on the battlefield.

transported further down the Tennessee River.³⁵ The relatively short journey to Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee turned difficult for the regiment. The Tennessee River was in flood stage due to heavy spring rains that left the river swollen and muddy. Severe cases of diarrhea and stomach cramps devastated the regiment as the men relied on the river as their main source of hydration.³⁶ John K. Duke's memoir described the river as, "more than bank full. On account of the muddy condition of the river, the 'boys' called it 'soup;' and from its use for several days, diarrhea followed to an alarming extent."³⁷

The river-induced illnesses decimated the regiment's manpower. By April 1st, 255 men were officially on sick roll.³⁸ In total, the regiment was reduced by approximately twenty-five percent as the sickness spread rapidly through the steamship. The proximity of the river proved too alluring for the thirsty and bored men. It was too convenient to dip a cup of water as the ship sailed down the Tennessee leading to the widespread nature of the illness. However, the men did not lose their sense of humor and cleverly named the severe cases of diarrhea the "Tennessee Quickstep."³⁹ In all, the horrific journey down the Tennessee River lasted twelve long days.⁴⁰

³⁵ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7; Wiley Sword, *Shiloh: Bloody April* (Dayton: The Press of Morningside Books, 1988), 37-38.

³⁷ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*; David W. Reed, *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged*, ed. Timothy B. Smith (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 95; Steven E. Woodworth chronicles the Union army's movements along the Tennessee River in his book, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865*. Even though Woodworth does not specifically reference the Fifty-Third Ohio, his portrayal of the voyage corroborates the account of Duke. Woodworth writes that the steamships were overcrowded and filthy making adding misery to the journey.

³⁹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Disembarking from the steamship, the regiment stepped ashore for a brief stay in Savannah, Tennessee.⁴¹ Savannah was not a stronghold of Confederate sympathy. As the Fifty-Third Ohio learned during its time in the city, the majority of the population harbored strong feelings of Unionism and rejected secession. Savannah became a refuge for Southern citizens still loyal to the United States government following the state's exit from the Union. Later, Ulysses S. Grant located his headquarters in the mansion of a leading Savannah citizen and strong supporter of the United States, W.H. Cherry.⁴² Anti-secession sentiments were so strong in Savannah that a regiment in the Fifty-Third Ohio's division recruited approximately one hundred soldiers from the local population.⁴³ If the positive reception the Fifty-Third Ohio received in Savannah caused the soldiers to believe their campaign would be without resistance, that thought was soon corrected during the buildup to the Battle of Shiloh.

Following its brief stay in Savannah, the regiment moved to the mouth of Yellow Creek with the rest of Sherman's Fifth Division. The creek was located a little over thirty miles north of Savannah and provided access to an important Confederate railroad. Shortly after arriving at Yellow Creek on March 14, 1862, the Fifth Division was tasked with destroying a Rebel railroad network at Iuka.⁴⁴ The Fifty-Third Ohio was ordered to participate in the unsuccessful mission hindered by heavy rain, but the regiment was unable to field an effective fighting force. The stomach ailments caused by drinking the flooded Tennessee River still plagued the Ohioans with

⁴¹ T.J. Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh; Report of the Commission* (Cincinnati: C. J. Krehbiel & Co., 1903), 23.

⁴² Steven E. Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2005), 142.

⁴³ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga, 1862-1864*, ed. The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 109.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

devastating effects.⁴⁵ Sources of water around the Tennessee remained compromised and detrimental to the soldiers' health.

During the division's expedition from Yellow Creek to Iuka, the commanding officer of the gunboat *Tyler* brought Pittsburg Landing to General Sherman's attention as potential spot for a Union rendezvous prior to striking Corinth, Mississippi. The *Tyler* engaged Rebel forces at Pittsburg Landing on March 1, 1862 and the location left a lasting impression on the crew.⁴⁶ Sherman was equally impressed and passed the information to his superiors.⁴⁷ Ultimately, Union leadership chose Pittsburg Landing as the official Union camp in preparation for the invasion of Mississippi. A system of streams and creeks surrounded the landing making it a naturally defensible location, but choosing Pittsburg Landing placed the Union army on the same side of the Tennessee River as Albert Sidney Johnston's Rebel forces and left the Union soldiers no avenue of retreat.⁴⁸

Pittsburg Landing was already established as a popular river destination before the area erupted with the guns of Shiloh. Approximately ten years before the battle, the landing housed a general store that provided essential materials to travelers and local inhabitants. Later, a man named Pitts Tucker built a log cabin above the river and peddled alcohol. Attracting frequent stops from river passengers, the area grew and became known as Pittsburg Landing.⁴⁹ The slope of the river bank, and the presence of several open fields, made Pittsburg Landing an ideal

⁴⁵ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteers during the War of the Rebellion*, 7.

⁴⁶ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga, 1862-1864*, ed. The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 109.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Timothy B. Smith, *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 19.

⁴⁹ Sword, *Shiloh*, 115-116.

location for disembarking a large number of soldiers.⁵⁰ With the infrastructure of a landing already in place, the surrounding flat areas were an ideal location to house the campsites of a large army. Once in camp at Pittsburg Landing, Union troops were positioned only about twenty miles from their main objective of Corinth.⁵¹

The area around Pittsburg Landing was still a frontier in the spring of 1862. Including a crude church named the Shiloh Meetinghouse, only a few rough cabins and small farms broke up the wooded area. The Shiloh Meetinghouse was a Methodist Church that took its name from a Scripture reference meaning “a place of peace.”⁵² Eventually, the battle that occurred around the church would take the crude chapel’s name.⁵³ Shiloh veteran Leander Stillwell of the Sixty-First Illinois Infantry remembered the area as “thickly wooded,” but a series of moderately sized open fields broke up the forested landscape.⁵⁴ The terrain around the landing, and especially the creeks and river, would have a major impact on the movement of troops, the flow of the battle, and its ultimate outcome.

The Fifty-Third Ohio arrived at Pittsburg Landing around March 15, 1862 after a short steamboat journey from Savannah.⁵⁵ The regiment did not immediately disembark from the

⁵⁰ Leander Stillwell, *The Story of a Common Soldier* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1920), 40.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² McDonough, *Shiloh*, 4.

⁵³ Earl J. Hess, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 45.

⁵⁴ Stillwell, *The Story of a Common Soldier*, 40.

⁵⁵ E. C. Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1890-1896, Volume IV*, ed. W.H. Chamberlin (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1896), 2; John K. Duke’s regimental memoir placed the regiment’s arrival at Pittsburg Landing closer to March 19, 1862. Neither Duke nor Dawes appeared confident in the exact date that the Fifty-Third Ohio stepped ashore at the landing. It is important to remember that Dawes was present at the Battle of Shiloh while Duke was not a member of the regiment until later in the war. Duke relied on the recollections of his comrades as sources for this period of the regiment’s service.

Anglo-Saxon and the Ohioans were not settled into their Pittsburg Landing camp until March 20, 1862.⁵⁶ The landing soon became a beehive of activity with the frequent sounds of steamboat whistles echoing through the woods. The Civil War occurred during the peak of American steamboat travel. Approximately 735 steam-powered vessels carried over 162,000 tons of cargo on the western rivers alone by the outbreak of war.⁵⁷ Like many technological and industrial innovations, steam-powered river transportation was a great advantage for the Union cause. Northern manufactures built the majority of the boats that travelled the Ohio, Mississippi, Tennessee, and other western rivers.⁵⁸ By the late-winter of 1862, the United States possessed the capability to transport its troops into the heart of the Confederacy by river. The Fifty-Third Ohio was among the regiments rendezvousing at Pittsburg Landing through the use of a great Northern flotilla.

The Camp on Rea Field

Colonel Appler placed his men approximately a quarter mile from the Shiloh Meetinghouse and three miles from the Tennessee River near a spring of water the regiment hoped would alleviate their digestive suffering. However, it was quickly discovered that the spring contained an unknown contaminant that only worsened the regiment's collective health.⁵⁹ After only a few days in camp, the regiment had two-thirds of its men on the sick list.⁶⁰ By the

⁵⁶ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 7.

⁵⁷ Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Logistics: A Study of Military Transportation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 35.

⁵⁸ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

morning of the Battle of Shiloh's first day, the Fifty-Third Ohio's consisted of 646 men and officers reporting for duty and 206 remaining on the sick list.⁶¹ Once again, the Fifty-Third Ohio encountered the dangers of contaminated water that plagued both sides of the conflict for the duration of the war.

Similar to the conditions at Paducah, Pittsburg Landing was saturated with water in the spring of 1862. The heavy spring rains pushed the Tennessee River beyond its limits and caused the surrounding streams to spill over their banks.⁶² High water and damp ground were not the only obstacles facing Appler's men. The thick underbrush of the surrounding forests made even the shortest journeys between regimental camps difficult.⁶³ However, the Fifty-Third Ohio still managed to successfully find a dry and open field for its campsite.

Colonel J.J. Appler ordered the Fifty-Third Ohio to pitch its tents in an exposed position known as Rea (sometimes spelled 'Rhea' and pronounced 'Ray') Field. The regiment was one of the farthest Union encampments from the Tennessee River.⁶⁴ Appler's men situated their camp on the main road leading to Corinth, Mississippi from Pittsburg Landing.⁶⁵ The encampment was approximately 500 yards in advance of the remainder of its brigade and their brigade commander, Colonel Jesse Hildebrand.⁶⁶ From this position, the regiment was mostly isolated.

⁶¹ Reed, *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged*, ed. Smith, 95.

⁶² Phillip R. Kimmerly, "Environment and the Course of Battle: Flooding at Shiloh (April 6-7, 1862)," *Journal of Military History* 79, no. 4 (October 2015): 1079-1085.

⁶³ "Letter from Richard Allen to James Allen, March 12, 1862," Ohio University Digital Archival Collections, Accessed June 20, 2022, <https://media.library.ohio.edu/digital/collection/p15808coll6/id/3808/rec/6>.

⁶⁴ Carl R. Schenker, Jr. "Ulysses in His Tent: Halleck, Grant, Sherman, and the 'Turning Point' of the War," *Civil War History* 56, no. 2 (June 2010): 184.

⁶⁵ Anonymous, "The 53rd Regiment," *Portsmouth Daily Times*, May 17, 1862, 2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Its fellow Third Brigade regiment, the Fifty-Seventh Ohio, camped approximately two-hundred yards to the regiment's right.⁶⁷ The closest troops on the regiment's left was a detachment of Prentiss' Division situated about one-half mile behind and to the left of the Fifty-Third Ohio.⁶⁸

Once the Fifty-Third Ohio was in camp, the collective mood of the regiment brightened. Throughout the Union camp, soldiers were enjoying the relative stability of camp life around the Shiloh Meetinghouse following the damp stay at Paducah, cramped steamboats, and brief residencies at river towns along the Tennessee.⁶⁹ A member of the Twelfth Iowa Infantry remembered the scene as a "gigantic picnic" before Confederates drastically altered the mood.⁷⁰ Colonel Appler's men settled in tents that provided a sense of permanency even though the army was massing to strike Corinth. The Fifty-Third Ohio most likely covered Rea Field with Sibley tents that were the predominant choice of shelter at Pittsburg Landing for its ability to comfortably house sixteen men.⁷¹ As the weather dried, the scene around the Shiloh Meetinghouse became a picturesque spring environment.

Rea Field was much larger in 1862 than today. Following the war, the forests around the field grew and reduced the size of the former campsite. The Fifty-Third Ohio had an obstructed view of Sherman's headquarters near the Shiloh Meetinghouse on the eve of battle. Today, the church is completely blocked by the forest and not visible from Rea Field during the summer

⁶⁷ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History, Volume IV*, ed., W.H. Chamberlain, 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 140.

⁷⁰ Charles L. Sumbardo, "Some Facts about the Battle of Shiloh," in *Glimpses of the Nation's Struggle, Third Series: Papers Read before the Minnesota Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1889-1892*, ed., Edward D. Neill (New York: D.D. Merrill Company, 1893), 31-32.

⁷¹ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 140; Lucius W. Barber, *Army Memoirs of Lucius W. Barber, Company "D," 15th Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Chicago: The J.M.W. Jones Stationery and Printing Co., 1894), 48.

months. By comparison, the ridge separating Rea Field from the church was sparsely wooded in 1862. The Fifty-Third Ohio's obstructed visibility extended to the fields where the initial shots of the Battle of Shiloh were fired.⁷² This lack of visibility later impacted the decisions made by the regiment's commander as the clash moved closer to the Rea Field on the morning of April 6, 1862.

The Fifty-Third Ohio's placement on Rea Field violated the orders of General Sherman, but not because of its isolated position.⁷³ As previously mentioned, Colonel Appler situated his men on Rea Field to allow for easy access to the nearby fresh-water spring. Sherman stated in Orders No. 15 issued on March 19, 1862 that, "convenience of water may be considered, but must not control the position of the camp."⁷⁴ In the same order, Sherman ordered the Fifty-Third Ohio's brigade to locate their regimental camps near the Shiloh Church and on the left side of the Corinth Road.⁷⁵ Colonel Appler appeared to follow Sherman's order to camp facing west for parade and battle formations, but neglected the order to minimize the distance between regiments.⁷⁶ The gap between the Fifty-Third Ohio's camp and the closest regiment well exceeded the 22-pace limit imposed by Sherman.⁷⁷ However, no evidence exists to indicate that Sherman attempted to correct the location of the regiment.

⁷² Mark Grimsley and Steven E. Woodworth, *Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 74-79.

⁷³ McDonough, *Shiloh*, 52.

⁷⁴ Robert N. Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume X, Part II* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 50.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Sherman, Grant, and the Fortification Debate

The camp at Pittsburg Landing continued to grow in the weeks following the Fifty-Third Ohio's arrival. Similar to his role at Paducah, General Sherman commanded the troop buildup along the banks of the Tennessee River. Sherman's command was not technically official, but the result of General C.F. Smith remaining onboard a steamship after suffering a minor injury that turned serious.⁷⁸ Smith scraped his leg on a boat causing a serious infection to threaten his life.⁷⁹ The injury would soon be a factor into the return of Ulysses S. Grant to field command on the eve of the Battle of Shiloh. Grant was eventually restored to command on March 13, 1862 and located his headquarters over five miles away in town of Savannah, Tennessee.⁸⁰ Due in part to his pre-war military experience and his status as a West Point graduate, Sherman remained in charge of the daily operations at the landing.⁸¹

Under Sherman's oversight, the camp at Pittsburg Landing grew to approximately 5,000 tents with multiple drilling grounds and strong supply lines from the river. Almost everything a Civil War army needed was available on the banks of the Tennessee. However, one thing was suspiciously absent that would soon haunt the soldiers in blue. No fortifications or defensive works were constructed leaving the Union soldiers vulnerable to an attack.⁸² If Albert Sidney

⁷⁸ Lewis, *Sherman*, 213.

⁷⁹ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 142.

⁸⁰ Ulysses S. Grant, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Volume I*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc, 1956), 466.

⁸¹ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History, Volume IV*, ed., W.H. Chamberlin, 3.

⁸² Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the War of the Rebellion*, 12.

Johnston's Confederates decided to take the offensive, The Union army would be forced to fight without the advantage of an entrenched location.

The lack of fortifications became a source of controversy following the battle. General Sherman deflected the blame to his superiors by stating that he never received orders to construct defensive fortifications.⁸³ Grant shielded himself from criticism by writing the Battle of Shiloh occurred before defensive entrenchments were used in the West.⁸⁴ Truthfully, the Union command did not believe the Confederate forces would counter their advance until they were within sight of the Corinth, Mississippi defenses.⁸⁵ Grant and Sherman were convinced that the Confederate army lacked the ability and desire to march to Pittsburg Landing and attack their growing force. Regardless of the reason, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was in an exposed position, untrained, and without the protection of defensive works on the eve of the bloodiest battle any American had ever seen in the spring of 1862.⁸⁶

Historians have interpreted the failure to entrench in two distinct schools of thought. First, as part of the Union command's inability to understand the true nature of Civil War combat at that stage of the war, and secondly as the Union's overconfidence that Johnston would never leave his defenses at Corinth. Eventually, the historical question of entrenchments at Shiloh centers on the leadership of General Ulysses S. Grant. How historians perceive Grant's performance at Shiloh often impacts how they interpret the lack of entrenchments. As long as

⁸³ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 212

⁸⁴ Ulysses S. Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition*, ed. John F. Marszalek, David S. Nolen, and Louie P. Gallo (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 244.

⁸⁵ Woodworth, Steven E. *Shiloh: Confederate High Tide in the Heartland* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 1.

⁸⁶ The Shiloh fortification debate will be revisited in chapter six.

Shiloh veterans could voice their opinions, the entrenchment debate remained at the heart of questions related to the Union army's "surprise" at Pittsburg Landing.

Among the earliest to interpret the lack of fortifications as a misunderstanding of Civil War combat was Abraham Lincoln biographer, Carl Sandburg. His 1939 work portrayed the lack of entrenchments at Shiloh as the moment the Union command realized the true nature of the Civil War. Furthermore, Sandburg argued entrenchments were not an issue of concern for Union command, but for the lowest ranking soldiers. Solidifying his argument, Sandburg wrote: "One lesson sank home to the Union troops at Shiloh: From then on they dug trenches."⁸⁷

Bruce Catton shared Sandburg's assessment in *This Hallowed Ground: A History of the Civil War*. Catton argued that the Confederate advance should have been observed by the Union due to the Rebels' lack of discipline and noisy march toward Pittsburg Landing. However, the Union army's lack of defenses and preparation rescued the Confederate force from disaster.⁸⁸ Once again, the lack of entrenchments was presented as simply a lesson yet to be learned by April of 1862 and not the Union leadership's failure to prepare for an attack.

As the second half of the Twentieth Century gave rise to more histories focused exclusively on the Battle of Shiloh, the interpretation of entrenchments slightly shifted from the interpretations of Sandburg and Catton to placing the blame directly on the shoulders of the Union command. In 1977, James Lee McDonough argued that Union leadership collectively dismissed the need to entrench due to the offensive nature of their expedition. Whereas Sandburg and Catton argued the lack of entrenchments came from the greenish nature of the armies,

⁸⁷ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, Volume One* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1939), 477.

⁸⁸ Catton, *This Hallowed Ground: A History of the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2012), 110.

McDonough argued that the Union command knew the dangers of not fortifying against a possible attack and still chose to leave their soldiers exposed.⁸⁹ Wiley Sword shared McDonough's argument by focusing on the criticism of Grant's leadership following the battle.⁹⁰

O. Edward Cunningham's 1966 dissertation also blamed Grant for the Union's defense condition. Cunningham argued that Grant was solely responsible for the lack of fortifications since he ignored General Halleck's order to construct entrenchments.⁹¹ However, Timothy B. Smith somewhat returned to the "yet to be learned" thesis while still arguing that the Union command failed to properly prepare for an attack. Placing the blame on the Union command, Smith stated, "Perhaps the most obvious sign that the Federal high command feared no battle at Shiloh was that there were no entrenchments thrown up to guard the campsite."⁹² Smith solidified his argument with evidence that Halleck wanted Grant to entrench, fortifications were considered, and Confederate scouts were shocked to learn the Union camp was unprotected.⁹³ By adding a Shiloh veteran's recollection that the Union army had yet to learn the value of entrenchments, Smith's assessment was a combination of all the previous historiography of Shiloh entrenchments.⁹⁴

Steven E. Woodworth viewed the lack of fortifications in a different manner. In his book *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865*, he absolved Grant by portraying his

⁸⁹ McDonough, *Shiloh*, 52-53.

⁹⁰ Sword, *Shiloh*, 435.

⁹¹ O. Edward Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, ed. Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith (New York: Savas Beattie LLC, 2009), 109.

⁹² Smith, *Shiloh*, 53.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

force as an army intent only on forward motion.⁹⁵ In addition, Woodworth claimed, “entrenchment was not customary at that stage of the war,” in the introduction of a collection of essays titled *The Shiloh Campaign*.⁹⁶ Woodworth’s interpretations were a part of a historiographical shift that sought to remove a direct link between Grant and the failure to entrench that included Grant biographers H.W. Brands and Ronald C. White.⁹⁷

Ron Chernow’s Grant biography brought condemnation back to the general by arguing that Grant’s dedication to the offensive caused him to neglect his defense.⁹⁸ Grant was again portrayed as the central figure in the decision against entrenchment. Whereas McDonough, Sword, Cunningham, Smith and Chernow argued that Grant was a major part of the Union command’s failure to entrench, Woodworth, Brands, and White shifted the blame away from Grant and deflected the failure to C.F. Smith, Sherman, and Union engineers.

Missed Warning Signs

Regardless of why the army camped at Pittsburg Landing without the protection of entrenchments, it is clear the Union command drastically miscalculated the Rebel plans and regiments like the Fifty-Third Ohio would soon pay the price on the battlefield. A string of losses in the West pushed the Confederates toward desperation. Rather than wait for Union soldiers to attack Corinth, Mississippi, the Confederate force decided to hit Grant before his men were

⁹⁵ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 142-146.

⁹⁶ Steven E. Woodworth, ed., *The Shiloh Campaign* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 5.

⁹⁷ H.W. Brand, *The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses S. Grant in War and Peace* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 173-174; Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Random House, 2016), 209.

⁹⁸ Chernow, *Grant*, 196-198.

united with General Buell's Army of Ohio.⁹⁹ Another loss in the West would have been disastrous for the Confederate war effort and crush Southern morale. While trying to decide on the best strategy to turn the tide of the war in the West, Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston concentrated his forces at Corinth, Mississippi.¹⁰⁰ Johnston eventually decided to take the battle to Grant's army at Pittsburg Landing. According to his son, Johnston's plan was "to crush Grant in battle before the arrival of Buell."¹⁰¹

The Union camp at Pittsburg Landing remained unaware of the Confederate strategies until the morning of April 6, 1862. Johnston planned to use the terrain to his advantage by forcing battle in the land between Owl, Snake, and Lick Creeks trapping the Union soldiers against the Tennessee River.¹⁰² This placed the Fifty-Third Ohio on a direct course with the approaching Rebels. However, there were an abundance of missed signals that the Confederates were on the move. Approximately a week before fighting around the Shiloh Meetinghouse began, members of the Fifty-Third came into contact with Rebel soldiers. On March 30, 1862, three men from the regiment were surprised by a Rebel calvary unit and taken prisoner only two miles from Fifty-Third Ohio's Rea Field camp.¹⁰³

Shockingly, the Fifty-Third Ohio's contact with the Rebel horsemen did not cause alarm among the regiment or Union command. Neither the Fifty-Third Ohio's official reports of the

⁹⁹ Sword, *Shiloh*, 96-97.

¹⁰⁰ William Preston Johnston, "Albert Sidney Johnston at Shiloh," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Volume I*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc, 1956), 548-549.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 550.

¹⁰² Timothy B. Smith, *Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 5-6.

¹⁰³ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 114.

battle, nor the regimental memoir mentioned the incident. It seems strange that one of the first encounters with the enemy would be treated as trivial. However, the reason could be due to the Union belief that Rebel cavalry scouts were to be expected as Grant's force closed in on Johnston. The proximity of Corinth, Mississippi to the Shiloh Meetinghouse and Pittsburg Landing would explain this possible view. The only published recording of the event appears in Fifty-Third Ohio Adjunct Ephraim C. Dawes' account of the regiment's Shiloh experience for the Historical Society of Massachusetts read in 1893 and published in 1908.

Despite the encounter with Rebels, the Fifty-Third Ohio's attention focused on the pleasant Pittsburg Landing weather as the calendar turned from March to April.¹⁰⁴ Soldiers coming from Northern climates that typically experienced the extended grip of winter particularly enjoyed the warm spring weather of southern Tennessee. Throughout the Union camp, soldiers tended to their laundry and enjoyed strolls through the dense woods.¹⁰⁵ Military drills occupied the majority of the soldiers' time, but their schedules left room for swimming and other leisure activities.¹⁰⁶ In this setting, Grant's soldiers continued to focus entirely on the upcoming offensive movements and neglected any potential possibility of a Confederate attack.¹⁰⁷

The warming weather, mixed with the recent Union victories in the West, created a feeling of inevitable victory throughout the Union camp.¹⁰⁸ Many of Grant's men believed the

¹⁰⁴ Reuben P. Reed, "The Battle of Shiloh from my Own Standpoint: How Eight Men Held the Key-Point to the Landing against Over Eight Thousand for Five Hours and Saved the Army," *The National Tribune*, February 1, 1880, 10.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Catton, *This Hallowed Ground*, 111.

¹⁰⁷ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 8.

¹⁰⁸ McDonough, *Shiloh*, 18.

approaching attack on Corinth would not only sever important Rebel railroads, it would bring the war's immediate end.¹⁰⁹ Even General Grant was overcome with this sense of optimism. Writing to his wife from his Savannah, Tennessee headquarters one week before the fighting at Shiloh, Grant stated, "A big fight may be looked for someplace before a great while which it appears to me will be the last in the West."¹¹⁰ Grant conveyed a similar thought on the state of Confederate resistance following the fall of Fort Donelson writing that the secession movement in Tennessee was "on its last legs."¹¹¹

It is difficult to quantify the impact of the Union command's overconfidence on regiments like the Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh. Two armies were massing for a clash that both were woefully unprepared to fight. The Union force was a dangerous mix of raw recruits and overconfident veterans of the Fort Henry and Fort Donelson Campaigns.¹¹² The Confederate army was just as green. In the same regard, it is likely that the commanders of both armies, including those who were later viewed in a positive manner, were equally unprepared to lead soldiers into combat. The Fifty-Third Ohio's command structure resembled many of their fellow Union units with men who were highly favored among the civilian and political population in command instead of officers with the proper military training.

As the day of battle approached, Friday, April 4, 1862 was one of the most active days for the Fifty-Third Ohio. Adding to the potential warnings that a large Rebel force was in the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ulysses S. Grant, *My Dearest Julia: The Wartime Letters of Ulysses S. Grant to His Wife* (New York: The Library of America, 2018), 106.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 104.

¹¹² Barber, *Army Memoirs of Lucius W. Barber*, 48.

area, the regiment could hear the sounds battle in the distance.¹¹³ Even though the reverberations of the skirmish increased, it did not cause concern among the Union high command. Sometime on the 4th or early on the 5th, another missed warning came directly from the lips of Rebel soldiers captured during the day's fight.¹¹⁴ The apprehended Confederates flatly stated that they were not a part of small surveillance force, but the "advance of a great army."¹¹⁵ The Rebels clarified their warning boasting that an approaching Rebel force would destroy the Union camp at Pittsburg Landing and drive the Yankees from Pittsburg Landing.¹¹⁶ Historian Larry J. Daniel wrote that the Rebel prisoners "held at the Shiloh Church that evening, openly boasted of being a part of a grand army that would drive the Federals into the river the next day."¹¹⁷ Still, the warnings of an impending attack were dismissed.

As the sun set on the evening of April 4, 1862, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry had encountered Rebel soldiers, heard the distant sounds of battle, and saw Rebel prisoners guarded in the nearby church. The day's events increased the already heightened anxiety of Colonel J.J. Appler as the calendar changed to Saturday, April 5, 1862. In little over 24 hours, the regiment would be among the first Union soldiers engaged in the largest battle fought on the North American continent to that point. The soldiers of the Fifty-Third Ohio went to sleep in their tents on the night of April 4th with an inexperienced and jittery colonel leading their

¹¹³ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History, Volume IV*, ed., W.H. Chamberlin, 3; Daniel, *Shiloh*, 135.

¹¹⁴ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 115.

¹¹⁵ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History, Volume IV*, ed., W.H. Chamberlin, 3.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Daniel, *Shiloh*, 135.

regiment, a division commander trying to rehabilitate his image, and still suffering from consuming contaminated water.¹¹⁸

Without entrenchments and the defensive works found later in the war, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was dangerously exposed as the battle approached. Their lack of training and preparation was not unique among the soldiers stationed at Pittsburg Landing, but the Fifty-Third Ohio had never heard a shot fired in anger.¹¹⁹ On the eve of battle, William Tecumseh Sherman's line included his most inexperienced and untested regiments in the most vulnerable position without fortifications and major gaps between regimental camps.¹²⁰ Two inexperienced armies were about to bump into one another near the banks of the Tennessee River. Unfortunately for the soldiers from Camp Diamond, their position rested closer to the approaching Rebels than almost every other Union regiment. The Fifty-Third Ohio settled into their Sibley tents unaware that their Rea Field position sat on a crossroad between the approaching Rebels and main body of Grant's army.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁹ Grant, *Memoirs*, ed., Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 244.

¹²⁰ Winston Groom, "Sherman's Folly at Shiloh," *The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 24, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 46.

Chapter 4

The Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh

Introduction

Warning signs that a large Rebel force was inching closer to the Union line continued to appear throughout Saturday, April 5, 1862. Seemingly endless reports of enemy soldiers lurking in the woods circulated throughout Pittsburg Landing. On the eve of battle, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry's camp on Rea Field was overcome with the fear of a possible Confederate attack.¹ The regimental adjunct, Ephraim C. Dawes, remembered April 5th as, "a day of rumors."² The Fifty-Third Ohio's suspicions were not unfounded. By 10am, General William Joseph Hardee's Corp of Albert Sidney Johnston's Army of Mississippi was within one mile of the Shiloh Meetinghouse and closing in on Appler's men.³

However, the Fifty-Third Ohio began its day oblivious to the reality of the threat, participating in drills, and enjoying the bright spring sunshine of southern Tennessee.⁴ In the coming fight, the problems associated with supply chain issues, inadequate leadership, and poor training noticeably hindered the Fifty-Third Ohio's performance. The events of April 6, 1862 placed the Ohioans in direct verbal conflict with its new division commander, William Tecumseh

¹ E. C. Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1890-1896, Volume IV*, ed. W.H. Chamberlin (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1896), 3.

² Ibid.

³ John K. Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion* (Portsmouth: The Blade Printing Company, 1900), 15.

⁴ Ephraim C. Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga, 1862-1864*, ed. The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1908), 116.

Sherman. The Battle of Shiloh, and the debates that followed, forever linked the Fifty-Third Ohio and General Sherman.

The regiment's reputation was forever altered by the events at Shiloh. In this regard, questioning the effectiveness of the Fifty-Third Ohio in the combat of Shiloh is essential for understanding how the battle's legacy remained with the Ohioans. Were the reports of a large approaching Rebel army accurately portrayed by the Fifty-Third, or was the Union command correct in its decision to dismiss the warnings? Overall, the questions related to understanding the regiment's participation in the battle is grounded in two additional questions. First, how did the regiment's past impact its ability to defend the Union camp at Pittsburg Landing? Next, why did General Sherman appear to hold the Fifty-Third Ohio in such low esteem before and after the battle? Despite the Confederate attack that would soon surprise the Union camp, and the ineffectiveness of its leadership, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry presented accurate information on the pending Rebel attack and remained in the fight for the entirety of the Battle of Shiloh.

Shiloh: Day One (April 6, 1862)

In accordance with the testimony of Union pickets, Rebel forces were unmistakably on the move and preparing to attack. Two days prior, Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston reminded his men of the task before them. Johnston planned to smash Grant's army before it united with the approaching force of General Don Carlos Buell.⁵ Once combined, the armies of

⁵ William Preston Johnston, "Albert Sidney Johnston at Shiloh," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Volume I*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc, 1956), 550; Jay Luvaas, Stephen Bowman, and Leonard Fullenkamp, eds., *Guide to the Battle of Shiloh* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1996), 24-25; Winston Groom, *Shiloh: 1862* (Washington: National Geographic Society, 2012), 190; Gregory A. Mertz, *Attack at Daylight and Whip Them: The Battle of Shiloh, April 6-7, 1862* (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 2019), 23-25.

Grant and Buell planned to march on Corinth, Mississippi and destroy Johnston's Confederates. Instead, the Rebels hoped to surprise Grant at Pittsburg Landing, but weather and other factors delayed their march. Confederate leadership feared the element of surprise was lost following skirmishes with Union pickets. Fortunately for the men under Johnston's command, Union leadership failed to appreciate the danger posed by the growing presence of soldiers, "in butternut clothes."⁶ The desperate need for a Southern victory based on a surprise attack was not lost on General Johnston who called the Confederate advance, "...the hopes of eight millions of people..." and reminded his men to perform, "worthy of your race and lineage" in the coming battle.⁷

However, the Union command did not mirror Johnston's determination and seriousness. The Fifty-Third Ohio spent considerable time drilling and practicing military maneuvers related to the upcoming strike on Corinth, but the soldiers in blue remained unaware of the Rebels positioned on the outskirts of their camp. General Grant knew many of his soldiers had yet to experience combat and believed their time at Pittsburg Landing would be best spent drilling on the camp's parade grounds.⁸ On the morning of April 5th, Colonel Appler was following General Grant's orders leading his men through another military drill in the open ground near Rea Field.⁹ While Appler's men learned essential military tactics, a group of mounted soldiers at the far end

⁶ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 4.

⁷ Robert N. Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume X, Part II* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 389: (Referred to as *OR: 10, Part 2* for the remainder of the Chapter.)

⁸ Ulysses S. Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition*, ed. John F. Marszalek, David S. Nolen, and Louie P. Gallo (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 244; Joseph Allen Frank and George A. Reaves, *Seeing the Elephant: Raw Recruits at the Battle of Shiloh* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 78.

⁹ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 116.

of Rea Field caught the Ohioans' attention.¹⁰ Appler was convinced that the figures were enemy soldiers and quickly dispatched a detachment of the Fifty-Third Ohio to pursue the Confederates.¹¹ The time was 4 p.m.¹² A few shots were exchanged before mounted Rebels disappeared into the surrounding forest.¹³

The presence of Rebel soldiers on Rea Field forced Colonel Appler into action. Grasping the seriousness of the situation, he ordered his men into formation and prepared for a fight.¹⁴ This was not the Ohio colonel's first sense of uneasiness at Pittsburg Landing. Appler had been on edge since the morning of April 5th and remained in a similar state throughout the day.¹⁵ However, the nervous colonel properly handled the situation. Not only did Appler send a detachment to pursue the mounted Rebels and formed a line of battle, he also dispatched his quartermaster, J.W. Fulton, to alert General Sherman of the growing threat.¹⁶ Unfortunately for the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio, Sherman was not receptive to Appler's message triggering a chain of events that would be at the center of the debate between the general and the regiment for decades to come.

¹⁰ Ibid; Steven E. Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 152.

¹¹ Wiley Sword, *Shiloh: Bloody April* (Dayton: The Press of Morningside Books, 1988), 127; Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 3-4.

¹² Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 3-4.

¹³ Ibid., 4; Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh: The Battle that Changed the Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 137.

¹⁴ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 116; Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 152.

¹⁵ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 3.

¹⁶ O. Edward Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, ed. Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith (New York: Savas Beatie, LLC, 2009), 135; Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 116-117.

Colonel Appler's warning was promptly delivered to Sherman who was already aware that Confederate cavalry had been visible to the Union lines the previous evening.¹⁷ However, the general did not take Appler's warning seriously and dismissed his report. Sherman was not content to simply toss Appler's warning aside, but chose to publicly humiliate the colonel. The general sent back a blistering response meant to demean the nervous colonel. Quartermaster Fulton returned with Sherman's response while the Fifty-Third Ohio stood in battle formation. Fulton relayed Sherman's response to Appler reading the message aloud: "Colonel Appler, General Sherman says: Take your damned regiment to Ohio. There is no enemy nearer than Corinth."¹⁸ Upon hearing these words, the regiment laughed at Appler's expense, broke formation, and pursued other activities.¹⁹

The Fifty-Third Ohio's brush with the enemy was not a unique occurrence on April 5, 1862. Other regiments, including the Seventy-First Ohio, encountered Confederate forces in numbers that indicated more than just a scouting party was in the vicinity.²⁰ Earlier that day, Sherman was also warned by the Fifty-Third Ohio's brigade commander, Colonel Jesse

¹⁷ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs* (New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 2005), 213.

¹⁸ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 4; James Lee McDonough, *Shiloh: In Hell before Night* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 56. Sword, *Shiloh*, 127; Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 152; Cunningham, *Shiloh*, ed. Joiner and Smith, 135; Daniel, *Shiloh*, 137; John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 177.

¹⁹ Daniel, *Shiloh*, 137; Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 117; Sherman biographers John F. Marszalek, Steven E. Woodworth, Lloyd Lewis, and James Lee McDonough all mention Sherman's refusal to take Appler's warning seriously by directly referencing the "take your damned regiment to Ohio" quote. In each case, the writings of Ephraim C. Dawes are the main sources referenced. Robert L. O'Connell also references the incident in his book *Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman*, but he does not directly quote Dawes' version of Sherman's words. However, all of the biographies use the incident to illustrate Sherman's initial failure at the Battle of Shiloh before writing about the general's rebirth under enemy fire. While the incident is recorded in Sherman biographies, it is usually used to set the stage for Sherman's ascension to military glory. Sherman's transformation at Shiloh is where the Fifty-Third Ohio's combat at Shiloh usually ends leaving the regiment entrenched in the negative portrayals consistent with Sherman biographies.

²⁰ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 8.

Hildebrand, that a large Rebel force was spotted approaching the camp.²¹ The pickets of the Seventy-Seventh Ohio reported a mass exodus of rabbits and squirrels from the woods followed by Rebel cavalry and infantry in the distance.²² Again, General Sherman chose not to believe the report. Instead, Sherman ordered the arrest of the soldier bearing Hildebrand's dispatch accusing him of: "bringing in a false report."²³ The Union command made no real preparations for an attack despite the abundant warnings. The soldiers in the Fifty-Third Ohio believed that the notices were not just overlooked, but that, "the necessary preparations for a conflict were totally ignored."²⁴

It is unclear why Sherman chose to ignore the warnings of April 5, 1862. The general was presented with several opportunities to prepare his men for the attack that smashed into the unsuspecting Union camp the following morning. Rebel camp fires too numerous to count were clearly observed by members of the Fifty-Seventh Ohio.²⁵ It is worth noting that Sherman also completely overlooked the events of April 5th in his memoir. In fact, he dismissed the warnings of April 5th by writing, "Saturday passed in our camps without any unusual event..."²⁶ It was not only in retrospect that Sherman viewed the events of April 5th as unimportant, he spent the day believing none of the warnings were worth the slightest concern. On the eve of battle, Sherman

²¹ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 116-117.

²² *Ibid.*, 115-116.

²³ *Ibid*; Robert H. Flemming, "The Battle of Shiloh as a Private Saw It," in *Sketches of War History 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, Volume VI*, ed. Theodore F. Allen, Edward S. McKee, and J. Gordon Taylor (Cincinnati: Monfort & Company, 1908), 136.

²⁴ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 8.

²⁵ Ed A. Gordon, "A Graphic Picture of the Battle of Shiloh," *The National Tribune*, April 26, 1883, 2.

²⁶ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 213.

reported to General Grant, “I have no doubt that nothing will occur to-day more than some picket firing... I do not apprehend anything like an attack on our position.”²⁷

The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry did not share Sherman’s confidence. Several men from the regiment spent the evening of April 5th into the morning of April 6th filled with extreme anxiety over Saturday’s events. Among the restless was Captain Wells S. Jones.²⁸ Captain Jones was one of the first to answer the Fifty-Third Ohio’s recruitment call and performed admirably at Shiloh, but he spent the eve of battle filled with nervous energy. Jones was not in his tent through the night as he fulfilled his role as brigade officer of the guard.²⁹ That role, combined with Jones’ lack of combat experience, undoubtedly factored into him remembering being “nervous... and upon the alert and along the guard-line most of the night.”³⁰

Jones was not alone in his uneasy state. Colonel Appler’s naturally nervous disposition kept him on high alert throughout the night of April 5th and into the early hours of April 6th.³¹ The colonel was awake when the first shots of the Battle of Shiloh broke the predawn Sabbath silence. Appler ran to Adjunct Ephraim C. Dawes’ tents upon hearing the distant sounds of battle around 4am on the 6th.³² Dawes recalled the colonel escorting him out of his tent where the two men clearly observed intermittent gun shots beyond the Fifty-Third Ohio’s picket line.³³ Colonel Appler was unable to sleep that entire night and informed Dawes that the sounds of constant

²⁷ *OR: 10, Part 2*, 93-94.

²⁸ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ N.L.H, “Letter from Camp: Camp Shiloh, Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, April 27, 1862,” *Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph*, May 9, 1862, 2.

³² Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*

gunfire were the cause.³⁴ Suddenly, the Fifty-Third Ohio's pickets raced into camp and reported that a large Rebel force was in front of the regiment's position. Appler's pickets believed the sounds of gunfire were too frequent to be anything other than a large-scale clash with the entirety of the Confederate army.³⁵ The pickets were convinced that a major Confederate force was closing in on the Fifty-Third Ohio's camp.

The noises that caused Appler and his pickets such concern were the loud guns of Colonel Everett A. Peabody's men of General Prentiss's division. Without orders, Colonel Peabody sent about 400 men from the Twenty-Fifth Missouri and Twelfth Michigan to investigate a report of Rebel soldiers spotted by Major James E. Powell's pro-Union Missouri troops around midnight.³⁶ The Union patrol advanced through the dark woods and entered Fraley Field where they encountered detachments of Rebel cavalry and members of the Third Mississippi belonging to General Hardee's Corps.³⁷ The Union then fell back toward their Pittsburg Landing camp with steady fire slowing the advancing Confederate.³⁸ This fighting in Fraley Field in the early hours of April 6, 1862 would be remembered as the opening round of the Battle of Shiloh.

The location of Fraley Field in relation to the Fifty-Third Ohio's camp at Rea Field allowed Colonel Appler to easily hear the battle. The fighting began approximately one hour

³⁴ Ibid; Timothy B. Smith, *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2014), 84-85

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Steven E. Woodworth, *Shiloh: Confederate High Tide in the Heartland* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 45-46.

³⁷ Ibid., 46-47; Robert N. Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume X, Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 278 (Referred to as *OR: 10, Part I* for the remainder of the chapter).

³⁸ D.B. Baker, "How the Battle Began," *The National Tribune*, April 12, 1883, 2.

before Appler woke Adjunct Dawes from his tent.³⁹ Fraley Field and Rea Field were only separated by a wooded area spanning roughly a mile.⁴⁰ Unlike the scattered fighting of the previous days that always seemed to end quickly, this battle intensified.⁴¹ Even more concerning for Appler, it was clear that the fight was creeping closer to Rea Field.⁴² Overall, the fighting on Fraley Field lasted over an hour.⁴³ With each shot, Colonel J.J. Appler grew increasingly uneasy and feared his regiment's position was in grave danger. Further adding to Appler's anxiety was the predawn darkness that engulfed Pittsburg Landing. The sun had yet to rise over what was soon to become the Shiloh Battlefield adding uncertainty to the situation.

Much has been written about J.J. Appler's disposition during the opening round of the Battle of Shiloh. Most historians have harshly assessed the colonel's approach and emphasized his uneasiness. Larry J. Daniel labeled Appler as "jittery" in his book, *Shiloh: The Battle that Changed the Civil War*.⁴⁴ Steven E. Woodworth branded Appler as "nervous" and Timothy B. Smith stated that Appler "did not perform well" at Shiloh.⁴⁵ While these assessments of Appler are appropriate for his overall performance at Shiloh, the colonel had reconnoitered the enemy position, alerted his superiors, and had his regiment in formation when the enemy moved on his camp. Historian Steven E. Woodworth also argued: "Sherman might have scoffed at Appler's

³⁹ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 278; Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 5.

⁴⁰ David W. Reed, *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged*, ed. Timothy B. Smith (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2008), xxiv.

⁴¹ Smith, *Shiloh*, 85.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Reed, *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged*, ed. Smith, 13.

⁴⁴ Daniel, *Shiloh*, 137.

⁴⁵ Steven E. Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2005), 159-160; Smith, *Shiloh*, 102.

concerns, but his brigade and regimental commanders were taking the situation seriously.”⁴⁶ In addition, Appler’s reconnaissance reports were soon verified despite General Sherman’s reluctance to accept the Ohioan’s intelligence.

As Appler and Dawes stood in their Rea Field camp, the colonel could no longer contain his uneasiness. The Fifty-Third Ohio was about to spring into action. First, Appler ordered Dawes to form the regiment, but quickly called him back with a new order to alert Colonel Hildebrand of the approaching clash.⁴⁷ Appler exhibited the tensions associated with the adrenaline of combat when he again called Dawes back and sent another soldier to the Fifty-Third Ohio’s picket line with orders to return with an update.⁴⁸ The men of the regiment were still mostly in their tents. What calm that was left in the camp quickly disappeared when a Union soldier from Fraley Field came into Appler’s camp nursing a bleeding wound on his side.⁴⁹ The wounded soldier from the Twenty-Fifth Missouri shouted, “the rebels are coming! get into line!”⁵⁰

The warning from the Missouri soldier was the last straw for Appler. Combined with the increasing echoes of gunfire, the injured soldier’s notice placed the Fifty-Third Ohio’s colonel on high alert. At that moment, Ephraim C. Dawes remembered that Appler ordered, “the long roll, and formed the regiment on its color line.”⁵¹ The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio fell into line and

⁴⁶ Woodworth, *Shiloh*, 64.

⁴⁷ Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Dawes, “The Battle of Shiloh,” in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 138.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 5

prepared to meet the coming Rebel onslaught. However, the regiment was not fully aware of the approaching army's size. According to Milton Bosworth of Company K: "we did not know the enemy was approaching in full force until they were within 300 or 400 yards."⁵² The green Ohio troops stood with rifles in hand under a Tennessee sky displaying the first streaks of sunlight.⁵³

Again, Colonel J.J. Appler followed the proper procedure by finally sending the delayed messages of approaching Rebels to Colonel Hildebrand and General Sherman.⁵⁴ While Hildebrand took the message seriously, General Sherman once more failed to appreciate the seriousness of the situation.⁵⁵ As he had done the previous day, Appler dispatched his quartermaster to alert to Sherman to the news of a possible Rebel attack. The quartermaster returned with message frustratingly similar to the previous day's rebuke. Upon returning to camp, Quartermaster Fulton read Sherman's reply to the colonel. Sherman again dismissed Appler with the humiliating reply: "You must be badly scared over there."⁵⁶

While recent Sherman biographers have portrayed the general's participation in the Battle of Shiloh as an overall success, they also have criticized his failure to take the reports of his subordinates seriously. However, this misstep has usually been explained as a part of a collective failure among Union command, or the result of the fog of war. James McDonough cited the confusion of Sherman's role as immediate commander of Pittsburg Landing, but still subordinate

⁵² Milton Bosworth, "Home Letter from the Camp," *Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph*, May 2, 1862, 2.

⁵³ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 264.

⁵⁴ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 5.

⁵⁵ Robert L. O'Connell, *Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York: Random House, 2014), 98.

⁵⁶ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 5-6; James Lee McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016). 6-7; Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 220.

to Grant, as a possible reason for Sherman's failure: "Sherman may have been dissuaded, to a degree, from taking measures required to keep fully abreast of the Confederate Army's location."⁵⁷ Robert L. O'Connell also connected Sherman's failure to recognize the danger of the approaching Rebel threat on his connection to Grant. O'Connell argued that "Sherman appeared to have picked up more than a little of Grant's supreme confidence" as a justification for general dismissing the warnings of his subordinates.⁵⁸ Citing the confusion associated with the fog of war, Stephen E. Woodworth wrote: "Like a general in any era, Sherman had had to sort through conflicting data in the hours leading up to the battle of Shiloh... he succumbed to the temptation of assuming his enemy would act in the way he wanted the enemy to act."⁵⁹

Around the same time as Sherman's latest rebuke of Appler, Captain Wells S. Jones of Company A left his position at the night guard to update brigade headquarters on the developing situation. Unknown to Jones, the next few hours would forever alter the direction of his life. As he passed Rea Field, Jones noticed that Appler already had the regiment in battle formation. Soon, Jones witnessed the rest of the Fifty-Third Ohio's brigade moving into line to meet the approaching Rebels. The clash moving toward the Fifty-Third Ohio was now approximately one-fourth a mile to the regiment's front. Despite General Sherman's reluctance to accept the realities of an imminent attack was coming, the Fifty-Third Ohio, and the rest of its brigade, stood ready to defend the general's flank.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 4.

⁵⁸ O'Connell, *Fierce Patriot*, 98.

⁵⁹ Steven E. Woodworth, *Sherman* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 53.

⁶⁰ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 21-22.; McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 6.

Following an order from his brigade commander, Appler then dispatched two companies to re-enforce the brigade's picket line.⁶¹ Shortly after these companies left the Fifty-Third Ohio's line, the remainder of the regiment caught its first glimpse of Rebels in full battle formation. An officer of the Fifty-Third Ohio, straight out of bed and attempting to dress as he ran toward the colonel, excitedly announced: "Colonel, the rebels are crossing the field!"⁶² South of camp, a large Confederate force was crossing the edge of Rea Field near the tree line.⁶³ Appler quickly notified Colonel Hildebrand and ordered the regiment to assemble to the left of camp facing the field's southern end.⁶⁴ According to the regiment's official report, the Fifty-Third Ohio was then perpendicular to the original line Appler formed after hearing the shots from Fraley Field.⁶⁵

While the regiment formed its new line facing the now visible enemy, the two companies dispatched to reinforce the picket line returned. Their report did little to steady the nerves of Colonel Appler and the untested men of the Fifty-Third Ohio. A captain from one company shouted, "The rebels out there are thicker than fleas on a dog's back," as he took his place in line.⁶⁶ In spite of Colonel Appler's anxious state, he again executed the proper military maneuver by shifting the regiment's line to face the enemy. Soon, Colonel Hildebrand ordered the Fifty-Third Ohio to move into the line it was already in the process of forming.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 6.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 139.

⁶⁴ Ibid; Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 6.

⁶⁵ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 264.

⁶⁶ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 6.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

J.J. Appler properly address every danger thrown at the Fifty-Third Ohio in a constantly evolving situation. From reconnaissance, to forming his men and recognizing the approaching threat, the colonel performed admirably. However, that would soon change as the first shots were fired at the regiment. Every correct maneuver ordered and executed by Appler before the fight erupted on Rea Field would soon be overshadowed by his lack of steadiness under fire. The moment of reckoning for Appler and his regiment finally arrived as the Confederate battle line was now within musket range and visible with the fully risen sun reflecting off their gun barrels on what otherwise would have been a perfect spring Sabbath in southwestern Tennessee.⁶⁸

George E. Cutler of Company G wrote that the Confederates approached the Fifty-Third Ohio's line with "ten regiments strong, about 7,000 coming up 4 regiments or more deep."⁶⁹

Appler took position behind the center of his regiment's line when he ordered the Fifty-Third to move into its third location of the morning.⁷⁰ The colonel ordered this maneuver following a warning from the regimental Adjunct, Ephraim C. Dawes, who noticed the Confederates on a direct course for the regiment's right flank. Appler placed Dawes at the head of the regiment with the responsibility of addressing its line when the first formation was ordered.⁷¹ Dawes remained in that position and began to assert himself as the regiment's leader while Appler allowed the confusion of battle to overwhelm his judgement. Heeding Dawes'

⁶⁸ Charles B. Kimbell, *History of Battery "A," First Light Artillery Volunteers* (Chicago: Cushing Printing Company, 1899), 40; Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 139.

⁶⁹ George E. Cutler, "Interesting Letter from Pittsburg Landing: A Lawrence County Man's Opinion of the Generalship Displayed at the Battle of Pittsburg Landing, Facts Concerning the 53d Regiment, the Charge of Cowardice," *Ironton Register*, May 8, 1862, 2.

⁷⁰ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 264; Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 6.

⁷¹ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 6.

warning, Appler excitedly shouted, “This is no place for us...Battalion, about face; right wheel!”⁷² The regiment once again changed positions.

The time of the regiment’s latest maneuver was approximately 6:45am.⁷³ As the Fifty-Third Ohio moved into its new position, the soldiers marched through their own camp as Rebel skirmishers opened fire.⁷⁴ For those still in the Fifty-Third Ohio’s camp, the morning routine continued unbothered by the presence of the enemy or the action of the regiment. Cooks were still preparing breakfast, soldiers on guard duty were reporting to their posts, and the sick remained in their beds.⁷⁵ Sensing the danger, Colonel Appler shouted orders to prepare the camp for the coming fight and instructed the sick to move to the rear.⁷⁶ Now, the Fifty-Third Ohio stood behind its camp in the edge of Rea Field’s surrounding forest.⁷⁷

The Fifty-Third Ohio was not completely alone in its new position. To the regiment’s right, two cannons from Allen C. Waterhouse’s battery unlimbered and prepared to open fire.⁷⁸ In addition, the commotion in Rea Field caught the attention of General Sherman who rode from his headquarters near the church to investigate. Sherman was sitting on horseback peering through his glass and riding in front of Waterhouse’s battery as more Confederates emerged from

⁷² Dawes, “The Battle of Shiloh,” in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 140.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *OR: 10, Part I*, 264.

⁷⁵ Dawes, “The Battle of Shiloh,” in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 140; Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 7.

⁷⁶ Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 7.

⁷⁷ *OR: 10, Part I*, 264.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*; Bjorn Skaptason, “The Chicago Light Artillery at Shiloh,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 104, no. 1&2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 86.

the woods.⁷⁹ With the Rebels marching across the field, General Sherman sat on his horse dangerously exposed to enemy fire.

Then, the tense buildup to combat transitioned to the horror of war as Adjunct Dawes called out to Lieutenant Eustice H. Ball of Company E to remove Sherman from the danger.⁸⁰ To alert the general, Ball yelled, “General, look to your right,” fearing that Sherman had not seen the Rebels moving through the field.⁸¹ The sight of the large Rebel force convinced Sherman that his men were truly under attack. According to Sherman biographer Robert L. O’Connell, the general was “in for the surprise of his life.”⁸² The general threw his hand into the air and exclaimed, “My God, we are attacked!”⁸³ As the chaos of the approaching battle consumed the Fifty-Third Ohio’s camp, Sherman’s orderly fell dead beside him.⁸⁴ Sherman’s hand was also pierced by a bullet from a Confederate rifle.⁸⁵ Seemingly unbothered by the injury, General Sherman ordered Appler to hold his line and promised to send support.⁸⁶ The general then rode away to assess the full picture of the attack.

At this stage of the battle, Sherman and Appler started following very different paths. Even though Appler had arguably outperformed Sherman on battle preparations and

⁷⁹ Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*; Lewis, *Sherman*, 220.

⁸² O’Connell, *Fierce Patriot*, 98.

⁸³ Lewis, *Sherman*, 220; Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 7; Mark Grimsley and Steven E. Woodworth, *Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 76

⁸⁴ Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds., *Sherman’s Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 243; Sherman, *Memoirs*, 213.

⁸⁵ McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 10.

⁸⁶ *OR:10, Part 1*, 264.

understanding the reality of the Rebel movements before the attack, the Fifty-Third Ohio's colonel melted under pressure while Sherman rose to the occasion. According to Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs, Grant did not worry about Sherman succeeding during Shiloh's first day. Grant remembered Sherman's ability under fire to, "inspire a confidence in officers and men that enabled them to render services... worthy of the best of veterans."⁸⁷ On the other hand, the Battle of Shiloh would result in the discharge of Colonel J.J. Appler from the United States Army.⁸⁸

Even though William Tecumseh Sherman was West Point educated and held several military-related positions before the outbreak of war, his battle credentials were still mostly unknown in the spring of 1862. Sherman was in the United States Army during the Mexican-American War, but he never set foot on any of the war's battlefields. He spent a large portion of his career in administrative and educational roles until the Civil War placed him in combat for the first time at the Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861. He always remembered the gruesome sights, smells, and sounds of that battle, but performed admirably during the clash. However, nothing compared to the horror that was about to engulf the fields around the Shiloh Meetinghouse. In spite of his lack of combat credentials, Sherman took his first steps toward becoming a Union hero at Pittsburg Landing.⁸⁹

Meanwhile, General Ulysses S. Grant was absent from Pittsburg Landing as the Fifty-Third Ohio faced the first shots of the Battle of Shiloh. The general was awaiting the arrival of General Buell's 40,000 strong Army of Ohio at his Savannah, Tennessee headquarters. Grant's

⁸⁷ Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed., Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 235.

⁸⁸ Ephraim C. Dawes to Ed McFurger, series 1, box 1, folder 46, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

⁸⁹ Lewis, *Sherman*, 64-84; Marszalek, *Sherman*, 181; Woodworth, *Sherman*, 57; O'Connell, *Fierce Patriot*, 102; McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 17-19.

breakfast had just been served when he heard the unmistakable sounds of battle coming from the landing.⁹⁰ Immediately, he departed for the front and directed scattered Union units toward the battle.⁹¹ Another reason for Grant's absence was due to stomach ailments and an injured ankle that limited his mobility.⁹² Grant had also been among the unconvinced that the increased clashes with Rebel soldiers indicated a pending large-scale attack, but the fact that he underestimated Albert Sidney Johnston became clear as he arrived at Pittsburg Landing.

The Fifty-Third Ohio still stood in battle formation as soldiers from General Hardee's Corps approached. The Rebel line filled the width of Rea Field with both flanks disappearing into the surrounding woods.⁹³ Suddenly, the Confederates unleashed a volley of fire on the Fifty-Third Ohio accompanied by a blast of artillery that stirred the dirt around the regiment and sent tree limbs crashing behind Company A.⁹⁴ Hardee's men marched through the Fifty-Third Ohio's camp and approached Appler's formation as the two cannons from Waterhouse's battery each unleashed a single shot.⁹⁵ Even though the Fifty-Third Ohio was in the midst of the most dangerous morning of its short history, the clock had yet to strike 7am.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South* (New York: Castle Books, 2000), 222-223.

⁹¹ Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed., Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 230-232.

⁹² Smith, *Shiloh*, 54.

⁹³ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 8.

⁹⁴ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 22.

⁹⁵ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 8.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

The Confederate soldiers advanced within fifty yards of the Fifty-Third Ohio's left flank.⁹⁷ Appler shouted above the noise for his men to fire in unison.⁹⁸ The regiment collectively fired on the enemy for the first time in the war. The volley stopped the approaching Rebels in their tracks causing them to recoil in front of the Ohioans.⁹⁹ The Confederates quickly regrouped, resumed their attack, and again charged the Fifty-Third Ohio's line.¹⁰⁰ Once more, the Ohioans fired with such force that the Confederates line temporarily dissolved.¹⁰¹ The untested regiment was answering the call of military duty.

Sometime early in the fight, the regiment suffered its first combat death. Frank Smith of Jackson, Ohio was killed when he was struck by two Confederate bullets.¹⁰² Captain Wells S. Jones remembered Smith as a dedicated abolitionist who "eagerly embraced the opportunity to bear arms for the cause."¹⁰³ Smith appeared too old for the rigors of military life, but readily embraced the opportunity to serve.¹⁰⁴ Smith's body "lay very near the big spring" as the Fifty-Third Ohio's first fatality at the Battle of Shiloh.¹⁰⁵ He would not be the last member of the regiment struck down by a Rebel gun near the banks of the Tennessee River.

⁹⁷ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 264.

⁹⁸ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 142.

⁹⁹ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 264; Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 142.

¹⁰⁰ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 264.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Wells S. Jones, "The Page of Memory! Anecdotes and Incidents of the Brave Old Fifty-Third!" *The Jackson Standard*, April 2, 1885, 1.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Although ill-prepared for the true nature of Civil War combat, the Fifty-Third Ohio initially met the Confederate onslaught with a successful barrage of murderous fire.¹⁰⁶ General Patrick Cleburne's brigade of Hardee's Corp suffered heavy losses in what historian John R. Lundberg called a "bloody repulse."¹⁰⁷ The Fifty-Third Ohio's well-directed fire decimated the attacking Mississippi and Tennessee regiments.¹⁰⁸ In spite of the Ohioan's success, Colonel Appler allowed anxiety to overwhelm his judgement. The Fifty-Third Ohio's colonel was positioned behind the regiment's left wing and clearly witnessed the two volleys' successful impact on the Confederates. However, overcome by terror, Appler ordered his regiment to, "fall back and save yourselves."¹⁰⁹ Despite the fact that the Fifty-Third Ohio was holding its ground, the majority of the regiment fled Rea Field in disorder and confusion in an abrupt and unnecessary retreat.¹¹⁰

Prior to Appler's order to retreat, several officers from the Fifty-Third Ohio were concerned that their commanding officer may prematurely order the regiment to fall back. Captain Wells S. Jones' Company A had already fought valiantly and successfully held the regiment's right flank through the morning.¹¹¹ Realizing that Appler was wavering, Jones exclaimed, "This is a good place to fight, and we will stay here."¹¹² Jones told the officers near

¹⁰⁶ T.J. Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh; Report of the Commission* (Cincinnati: C. J. Krehbiel & Co., 1903), 23-24.

¹⁰⁷ John R. Lundberg, "I Must Save this Army: Albert Sidney Johnston and the Shiloh Campaign," in *The Shiloh Campaign*, ed. Steven E. Woodworth (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 22.

¹⁰⁸ Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 72.

¹⁰⁹ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 264; Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground: A History of the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2012), 114; Smith, *Shiloh*, 102.

¹¹⁰ Smith, *Shiloh*, 102; Sword, *Shiloh*, 178-179; McDonough, *Shiloh*, 109; Daniel, *Shiloh*, 159.

¹¹¹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 22.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

him that he would not abandon his position despite an order from Appler to retreat. Adjunct Dawes, Captain James Percy, and Lieutenant Robert Starkey sided with Jones and agreed to stay in the fight.¹¹³ When the order to retreat was given, Jones' Company A and Percy's Company F stubbornly held their ground even as the remainder of the regiment fled past the Forty-Ninth Illinois in disorder.¹¹⁴

It is possible that Companies A and F did not hear Appler's order to fall back. According to Dawes' recollection after the war, Company A and F, "...did not hear this order," in reference to Appler's call to retreat.¹¹⁵ However, when considering Jones' words prior to the regiment's retreat, the stand of Companies A and F could have been the result of the soldiers' fear of participating in humiliating retreat. Jones appeared dedicated to his duty and shouted, "We came here to fight..." at Appler just before the colonel ordered the retreat.¹¹⁶ Regardless of why they remained in position, the two companies were soon engaged in a fierce fight. Jones, Percy, Dawes, Starkey, and their two companies joined the Seventeenth Illinois as the battle intensified.¹¹⁷ The Ohioans held their position among a hail of gunfire until approximately noon.¹¹⁸

Appler remained with his companies still engaged, but command was slipping from his grasp. As the Confederate fire increased, Adjunct Dawes witnessed the Fifty-Seventh Ohio break

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ *OR:10, Part 1*, 264-265.

¹¹⁵ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 9.

¹¹⁶ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 22.

¹¹⁷ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 265.

¹¹⁸ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Ohio Regiment Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 22-23.

near the position then held by the Fifty-Third Ohio's Companies A and F.¹¹⁹ Dawes desperately tried to persuade Appler to send his remaining men to the aid of their fellow Third Brigade regiment. Unfortunately, the overwhelming fear of potential death replaced the last remnants of Appler's courage. The colonel laid on the ground behind his men refusing to issue the order.¹²⁰ Appler instead ordered Dawes to have the regiment fall back and reform.¹²¹ Dawes told his colonel, "...I will not do it," resulting in Appler leaving the front, running in fear, and abandoning his regiment.¹²² For Colonel J.J. Appler of Portsmouth, Ohio, his fight at Shiloh, and his service in the army, were effectively over.

Even though, Appler was no longer leading the Fifty-Third Ohio, and the regiment remained engaged in the Battle of Shiloh, the regiment's reputation was forever altered by its commanding officer. Many of the regiment's critics cited the actions of Appler as proof that the Fifty-Third Ohio failed to do its duty at Shiloh. After Shiloh, Appler was run out of the United States Army, but his actions clouded the Fifty-Third Ohio's legacy following the battle.

The exit of Appler from the front was not the end of the Fifty-Third Ohio's fight on the first day of the Battle of Shiloh. The battle continued for the two companies refusing to leave the field. However, the regiment was left with a hole in its command structure. The regiment's Lieutenant-Colonel, Robert A. Fulton, was separated from the companies still engaged during the chaotic retreat.¹²³ Fulton separation does not indicate that he fled the scene in disgrace.

¹¹⁹ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 10.

¹²⁰ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 144.

¹²¹ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 10.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹²³ Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga*, ed., Historical Society of Massachusetts, 144.

Instead, he was remembered as a man of “resolute courage” and later rejoined the Fifty-Third Ohio on the front line.¹²⁴ Without a colonel or lieutenant-colonel, command of the regiment fell to Company A’s captain, Wells S. Jones.¹²⁵ Jones ordered the regiment, “to stay right here as long as there is any one else on the line.”¹²⁶

Soon after the change in command, Dawes informed Captain Percy that Jones was now leading the regiment. Whether caught in the fervor of battle or overcome with adrenaline, Percy raised his arm in a show of solidarity with Jones, swung his sword over his head, and shouted, “Tell Captain Jones I am with him. Let us charge!”¹²⁷ Dawes calmed the captain and reminded him of the regiment’s scattered state and its inability to effectively attack the enemy at that moment. Percy was later known as a soldier who embraced danger and bravely fulfilled his duty.¹²⁸ His first experience in combat on the morning of April 6, 1862 was no exception and earned Percy a reputation as a brave and courageous soldier.¹²⁹

Company A and F of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry fought mostly without ceasing since their regiment first made contact with the enemy. As the fighting on Shiloh’s first day increased, the regiment’s supply of ammunition was spent. Company A’s dwindling supply was remedied when a soldier from the Seventeenth Illinois filled their cartridge boxes. The Illinois soldier who came to the aid of the Ohioans was an acquaintance of Dawes named A.C.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 11.

¹²⁸ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteers during the War of the Rebellion*, 254-258.

¹²⁹ E.C. Dawes, “A Hero of the War,” in *G.A.R. Papers: Papers Read before Fred C. Jones Post, No. 401, Department of Ohio, G.A.R.*, ed. E.R. Monfort, H.B. Furness, and Fred H. Alms (Cincinnati: Elm Street Printing Co., 1891), 293.

Voris. Voris, a veteran of previous battles including Fort Donelson, shouted above the explosion of rifle fire, “it’s just like shooting squirrels, only these squirrels have guns, that’s all!”¹³⁰

Somewhat reassured, and now with ample ammunition, the Fifty-Third Ohio continued firing their Enfield rifles at the rising Confederate tide.¹³¹

Unfortunately for the Fifty-Third Ohio, the fighting seemed to increase by the second. The heavy Confederate fire took a severe toll on Companies A and F. The Rebel soldiers had overrun the cannons belonging to Waterhouse’s artillery and threatened the Ohioans’ position.¹³² Only forty of the two companies’ seventy men were still standing as able soldiers. Nineteen of the men were killed or wounded and approximately ten men left the line to escort severely injured men toward medical attention. Captain Jones saw no other option than to link with the Fifty-Seventh Ohio fighting to the left of the church.¹³³

The battle followed Jones’ men as they defeated a Confederate advance with the assistance of the Fifty-Seventh Ohio. In addition, the Seventy-Seventh Ohio arrived creating a line entirely consisting of the Third Brigade of the Fifth Division. The brigade’s line stretched toward the Tennessee River on the left with its right still hugging the Shiloh Meetinghouse. As the Rebels advanced on this line, the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio were again firing into their old campground in a fight that quickly descended into a chaos hindered by another lack of ammunition. The lack of standardized weapons plagued the Union line. Since each regiment required different ammunition for the various calibers, supplying ammunition was an extremely

¹³⁰ Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 12.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Anonymous, “Capt. Waterhouse’s Battery at Pittsburg,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 1862, 4.

¹³³ Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 12-13.

difficult task. This would not be not the last time the Fifty-Third Ohio was faced with supply issues and confusion during the Battle of Shiloh.¹³⁴

After the Fifty-Seventh and Seventy-Seventh Ohio regiments were overran by withering Confederate fire in a fight that a witness claimed, "...ain't got any rear," the Fifty-Third Ohio fell in with the Forty-Eighth Ohio.¹³⁵ Together, the remnants of the Forty-Eighth, Fifty-Seventh, and Fifty-Third Ohio regiments made a stand on the Purdy Road.¹³⁶ The Fifty-Third Ohio and the Forty-Eighth Ohio jointly repulsed another Rebel attack.¹³⁷ Sometime during the afternoon, Dawes and a small group from the Fifty-Third Ohio were separated from the rest of Companies A and F. After a brief and successful fight against a band of Louisiana troops, the Dawes' remnant located Lieutenant-Colonel Fulton and approximately 250 members of the Fifty-Third who followed Appler's retreat.¹³⁸

Fulton immediately assumed leadership of all the soldiers belonging to the Fifty-Third Ohio. The regiment was then ordered to support Union artillery. Even though several other regiments were present when the order was given, only Fulton's regiment to answer the call. The time was approximately 3:30pm. Rebels answered the Union cannons with an effective barrage before the Fifty-Third Ohio drew their fire away from the Union guns. At this point, the regiment settled into the spot where it would spend the night. Flanked by the Eighty-First Ohio on its left and the Forty-Fifth Illinois on its right, the Fifty-Third Ohio concluded its first day of combat.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Ibid., 13-14.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 14; Catton, *This Hallowed Ground*, 115.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 265.

¹³⁸ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 15-17.

¹³⁹ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 265.

During the night, wild rumors about the day's fighting drifting down the line. In addition to the true story of Confederate Albert Sidney Johnston's death, rumors swirled that the Union captured General Beauregard and Union General Buell was arriving.¹⁴⁰ However, not all the rumors encouraged the Fifty-Third Ohio. A man told Adjunct Dawes that he witnessed the surrender of the entire Union army at the Tennessee River.¹⁴¹ However, this misinformation was easily corrected when news reached the Fifty-Third Ohio that the rest of Companies A and F would soon link up with the division following a successful repulse of the day's final attack in connection with the Forty-Eighth Ohio.¹⁴²

Under the leadership of Wells S. Jones, Companies A and F were a part of the last line of defense on April 6, 1862. Still fighting with the Forty-Eighth Ohio, Jones' men were present when the Rebels attempted to slam into the Union line and drive them into the river. However, Union cannister, combined with infantry fire from a strong position, brought the day's fighting to an end. Grant's Union force was bloodied, but not broken.¹⁴³ The Ohioans stubbornly held every possible inch of ground.¹⁴⁴ But, the battle was not over and the gruesome task would return the next morning.

As evening gave way to night on April 6, 1862, the battlefield of Shiloh was a horrific scene of carnage and death. Chaplains from both sides spent the night searching the battlefield

¹⁴⁰ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 18.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 21; *OR: 10, Part 1*, 265.

¹⁴³ John A. Bering and Thomas Montgomery, *History of the Forty-Eighth Ohio Vet. Vol. Inf: From its Organization at Camp Dennison, O., in October, 1861, to the Close of the War, and its Final Muster-out, May 10, 1866* (Hillsboro: The Highland News Office, 1880), 22-24.

¹⁴⁴ Anonymous, "The Charge Against the Fifty-Third Ohio Regiment Unjust," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 16, 1862, 2.

for soldiers in need of spiritual comfort and preparation for the afterlife.¹⁴⁵ Since the Confederates now occupied the majority of the campsites that housed Union soldiers before the fighting began, Union surgeons were without the proper tools and medicine to treat the astounding number of wounded soldiers in blue.¹⁴⁶ However, the grisly work of amputation continued.¹⁴⁷ The battlefield echoed with the unforgettable sounds of mutilated men begging for mercy, relief, and death. As one Union veteran remembered: “There was never a night so long, so hideous, or so utterly uncomfortable.”¹⁴⁸

It had been a terrible day for the Union army, but the Confederates had not achieved total victory. Historian James Lee McDonough described the state of Union army as, “...pushed back, driven from position after position... always outnumbered, taking heavy losses, almost but never quite broken.”¹⁴⁹ Following the death of General Albert Sidney Johnston, Confederate command solely fell to General P.G.T. Beauregard. Victory appeared to be within the Confederates’ grasp when Beauregard called off the attack around 6pm on the evening of April 6th.¹⁵⁰ After eleven hours of fighting and realizing the Union held a strong artillery position near the Tennessee River, Beauregard decided to regroup, rest, and finish off Grant’s army the

¹⁴⁵ Cunningham, *Shiloh*, ed. Joiner and Smith, 337.

¹⁴⁶ Sword, *Shiloh*, 371.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ John A. Cockerill, “A Boy at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1903-1908, Volume IV*, ed. Theodore F. Allen, Edward S. McKee, and J. Gordon Taylor (Cincinnati: Monfort & Company, 1908), 30.

¹⁴⁹ McDonough, *Shiloh*, 182.

¹⁵⁰ Sean Michael Chick, *Dreams of Victory: General P.G.T. Beauregard in the Civil War* (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie LLC, 2022), 63-64.

following morning.¹⁵¹ Unknown to the Confederate commander, the Union position was strengthening with the arrival of General Buell's Army of Ohio.¹⁵²

Union command tried to reorganize their men throughout the night. In addition to the high number of dead and wounded Union soldiers, many of the raw troops fled the front lines. A mass of men huddled on the banks of the Tennessee River searching for a safe spot to successfully escape the clash intact. Some of these men refused to rejoin the fight as night fell on the battlefield. Instead, they swamped the riverbank and spread the disease of fear believing rumors that Grant's demise was imminent.¹⁵³ Undoubtedly, a few of the soldiers from the Fifty-Third who followed Appler's order to retreat were among these refugees.

Despite the high casualties and being pinned against the Tennessee, General Grant had no plan to disengage. Retreating across the river to safety via the Union's great steamboat armada was not a consideration. Furthermore, Grant was not going to fight a defensive battle from behind his hastily assembled, but strong, defensive position. The general was going on the offensive the next morning and planned drive the Confederates from the Union tents they now occupied. Grant, in one of the war's most oft quoted exchanges, relayed his plans to Sherman under the cover of a sturdy tree when he responded to Sherman's, "Well Grant, we've had the

¹⁵¹ G.T. Beauregard, "The Campaign of Shiloh," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Volume I*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc, 1956), 590.

¹⁵² Leander Stillwell, *The Story of a Common Soldier* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1920), 52.

¹⁵³ Anonymous, "Latest from Pittsburg," *Daily Ohio Statesmen*, April 11, 1862, 3.

devil's own day, haven't we?" with the silently confident remark, "Yes, lick 'em tomorrow, though."¹⁵⁴

The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry, now fully united after being separated during the day's fighting, still occupied a position between the Eighty-First Ohio and the Forty-Fifth Illinois.¹⁵⁵ The two factions of Wells S. Jones and Robert Fulton laid down together on the battlefield after a terrifying first day of combat.¹⁵⁶ Adjunct Ephraim C. Dawes remembered the fighting on the first day of Shiloh as, "the fiercest... on this continent."¹⁵⁷ Samuel R. Betts of Company G wrote that the regiment remained engaged in first day's fight for eleven hours.¹⁵⁸ Colonel J.J. Appler's location remained unknown.¹⁵⁹ Sole leadership of the Fifty-Third Ohio remained with Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Fulton. The men with Fulton and Jones survived their first fight and were prepared to face whatever new clash came with the morning.

The Fifty-Third Ohio were among the numerous Union soldiers without shelter after the fighting on April 6th. They slept on their guns as the groans of the dying filled the woods. Just when it appeared that the night of horrors could not get worse, the clouds opened and a heavy thunderstorm pelted both armies.¹⁶⁰ The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio had no option but to endure

¹⁵⁴ Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 205; Smith, *Shiloh*, 246; Daniel, *Shiloh*, 266; H.W. Brands, *The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses S. Grant in War and Peace* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 184; Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Random House, 2019), 219.

¹⁵⁵ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 265.

¹⁵⁶ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 23.

¹⁵⁷ Ephraim C. Dawes to S.C. Dawes, series 1, box 1, folder 46, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

¹⁵⁸ Samuel R. Betts, "Letter from the Fifty-Third: Camp Shiloh, Pittsburg Landing, April 10, 1862," *Ironton Register*, April 24, 1862, 3.

¹⁵⁹ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 264.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, *Shiloh*, 241-243.

the rain. Their Rea Field camp, and all their regimental possession, were in Confederate hands.¹⁶¹ Adding to the sleeplessness of the night, Union gunboats on the river fired at the Rebel lines in intervals. Meant to soften the Rebel lines and keep Beauregard's men from sleeping, the gunboats' thunderous booms shook the ground and deprived both sides from the chance of a restful night.¹⁶² Years later, Lucius Barber of the Fifteen Illinois shared his memory of that night: "The night was dark and stormy. The rain came down in perfect torrents and we had neither food nor shelter. Through the long dismal night, our rest was broken by the deep reverberating tones of the guns from the gunboat which kept up an incessant roar all night."¹⁶³

Along the Confederate lines, the soldiers still among the living attempted to sleep in the bullet-ridden Yankee tents. It had been a tough day for the Rebel force, but a successful one. Exhausted and realizing that they had not quite broke Grant's army, Confederate soldiers were mostly satisfied with the day's results.¹⁶⁴ However, many Rebel soldiers believed they could have achieved more. Many Southern soldiers thought they disengaged the enemy without achieving complete victory and one more push could have secured a war-altering victory in the West. In some Southern circles, particularly those whose understanding of battle was molded by Albert Sidney Johnston's son, General Beauregard would bear the responsibility for costing the Rebels a chance at total victory.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ Wills De Hass, "Annals of War: Chapters of Unwritten History, The Fearful Conflict at Shiloh," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 15, 1878, 9.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Lucius W. Barber, *Army Memoirs* (The J.M.W. Jones Stationery and Printing Co., 1894), 56.

¹⁶⁴ Henry Morton Stanly, *The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanly: The Making of a 19th Century Explorer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), 198-200.

¹⁶⁵ William Preston Johnston, *The Life of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston: Embracing His Services in the Armies of the United States, the Republic of Texas, and the Confederate States* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878), 635-640.

Shiloh: Day Two (April 7, 1862)

Although victorious in the first day's fighting, the situation was not completely positive for the weary Rebel soldiers as the morning of April 7, 1862 approached. The nature of the first day's fighting left Confederate units spread out on the battlefield. The Battle of Shiloh may have consisted of two large armies slugging it out on the banks of the Tennessee, but it frequently dissolved into violent skirmishes among small groups of combatants. This fact, combined with the Confederates desire to make use of the abandoned Union camps, left Rebel soldiers in a woefully scattered condition.¹⁶⁶

Even though General Beauregard planned to finish Grant's army off in the morning, the Rebels were in no real condition to successfully repulse an attack. Arguably, the Rebels were just as unprepared for an attack on the second day as the Union on the first day. The Confederate soldiers slept where they could and often made camp where their regiment fired its last shots of day. Some of the Southern men refused to rest for the opportunity to raid the Union camps. Rebel soldiers slogged through the mud and dodged the boom of Yankee gunboats to steal food and weapons from the abandoned Union camps.¹⁶⁷

General Buell's Army of Ohio arrived on the banks of the Tennessee as the last Confederate charge fizzled on the evening of April 6th. General Grant arranged for steamboats to ferry Buell's men to Pittsburg Landing and into the battle as quickly as possible.¹⁶⁸ Even though Buell's men exchanged just a few shots with the enemy, their presence undoubtedly boosted

¹⁶⁶ Beauregard, "The Campaign of Shiloh," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Volume I*, ed. Johnson and Buel, 591-593.

¹⁶⁷ Basil W. Duke, *History of Morgan's Cavalry* (Cincinnati: Miami Printing and Publishing Company, 1867), 153; McDonough, *Shiloh*, 190-191; Sword, *Shiloh*, 372-373.

¹⁶⁸ *OR:10, Part 1*, 292.

Union morale. The Army of Ohio continued to arrive on the battlefield throughout the rainy night. In addition to Buell, Lew Wallace arrived with a force of approximately 5,000 men to bolster the Union line.¹⁶⁹ Arriving too late to impact the fighting on April 6th, Wallace's army was fully in position by midnight and eager to join the next day's fight.¹⁷⁰ The new arrivals made Grant so certain that he would prevail the following day that he remembered believing: "that the next day would bring victory to our arms if we could only take the initiative."¹⁷¹

When morning came, Grant set his attack in motion. His soldiers made up the right of the Union line while General Buell's soldiers occupied the left flank.¹⁷² The Fifty-Third Ohio was not under the direct command of General Sherman during the second day's fighting due to the scattered nature of Union troops. Along with the Eighty-First Ohio, they were a part of hastily assembled collection under the command of a Kentucky-born democrat, General John A. McClernand.¹⁷³ The Eighty-First Ohio entered the battle as a part of the Second Brigade in General W.H.L. Wallace's Second Division.¹⁷⁴ Like the rest of the Union army on the morning of April 7, 1862, a lot had changed for the Eighty-First Ohio in the last twenty-four hours. Their division commander was mortally wounded and dying, they were introduced to the Fifty-Third Ohio, and placed under the command of McClernand.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed. Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 237-238.

¹⁷⁰ Christopher R. Mortenson, *Politician in Uniform: General Lew Wallace and the Civil War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 68.

¹⁷¹ Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed. Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 591.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁷³ Victor Hicken, "John A. McClernand and the House Speakership Struggle of 1859," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1960): 165.

¹⁷⁴ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 101.

¹⁷⁵ Smith, *Shiloh*, 414-416.

The Fifty-Third Ohio advanced under General Grant's order toward the Union camps now occupied by Beauregard's Confederates.¹⁷⁶ In conjunction with the Eighty-First Ohio, the two regiments moved over a mile from their original position without any signs of Rebel resistance.¹⁷⁷ Lieutenant R. A. Starkey and Lieutenant J.W. Fulton led an advance party of skirmishers in front of the advancing Fifty-Third Ohio.¹⁷⁸ Eventually, the Ohioans stumbled on a collection of Rebels determined to defend their position. As a member of the Eighty-First Ohio remembered, the Confederates opened a couple of cannons on the Ohioans sending, "shell and shot from two batteries... flying through our ranks."¹⁷⁹ The two Ohio regiments eventually chased the Rebels from their position with a bayonet charge.¹⁸⁰

As the fighting continued on the second day, the Fifty-Third Ohio became a part of a heavy clash on the Union left.¹⁸¹ The Confederate onslaught forced the Ohioans from their position until the arrival of reinforcements gave the Union the advantage.¹⁸² Then, General McClelland ordered the Fifty-Third Ohio to fill a different role. After engaging in combat for the past forty-eight hours, the regiment was reassigned as sharpshooters. In this role, the Fifty-Third Ohio successfully assisted in one of the final Union assaults at the Battle of Shiloh made

¹⁷⁶ Anonymous, "The Shiloh Campaign: Buell's Troops Arrive During the Night and Take Position, The Second Day," *The National Tribune*, July 3, 1884, 1-2.

¹⁷⁷ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 23.

¹⁷⁸ *OR: 10, Part I*, 265.

¹⁷⁹ W.H. Chamberlain, *History of the 81st Regiment Ohio Infantry Volunteers during the War of the Rebellion* (Cincinnati: Gazette Steam Printing House, 1865), 18.

¹⁸⁰ *OR: 10, Part I*, 265.

¹⁸¹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 23.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*; *OR: 10, Part I*, 266.

by Buell's soldiers.¹⁸³ The last Union attack finally and thoroughly broke the Rebel line and sent Beauregard's army withdrawing back toward Corinth.¹⁸⁴ The muddy ground and saturated roads made the Confederate withdrawal difficult, and a Union pursuit almost impossible, but the Union soldiers had successfully repulsed the attack on Pittsburg Landing. However, victory came at a high price.¹⁸⁵

On the Confederate side, the battle had taken a completely unexpected turn. The Rebels were on the verge of driving the Union soldiers into the Tennessee less than twenty-four hours earlier. Now, they were retreating from the field, heading back to Corinth, and leaving the battlefield in Union possession. Due to the Union's overwhelming numerical advantage and Grant's daring counterattack, withdrawal was arguably the only option left for General Beauregard. The Rebel attack on Pittsburg Landing was a gamble that nearly succeeded, but General Grant prevailed on a Western battlefield once again.

The Battle of Shiloh was a horrific experience for the men on both sides. Similar to the Fifty-Third Ohio, the clash was the first war experience for the majority of Confederate and Union soldiers. From the opening shots to the closing charge, the Fifty-Third Ohio remained engaged in the fight. The regiment's only rest came during the rain-soaked night following the battle's first day. Adjunct Ephraim C. Dawes only recorded two words in his pocket diary on April 7th: "still fighting."¹⁸⁶ The Fifty-Third Ohio ended April 7th near the Shiloh Meetinghouse.

¹⁸³ *OR: 10, Part 1, 266.*

¹⁸⁴ Chamberlain, *History of the 81st Regiment Ohio Infantry Volunteers during the War of the Rebellion*, 19.

¹⁸⁵ Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed., Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 241-242.

¹⁸⁶ Ephraim C. Dawes Pocket Journal, April 7, 1862, series 4, box 3, folder 78, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

After the confusion of combat, the regiment was finally reunited with the regiments of the Fifth Division's Third Brigade.¹⁸⁷

The Day After Shiloh: April 8, 1862

By the morning of April 8, 1862, it was clear that the Rebels had abandoned the field.¹⁸⁸ Still, the battered victors dispatched a small advance party to determine Confederate intentions. General Sherman's division contacted the retreating Rebels near a place known as Fallen Timbers. Covering the Confederate retreat, Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest attempted to lure the pursuing Union troops into an ambush. Dismounted Rebel cavalry fired on Sherman's men. Behind Forrest's initial line, approximately three hundred Confederate horsemen waited to spring their trap.¹⁸⁹ Once again, the Fifty-Third Ohio, and the rest of its brigade, was in the midst of the fighting.

The fight on Monday April 7, 1862 illustrated the effectiveness of the Fifty-Third Ohio under fire. Upon contacting Forrest's men approximately five miles from Shiloh on the road leading to Corinth, General Sherman deployed Colonel Hildebrand's brigade to advance on the enemy. First, the Seventy-Seventh Ohio engaged the Confederates with the Fifty-Third Ohio in support. The Seventy-Seventh Ohio formed into a battleline and prepared their rifles to fire. Before the Seventy-Seventh Ohio could direct its fire toward the enemy, Forrest sprang his trap. The Rebel cavalry violently charged the regiment forcing the Seventy-Seventh to break and retreat.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ *OR: 10, Part 1, 266.*

¹⁸⁸ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 233.

¹⁸⁹ Daniel, *Shiloh*, 296-297.

¹⁹⁰ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio during the War of the Rebellion*, 89.

Following the breaking of the Seventy-Seventh's line, the Fifty-Third Ohio was ordered to quickly fall into a battle formation. The regiment, now engaged in combat for the third consecutive day, fixed bayonets and prepared for the fight. The Fifty-Third Ohio then executed a daring and brave movement by charging toward the mounted Confederates. Forrest's men were no match for the Ohioans and began to ride away. Not only did the Fifty-Third Ohio force the Rebel cavalry to break, a large number of soldiers from the Seventy-Seventh Ohio were rescued by their fellow Third Brigade regiment.¹⁹¹ In addition, several of Forrest's men cut down by the Fifty-Third Ohio lay dead among the trees.¹⁹² The Fifty-Third Ohio pressed the attack until the fallen trees, and the arrival of night, hindered the regiment's ability to execute military maneuvers.¹⁹³

The promptness of the Fifty-Third Ohio's actions during the fight at Fallen Timbers on April 8, 1862 illustrated how rapidly the regiment matured during the Shiloh campaign. The Ohioans entered the Battle of Shiloh totally green and were forced to learn Civil War combat in the midst of a battle General Sherman remembered as, "one of the most fiercely contested of the war."¹⁹⁴ By April 8th, the Fifty-Third Ohio was a veteran regiment that not only engaged the Rebels without hesitation, the Ohioans most likely saved General Sherman from capture when the enemy unleashed its trap.¹⁹⁵ Whether the regiment's growth was due to finally "seeing the

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 89-90.

¹⁹² *OR: 10, Part 1*, 266.

¹⁹³ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 89-90.

¹⁹⁴ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 231.

¹⁹⁵ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 90.

elephant,” or if they just benefitted from the removal of Colonel Appler from command, the Fifty-Third Ohio exited the Shiloh campaign prepared meet the call of duty for the duration of the war.

General Ulysses S. Grant ultimately decided against a full pursuit of the Confederate retreat. The frequent and heavy rains of the previous few days left the roads in a muddy condition that were worsened by the retreating Rebel wagons. Grant’s army, although ultimately victorious, was just as battered and exhausted as the enemy. There was also a question of seniority that prohibited Grant from ordering Buell’s men to pursue Beauregard. Grant believed that the brutal fighting at Shiloh left the Union army without the strength and manpower to successfully follow up on its defense of Pittsburg Landing.¹⁹⁶ Instead, the Union soldiers returned to the battlefield to bury the dead laying exposed to the warm spring sun.¹⁹⁷

During the fighting at Shiloh on April 6th and 7th, nine members of the Fifty-Third Ohio were killed in action. Forty-four soldiers received injuries, but zero were reported missing. A few minor injuries occurred on the fighting at Fallen Timbers that afflicted seven of the Ohioans.¹⁹⁸ As the regiment returned to the battlefield at Shiloh following the fight at Fallen Timbers, its connection to the battle was far from over. Speculation, rumors, and false accounts of the clash would soon overpower the initial praise placed on General Grant and his men for driving the enemy from Pittsburg Landing. The Union command would soon be forced to answer questions about the preparedness of their men and whether the army was surprised by Johnston’s attack. However, the finger pointing would not solely be directed at high-ranking officials. The Fifty-

¹⁹⁶ Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed., Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 242.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 243-244; Daniel, *Shiloh*, 293; Smith, *Shiloh*, 397-402; Sword, *Shiloh*, 417-422; McDonough, *Shiloh*, 208-213.

¹⁹⁸ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 266.

Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry's performance, and its honor, would soon be the center of attention.

Chapter 5

The Fifty-Third Ohio's "White Feather" at Shiloh

Introduction: The Context of Shiloh's Complicated History

As the smoke cleared from the battlefield at Shiloh, both home fronts basked in the temporary jubilation of perceived victory. However, the elation experienced by citizens of the United States and Confederate States did not accurately reflect the battle's true outcome. Confederate leadership electrified the South with a premature telegraph to Richmond announcing a sweeping victory on the evening of April 6, 1862.¹ The excitement throughout the Confederate States of America was soon replaced by the realities of defeat. Leaving the Union in possession of Pittsburg Landing was eventually viewed as a Rebel loss by almost everyone except General P.G.T. Beauregard, who clung to the previous message of triumph.²

Beauregard's assessment of the battle was among the first of many attempts to calculate Shiloh's true outcome. The blurring of fact, fiction, and fantasy further complicated attempts to construct an accurate history. In an April 16th message to the Army of Mississippi, the Confederate general continued to spin his army's action at Shiloh as a crippling blow to the Union war effort stating: "You have bravely fought the invaders of your soil for two days in his own position... Your success has been signal... You have done your duty. Your commanding general thanks you."³ For decades, Beauregard continued to present the battle in the best possible

¹ Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh: The Battle that Changed the Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 313.

² James Lee McDonough, *Shiloh: In Hell before Night* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 218.

³ Robert N. Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume X, Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 397. (Referred to as *OR: 10, Part I* for the remainder of the chapter).

light for the Rebel cause.⁴ Many other Confederate leaders viewed the Battle of Shiloh as a missed opportunity that should have been a war-altering victory.⁵

The Battle of Shiloh also created a confusion between reality and fabrication in the North. The Union victory once again elevated Ulysses S. Grant's status as a war hero until the high casualty numbers soured the Northern mood. Popular opinion quickly turned against the successful general for the first time in the war.⁶ In addition, questions arose about the status of Union defenses at Pittsburg Landing and whether the Union army had been surprised on April 6, 1862. Even the old accusation of drunkenness returned to haunt a disheartened Grant.⁷ According to historian James McPherson: "Grant was now a bigger goat than Albert Sidney Johnston had been in the South after his retreat from Tennessee."⁸ Ultimately, General Henry Halleck arrived at Pittsburg Landing and pushed Grant into a meaningless subordinate role.⁹

Due to the debates and finger pointing, Grant remembered the Battle of Shiloh as: "perhaps less understood, or, to state the case more accurately, more persistently misunderstood, than any other engagement between National and Confederate troops during the entire rebellion."¹⁰ William Tecumseh Sherman, the recipient of similar criticism, agreed with Grant's

⁴ G.T. Beauregard, "The Campaign of Shiloh," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Volume I*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), 593.

⁵ Jefferson Davis, *The Fall of the Confederate Government* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2010), 65-68.

⁶ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 414.

⁷ Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 208-211.

⁸ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 414.

⁹ Chernow, *Grant*, 213.

¹⁰ Ulysses S. Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition*, ed. John F. Marszalek, David S. Nolen, and Louie P. Gallo (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 251.

assessment of Shiloh's legacy. In his memoir, Sherman wrote: "Probably no single battle of the war gave rise to such wild and damaging reports."¹¹ The clash on the banks of the Tennessee River still caused casualties long after the Rebel army withdrew. However, the victims were no longer the results of horrific battlefield injuries, but the damaged reputations of commanders. Questions surrounding the tardiness to the battlefield of General Lew Wallace, and whether Grant could have won without the arrival of General Don Carlos Buell's army, provided newspapers with sensational material for an eager public.¹²

Commanding generals and household names were not the only recipients of accusations, slanders, and falsehoods. There was enough blame for every soldier associated with the Union military victory, or perceived loss, at Shiloh. Arguably, few soldiers understood Grant and Sherman's assessments of the battle's legacy more than the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Not only was the regiment still reeling from the shock of its first encounter with the enemy, but additional wounds from the Battle of Shiloh festered for decades through spoken words, newspaper articles, and memoirs. As the Fifty-Third Ohio's de-facto regimental historian wrote in 1900, "a certain amount of odium was sought to be cast upon the 53rd Ohio Regiment" in the Shiloh narrative.¹³

To understand the lasting impact of the Battle of Shiloh on the Fifty-Third Ohio, the sources of the criticism, and reasons why the regiment was ostracized, must be considered. First, how the Union command viewed the actions of the Fifty-Third Ohio on the morning of April 6,

¹¹ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 2005), 229.

¹² Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground: A History of the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2012), 118.

¹³ John K. Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion* (Portsmouth: The Blade Printing Company, 1900), 8.

1862 should be examined. This question focuses heavily on General Sherman's interpretation of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh with emphasis on his face-to-face rebuke of the regiment in the battle's immediate aftermath. In addition, General Grant's opinion of regiments who initially fled the frontlines adds further context to the overall interpretation of the Fifty-Third Ohio. Next, how was the Union commanders' opinion of the regiment influenced solely by the actions of Colonel Appler?

The second set of questions that are necessary for a full understanding of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh are connected to the regiment's portrayal in the press. First, how was the regiment presented in the local Ohio press? Furthermore, the harsh treatment of the regiment in the Chicago newspapers, and how that was connected to the need of the Illinois press to protect the honor of its state's soldiers, is examined. Finally, the question of how the regiment responded to criticism places the post-Shiloh debate into larger questions of honor, duty, and manhood of the Civil War Era. Despite staying in the fight for the duration of the battle, the Fifty-Third Ohio remained the focus of unjust innuendo and allegations of cowardice related to Colonel J.J. Appler's rash and unnecessary order to withdraw that cast a long shadow over the regiment's legacy.

Union Commanders' Criticisms of the Fifty-Third O.V.I.

At the Battle of Shiloh, the state of Ohio received a bad name based on the perceived unsteadiness of its soldiers under fire. Ohio troops, including the Fifty-Third Ohio, were viewed by some of their comrades in a negative light for failing to hold their ground against the initial Rebel attack. John A. Cockerill of the Seventieth Ohio remembered a Union lieutenant saying in the midst of battle: "Ohio is making a bad show of itself here today. I have stragglers from a

dozen Ohio regiments going past here for half an hour. Ohio expects better work from her sons than this.”¹⁴ The Fifty-Third Ohio was not unique among its fellow Ohio regiments for the criticism it received. However, the ferocity of the attacks against the regiment was particularly hurtful. The broad statements about Ohio soldiers wounded the collective pride of the state, but it was the direct accusations of cowardice against the Fifty-Third Ohio that truly tarnished the regiment’s legacy.

Several factors placed the Fifty-Third Ohio in the direct path of criticism and condemnation during the fallout from Shiloh. Arguably, no bigger factor assisted in smearing the regiment’s name more than generals looking to redirect their own critics. General Sherman was particularly hurt by the slanderous reports of against him and General Grant in the Union newspapers. Sherman felt the attacks were unjust and renewed his longstanding feud with the press.¹⁵ Officers caught in the censure’s crosshairs readily passed the buck to the men serving under them as the accusations mounted. General Sherman became the focus of many criticisms related to Shiloh, but he was equally angry about the attacks on Grant who the press painted as negligent and mostly responsible for the failures of Shiloh.¹⁶

Sherman had already faced his share of troubles with the press and was just emerging from the accusations against his mental health first published by the *Cincinnati Commercial*

¹⁴ John A. Cockerill, “A Boy at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1903-1908, Volume IV*, ed. Theodore F. Allen, Edward S. McKee, and J. Gordon Taylor (Cincinnati: Monfort & Company, 1908), 19.

¹⁵ Robert L. O’Connell, *Fierce Patriot: The Tangle Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York: Random House, 2014), 102-103; John F. Marazalek, *Sherman: A Soldier’s Passion for Order* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1993), 183;

¹⁶ Marazalek, *Sherman*, 183; H.W. Brands, *The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses S. Grant in War and Peace* (New York: Anchor Books, 2013), 186-188; Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Random House, 2016), 228; Ronald L. Miller, *Vicksburg: Grant’s Campaign that Broke the Confederacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 85-87; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 415.

when the Battle of Shiloh occurred.¹⁷ According to Sherman biographer and historian John F. Marszalek, Sherman “battled the press in a conflict that in intensity rivaled the fighting between Union and Confederate soldiers.”¹⁸ Sherman likely searched for cover out of fear of repeating the negative press of the previous year. Partly related to the growing desire to identify scapegoats for the Battle of Shiloh, the Fifty-Third Ohio found itself in the midst of the controversy. No source was harsher in its criticism of the Fifty-Third Ohio than its division commander, William Tecumseh Sherman.

Historian Brooks D. Simpson argues that Sherman tried to defend the Union surprise at Shiloh by overstating the preparedness of his troops.¹⁹ According to Simpson, Sherman was “eager to discredit negative newspaper reports detailing a Union army overrun in a moment of absolute surprise, went too far when it came to defending themselves from the charges that they had not anticipated the Confederate attack.”²⁰ Sherman knew that his failure to take the reports of approaching Rebels seriously would likely taint his legacy.²¹ In addition, the general sent multiple rebukes to the Fifty-Third Ohio and its colonel for alerting him of a large Confederate force approaching Pittsburg Landing.²² For Sherman, it was important to deflect the claims to an easier target. Unfortunately, the Fifty-Third Ohio perfectly suited that role.

¹⁷ Marazalek, *Sherman*, 164-165.

¹⁸ John F. Marszalek, *Sherman's Other War: The General and the Civil War Press* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1999), 3.

¹⁹ Brooks D. Simpson, “After Shiloh,” in *The Shiloh Campaign*, ed. Steven E. Woodworth (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 147.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

²² E. C. Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1890-1896, Volume IV*, ed. W.H. Chamberlin (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1896), 4-6.

On April 11, 1862, Sherman made his displeasure with the regiment known. He called the Fifty-Third Ohio to attention and berated its performance in the opening rounds of the battle. Regimental adjunct, Ephraim C. Dawes, recorded in his diary for the 11th that the Fifty-Third Ohio was: “publicly disgraced to day.”²³ As the regiment stood at attention before its division commander, Sherman unloaded a scolding public rebuke of the Fifty-Third Ohio’s performance on April 6th.²⁴ The general accused the regiment of cowardice in the face of the enemy and verbally attacked the Ohioans’ honor. General Sherman must have raised his voice in anger, possibly screaming, allowing the exchange to be recorded by a nearby member of another regiment.²⁵ A.F. Davis of the Fifteenth Indiana Infantry listened as Sherman scolded the Fifty-Third Ohio.²⁶

In a letter to his brother, Davis recorded the blistering attack: “On Wednesday Gen. Sherman found the 53rd Ohio in a hollow square in a few yards from my tent and addressed them for near one hour. And of all the rebukes that I ever hear men get he gave them. Calling them cowards, bastards and every low name he could think of.”²⁷ Sherman continued his reprimand by stating the Fifty-Third Ohio was a “disgrace to the nation” and threatened to kill members of the

²³ Ephraim C. Dawes Pocket Journal, April 11, 1862, series 4, box 3, folder 78, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

²⁴ The exact date of Sherman’s public rebuke is unknown. Ephraim C. Dawes’ writings seem to indicate that the event happened on April 11th while A.F. Davis’ letter places it on the Wednesday after the Battle of Shiloh (April 10, 1862).

²⁵ A.F. Davis to F.D. Davis, April 21, 1862, Columbia Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.

²⁶ *Ibid*; Joseph Allen Frank and George A. Reaves, *Seeing the Elephant: Raw Recruits at the Battle of Shiloh* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 43.

²⁷ A.F. Davis to F.D. Davis, April 21, 1862.

regiment with Union cannons if they ever broke again.²⁸ Specifically, Sherman threatened to “open on them with grape and canister” if a repeat of Shiloh occurred.²⁹

In addition to Sherman’s negative portrayal, General Don Carlos Buell later blamed the Fifty-Third Ohio for the Union initial failure at Shiloh in an article for *Century* magazine. However, Buell not only criticized the Fifty-Third Ohio, but blamed the entire Third Brigade of Sherman’s Fifth Division for failing to hold the Union line.³⁰ First, Buell wrote that Sherman’s left, the position occupied by the Fifty-Third Ohio, “immediately broke into a rout.”³¹ Later, he stated: “Hildebrand’s brigade now disappeared in complete disorder from the front, leaving three pieces of artillery in the hands of the enemy.”³² The Fifty-Third Ohio became a universal scapegoat for Union generals connected to the Battle of Shiloh.

It should be noted that General Buell was not present when the first shots of the Battle of Shiloh were fired.³³ The general was waiting to bring his full army together with Grant’s soldiers to initiate the strike on Corinth, Mississippi.³⁴ Buell likely based his portrayal of the Fifty-Third Ohio, and the Third Brigade of the Fifth Division, off reports filed by the participants of the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Don Carlos Buell, “Shiloh Reviewed,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Volume I*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc, 1956), 500-501.

³¹ Ibid., 500.

³² Ibid.

³³ Timothy B. Smith, *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 78-81; O. Edward Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, ed. Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith (New York: Savas Beattie LLC, 2009), 161.

³⁴ Wiley Sword, *Shiloh: Bloody April* (Dayton: The Press of Morningside Books, 1988), 39.

clash. Undoubtedly, Sherman's opinion of the battle's opening minutes influenced Buell's account and contributed to his unflattering picture of the Fifty-Third Ohio.

Buell's assessment of the battle reached a wide audience. In the 1880s, the formerly titled *Scribner's* magazine was in the process of being rebranded as *Century*. The magazine's new editors were hoping to find a series of novel articles that would capture the nation's attention. With the Civil War receding into history and memory, and the conflict's veterans aging, the idea was born to persuade soldiers from both sides to record their wartime experiences for the publication.³⁵ Shortly after the first "battle paper" was printed, the circulation of *Century* rose from approximately 127,000 to 225,000 with an estimated readership of around two million.³⁶ The articles were printed in the 1880s in a four volume set and reprinted in 1956 ensuring that the early portrayals of soldiers, like the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio, continued to heavily influence the historiography of the Civil War.³⁷

The Impact of the Union Command's Censure of Appler on the Fifty-Third O.V.I.

The public censure of the Fifty-Third Ohio was not the only time the regiment was the focus of General Sherman's anger. As time passed, however, his displeasure with the regiment shifted more toward the actions of Colonel J.J. Appler, but he never fully pardoned the Fifty-Third Ohio as a whole. In an 1862 letter, Sherman placed Appler into the group of colonels who withered in the face of the Rebel attack at Shiloh. The general called these men "cowards," and

³⁵ Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Volume I* (New York, Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), iii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, x.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, iii-iv.

the soldiers who followed them were defined as “those who deserted their colors.”³⁸ In addition, General Sherman wrote harshly of the Fifty-Third Ohio in his official report and echoed some of his earlier charges against the regiment.

Sherman’s recollection of the battle was recorded one day before the Fifty-Third Ohio’s adjunct, Ephraim C. Dawes, recorded the regiment being “publicly disgraced,” and roughly the same time as the rebuke of the regiment recorded by A.F. Davis.³⁹ In his report, Sherman wrote that “Appler’s regiment broke in disorder” and that “two regiments of Hildebrand’s brigade – Appler’s and Mungen’s – had already disappeared to the rear” by 10 am on April 6th.⁴⁰ Sherman later added the report, and his assessment of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh, to his published memoir which allowed his version to reach a wide audience.⁴¹ Not only did the regiment’s division commander blame the Fifty-Third Ohio in the immediate aftermath of Shiloh for the initial failure of his command, Sherman remained firm in this conviction for the remainder of his life.

A change in the Fifty-Third Ohio’s command did not appear to ease Sherman’s frustration toward the Ohioans. Colonel J.J. Appler was removed from command following the Battle of Shiloh.⁴² Eventually, Wells S. Jones of Company A replaced Appler and led the

³⁸ Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds., *Sherman’s Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 243-245.

³⁹ Ephraim C. Dawes Pocket Journal, April 11, 1862; A.F. Davis to F.D. Davis, April 21, 1862; *OR: 10, Part 1* 248.

⁴⁰ *OR 10: Part 1: 249.*

⁴¹ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 218-227.

⁴² The Roster Commission, *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865: Volume IV, 37th-53rd Regiments – Infantry* (Akron: The Werner PTG. and MFG. Co., 1887), 675; Ephraim Dawes to Ed McFurger, April 29, 1862, series 1, box 1, folder 43, Ephraim C. Dawes Paper, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois; Steven E. Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 197.

regiment as it became known as a reliable and brave unit.⁴³ The general's later correspondences that praised the efforts of the regiment were still accompanied by his original criticism of Appler. In a letter praising the Fifty-Third Ohio from June of 1864, Sherman still referenced the regiment as: "that very Regt. which first broke, the 53rd Ohio, Col. Appler."⁴⁴ In Sherman's eyes, the perceived stain of Shiloh remained with the Fifty-Third Ohio in spite of the regiment's later success.

Sherman's disgust with Appler was primarily based on the colonel ordering the regiment to "fall back and save yourselves."⁴⁵ The general was present with the Fifty-Third Ohio when he realized his line was under attack. Sherman promised to send support to bolster the position before riding away to assess the overall situation. As Sherman departed from the Ohioans, the general ordered the regiment to meet the Confederate assault where it stood: "Appler, hold your position; I will support you."⁴⁶ Shortly after Sherman's departure, Appler lost his nerve and ordered an unnecessary retreat from the Fifty-Third Ohio's Rea Field position.

The story of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh remained almost exclusively negative for the approximately one-hundred years following the battle. By comparison to the great battles in the East, the Western Theater did not receive enough attention to spark a major historiographical

⁴³ Anonymous, "Major Foster Presents the Old 53rd O.V.I. Flag to State," *Chillicothe Gazette*, July 20, 1914, 1; Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 245-246;

⁴⁴ Simpson and Berlin, eds. *Sherman's Civil War*, 650.

⁴⁵ *OR: 10, Part 1*, 264; Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground: A History of the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2012), 114; Smith, *Shiloh*, 102; James Lee McDonough, *Shiloh: In Hell before Night* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 109; Daniel, *Shiloh*, 159; Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 9.

⁴⁶ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 8; Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 221; Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 158; Daniel, *Shiloh*, 158; Sword, *Shiloh*, 176.

shift for Appler or his men. Unfortunately for the Fifty-Third Ohio, Sherman's assessment of the regiment's performance at Shiloh became foundational research for the general's biographers. The reoccurring critique of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh usually cites Sherman's censure of Appler and the men who followed his order to retreat.

As mentioned in chapter one, the historiography of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh has been largely negative among Sherman biographers. The negative portrayals often focused on Appler, but the colonel was usually presented as a part of the regiment and not as the outside factor of poor leadership beyond the regiment's control. James Lee McDonough wrote that Sherman's failure to hold his line on the morning of April 6, 1862 was likely tied to the retreat of the Fifty-Third Ohio from Rea Field.⁴⁷ Robert L. O'Connell described Appler as "nervous" and praised the heroic Sherman as a leader who "righted himself and took on the wave" after failing to believe reports of Rebels near Pittsburg Landing.⁴⁸

Steven E. Woodworth, with a slightly more balanced assessment, still wrote that the Fifty-Third Ohio "crumbled" on the morning of April 6th.⁴⁹ Woodworth also argued in his book *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865*, that the "apparent constitutional coward Jesse Appler" was somewhat responsible for alerting the Union camp of the Rebel threat on April 6, 1862.⁵⁰ Also balanced but still harsh in his calculation of the Fifty-Third Ohio's first moments in combat, Lloyd Lewis agreed with Sherman's assessment of the regiment and

⁴⁷ James Lee McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country, A Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016), 11.

⁴⁸ O'Connell, *Fierce Patriot*, 99.

⁴⁹ Steven E. Woodworth, *Sherman* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 54.

⁵⁰ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 199.

Appler's performance.⁵¹ Due in part to the lack of histories written about the Battle of Shiloh, the established reputation of the regiment remains entrenched in the American mind.⁵²

Through all of this criticism, General Grant was mostly silent. The general, who was also the target of growing public animosity following Shiloh, was disappointed and angered at the performance of some of the men under his command. However, no surviving record exists to indicate that Grant specifically called out the Fifty-Third Ohio. Grant approached the situation with more universal critiques, but he did feel animosity toward the officers who abandoned their positions in the early moments of the Battle of Shiloh. In addition, he felt substantially more contempt for colonels like Appler for running than he did the men who followed their example. Writing in his memoirs, Grant stated: "Colonels led their regiments from the field on first hearing the whistle of the enemy's bullets. In these cases the colonels were constitutional cowards, unfit for any military position."⁵³

The Fifty-Third Ohio and the Northern Press

Thanks to the public demand for information from Shiloh, the criticisms of the regiment reached a large readership. The citizens from the Fifty-Third Ohio's hometowns could not avoid the negative reports. Even though the entire nation was hungry for news about Shiloh, the

⁵¹ Lewis, *Sherman*, 221.

⁵² Timothy B. Smith, *Shiloh: Myth and Memory*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013), xi.

⁵³ Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed., Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 225; Grant also published an article on Shiloh for *Century* titled "The Battle of Shiloh." In the article, Grant again did not mention the Fifty-Third Ohio by name. However, he stated that Sherman division was "raw" and untested. He again praised General Sherman's leadership and claimed that Sherman's heroic efforts made up for his division's lack of experience. This reflected Grant's portrayal of Sherman in his memoirs as one of the Union saviors at Shiloh.

Western states were particularly interested.⁵⁴ As Steven E. Woodworth summarized the region's desire for news from the front: "News of what was then the bloodiest battle ever fought by Americans hit the Midwest hard."⁵⁵ Family and friends impatiently awaited news about their local regiments and read every piece of information available.

While it may have been a comforting for the men to know their relatives followed the regiment's every move, it also ensured that the accusations against the unit would not go unnoticed. The public criticism of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh went through two phases. First, the regiment was collectively shamed for breaking on the morning of April 6, 1862. Then, the retreat from Rea Field was rebranded as a failure of command with Colonel J.J. Appler as the main target. In this regard, the press largely followed the interpretative shift of the Union high command. However, the Fifty-Third Ohio remained linked to the underwhelming performance of its colonel.

Among other critiques, a damaging claim circulated that the Ohioans broke without firing their guns at various points of the battle. This charge grew in popularity as the Fifty-Third Ohio emerged as one of the battle's most criticized Union regiments. Among others, Lucius Barber of the Fifteenth Illinois Volunteer Infantry shared this interpretation. Writing in his 1894 memoir, Barber wrote that the Fifty-Third Ohio was in support of his regiment in mid-morning hours of April 6, 1862.⁵⁶ Barber claimed: "We had hardly gotten our line formed before the enemy opened on us with grape and canister... The 53d Ohio, appalled at the sight, broke and ran

⁵⁴ Steven E. Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 202.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Lucius W. Barber, *Army Memoirs* (Chicago: The J.M.W. Stationery and Printing Co., 1894), 53.

without firing a gun.”⁵⁷ This stigma remained with the regiment as historians such as Timothy B. Smith, Wiley Sword, Steven E. Woodworth, and others relied on Barber’s account as a source for their interpretations of the Battle of Shiloh.

The charge of retreating without firing a shot originally surfaced in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Shiloh. And for the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio, the accusation arguably came from the worst possible source. The *Daily Ohio Statesman* printed the accusation in an article published approximately one week after the battle.⁵⁸ People throughout the regiment’s home state read the indictment: “the Fifty-Third Ohio was ordered to the rear in disgrace, for refusing to fight.”⁵⁹ Unfortunately for the regiment, the criticisms continued to mount.

The *Daily Ohio Statesmen* was not the only newspaper to print the accusation in April of 1862. Other papers printed their own version of the story, or reprinted the original. The April 17, 1862 edition of the *Illinois Daily State Journal* included an article claiming the regiment fled “without firing a gun”.⁶⁰ In addition, the paper specifically called out the Fifty-Third Ohio as one of the many regiments who failed to muster any response to the Rebel attack stating: “Some of the regiments, it is even said, ran without firing a gun. Col. Appler’s Fifty-third Ohio is loudly complained of on this score, and others are mentioned.”⁶¹ Unlike Barber’s memoir, it is clear that

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Anonymous, “Latest from Pittsburg,” *Daily Ohio Statesman*, April 11, 1862, 3.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Anonymous, “The Battle on Sunday: Our Men Surprised,” *Illinois State Journal*, April 17, 1862, 2.

⁶¹ Ibid.

the *Illinois Daily State Journal* portrayed the Fifty-Third Ohio as failing to discharge its weapons during the initial Rebel attack.

The accusations against the Fifty-Third Ohio were direct attacks on the era's concepts of honor and manhood. As stated in chapter two, honor and manhood were often major factors in the decision to enlist for many Civil War soldiers. How a soldier performed in the face of enemy fire could forever alter how his friends, family, and comrades viewed his character.⁶² For the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio, the accusation of fleeing the field at Shiloh without firing a shot was devastating when viewed through the lens of the Civil War Era.

Illinois newspapers continued to be the harshest early critics of the regiment. The papers in Chicago were particularly rough in their accusations.⁶³ Before details of the battle's first day turned the *Chicago Tribune's* anger toward Colonel Appler instead of the regiment in general, the paper labeled the Fifty-Third Ohio as a regiment that was "accused of running to the rear."⁶⁴ The April 15, 1862 edition of the *Chicago Tribune* was particularly harsh on the Fifty-Third Ohio. In attempt to justify why its local battery belonging to Captain Allen C. Waterhouse was overrun by the enemy, the Chicago paper accused the Ohio regiment of failing to protect the Illinois cannons.⁶⁵ Losing its guns to the enemy was a stain on the reputation of the battery which likely led the Illinois press to use the Ohioans to explain the loss. The paper wrote that Fifty-

⁶² James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13.

⁶³ John Sherman, *Battle of Pittsburg Landing: Remarks of Hon. John Sherman, of Ohio, In Senate of the United States*, May 9, 1862 (Washington: Scammell & Co. Printers, 1862), 1.

⁶⁴ Anonymous, "The Ohio 53rd," *Chicago Tribune*, April 24, 1862, 1.

⁶⁵ Anonymous, "Capt. Waterhouse's Battery at Pittsburg," *Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 1862, 4.

Third Ohio was on the left of Waterhouse's battery and "upon the first volley received by the enemy, cut and run cut and run like so many sheep."⁶⁶

Regardless of where the slanderous articles originated, the pride and honor of the regiment was severely damaged. An April 12th article from the *Cincinnati Times* tried to make sense of the accusations against its former local heroes. Cincinnati, located in Hamilton County, supplied men for the regiment's Company K under the direct command of Captain Preston R. Galloway.⁶⁷ The article, later printed by *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, was written as answer to another article that claimed: "the Fifty-third Regiment of Ohio Volunteers, at the late battle of Pittsburg, had acted disgracefully, by evincing a degree of cowardice not to be tolerated."⁶⁸ Furthermore, the charge of retreating "without firing a gun" was directed at the Fifty-Third Ohio from a source claiming to be familiar with the events.⁶⁹ The *Cincinnati Times* tried to defend its local soldiers by debunking the slanders against the regiment. Not only did the charges of cowardice wound the pride of the men directly involved in the Fifty-Third Ohio's fight on April 6, 1862, they also drug the name of southern Ohio through the mud of defamation.

The *Cleveland Daily Leader* also attempted to find clarity for the regiment's actions. Even though the paper was concerned about how the regiment was perceived, the article was more concerned about the state pride of Ohio. Calling the charges against the regiment: "the rumored disgrace of the 53d Ohio Regiment at the Pittsburg battle," the paper hoped that some

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ John K. Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteers during the War of the Rebellion* (Portsmouth: The Blade Printing Company, 1900), 4.

⁶⁸ Anonymous, "The Charge Against the Fifty-third Ohio Regiment Unjust," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 16, 1862, 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

piece of information would shed light on why Appler's men failed in the face of the enemy.⁷⁰ According to the article, the potential cowardice of an Ohio regiment was "deeply mortifying to our State pride."⁷¹ Even though the regiment came from the opposite end of the state as the *Cleveland Daily Leader's* readership, the failure of any Ohio regiment was a disgrace to the entire state. The article ended on an optimistic, but wishful, tone: "we cannot comprehend how there should have been such a demonstration by the whole Regiment, unless upon the supposition that it was the result of some accidental cause not contemplated, producing, perhaps, a momentary panic, not uncommon in battle."⁷²

Similarly, the community of Gallipolis, Ohio sought answers to questions pertaining to the regiment's honor. Even though the community was located in Gallia County, the local newspapers felt a sense of duty to come to the defense of a regiment created in its neighboring county, Jackson.⁷³ The *Gallipolis Journal* acknowledged the charges against the regiment: "The 53d Ohio regiment is accused of showing the white feather at the late battle of Pittsburg."⁷⁴ Fearing that the rumors might taint the name of southern Ohio, local newspapers searched for answers.

The claims of cowardice deeply offended the era's sense of honor, bravery, and masculinity. The Victorian influence on American culture demanded that a man perform bravely in the face of danger.⁷⁵ Colonel Appler definitely violated the era's codes of manly conduct and

⁷⁰ Anonymous, "The Fifty-Third Ohio," *Cleveland Daily Leader*, April 14, 1862, 2.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Anonymous, "The 53d Ohio," *Gallipolis Journal*, April 17, 1862, 2.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 13.

the charges trickled down to the rest of the regiment. According to historian Lorien Foote: “courage was intimately connected with honor, an ideal of manhood...and with self-control...Obviously a man overcome by his fear had lost control of his emotions and was, to use the contemporary phrase, ‘unmanned.’”⁷⁶ Arguably, no greater danger, and no better chance for proving one’s worth, ever existed than a Civil War battlefield. Historian Peter S. Carmichael argued that soldiers of the Civil War Era were willing to face certain death and take part in suicidal missions to avoid being shamed with the labels of disgrace and dishonor.⁷⁷

Union soldier and college professor Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain said of maintaining battlefield integrity: “an officer is so absorbed by the sense of responsibility for his men, for his cause, or for the fight that the thought of personal peril has no place whatsoever in governing his actions. The instinct to seek safety is overcome by the instinct of honor.”⁷⁸ In the months that followed Shiloh, it was clear that Colonel Appler had violated the era’s code of honor, but an opportunity remained for the rest of the regiment to escape the controversy unscathed. Specifically, Appler had let the fear of personal harm overcome his duty to his men and his country. If the men could clearly explain that Appler ordered the retreat, and prove that not every member of the regiment followed, the collective honor of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry could remain intact. In this regard, the importance of setting the record straight was paramount for the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio.

⁷⁶ Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 57.

⁷⁷ Peter S. Carmichael, *The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 133.

⁷⁸ Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 2004), 15.

The Fifty-Third Ohio's role as one of the first regiments to make contact with the enemy on the morning of Shiloh's first day allowed it to be used as a scapegoat. Even a member from the Fifty-Third Ohio's own brigade, R.B. Griggs of the Seventy-Seventh Ohio, used the regiment to cover his own unit's failures. In the pages of the *National Tribune*, Griggs was quoted: "The 53d gave way long before the 77th. If the 53d could have held its position the 77th would not have had to fall back. The 53d was in advance and to the left of the 77th about 300 yards, and when the 53d gave way the Rebels came in on our left flank, and we were compelled to fall back and be taken prisoners."⁷⁹

The Press Shifts the Blame to Appler

In the weeks after Shiloh, news outlets started to blame the regiment's leadership rather than collectively disparaging the unit for the perceived failures at Shiloh. Originally running in the *Cincinnati Times*, the *Daily Ohio Statesmen* printed an April 30th article that placed the guilt squarely on the shoulders of Colonel J.J. Appler: "Col. Appler, of the Fifty-third Ohio, is charged with displaying great cowardice at Pittsburg Landing."⁸⁰ The article lifted some of the stain on the regiment's name claiming of Appler: "through his trepidation the regiment was broken, and the men fought as best they could under other commanders."⁸¹ This interpretation was a part of the redirection of blame from the regiment to its leader.

The Appler-centered interpretation of the regiment's failure was shared by the members of the Fifty-Third Ohio. Following the battle of Shiloh, Colonel J.J. Appler remained separated

⁷⁹ Editors of the National Tribune, "The Shiloh Campaign: Last Words from Our Contributors, Interesting Points Elucidated," *The National Tribune*, July 24, 1884, 3.

⁸⁰ Anonymous, "Untitled," *Daily Ohio Statesman*, April 30, 1862, 2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

from his unit. The colonel did not rejoin the regiment until late on Monday night, April the 7th.⁸² When Appler entered the regiment's camp, his men greeted him with anger and derided their colonel for cowardice. David Neal of Company I confirmed to the *Ironton Register* that "Col. J.J. Appler run from the field at the commencement of the fight, and failed to show his face until the battle was over."⁸³ Arguably, the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio appeared to know that their Shiloh story had been severely tainted by Appler. According to Neal, when the colonel finally returned to camp, the men of the regiment shouted "Shoot him! Shoot him!"⁸⁴ Appler tried to resign, but he was informed that he would instead be "cashiered, dismissed from the service, and sent home in disgrace."⁸⁵

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Fulton's official report echoed the account of David Neal and the shift toward blaming Appler for the failures of the Fifty-Third Ohio. Fulton's report stated that Appler "abandoned" the Fifty-Third Ohio. Later, and John K. Duke's regimental memoir agreed with Fulton and labeled the Fifty-Third Ohio's leaders, presumably with Appler in mind, as "amateurs in matters of warfare."⁸⁶ The regiment realized the interpretation of their service was tied to the actions of their commander. Unfortunately for the Fifty-Third Ohio, Appler's

⁸² Ephraim C. Dawes to Marshall (Last Name Illegible), April 21, 1862, series 1, box 1, folder 46, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

⁸³ David Neal, "David Neal, of Company I, 53^d Regiment," *Ironton Register*, April 24, 1862, 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *OR 10: Part 1*, 265; Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 24.

reputation was destroyed.⁸⁷ General Sherman filed for Appler to be court-martialed two weeks after Shiloh.⁸⁸

The shifting of blame to Appler did not totally free the rest of the Fifty-Third Ohio from the continued mudslinger. Newspaper articles continued to print the previous allegations and connected the regiment with its colonel's actions. As late as 1900, the stain of Shiloh still haunted the Fifty-Third Ohio. In Duke's regimental memoir, the author still sought to clear the regiment's name. Duke stated that the Fifty-Third Ohio was unjustly derided for its conduct at Shiloh. Furthermore, Duke referenced the accusations against the regiment as one of the factors for printing the memoir.⁸⁹

By the turn of the century, the Fifty-Third Ohio had experienced ever-evolving portrayals related to the Battle of Shiloh. Although mostly negative, the regiment occasionally found a sympathetic newspaper or author willing to give the unit a balanced depiction. Ohio's commission on its troops' conduct at Shiloh provided a balanced portrayal of the regiment and accused Colonel Appler for being the source of the Fifty-Third Ohio's criticism. In spite of this approach, the commission still dedicated a major portion of its report on regiment to the failures at Shiloh and the accusations that followed.⁹⁰

The commission came into existence as a part of the preparations for the establishment of the Shiloh National Military Park. Its purpose was to "locate positions of Ohio troops and erect

⁸⁷ Steven E. Woodworth, *Shiloh: Confederate High Tide in the Heartland* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013) 150.

⁸⁸ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 197.

⁸⁹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 8-9.

⁹⁰ T.J. Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh; Report of the Commission* (Cincinnati: C. J. Krehbiel & Co., 1903), 23-24.

monuments therefore on the battlefield of Shiloh.”⁹¹ Setting its sights firmly on Appler, the commission wrote: “The 53d has been much criticized about their conduct in the first day’s battle of Shiloh. They were unfortunate in having an arrant coward for a colonel, who at the first sight of the enemy deserted his men.”⁹² The debate over the regiment’s performance at Shiloh remained central to the story of the Fifty-Third Ohio long after the conclusion of the war.

The Response of the Fifty-Third Ohio and Its Defenders

The claims against the regiment continued to deeply wound the men. Adjunct Dawes acknowledge that the charges were a frequent topic of conversation among the Fifty-Third Ohio’s soldiers even in battle’s immediate aftermath. In an April 21, 1862 letter, a concerned acquaintance wrote Dawes asking his friend to address the negative newspaper reports and clarify the Fifty-Third Ohio’s actions during the Battle of Shiloh. Merely questioning the integrity and honor of the regiment hurt Dawes. It was one thing to have strangers write disparaging reports in the newspapers, but the letter from a friend placed Dawes on the defensive.⁹³

In the letter, Dawes not only defended his actions and the actions of his regiment, but he gently scolded his acquaintance for questioning the Ohioans’ honor: “I know the papers have been pitching into us – That we are everywhere cursed as cowards; but it did hurt me for you to

⁹¹ Ibid., 2; Daniel J. Ryan, *The Civil War Literature of Ohio: A Bibliography with Explanatory and Historical Notes* (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1911), 538; William Herbert Page, ed., *The General Code of Ohio: Revised Compact Edition, Including all Laws of a General Nature in Force January 1, 1921 with Notes Showing the Legislative History of Each Section, Also Cross-References to Kindred Sections* (Cincinnati: The W.H. Anderson Company, 1921), 5,850.

⁹² Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh*, 24.

⁹³ Ephraim C. Dawes to Marshall (Last Name Illegible), April 21, 1862.

ask the simpler & very natural question, ‘Were you in the fight either of the two days?’⁹⁴ Dawes admitted his sensitivity to the question was a result of the constant barrage of attacks coming from the press, other Union regiments, and General Sherman.⁹⁵ In the letter, Dawes took the first step toward his self-appointed role as the regiment’s historian and defender by writing “you can’t appreciate our position exactly without what it would take me a week to tell you by word of mouth... Yes, I was in the fight.”⁹⁶

Ephraim C. Dawes later became one of the Fifty-Third Ohio’s most prolific defenders during the postbellum period, but he began his efforts to vindicate the regiment in the immediate aftermath of the battle. The remainder of Dawes’ life was dedicated to addressing the rumors and innuendos directed at the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry. First, he wrote a two-part essay meant to set the regiment’s record straight that was published by the Historical Society of Massachusetts in 1893 and 1895. Then, he wrote a full-length account of the regiment for the Ohio Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States that was published in an 1896 collection of essays. In addition, Dawes chronicled the regiment’s war service with papers for the G.A.R. War Papers collection and a history of the Army of the Tennessee. Dawes voluntarily became the self-appointed official historian of the regiment following the death of fellow-veteran, R.H. Brewster.⁹⁷ Until his April 23, 1895 death from heart failure triggered by severe influenza, Dawes was unquestionably the greatest chronicler of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry and its most productive defender.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, i-ii.

⁹⁸ L.J. Kozlowski, “An Indomitable Will: Major Ephraim Cutler Dawes,” *Timeline* 9, no. 3 (June 1992), 29.

After Dawes' death, the task of officially correcting lingering doubts about the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh fell to John K. Duke. Even though Duke was not a member of the regiment at its inception, nor was he present at the Battle of Shiloh, he relied heavily on the writings of veterans like Dawes. Unfortunately, most of Duke's sources have been lost to history and no longer exist in their original form. However, a history of the Fifty-Third Ohio was published by Duke in 1900 that promoted the Fifty-Third Ohio's collective version of Shiloh.⁹⁹ Undoubtedly related to Shiloh's status as the main topic of regimental reunions near the turn of the century, approximately one-third of the Duke's book was devoted to the battle.¹⁰⁰ It is evident that the regiment still felt the sting of the original criticism associated with its performance in the battle's opening moments. As the regiment's de-facto historian, Duke sought to separate the actions of the regiment at Shiloh from Appler and the initial historiography of the battle.

Duke faced another obstacle that hindered any attempt by the Fifty-Third Ohio to alter the public perception of their role at Shiloh. When the initial historiography of the battle emerged, the fighting at the Hornet's Nest was the primary focus. David W. Reed's *The Battle of*

⁹⁹ The "accuracy" of Duke's account of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh reflected the overall writings of various members of the regiment related to the battle. Ephraim C. Dawes, Samuel R. Betts, George E. Cutler, Milton Bosworth, and other veterans portrayed the Fifty-Third Ohio as victims of poor leadership, inadequate training, defective supply lines, and failure of General Sherman to understand the threat posed by Albert Sidney Johnston's approaching Rebels. During the historiographical shift of the late 1900s and early 2000s, many historians came to share this interpretation. Larry J. Daniel's *Shiloh: The Battle that Changed the Civil War*, Steven E. Woodworth's *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865*, Timothy B. Smith's *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish*, Ed Bearss' *Fields of Honor: Pivotal Battles of the Civil War* all mention the impact of these outside factors as a part of the Fifty-Third Ohio's story at Shiloh. While these works do portray the Fifty-Third Ohio in a negative light at times, their more balanced approach to the regiment's story places the Ohioans in the context of the early Union war effort in the West in contrast to many of the biographers on General William Tecumseh Sherman.

¹⁰⁰ Chapters 3 through 7 directly address the regiment's involvement in the Battle of Shiloh. Furthermore, Duke extensively uses the official reports and writings of both Union and Confederate soldiers to prove the Fifty-Third Ohio acted honorably during the clash. Confederate Basil W. Duke's account of the battle is included with full text similarly to the writings of the Fifty-Third Ohio's veterans. A full-length inclusion of Ephraim C. Dawes' "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh" follows General Sherman's official report and acts as a counterbalance to the generally negative portrayal of the regiment.

Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged was one of the first major works on Shiloh. Reed was a veteran who selected as Shiloh's official historian during the effort to establish the battlefield as a National Military Park.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, he had fought at the Hornet's Nest which arguably influenced the level of importance it received. Due in large part to the lack of scholarly works on Shiloh during the first half of the 1900s, Reed's version ensured that the Hornet's Nest remained the battle's focal point. According to historian Timothy B. Smith: "Today, in large part because of Reed's historical efforts, historians view the Hornet's Nest as the focal point in the Battle of Shiloh. It is Shiloh's Pickett's Charge; it is Shiloh's Bloody Lane."¹⁰²

Officially published two years after Duke's regimental memoir, Reed's work mirrors Sherman's account of the battle. Although not as stern as the general's portrayal, Reed still wrote that the Fifty-Third Ohio "fell back disorganized, passing to the rear around the flank of the Forty-ninth Illinois."¹⁰³ However, Reed did mention Adjunct Dawes and the two companies that remained in the fight, but he countered that fact by stating that "eight companies going to the landing at once" after Appler's order to retreat.¹⁰⁴ Overall, the Fifty-Third Ohio's struggle at Rea Field was a small part of Reed's work in terms of the general battle. The regiment's historical reputation remained at the mercy of Sherman's memoir and the general's biographers. The memoirs of well-known leaders like Grant and Sherman were printed by publishers with a nationwide reach while Duke's memoir on the Fifty-Third Ohio was published by a small

¹⁰¹ Timothy B. Smith, *Rethinking Shiloh: Myth and Memory* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press), 45-46.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁰³ David W. Reed, *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged*, ed. Timothy B. Smith (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 57.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

company in Portsmouth, Ohio. For this reason, and many others, Civil War history has been heavily influenced by the recollections of household names like Sherman.

Dawes and Duke were not the only members of the regiment to publicly defend the unit. A few reluctant defenders emerged immediately following the battle. Samuel R. Betts of the regiment's Company G came to the Fifty-Third Ohio's defense with a letter printed in the *Ironton Register* dated April 10, 1862.¹⁰⁵ Although not originally intended for publication, Betts provided the *Ironton Register* with vital information in the paper's attempt to clear the name of its local soldiers. Betts wrote that the regiment was in the fight for "eleven hours on Sunday and twelve hours on Monday."¹⁰⁶ Betts claimed that the men of the regiment "fought like veterans" and that Appler's actions kept the Fifty-Third Ohio from standing "among the first regiments in the mighty force."¹⁰⁷

The publication of the Betts' letter helped the regiment reach its home counties with the Fifty-Third Ohio's version of events. According to the May 8, 1862 edition of the *Ironton Register*, Betts' letter was "of the highest interest to all our readers in this section of Ohio."¹⁰⁸ The papers further claimed that Betts believed the Union cause at Shiloh was in a desperate condition until the arrival of General Buell's troops. Possibly frustrated by reports that Sherman was furious with the regiment, a report that was undeniably confirmed by the general's public rebuke, the *Ironton Register* wrote that Betts' account confirmed "that drunkenness and

¹⁰⁵ Samuel R. Betts, "Letter from the Fifty-Third: Camp Shiloh, Pittsburg Landing, April 10, 1862," *Ironton Register*, April 24, 1862, 3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous, "The Letter from Pittsburg Landing Battlefield, Which We Published Last Week," *Ironton Register*, May 8, 1862, 3.

carelessness were the prevailing sins of our Generals on the first day of the battle.”¹⁰⁹ The paper confessed that the letter was private and not intended for publication, but “it is all the better on that account, as it states some things that otherwise might have been concealed.”¹¹⁰

The *Ironton Register* also published a letter from George E. Cutler in the May 8, 1862 edition. Cutler was a First Lieutenant in Company G of the Fifty-Third Ohio at the time of the battle.¹¹¹ In the published letter, Cutler stated that he “blamed Sherman seriously” for the perceived failures of the regiment.¹¹² Cutler’s words were intended for family and friends to address the charge of “running” directed at the Fifty-Third Ohio, but found its way into the paper.¹¹³ The letter claimed that Sherman “allowed the enemy to have a line of pickets within our line of pickets for two or three days observing all our weak points” and that the general “did not know anything of them.”¹¹⁴ The letter reflected the opinion of other Fifty-Third Ohio soldiers like Dawes, Betts, and Duke that the regiment was primarily the victim of poor leadership.

In addition, the Fifty-Third Ohio was not without prominent defenders. General Sherman’s brother stood before the United State Senate on May 9, 1862 to defend Ohio soldiers. Senator John Sherman remarked: “I especially desire to show the part taken by the volunteers from Ohio in that bloody and most important contest. Like other citizens of Ohio, I felt keenly

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ The Roster Commission, *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865: Volume IV*, 695.

¹¹² George E. Cutler, “Interesting Letter from Pittsburg Landing: A Lawrence County Man’s Opinion of the Generalship Displayed at the Battle of Pittsburg Landing, Facts Concerning the 53d Regiment, the Charge of Cowardice,” *Ironton Register*, May 8, 1862, 2.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

the indiscriminate imputation cast by the earlier accounts of the battle, especially in the Chicago papers, upon the Ohio volunteers.”¹¹⁵ Senator Sherman defended the Fifty-Third Ohio as “raw,” poorly led, and as victims of the army supply chain.¹¹⁶

Even though the senator’s speech could easily be viewed as a defense against the charge of his brother being surprised by the Rebel attack, he still exonerated the regiment while defaming Colonel Appler. By the time of Senator Sherman’s speech, the shifting of the blame to Appler was already underway. Sherman said of the colonel: “I do not wish to extenuate the conduct of Colonel Appler...His conduct should not tarnish the fair fame of brave men who, no doubt, would have this attack bravely but for his order to retreat.”¹¹⁷

Forever Linked: The Fifty-Third Ohio, General Sherman, and the Battle of Shiloh

General William Tecumseh Sherman mostly remained steadfast in his rebuke of the regiment as a whole. The topic of Shiloh, and Sherman’s treatment of the regiment, dominated the Fifty-Third Ohio’s reunions. Covering an 1886 regiment reunion, a reporter for the *Jackson Standard* wrote: “As Shiloh must ever be a prominent feature in the history of the Fifty-Third, the story of the retreat of the Regiment, and the cowardice of the commanding officer was a sad blow to the many friends of the Regiment in Jackson.”¹¹⁸ However, the newspaper argued that the local community was more outraged by Sherman’s rebuke of the regiment than the rumors of

¹¹⁵ Sherman, *Remarks of Hon. John Sherman*, 1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁸ Anonymous, “The Fifty-Third! Re-Union at Wellston Last Week,” *The Jackson Standard*, September 2, 1886, 2; The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was formed at Camp Diamond in Jackson, Ohio following a September 6, 1861 order by Ohio governor, William Dennison, Jr.

cowardice, stating: “there was universal indignation at Gen. Sherman’s brutal treatment of the Regiment.”¹¹⁹ Despite the positive mutual feelings between the regiment and Sherman during the later stages of the war, the controversy surrounding Shiloh remained.

The debate over the regiment’s performance on the morning of April 6, 1862 revolved around General Sherman’s assessment of the Fifty-Third Ohio and whether the Union had been surprised. Considering these questions, the Fifty-Third Ohio was unjustly criticized for failing in the face of the enemy at the Battle of Shiloh. The battle and regiment remained connected. When just two veterans arrived for the last reunion in 1927, Shiloh was the only battle mentioned by name in the newspaper’s regimental biography.¹²⁰ Furthermore, many members of the regiment and their families believed that the true source of the stain on the Fifty-Third Ohio’s name was the result of General Sherman deflecting the censure that should have rightfully been directed at him. According to Duke: “Someone was to blame and if these gentlemen could find a scape-goat they might escape just condemnation for poor generalship, and thus it was that the 53rd and the 77th Ohio were censured.”¹²¹

Sherman’s chastisement of the regiment may have caused a feeling of isolation among the men in the Fifty-Third Ohio. Following the Battle of Shiloh, William Tecumseh Sherman began his transformation from a division commander to a living military legend. According to Sherman biographer Robert L. O’Connell, Sherman was greeted with roaring applause “everywhere he went” and that the army was becoming “Uncle Billy’s boys.”¹²² Furthermore,

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Anonymous, “Gallant Old 53rd O.V.I. Holds Last Reunion in Jackson; Only Two Members Present,” *Portsmouth Daily Times*, September 16, 1927, 17.

¹²¹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 25.

¹²² O’Connell, *Fierce Patriot*, 230.

Sherman praised the individual and collective efforts of men in his division. The day after the battle, the general praised the efforts of men in Seventieth Ohio Volunteer Infantry telling the regiment's colonel that he was "worth your weight in gold to me."¹²³ Undoubtedly, the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio most likely felt like outcasts when they compared the rebuke they received to the general's praise of other regiments.

The bond between Sherman and his men was based on a mutual admiration and respect that began on the battlefield at Shiloh. Later in the war, soldiers showed their affection and dedication to their general by approvingly greeting Sherman with cheers of "Uncle Billy" whenever he came into their view.¹²⁴ According to Steven E. Woodworth, Sherman's soldiers never "particularly cared where they were bound, as long as Uncle Billy was directing them."¹²⁵ The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio later came to share this relationship with the general, but they found themselves outside the bonds of affection spreading through Sherman's division in the days after Shiloh.¹²⁶

Unlike the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio, General Sherman had a powerful weapon in his arsenal that came assisted in his defense following the criticism of Shiloh. Sherman's family wielded immense power in Ohio politics. Among others, the general's surrogate father, Thomas Ewing, publicly came to Sherman's defense. Ewing published a public article defending Sherman from allegations made against the general by the Lieutenant Governor of Ohio,

¹²³ Ibid., Cockerill, "A Boy at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Volume IV*, ed. Allen, McKee, and Taylor, 34.

¹²⁴ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 553.

¹²⁵ Steven E. Woodworth, *Sherman* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 153.

¹²⁶ Wells S. Jones, "Honors to the Dead Hero." *Waverly Watchman*, February 2, 1891, 2.

Benjamin Stanton.¹²⁷ Even though the Lieutenant Governor clarified his criticism against Ohio generals was based on the fact that Union forces were surprised on April 6, 1862, the charges did not specifically mention General Sherman.¹²⁸ Specifically, the Lieutenant Governor stated: “The disasters of Sunday, April 6th, were the result of surprise, which is justly chargeable on the commanding officers.”¹²⁹

After Ewing’s public response, Lieutenant Governor Stanton answered by presenting evidence that Sherman’s men had been surprised. Citing the official reports of men under the general’s command, Stanton argued that the troops were at breakfast, in bed, or going about other camp activities when they heard the sounds of heavy gunfire. Even though some of Sherman’s men, including the Fifty-Third Ohio, were in formation when the official attack began, the entire Union camp presented itself as if the whole army was completely unaware of the impending Rebel attack.¹³⁰ According to historian Kenneth J. Heineman, “the Ewings reacted harshly to these attacks.”¹³¹

In spite of the general’s remaining frustration over Shiloh, Sherman eventually came to view the overall performance of the regiment in a positive light. In 1864, Sherman wrote: “I also take great pleasure in adding that nearly all the new troops that at Shiloh drew from an official censure have more than redeemed their good name, among them...the 53rd Ohio...it has shared

¹²⁷ Kenneth J. Heineman, *Civil War Dynasty: The Ewing Family of Ohio* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 139.

¹²⁸ Benjamin Stanton and Charles Whittlesey, eds., *Letter of Lieut. Gov. Stanton, In Reply to Hon. Thos. Ewing* (Columbus: Office of the Ohio State Journal, 1862), 3-6.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-17.

¹³¹ Heineman, *Civil War Dynasty*, 138.

every campaign and expedition of mine since...and fight as well as the best Regiment in this or any army.”¹³² The regiment remained connected to the general for the duration of the war fighting at Vicksburg, Chattanooga, and Atlanta among others.¹³³

The Fifty-Third Ohio also came to view Sherman in positive light. When the general passed away in 1891, Wells S. Jones of Company A, and later commander of the regiment, held a memorial service for Sherman. Alerting his former comrades to the service, Jones submitted a small announcement to the local newspaper: “On Saturday next at 2 o’clock in the afternoon, Barnes Post, preceded by the Waverly Cornet Band, will proceed to the court house, where, with the citizens of the county, suitable honors will be paid to Gen. Wm. T. Sherman, the dead hero, whose body on that day will be deposited in its final resting place.”¹³⁴ Despite the ongoing debate over the Battle of Shiloh’s first day, the Fifty-Third Ohio still honored the man they followed into battle during the Civil War.

¹³² Simpson and Berlin, eds., *Sherman’s Civil War*, 650.

¹³³ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 202.

¹³⁴ Wells S. Jones, “Honors to the Dead Hero,” *Waverly Watchman*, February 2, 1891, 2.

Chapter 6

History, Historians, and the Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh

By the conclusion of the Civil War, the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry were veterans of the Western Theater's most significant battles. The unit that emerged from the war no longer resembled the collection of men that left Jackson, Ohio in the early months of 1862. The regiment engaged Confederate forces at Corinth, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Columbia, and numerous other clashes.¹ However, one battle loomed the largest and haunted the regiment's legacy long after the death of its final veteran. No event remained as firmly connected to the Fifty-Third Ohio as the Battle of Shiloh. Despite its successful involvement in later engagements, the regiment's first combat experience remained a defining moment.

The Battle of Shiloh, and the perceived failure of the regiment, cast a long shadow over the legacy, reputation, and honor of the Fifty-Third Ohio.² The Fifty-Third Ohio continued its efforts to free itself from the accusation of cowardice and its unfortunate role as the battle's scapegoat for General Sherman. When the men gathered for regimental reunions, the conversation inevitably turned to the battle and its impact on the honor of the Fifty-Third Ohio. The men of the regiment likely agreed with Alvin P. Hovey of the Twenty-Fourth Indiana's assessment of Shiloh: "Thousands of brave, true soldiers and patriots have been branded with the names of 'craven' and 'coward' who were only the victims of the surprise, blunders, and mistakes of that Sunday morning."³

¹ John K. Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Ohio Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion* (Portsmouth: The Blade Printing Company, 1900), 201-202.

² Anonymous, "The Fifty-Third! Re-Union at Wellston Last Week," *The Jackson Standard*, September 2, 1886, 2.

³ Alvin P. Hovey, "Pittsburg Landing: Are the Charges of Surprise True or False?" *The National Tribune*, February 1, 1883, 1.

The accusations, innuendoes, and slanders following the Battle of Shiloh forced the men of the regiment on the defensive. Not every man took up the pen or stood behind podiums to give their version of the battle, but the newspaper coverage of the regimental reunions indicate that Shiloh forever remained on the minds of veterans of the Fifty-Third Ohio. Sherman's rebuke of the regiment, and his accusation of cowardice, motivated the Fifty-Third Ohio to explain why it was the focus of extreme criticism.⁴ The regiment continued to fight the Battle of Shiloh in Ohio newspapers, the *National Tribune*, *Century* magazine, the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, and other venues.

To understand why Shiloh occupied such an exalted place in the regiment's collective consciousness, it is important to ask how the Fifty-Third Ohio became entangled in the Shiloh controversy. General Sherman was quick to publicly berate the regiment, but what were the conditions that caused the regiment to become viewed as failures? Furthermore, Sherman used the Fifty-Third Ohio as a scapegoat for his own shortcomings at Shiloh. Why was the regiment a perfect candidate for Sherman's attempt to deflect blame? Overall, the Fifty-Third Ohio was the victim of circumstances beyond their control. Poor leadership, inadequate training, a lack of fortifications, the inability of Union command to understand the seriousness of the approaching Rebel threat, and General Sherman's need to deflect blame, placed the regiment on the path to criticism.

The men of the Fifty-Third Ohio were average individuals who were peacefully going about their lives when political and social forces intervened. Suddenly, they were caught in what was undoubtedly the most consequential debate since the nation's founding. Lincoln's election in

⁴ A.F. Davis to F.D. Davis, April 21, 1862, Columbia Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri; Ephraim C. Dawes to Marshall (Last Name Illegible), April 21, 1862, series 1, box 1, folder 46, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

1860, decades of growing sectional hostility, and decisions made hundreds of miles away from Ohio in the Confederate secession conventions thrust the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio into the bloodiest war in American history. Outside of casting a vote in the presidential election and discussing slavery with neighbors, the major forces that led the men to the banks of the Tennessee River in the spring of 1862 were beyond the control of the average citizen. The soldiers in the ranks of the Fifty-Third Ohio were small pieces in the larger chess game of the Civil War.

Unprepared and Poorly Supplied

Like many regiments on both sides of the conflict, the Fifty-Third Ohio entered the field with almost no preparations for the combat of the Civil War era. The Battle of Shiloh was defined by two inexperienced armies chaotically fighting around the Shiloh Meetinghouse during two days in early April 1862. The battle's role as one of the earliest major land engagements in the West meant that it was fought by an unparalleled high number of inexperienced soldiers.⁵ According to historians Joseph Allen Frank and George A. Reeves: "There were more green troops in this battle than any battle of the Civil War. Three of Grant's divisions were raw, virtually all of Buell's army had never seen major action before."⁶ The inexperienced Union army fought an equally green Confederate force under the command of Albert Sidney Johnston in a battle that shocked both sides and forever altered the expectations for future combat.⁷

⁵ Joseph Allan Frank and George A. Reeves, *Seeing the Elephant: Raw Recruits at the Battle of Shiloh* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 11.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid; Alan R. Millett, Peter Maslowski, and William B. Feis, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States from 1607-2012* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 167.

While it is certain that many of the regiments present at the Battle of Shiloh were as green as the Fifty-Third Ohio, it is equally sure that no unit was more inexperienced. The regiment arrived at the Union camp on the banks of the Tennessee River without any concept of military action or combat. As stated in chapter two, the Ohioans never participated in a single battalion drill before departing its camp for the field and entered Confederate territory as a collection of men more than a military unit.⁸ Furthermore, the Fifty-Third Ohio only had its weapons for a few weeks before the regiment fired in unison against an enemy force for the first time.⁹ In this regard, the Fifty-Third Ohio reflected the overall supply issues facing the United States forces in the early war. According to historian Earl J. Hess, the Western Theater “is where the problems of shipping materials and moving large armies were most formidable... the most severe test of military supply occurred in the West.”¹⁰

The United States government struggled to supply the largest war effort in its history. Regiments like the Fifty-Third Ohio experienced the dangers of poor supply lines. As Roger Lowenstein’s book *Ways and Means: Lincoln and His Cabinet and the Financing of the Civil War* stated: “The Union’s financial needs dwarfed any prior expense or governmental undertaking.”¹¹ Illustrating how ill-prepared the federal government was for the outbreak of Civil War, and the financial burden of defeating the rebellion, President Lincoln asked congress to approve \$400 million for the war effort. The president requested the money to ensure the war

⁸ E. C. Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1890-1896, Volume IV*, ed. W.H. Chamberlin (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1896), 1.

⁹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 7.

¹⁰ Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Supply and Strategy: Feeding Men and Moving Armies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020), 2.

¹¹ Roger Lowenstein, *Ways and Means: Lincoln and His Cabinet and the Financing of the Civil War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022), 50.

was “a short and decisive one” and asked for “at least four hundred thousand men” to supplement the armed forces.¹²

The decisions on how to best recruit an army, equip troops, and to finance a war happened well above the highest-ranking soldiers in the Fifty-Third Ohio. Washington held the power over the flow of supplies to the front line. Even the state government in Columbus largely depended on the federal government to equip Ohio troops. Like most Union soldiers in the war’s earliest days, the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio were the victims of a supply chain and an economic debate that happened hundreds of miles from their theater of war.¹³

The Lack of Fortifications at Shiloh

Arguably, the biggest factor that set the Fifty-Third Ohio on the path to perceived failure was the unwillingness of the regiment’s superiors to understand the danger of the approaching Rebel attack. As stated in chapters three and four, Union command was presented with ample warnings which they chose to ignore. General Sherman specifically refused to order his men to prepare for a possible attack. The general was confident that the bulk of Albert Sidney Johnston’s Confederate force was still entrenched at Corinth, Mississippi and any visible Rebel soldiers were simply scouting the Union encampment.¹⁴

¹² Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cleveland: De Capo Press, 2001), 602; Lowenstein, *Ways and Means*, 53; Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 363; Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 170.

¹³ Bruce Levine, *Thaddeus Stevens: Civil War Revolutionary, Fighter for Racial Justice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 127.

¹⁴ Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 4; Robert L. O’Connell, *Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York: Random House, 2014), 98; James Lee McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016), 4-5; Robert N. Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume X, Part II* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 93-93: (Referred to as *OR: 10, Part 2* for the remainder of the Chapter.)

Two of the warnings came directly from the Fifty-Third Ohio. Sherman not only refused to believe the reports, but he publicly rebuked Colonel Appler for sending the warnings. The general could have taken the reports seriously and prepped the Pittsburg Landing camp for the pending attack, but instead he reprimanded Appler for being “badly scared” and told the Ohioan to “take your damned regiment to Ohio.”¹⁵ However, Sherman refused to take the reports seriously and reported on the eve of battle that he did not expect any large-scale attack on the Union position.¹⁶ He later remembered April 5, 1862 as a day without any significant developments.¹⁷ According to historian James Lee McDonough: “How Sherman could have so completely missed or ignored the signs that should have alerted him to the imminent danger remains a puzzle.”¹⁸

While it is impossible to accurately measure how the Fifty-Third Ohio would have performed if General Sherman had taken the warnings seriously, it would have undoubtedly benefitted the regiment if the whole Union camp had been more vigilant. In this regard, the debate over the lack of fortifications at Pittsburg Landing is directly connected to the performance of the Fifty-Third Ohio. The regiment met the Rebel onslaught in the open field around its camp on the morning of April 6th. While it is possible that the Ohioans threw down logs and other items capable of creating a hastily constructed defense, a full defensive perimeter would arguably have been more effective.¹⁹

¹⁵ Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 4-6.

¹⁶ *OR: 10, Part 2*, 93-94; William T. Sherman, *Memoirs* (New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 2005), 213

¹⁷ *OR: 10, Part 2*, 93-94.

¹⁸ McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 5.

¹⁹ Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 158; Specifically, Daniel stated that the far left of the Fifty-Third Ohio’s line quickly constructed defensive works during the Rebel attack that included logs and bales of hay.

However, the Union army did not entrench at Pittsburg Landing. Historian Steven Woodworth contended that the lack of entrenchments was consistent with how the war was conducted in 1862. Woodworth stated that entrenchments were “not customary at that stage of war.”²⁰ Some soldiers present at Shiloh shared Woodworth’s assessment. General James Turtle claimed that a soldier would have been “laughed out of camp” if he suggested building fortifications at that stage of the war.²¹ General Grant stated: “Up to that time the pick and spade had been but little resorted to at the West.”²²

The Fifty-Third Ohio did not share this view. The official historian of the regiment, John K. Duke, argued that the Ohioans would have fared better if they had been protected by strong fortifications.²³ Duke’s overall assessment of the condition of the Union army of Shiloh was a blistering attack on his superiors: “It is well to note that we had no fortifications of any kind for our use; our entire force being in an unorganized condition, resembling more a mob than what it should have been, a well organized and equipped army.”²⁴ Furthermore, the Fifty-Third Ohio’s adjunct, Ephraim C. Dawes, cited the lack of Union entrenchments as one of the deciding factors that motivated Confederate leadership to launch the April 6, 1862 attack.²⁵ Milton Bosworth of

²⁰ Steven E. Woodworth, ed., *The Shiloh Campaign* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2009), 5.

²¹ William K. Belknap, *History of the Fifteenth, Iowa Veteran Volunteer Infantry* (Keokuk: R.B. Ogden and Son Print, 1887), 192.

²² Ulysses S. Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition*, ed. John F. Marszalek, David S. Nolen, and Louie P. Gallo (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 244.

²³ Duke’s status as the Fifty-Third Ohio’s official historian appears to have been a role occupied by default. According to his memoir, most members of the regiment believed James R. Percy was destined to the regimental historian due to his thorough journaling during the war. However, Percy was killed during the Atlanta campaign in 1864. After attempts to write the regiment’s history stalled following the deaths of R.H. Brewster and Ephraim C. Dawes, the task fell to John K. Duke.

²⁴ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 25.

the Fifty-Third Ohio Company I complained that the Union camp had not “fortified, planted batteries, or felled timber, or done anything else to prevent surprise or ward off an assault.”²⁶

It should be noted that a large proportion of Union soldiers believed their camp should have been fortified. Even though almost every account that promotes this belief was written in retrospect, it is clear that a significant number of Union soldiers believed their Shiloh experience would have been drastically different if they met the Rebel assault from behind the protection of fortifications. In addition, the argument that entrenchments were not a part of the war by the spring of 1862 is perplexing when contrasted with how Grant and Sherman viewed the intentions of Albert Sidney Johnston. The Union command at Shiloh was thoroughly convinced that the Confederate army was not going to strike Pittsburg Landing. Instead, it was generally accepted that Johnston’s Rebels would await Grant’s attack on Corinth, Mississippi and fight from behind their own entrenchments.²⁷ The fact that entrenchments were expected at Corinth, and that entrenchments were used at Corinth and Vicksburg, conflicts with the belief that they were not yet considered in the Western Theater. Either way, the decision against building fortifications was beyond the Fifty-Third Ohio’s control and impacted how the regiment’s Shiloh experience unfolded.

The Civil War mostly began as outdated combat between two armies in an open field. Historians traditionally cite the continuation of Napoleonic warfare combined with rifled musket as the cause of the war’s high casualty numbers.²⁸ According to James McPherson, this

²⁵ Ephraim C. Dawes, “The Battle of Shiloh,” in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga, 1862-1864*, ed. The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1908), 135.

²⁶ Milton Bosworth, “Home Letter from the Camp,” *Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph*, May 2, 1862, 2.

²⁷ O. Edward Cunningham, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, ed. Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith (New York: Savas Beatie, LLC, 2009), 109.

combination emphasized going on the offensive and “West Point teaching stressed the tactical offensive.”²⁹ Arguably, the emphasis on offensive campaigns may have factored into the reasons why Union command refused to entrench at Pittsburg Landing. The Union army, and Ulysses S. Grant, were committed to an offensive campaign that may have decreased commanders’ willingness to construct fortifications.³⁰

The Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh may have been the victim of its era. By the spring of 1862, Civil War tactics primarily focused on the movement of troops instead of the fighting from behind defensive entrenchments.³¹ It is possible that few commanders understood how to direct soldiers from a fixed position since the accepted tactics of the time were centered on concepts of parade marching and maneuverability. In addition, it is possible that commanding officers on both sides at Shiloh were still trying to master the techniques of multiple lines and open field tactics at the time of Shiloh and simply overlooked the necessity of defensive works. This would explain Grant’s insistence on drills rather than the construction of fortifications at the Pittsburg Landing camp.

However, fighting behind entrenched positions increased as the war the continued. As McPherson wrote, the Civil War shifted to “the tactical predominance of the defense.”³² Famously, Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia charged into a fixed fortified position on

²⁸ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 472-477

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 473.

³⁰ Steven E. Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory: The Army of the Tennessee, 1861-1865* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 142-146.

³¹ Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), xi-xiii.

³² McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 477.

the afternoon of July 3, 1863. In what became known as Pickett's Charge, the Army of Northern Virginia lost around 42% of its manpower during the attack.³³ After two days of offensive maneuvers, Lee's army limped away from Gettysburg with a noticeable depletion in manpower.³⁴ According to historian Earl Hess, northern losses at Gettysburg are harder to ascertain due to the Union regiments involved in answering the attack "had seen action" during the previous two days.³⁵ The Confederate soldiers attacked into the teeth of a strong defensive position that included fortifications of stone walls and fences already in place when the battle began, hastily assembled breastworks, and earthworks created by the Federal troops.³⁶ Union losses were still high, but playing defense allowed the Union to absorb the blow of Pickett's Charge and ultimately repulse the attack.

In addition, Ambrose Burnside's Army of the Potomac faced a similar situation when it attacked a Rebel force behind a stone wall at the Battle of Fredericksburg. The Union soldiers made several unsuccessful attempts to dislodge the Confederate soldiers from its fortified position. As a result, 1,284 Union soldiers were killed with an additional 9,600 wounded and 1,769 were reported missing or captured.³⁷ Southern losses were drastically lower with approximately 608 Confederates killed and 4,116 wounded.³⁸ Due in large part to the strength of

³³ Earl J. Hess, *Pickett's Charge: The Last Attack at Gettysburg* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 333.

³⁴ Robert N. Scott, ed. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies Series I, Volume XXVII, Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 117; Allen C. Guelzo, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2013), 441-446; Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 525-526.

³⁵ Hess, *Pickett's Charge*, 335-336, 441-446.

³⁶ Earl J. Hess, *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 231-232.

³⁷ Chris Mackowski and Kristopher D. White, *Simply Murder: The Battle of Fredericksburg, December 13, 1862* (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie LLC, 2017), 100.

the Confederates' fortifications, the Battle of Fredericksburg was one of the most lopsided and complete victories scored by either side during the war.³⁹

The Union army met a similar fate later in the war at Cold Harbor where the Confederates occupied a strong defensive line that included entrenchments.⁴⁰ Overall, the Rebels had at least twelve hours to fortify its line and to prepare for the coming Union assault.⁴¹ One assault on the Confederate breastworks resulted in Union casualties that more than doubled the number of Rebels killed, missing, and captured.⁴² While there is no doubt that exceptions to the success of entrenchments during the Civil War exists, it is mistakeably clear that substantial fortifications of some kind could have drastically altered the Fifty-Third Ohio's ability to hold its ground on the morning of April 6, 1862.

It is impossible to calculate how the Union army at Gettysburg, and the Confederate force at Fredericksburg and Cold Harbor, would have performed without entrenchments. However, the overwhelming victories from behind fixed fortifications indicate that entrenchments were beneficial to a defending force during the Civil War. Unfortunately for the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio, neither Grant nor Sherman ordered the large-scale construction of defensive works.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 572-575; Gary W. Gallagher, "The Yanks Have Had a Terrible Whipping: Confederates Evaluate the Battle of Fredericksburg," in *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Decision on the Rappahannock*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 93; Bruce Catton, *Never Call Retreat* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 24-26; Mackowski and White, *Simply Murder*, 100.

⁴⁰ Keith S. Bohannon, "Breastworks Are Good Things to Have on Battlefields: Confederate Engineering Operations and Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign," in *Cold Harbor to the Crater: The End of the Overland Campaign*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher and Caroline E. Janney (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 123.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Earl J. Hess, *Trench Warfare Under Grant and Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign* (Chapel Hill: The University of Press of North Carolina, 2007), 149.

Again, this decision was made above the rank of the soldiers in the Fifty-Third Ohio. General Sherman did not order construction due to his position as Grant's subordinate.⁴³ Grant did not order the building of fortifications because he was focused on training and offensive maneuvers.⁴⁴ Even though these decisions were out of the hands of the Fifty-Third Ohio, the regiment paid the price for the decision when the Rebel force slammed into its Rea Field Camp on the morning of April 6, 1862.

Overall, the Army of the Tennessee lost approximately 7,000 men on Shiloh's first day.⁴⁵ These losses are comparable to the killed, missing, and wounded numbers of the charging Rebels at Gettysburg, Grant's assault at Cold Harbor, and the attacking Union soldiers at Fredericksburg. The Fifty-Third Ohio lost approximately forty-four men that were either killed, wounded, or missing.⁴⁶ It is impossible to accurately calculate how the losses, and the effectiveness of the regiment's defense of Sherman's left flank, would have been altered by construction of entrenchments, but the history of combat during the Civil War illustrates a strong

⁴³ Sherman, *Memoirs*, 212-213.

⁴⁴ Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed., Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 244.

⁴⁵ Earl J. Hess, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 47; Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed., Marszalek, Nolen, and Gallo, 238.

⁴⁶ T.J. Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh; Report of the Commission* (Cincinnati: C. J. Krebbiel & Co., 1903), 24. John K. Duke's regimental memoirs cites slightly different numbers from the Ohio at Shiloh Commission. Duke lists the Fifty-Third Ohio's losses at seven killed, thirty-nine wounded, and five missing. Although the numbers closely reflect the commission's account of nine killed, thirty-three wounded, and two missing, there is a slight discrepancy in numbers. Duke's regimental history was published in 1900 and the commission's account was published in 1903. It is unlikely that the numbers from the 1862 battle officially changed much in the intervening time. However, it is worth noting that the commission's numbers are written on the Fifty-Third Ohio's Shiloh monument located on Rea Field. In addition, the official report written by the regiment's lieutenant colonel Robert Fulton listed the Fifty-Third Ohio's losses at nine killed, forty-four wounded, and zero missing, but was later revised.

argument that defensively fortified positions were capable of withstanding assaults from large numbers of soldiers.

Surprised at Shiloh

The accusation that the Union army was surprised at Shiloh is connected to the fortification debate. Many soldiers throughout the various ranks believed the army was completely caught off guard on the morning of April 6, 1862. Duke's regimental history definitely labeled the attack as a surprise: "It is impossible to deny that the battle of Shiloh was a great surprise."⁴⁷ Duke's writings were based on the recollections of a variety of soldiers from the ranks of the Fifty-Third Ohio. The writings and diaries of John K. Duke, John R. Percy, R.H. Brewster, and others were consulted by Duke.

Duke's final analysis, and presumably the majority opinion of the Fifty-Third Ohio's veterans, of the condition of the Union camp at Pittsburg Landing was a contemptuous censure intended to remove the stain of Shiloh from the Fifty-Third Ohio:

Taking into consideration the physical condition of the regiment, and indeed the army at the date of this battle... also that the army was simply en-massed with no regard to military rules or the usages of war; that men and the majority of officers were amateurs in matters of warfare, that the few experienced officers of former wars, or those who were West Point graduates, were remote from the front...it would be a gross injustice to the men who fought this battle so say that they were responsible for the deplorable disasters of the first day's fight.⁴⁸

Among those that believed the attack surprised the Union forces was the "Ohio at Shiloh Commission." In its report published in 1903, the commission stated that "the officers in command of the Union army did not anticipate that a battle would be fought there until they saw

⁴⁷ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

the heavy columns of the enemy bearing down on them.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, the report somewhat absolved the Fifty-Third Ohio from the accusation of cowardice by stating: “There are mitigating circumstances connected with the disordered condition of this regiment on that Sunday morning.”⁵⁰

Indiana soldier Alvin P. Hovey shared the assessment of Duke and the Ohio Commission. Writing for *The National Tribune*, Hovey argued that the Union army was completely taken by surprise at Shiloh. Hovey used Dennis Hart Mahan’s book on military fortifications to strengthen his argument. According to Mahan, a surprise attack is simply “an unexpected attack, for which the assailed are not prepared.”⁵¹ Hovey connected his argument to Mahan’s definition and stated “under this definition, was not General Sherman and his forces more than surprised on Sunday morning, April 6th, 1862?”⁵² Furthermore, the article boldly asserted: “thousands of men... would swear before the world and their God that there could be no mistake as to that surprise.”⁵³

Lucius Barber of the Fifteenth Illinois shared Hovey’s opinion that the Union army was undeniably surprised. Writing in his 1894 memoir, Barber stated: “The enemy was in camp before it had time to arouse and form a line. Some were shot in their sleep, never knowing what hurt them. Terrible and complete was the surprise.”⁵⁴ Barber also claimed that the Pittsburg Landing camp showed no sign that the Union soldiers were concerned about a possible attack on

⁴⁹ Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh*, 24.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Dennis Hart Mahan, *A Treatise on Field Fortification, Containing Instructions on the Methods of Laying Out, Constructing, Defending, and Attacking Intrenchments, with the General Outlines Also of the Arrangement, the Attack of Defence, of Permanent Fortifications* (New York: John Wiley, 1856), 93.

⁵² Alvin P. Hovey, “Surprise at Shiloh,” *The National Tribune*, April 5, 1883, 1.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Lucius W. Barber, *Army Memoirs* (Chicago: The J.M.W. Stationery and Printing Co., 1894), 51.

the night before the battle. Instead, Barber painted a picture of camp filled with games, music, and entertainment inconsistent with proper military vigilance.⁵⁵

The recollection of Leander Stillwell of the Sixty-First Illinois Infantry reflected the accounts of Hovey and Barber. Stillwell remembered the Union camp as routine and without preparations for a pending battle. At the moment of the Rebel assault, Stillwell wrote that the men “were scattered around the company streets and in front of the company parade grounds, engaged in polishing and brightening their muskets, and brushing up and cleaning their shoes, jackets, trousers, and clothing generally. It was a most beautiful morning.”⁵⁶ The Confederate attack changed Stillwell’s morning from being “like as Sunday in the country at home” to a day that was constantly on his mind.⁵⁷

Within the Fifty-Third Ohio’s brigade, Robert H. Flemming of the Seventy-Seventh Ohio’s recollection of the Rebel attack corroborated the accounts of Hovey, Barber, and Stillwell. Flemming stated in a paper that the army had been taken by surprise on the morning of April 6, 1862.⁵⁸ Furthermore, he remembered the morning of the attack as a “spring day of superb beauty” filled with “the usual camp duties.”⁵⁹ Solidifying his argument that the Union camp was taken by complete surprise, Flemming wrote: “There were no indications of the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Leander Stillwell, *The Story of the Common Soldier* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1920), 42.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 42-53.

⁵⁸ Robert H. Flemming, “The Battle of Shiloh as a Private Saw It,” in *Sketches of War History, 1861-1865: Papers Prepared for the Commandery of the State of Ohio, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, Volume IV*, ed. Theodore F. Allen, Edward S. McKee, and J. Gordon Taylor (Cincinnati: Monfort and Company, 1908), 146.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 138.

impending bloody conflict, excepting the distant sound of an occasional musket shot... as that had been going on at intervals for a day or two, we thought nothing of it.”⁶⁰

Members of the Fifty-Third Ohio that weighed in on the issue agreed that the Union army had been taken by surprise. Milton Bosworth stated that the regiment “did not know that the enemy was approaching in full force until they were within 300 yards.”⁶¹ Adjunct Dawes recorded Sherman’s response to the attack as “my God, we are attacked!” after writing about the general’s two rebukes of Appler’s intelligence as an indication that Union command was caught off guard.⁶² In addition, coverage of a regimental reunion in *The Jackson Standard* newspaper stated: “The question came up whether Sherman was surprised at Shiloh. That question was settled on the battlefield. He was surprised, completely, ingloriously.”⁶³ Presumably, the article’s anonymous author reached this conclusion after discussing the battle with the veterans of the Fifty-Third Ohio.

Almost all of the scholarly work on the Battle of Shiloh presents the Confederate attack as a surprise to the Union army. Larry J. Daniel wrote that “there is no question that the Federal army was surprised at Shiloh, and for that Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman cannot escape substantial blame.”⁶⁴ Wiley Sword presented Grant and Sherman as unsuspecting on the eve of the attack.⁶⁵ Sherman biographer John F. Marszalek also shared this assessment.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Bosworth, “Home Letter from the Camp,” 2.

⁶² Dawes, “My First Day under Fire at Shiloh,” in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 8.

⁶³ Anonymous, “The Fifty-Third! Reunion at Wellston Last Week,” *The Jackson Standard*, 2.

⁶⁴ Daniel, *Shiloh*, 14.

⁶⁵ Wiley Sword, *Shiloh: Bloody April* (Dayton: The Press of Morningside Books, 1988), 125-132.

According to Marszalek, the proof that the Union army was surprised at Shiloh rests in the fact that “Union high command, not expecting an attack, simply ignored all information to the contrary.”⁶⁶ Sherman biographer Robert L. O’Connell also stated that the Rebel attack was a “surprise” to the general.⁶⁷

James L. McDonough combined his argument that the Union army had been surprised with a condemnation of the camp’s lack of fortifications. McDonough stated that “the failure of Grant lay... in allowing his army to remain in badly aligned encampments for repelling an attack, with no entrenchments, on the same side of the river as the enemy camp.”⁶⁸ In addition, he argued that Grant’s decision to stay at his headquarters nine miles away from Pittsburg Landing further indicated that the Union army was not expecting an attack.⁶⁹ Even though McDonough stated that Sherman would have been able to hold his position on the morning of April 6, 1862 if the Fifty-Third Ohio had not broken, his overall scholarship presents an argument that the true failures at Shiloh rests on the decisions made by Union commanders above the regimental level.⁷⁰

Furthermore, James McPherson, in agreement with the historiographical interpretations of Daniel, Sword, Marszalek, O’Connell, and McDonough, condemned Grant as “not prepared for the thousands of screaming rebels who burst out of the woods near Shiloh church.”⁷¹ Steven

⁶⁶ John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier’s Passion for Order* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 175.

⁶⁷ Robert L. O’Connell, *Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York: Random House, 2014), 96.

⁶⁸ James Lee McDonough, *Shiloh: In Hell before Night* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 57.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁰ McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 11; McDonough, *Shiloh*, 57-58.

⁷¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 408.

E. Woodworth claimed General Sherman did not “grasp the serious of the situation that the Army of the Tennessee faced” until the full Rebel attack was visibly in motion on the Fifty-Third Ohio’s Rea Field camp.⁷² Joseph Allen Frank and George A. Reaves summarized the experience of Union soldiers at Shiloh as “an army of green volunteers wedged in the confluence of several streams and unprepared for attack was taken by surprise by A.S. Johnston’s Confederates.”⁷³ Grant biographers Ronald C. White, H.W. Brands, and Ron Chernow also agreed that the Union high command was surprised at Shiloh.⁷⁴

The historiography of the surprise attack at Shiloh perhaps absolves the Fifty-Third Ohio for any failures during Shiloh’s first day. If the Union position had been fortified, and the Army of the Tennessee on full alert, it is likely that the Fifty-Third Ohio would not have abandoned its initial position on Rea Field. However, the decisions on what level of heightened security to place the Pittsburg Landing camp was in the hands of General Grant and General Sherman. The regiment, as were all Union units at Shiloh, was not fully in control of its destiny.

Historian Timothy B. Smith disagreed with the accepted interpretation of the Confederate surprise attack in his book, *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish*. Smith argued: “the idea that Federals were totally negligent of security is a myth.”⁷⁵ However, Smith also argued that Sherman suffered a “strategic surprise” as a part of his more complex interpretation.⁷⁶ Almost alone in his

⁷² Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 158.

⁷³ Frank and Reaves, *Seeing the Elephant*, 90.

⁷⁴ Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Random House, 2016), 213-216; H.W. Brands, *The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses S. Grant in War and Peace* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 174; Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 197-200.

⁷⁵ Smith, *Shiloh*, 54.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

interpretation of the Union preparedness for the Rebel attack, Smith points to the rampant sickness among the ranks as equally important to the Union's ability to respond to the attack as the failure to entrench.⁷⁷ Even though Smith stands alone in this historiographical debate, he presents another uncontrollable factor that hindered the Fifty-Third Ohio's capability at Shiloh. The Ohio regiment was not spared from the illnesses that spread through the Union camp.

The Impact of Illness and Poor Leadership on the Fifty-Third Ohio

As stated in chapter three, the Fifty-Third Ohio did not arrive at the Pittsburg Landing camp at full strength. The Tennessee River's flooded state led to the regiment being decimated by stomach ailments. After spending several days drinking contaminated water, and without the proper medical knowledge of waterborne illnesses, the Fifty-Third Ohio limped ashore.⁷⁸

Approximately 216 members of the regiment were officially on the sick list when the battle began.⁷⁹ Similar to the other events that hinder the regiment's ability to perform at full capacity, the widespread illness was beyond the regiment's control.

The Fifty-Third Ohio entered the Battle of Shiloh without a true military leader. Colonel Appler was a respected community leader whose social status elevated him to command.⁸⁰ The colonel was an older man without any military experience outside of the Ohio militia and a brief stint with the Twenty-Second Ohio before taking command of the Fifty-Third Ohio in September of 1862.⁸¹ Like many regimental commanders in the Union army, it was speculated that Appler

⁷⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁷⁸ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 7.

⁷⁹ David W. Reed, *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged*, ed. Timothy B. Smith (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 95.

⁸⁰ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 1-2.

was appointed to command through the spoils system. The Fifty-Third Ohio's regimental memoir twice tied Appler's appointment to Ohio governor, William Dennison Jr.⁸² According to a *Cincinnati Times* article that circulated in Ohio newspapers after Appler's disastrous performance at Shiloh, the colonel was accused of being "another of Gov. Dennison's pets."⁸³

Among others, the article was printed in the democrat-leaning newspaper, the *Daily Ohio Statesman*. The paper, along with the article's original publisher, were openly hostile to Governor Dennison. The *Daily Statesman* was founded as to promote the Democrat Party, but had transformed into a controversial Copperhead publication by the outbreak of the Civil War.⁸⁴ This placed the paper in direct opposition with the Whig turned Republican governor. By the time the Battle of Shiloh occurred in April of 1862, Governor Dennison had been replaced by David Tod as the chief executive of Ohio. Tod was a pro-war Democrat and the 1861 gubernatorial candidate of the Unionist Party consisting of Republicans and Unionist Democrats.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 1; Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 1-2.

⁸² Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 1-2; Even though Duke's regimental memoir specifically mentions that Governor Dennison appointed J.J. Appler to his leadership role, the memoir does not present his appointment in a negative manner. Instead, it is stated to explain how Appler became the regimental colonel in the opening chapter dedicated to the creation of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry.

⁸³ Anonymous, "Colonel Appler of the Fifty-Third Ohio," *Daily Ohio Statesman*, April 30, 1862, 2.

⁸⁴ "Daily Ohio Statesmen (Columbus, Ohio), 1855-1870," Library of Congress: Chronicling America. Accessed October 4, 2022, <http://loc.gov/item/sn84028645/>.

⁸⁵ George Knepper, *Ohio and Its People: Bicentennial Edition* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2003), 200-201; The Unionist coalition of Republican and pro-war Democrats defeated the Copperhead Democrats in the 1861 election with a comfortable victory. Unionist Tod won 206,997 against Democrat Hugh Jewett's 151,774. However, the election proved that the anti-war Democrats were still a powerful political force in Ohio. Copperhead ideology never completely disappeared from Ohio during the war, but it was kept in check by the coalition.

However, J.J. Appler spent his public service and political career as a member of the Democrat Party.⁸⁶ It is unclear whether these papers were originally unaware of Appler's affiliation or if the Copperhead influenced persuaded the publications to deride any connection to the war against the Confederate States of America. Clearly, Appler was not in opposition to the Union war effort despite his shortcomings on the battlefield. It is likely that the colonel's affiliation to Dennison was mentioned to draw a distinction between the Unionist coalition in Ohio and the paper's Copperhead persuasion. Although never strong enough to defeat the pro-war sentiments of the majority of Ohioans, enough of the state's citizenry held pro-Confederate sympathies that the Rebel government believed Ohio could be plucked away from the Union effort with the right politician and proper effort.⁸⁷ In this climate, the rhetorical and political war between the two Ohio factions continued throughout the war.⁸⁸

Appler was not alone in his role as a civilian commander. The Fifty-Third Ohio went into combat on the morning of April 6, 1862 without any militarily trained officers. Even the men who were remembered for their bravery and courage at the Battle of Shiloh were without previous military credentials. Adjunct Ephraim C. Dawes joined the Fifty-Third Ohio as a recent graduate of Marietta College.⁸⁹ James R. Percy, who rallied the regiment with Dawes and Wells S. Jones after Appler's order to retreat, was a graduate of the Polytechnic School in the state of

⁸⁶ Anonymous, "Scioto County Democratic Ticket," *Portsmouth Daily Times*, September 20, 1859, 2.

⁸⁷ Andrew R. L. Cayton, *Ohio: The History of a People* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 130.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸⁹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 2.

New York and a teacher in Piketon, Ohio when the war began.⁹⁰ Wells S. Jones had an educational background that included teaching and graduating from Starling Medical College in Columbus Ohio.⁹¹ When he joined the Fifty-Third Ohio, Jones was a doctor in Waverly, Ohio and without prior military service.⁹² Even the regiment's lieutenant-colonel, Robert A. Fulton, was strictly a civilian before joining the Fifty-Third Ohio.⁹³

Unqualified military leadership was not unique to the Fifty-Third Ohio. The problem of political generals plagued the Union army. While it is true that some politically appointed leaders were competent commanders, it is likely that most were especially inept in the war's earliest years. The system of appointing unqualified leaders, like Colonel Appler, usually occurred either to reward loyal politicians at the state and national level, or to balance the number of democrat and republicans in a regiment, division, or army.⁹⁴ Colonel Appler's status as a democrat in a regiment from a politically diverse region may have factor into his appointment as colonel of the Fifty-Third Ohio.⁹⁵ The accepted practice of appointing unqualified commanders to lead men into battle placed the Fifty-Third Ohio in a difficult position during the initial Confederate

⁹⁰ E.C. Dawes, "A Hero of the War," in *G.A.R. Papers: Papers Read before Fred C. Jones Post, No. 401, Department of Ohio, G.A.R.*, ed. E.R. Monfort, H.B. Furness, and Fred H. Alms (Cincinnati: Elm Street Printing Co., 1891), 293.; Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 254-258.

⁹¹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 244-248.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁴ David Work, *Lincoln's Political Generals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 1-5.

⁹⁵ Anonymous, "Scioto Democratic Ticket," *Portsmouth Daily Times*, September 20, 1859, 2.

assault on Shiloh's first day. As Adjunct Dawes wrote during the days that followed the battle: "Had we had a good Col. Instead of being disgraced, we would have been honored."⁹⁶

Sherman's Scapegoat

William Tecumseh Sherman's anger toward the Fifty-Third Ohio was based on Colonel Appler's decision to withdraw from the Rea Field area on the morning of April 6, 1862. The nervous colonel ordered the retreat, and abandoned his men, after Sherman ordered him to hold his position and promised to support the colonel. In addition, the general was with the Fifty-Third Ohio when he realized his position was under attack.⁹⁷ Sherman's presence at the moment of the attack, and the general's later rebuke of the regiment, forever linked William Tecumseh Sherman, the Fifty-Third Ohio, and the Battle of Shiloh together.

The Fifty-Third Ohio first met Sherman soon after the general returned to duty following the accusation of insanity. The scornful attacks on his character and mental health deeply hurt the general.⁹⁸ First, the *Cincinnati Commercial* blasted him for being "insane" and berated him for reportedly considering removing his army from Kentucky and retreating into Indiana while in command in Bluegrass State.⁹⁹ The article circulated among the Northern press appearing in

⁹⁶Ephraim C. Dawes to Marshall (Last Name Illegible), April 21, 1862, series 1, box 1, folder 46, Ephraim C. Dawes Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

⁹⁷ Robert N. Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume X, Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 264 (Referred to as *OR 10: Part I* for the remainder of the chapter); Lewis, *Sherman*, 220; Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 7; Mark Grimsley and Steven E. Woodworth, *Shiloh: A Battlefield Guide* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 76.

⁹⁸ Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, *Sherman's Civil War Letters: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 174; Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman: Fighting Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 203.

⁹⁹ Anonymous, "General William T. Sherman Insane: From Yesterday's Cincinnati Commercial," *Chicago Tribune*, December 12, 1861, 1.

major markets such as Chicago.¹⁰⁰ Talks of Sherman's "lunacy" even circulated among members of Lincoln's cabinet.¹⁰¹ When the general entered his commanding role in Kentucky, the strong political divisions in the state increased his naturally anxious personality.¹⁰² The Sherman that emerged from the episode was arguably more aware than ever about his public perception.

The Fifty-Third Ohio did not collectively meet General Sherman until it arrived at Paducah on February 23, 1862. It is unclear if any member of the regiment had any previous encounters with the general, but at least some members must have known Sherman's name due to his politically powerful Ohio family.¹⁰³ It is also uncertain if the regiment was aware of the charges made against their new division commander. The widely circulated nature of the "insanity" article indicates that members of the Fifty-Third Ohio probably read the accusations depending on the availability of newspapers at Camp Diamond. However, there is no record that the Fifty-Third Ohio viewed Sherman as "insane."

When the Fifty-Third Ohio brought its reports of Confederates lurking in the woods and fields around Pittsburg Landing, the ordeal was still fresh on Sherman's mind. The general likely had the accusation of insanity on his mind when he rebuked Appler's warnings. Sherman's use of colorful phrases to downplay the threat may have been compensation for his previous overestimates of enemy strength in Kentucky. It was the overestimates that eventually led to the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Salmon P. Chase, *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1954), 51; Marszalek, *Sherman*, 160-161.

¹⁰² John F. Marszalek, *Sherman's Other War: The General and the Civil War Press* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1999), 67.

¹⁰³ Kenneth J. Heineman, *Civil War Dynasty: The Ewing Family of Ohio* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 1-16.

accusations against the general's mental stability. Historian James Lee McDonough presented this argument in his biography of the general: "He overcompensated, trying to avoid the kind of criticism he had encountered earlier in Kentucky."¹⁰⁴

The Fifty-Third Ohio was again caught in a situation not of its own making. It was not the regiment who claimed the general was insane, nor did the Ohioans print the articles that circulated the accusation. All the Fifty-Third Ohio and Colonel Appler did was properly assess the Rebel's intentions on April 5th and 6th.¹⁰⁵ If Sherman did ignore the warnings due to the similarities the buildup to Shiloh shared with the general's Kentucky experience, the Fifty-Third Ohio paid the price. It is impossible to calculate how the opening round of the battle would have been different if Sherman had taken the regiment's reports seriously, but it could have given the Fifty-Third Ohio and the entire camp more time to prepare for the assault. Instead, the general did not recognize the Confederate movements as an attack until Rea Field was swarming with Rebel soldiers.¹⁰⁶

Despite the regiment's shortcomings, the Fifty-Third killed a large number of Rebel soldiers. Seventy members of the Sixth Mississippi regiment were killed during the Battle of Shiloh.¹⁰⁷ Presumably, a large portion of those deaths were a direct result of the Fifty-Third Ohio's initial volleys. 300 of the 425 Mississippians who participated in the attack against the

¹⁰⁴ McDonough, *William Tecumseh Sherman*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 1; Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 3-6; Ephraim C. Dawes, "The Battle of Shiloh," in *Campaigns in Kentucky and Tennessee Including The Battle of Chickamauga, 1862-1864*, ed. The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1908), 116-117.

¹⁰⁶ Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman*, 220-221; Steven E. Woodworth, *Sherman* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 53.

¹⁰⁷ S.A. Cunningham, ed., *Confederate Veteran: Published Monthly in the Interest of Confederate Veterans and Kindred Topics* (Nashville: Confederate Southern Memorial Association, 1897), 561.

Fifty-Third Ohio were later listed as killed, wounded, or missing.¹⁰⁸ Today, one of the discovered Confederate mass burial sites is located at the edge of Rea Field. It is additionally likely that a large portion of the soldiers buried there were the victims of the Fifty-Third Ohio's vicious fire on the morning of April 6th.

At least two attacks on the Fifty-Third Ohio's position were thoroughly beaten.¹⁰⁹ As Adjunct Dawes remembered; "The first fire of our men was very effective. The Confederate line fell back, rallied, came forward, received another volley, and again fell back" before Appler ordered the retreat.¹¹⁰ Historian O. Edward Cunningham wrote that the "Fifty-Third Ohio was not routed...for the company commanders on the right were of sterner stuff" than Appler.¹¹¹ However, the insistence on early Civil War histories to rely on the words of the conflict's "great" men and leaders left the regiment's reputation damaged. The facts of the Battle of Shiloh, and the words of the men from the Fifty-Third Ohio, were overwhelmed in the public square by the writings and opinions of monumental figures like Sherman.

The official report of Confederate General Patrick Cleburne referenced the effectiveness of the Fifty-Third Ohio. The Sixth Mississippi, along with the Twenty-Third Tennessee, attacked the Fifty-Third Ohio on April 6, 1862 under the Cleburne's leadership.¹¹² According to Cleburne's report: "The Sixth Mississippi and the Twenty-third Tennessee charged through the

¹⁰⁸ John L. Frizzell, "The Sixth Mississippi Infantry Regiment: Courageous Citizen Soldiers," *Tenor of Our Times* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 49; *OR 10: Part 1*, 581.

¹⁰⁹ McDonough, *Shiloh*, 109; Cunningham, *Shiloh*, ed. Joiner and Smith, 169.

¹¹⁰ Dawes, "My First Day under Fire at Shiloh," in *Sketches of War History*, ed. Chamberlin, 9; Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 72.

¹¹¹ Cunningham, *Shiloh*, ed. Joiner and Smith, 169.

¹¹² *OR 10: Part 1*, 581; Grimsley and Woodworth, *Shiloh*, 77; Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 72-73.

encampments of the enemy...Under terrible fire much confusion followed, and a quick and bloody repulse was the consequence.”¹¹³ Cleburne also wrote that the Sixth Mississippi “yielded and retreat in disorder” and the Twenty-Third Tennessee was “with difficulty rallied” after it had fled one-hundred yards from the front.¹¹⁴ The Fifty-Third Ohio inflicted heavy damage on the charging Rebels before Appler ordered the regiment to retreat.¹¹⁵

The Redemption of the Fifty-Third Ohio

The Fifty-Third Ohio had no record of bravery to fall back on when the accusations against its honor mounted. Since Shiloh was the regiment’s first fight, the Fifty-Third Ohio was without positive achievements to counter the attacks. The regiment may have been unjustly labeled as cowards and failures at the Battle of Shiloh, but the remainder of their war record was remembered as honorable and courageous. Despite Sherman’s continued use of the regiment as a scapegoat for Shiloh, the general grew to respect, and depend on, the regiment.

Colonel Appler was discharged from command in the wake of his disastrous performance.¹¹⁶ Captain Wells S. Jones replaced Appler as the commander of the regiment after the majority of the Fifty-Third Ohio’s officers recommended him for the job.¹¹⁷ Immediately following Shiloh, the regiment debated whether Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Fulton should move

¹¹³ *OR 10: Part 1*, 581.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 581.

¹¹⁵ Grimsley and Woodworth, *Shiloh*, 78; Smith, *Shiloh*, 102-103; McDonough, *Shiloh*, 109; Daniel, *Shiloh*, 159.

¹¹⁶ The Roster Commission, *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865: Volume IV, 37th-53rd Regiments – Infantry* (Akron: The Werner PTG. and MFG. Co., 1887), 675; Ephraim Dawes to Ed McFurger, April 29, 1862, series 1, box 1, folder 43, Ephraim C. Dawes Paper, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

¹¹⁷ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 90.

into Appler's role, or if Jones should be the new regimental commander.¹¹⁸ Ultimately, Jones assumed command and the regiment set out to wipe away the public perception of Shiloh.

Jones' bravery and leadership took the regiment to new heights of battlefield success. During the Atlanta Campaign, Jones courageously saved the regimental flag after the color bearer was shot and the banner was in danger of falling into enemy hands.¹¹⁹ Jones risked his life, saved the flag, and lifted the spirits of the Fifty-Third Ohio.¹²⁰ Jones eventually gained the rank of general and was seriously wounded during the attack on Fort McAllister on December 13, 1864.¹²¹ He survived and was mustered out with the rest of the regiment on August 11, 1865.¹²² Jones returned to Waverly, Ohio after the war, resumed his medical practice, and assisted in establishing a Republican Party presence in Pike County, Ohio.¹²³

Ephraim C. Dawes continued to show the bravery exhibited on the battlefield at Shiloh for the duration of his service. Dawes was horrifically wounded in May of 1864 in Dallas, Georgia.¹²⁴ A Rebel bullet struck him in the jaw and caused severe damage to his face.¹²⁵ His

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Anonymous, "Major Foster Presents the Old 53rd O.V.I. Flag to State," *Chillicothe Gazette*, July 20, 1914, 1.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 245-246.

¹²² The Roster Commission, *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865: Volume IV*, 675.

¹²³ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 246-248.

¹²⁴ The Roster Commission, *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865: Volume IV*, 675.

¹²⁵ L.J. Kozlowski, "An Indomitable Will: Major Ephraim Cutler Dawes," *Timeline* 9, no. 3 (June/July 1992): 20.

jaw was completely shattered requiring an experimental surgery.¹²⁶ The wound forced his discharge from the military in 1864, but his heroic exploits on the battlefield led to his promotion to brevetted lieutenant colonel.¹²⁷ Dawes continued to show courage after war by refusing to allow the injury to hinder his efforts to tell the regiment's story with emphasis on the Battle of Shiloh until his death in 1895.¹²⁸

Another of the regiment's Shiloh heroes was Captain James R. Percy. At Shiloh, Percy bravely stood with Jones and Dawes instead of Appler.¹²⁹ He entered the Fifty-Third Ohio as a private before his promotion to captain of Company F on January 1, 1862.¹³⁰ Captain Percy quickly gained a reputation as a leader and exhibited bravery throughout his service. He died on August 18, 1864 after being shot on the frontline of a battle outside Atlanta, Georgia.¹³¹ According to Ephraim C. Dawes who fought beside Percy at Shiloh and beyond: "No braver man died for the Union than Capt. James R. Percy."¹³²

In addition to the individual displays of bravery, the Fifty-Third Ohio more than answered the call of duty following the battle of Shiloh. *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* indicate a regiment that won the trust and admiration of its fellow units. The reports show that Union commanders never hesitated to rely

¹²⁶ Ibid., 20-29.

¹²⁷ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 251.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 252-253.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹³⁰ The Roster Commission, *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865: Volume IV*, 692.

¹³¹ Dawes, "A Hero of the War" in *G.A.R. Papers*, eds., Monfort, Furness, and Alms, 298.

¹³² Ibid., 293.

on the regiment. Undoubtedly, the regiment won this respect partly due to the leadership that replaced Appler.

Even though the regiment played a minor role in Vicksburg Campaign of 1863, it never failed in the face of the enemy.¹³³ After the fall of Vicksburg, the Fifty-Third Ohio successfully crossed a river under intermittent enemy fire.¹³⁴ In addition, the Ohioans engaged Confederate forces around Jackson, Mississippi including skirmishes around the Rebel defensive works.¹³⁵ Fifty-Third Ohio commanding officers wrote of his men: “With feelings of great pleasure, I announce the fact that every officer and soldier in my command have performed their arduous duties cheerfully. Their patience and courage well deserve the admiration of their commanding officers and the gratitude of their country.”¹³⁶

The regiment was heavily engaged during the Atlanta Campaign of 1864. General J.A.J. Lightburn wrote of the Fifty-Third Ohio and the leadership of Colonel Wells Jones during a fiery exchange with the Rebels. In the report, Lightburn wrote that the Ohioans were dispatched to defeat a heavily armed group of Rebel skirmishers occupying a ridge in front of the Union army.¹³⁷ The Fifty-Third Ohio, along with the Forty-Seventh and the Forty-Fourth Ohio, were driven back by the skirmishers.¹³⁸ However, this did not cause Lightburn to view the Fifty-Third

¹³³ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 105.

¹³⁴ Robert N. Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume XXIV, Part III* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 642-643.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 643.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Redfield Proctor, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume XXXVIII, Part III* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891) 222-223; (Referred to as *OR: 38, Part 3* for the remainder of the chapter.)

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 223.

Ohio in a negative manner. Instead, he wrote glowingly of the regiment: “The regiments sent out to occupy the ridge in the open field came back broken, but rallied in the main line and fought well.”¹³⁹ The Fifty-Third Ohio’s superior offered the complete assessment of service denied the Ohioans at Shiloh by General Sherman. Overall, Lightburn included the Fifty-Third Ohio in his assessment that “the officers and the men behaved well.”¹⁴⁰

Wells S. Jones’ report of September 12, 1864 chronicled the entirety of the Fifty-Third Ohio’s service during the Atlanta Campaign. The regiment remained almost constantly engaged on the front line or in support of major maneuvers. John K. Duke remembered the regiment’s service in a telling, but biased assertion: “It is not vainglorious to assert that no regiment in the Army of the Mississippi did more to assist in the capture of Atlanta than did the 53rd O.V.V.I.”¹⁴¹ Jones’s official report balanced the service of the Fifty-Third Ohio with their fellow regiments, but he still praised the efforts of his unit. According to Jones, the Fifty-Third Ohio, with the assistance of the Thirty-Seventh Ohio, “drove the enemy out from among the fallen timber and behind the trees to their rifle pits” in a May 13, 1864 fight on the approach to Atlanta.¹⁴² Furthermore, Jones included the Fifty-Third Ohio in his overall assessment of his brigade efforts in the fight for Atlanta: “Too much credit cannot be given to the brave officers and men who compose this brigade.”¹⁴³

The Fifty-Third Ohio continued to build its reputation as a reliable regiment during Sherman’s 1864 “March to the Sea.” In December, the regiment played a role in the storming of

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 158.

¹⁴² *OR*: 38, Part 3, 225

¹⁴³ Ibid., 230.

Fort McAllister. Union soldiers took control of the fort within ten minutes of the start of the attack.¹⁴⁴ The Fifty-Third Ohio was again praised as a part of the larger Union force when its commanding officers wrote: “The conduct of the regiments engaged deserves the highest praise – not a falter, but steadily on under a withering fire, until three starry banners waved from the parapets.”¹⁴⁵ In this battle, the beloved colonel of the Fifty-Third Ohio, Wells S. Jones, was severely injured by a Rebel bullet transferring command of the Second Brigade of the Second Division to Colonel Jas. S. Martin.¹⁴⁶ The Fifty-Third Ohio then participated in the destruction of Confederate railroads and infrastructure in Georgia to damage the Rebel war effort.¹⁴⁷

Arguably, no praise went as far to erase the stain of Shiloh than the approval heaped on the Fifty-Third Ohio by General Sherman in June of 1864. Even though the debate over Shiloh continued, Sherman spoke highly of the regiment he once publicly berated. His June 13, 1864 correspondence with Professor Henry Coppee contained the following:

I also take great pleasure in adding that nearly all the troops that at Shiloh drew from me official censure have more than redeemed their good name; among them that very regiment that first broke, the Fifty-third Ohio, Colonel Appler. Under another leader, Colonel Jones, it has shared every campaign and expedition of mine since; is with me now and can march and bivouac and fight as well as the best regiment in this or any army. Its reputation now is equal to that of any from the State of Ohio.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Daniel S. Lamont, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume XLV* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1893), 114-115; (Referred to as *OR: 44* for the remainder of the chapter).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁴⁶ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 169; *OR: 44*, 115.

¹⁴⁷ *OR: 44*, 115.

¹⁴⁸ Russell A. Alger, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume LII, Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898), 561.

Sherman's inclusion of his negative assessment of the regiment at Shiloh further indicates the festering nature of his displeasure from April 6, 1862. However, the statement shows the impact of the change in leadership, and the regiment's full war record, on Sherman's overall perception of the Fifty-Third Ohio. While it is impossible to calculate the full influence of Sherman's post-Shiloh rebuke on the Fifty-Third Ohio, it is clear that the regiment had transformed its reputation by the start of the Atlanta Campaign. In this regard, the Fifty-Third Ohio had regained the honor lost from the censures of Shiloh and proved their collective worthiness of manhood of the Civil War Era.

The record of the Fifty-Third Ohio is one of a regiment that met every challenge of the war. The events connected to Appler's retreat were an aberration when the remainder of the regiment's service is considered. Even though the perceived failures of the Battle of Shiloh's earliest moments were related to factors beyond the regiment's control, they were also connected to the leadership of J.J. Appler. Once the Fifty-Third Ohio was freed from his command, the regiment performed admirably. The regiment stood up to the Rebel onslaught after Appler abandoned them on April 6, 1862. In the command vacuum created by his departure, true leaders came to the forefront. Once Appler was out of the picture, the true character and capability of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry rose to the surface.

Grand Review and Mustered Out

On May 24, 1865, the Fifty-Third Ohio arrived in Washington, D.C. for the Grand Review. The regiment spent the previous night six miles from the city and marched into Washington, joined the Review, and marched by the stand of dignitaries around 11 a.m. Like most of the soldiers from the Western Theater, the Fifty-Third Ohio walked through the

celebration “bronzed, ragged, shoeless, and dirty; but the healthiest and bravest lot of dare-devils that ever paraded in review before the American public.”¹⁴⁹ The armies of the West may not have looked as fancy as the Army of the Potomac, but their credentials were undeniable.¹⁵⁰

The Fifty-Third Ohio was a green regiment that first faced enemy fire on April 6, 1862 near the banks of the Tennessee River. They emerged from the war as hardened and effective group of veterans. The Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry were present at sixty-nine engagements. By the time the Ohioans mustered out in August 1865, they had travelled approximately 6,400 miles. The journey from Camp Diamond to Little Rock, Arkansas was more than a geographical journey through the reunited states, it was also an expedition of character.¹⁵¹ The men of the regiment learned if they were worthy of the era’s title of man, or if their honor would be irreversibly tarnished by battlefields.

Shiloh became a national battlefield when President Grover Cleveland signed legislation for its creation on December 27, 1894.¹⁵² Today, a monument to the Fifty-Third Ohio stands in the middle of Rea Field. A marker designating the regiment’s campsite is located just a few steps away.¹⁵³ The monument to the Fifty-Third Ohio was a part of the larger effort to remember the service of all Ohioans at the Battle of Shiloh. The state of Ohio dedicated the first monuments on

¹⁴⁹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 199.

¹⁵⁰ Woodworth, *Nothing but Victory*, 638-641.

¹⁵¹ Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion*, 200; The regiment traveled to Little Rock following the Grand Review and officially concluded its wartime service.

¹⁵² Timothy B. Smith, *This Great Battlefield of Shiloh: History, Memory, and the Establishment of a Civil War National Military Park* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 28.

¹⁵³ Grimsley and Woodworth, *Shiloh*, 74-77.

the new national battlefield on June 6, 1902.¹⁵⁴ Thirty-four markers were transferred to the national government from Ohio before an assembled crowd of approximately two-thousand spectators.¹⁵⁵

During the dedication ceremony, Judge David F. Pugh addressed the crowd and honored the sacrifice and bravery of Ohioans at Shiloh. Pugh had been selected the chairman of the committee overseeing the Ohio Shiloh monuments partly due to his status as one of the youngest Ohioans to serve in the clash forty years prior. The mood of the day was about reconciliation between the once warring geographic factions of the United States and remembrance for the Ohio soldiers whose bodies were buried at the battlefield. The debates that followed the battle, including the dispute between General Sherman and the Fifty-Third Ohio, were not a part of the festivities. Even a delegate from Mississippi whose soldiers crashed into the Fifty-Third Ohio's line on the morning of April 6, 1862 attended the ceremony to greet his state's former enemy as friends.¹⁵⁶ According to Timothy B. Smith, "patriotism, reconciliation, and honor were very much in the minds of the park builders."¹⁵⁷

Pugh spoke highly of the Ohio soldiers at Shiloh: "We are here today to dedicate the monuments erected by the state of Ohio to commemorate the achievements of Ohio dead... Whether they should wear a harp and crown was not the question that was uppermost in their minds. Their supreme desire was to do their duty to country, and the rest they left to God."¹⁵⁸ In

¹⁵⁴ Charles E. Shedd, Jr., *A History of Shiloh National Military Park* (Washington: United States Department of the Interior, 1954), 40; Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh*, 183.

¹⁵⁵ Shedd, Jr., *A History of Shiloh National Military Park*, 40; Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh*, 183-185.

¹⁵⁶ Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh*, 184-188.

¹⁵⁷ Smith, *This Great Battlefield of Shiloh*, xvii.

¹⁵⁸ Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh*, 189-190.

addition, the chairman collectively sainted the Ohioans who died at Shiloh by telling the crowd that “they were more than heroes. They were heroes plus the qualities which constitute patriots.”¹⁵⁹ Even though Pugh never directly referenced the Fifty-Third Ohio in his dedication speech, his sentiments could have provided the regiment’s veterans with some solace to know that their fallen comrades were venerated as heroes of the battle that plagued their regimental reputation.

The monument to the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry does not address the controversy that followed the battle. It simply states the regiment was commanded by Colonel Appler and Lieutenant-Colonel Robert A. Fulton. The designations that the regiment was a part of Sherman’s Fifth Division, Hildebrand’s Third Brigade, and the Army of the Tennessee are also listed. Furthermore, the numbers of dead, wounded, and missing are listed with the inscription: “This regiment formed here at 8 a.m., April 6, 1862, but soon fell back across the ravine in the rear.”¹⁶⁰

The words on the Fifty-Third Ohio’s Shiloh monument are left open to the interpretation of the reader to decide whether the regiment fell back in disgrace or fell back to continue the fight. The regiment may have been tangled in the controversies that followed Shiloh, but its tarnished reputation was due to outside factors. In addition, the remainder of the regiment’s wartime service showed that any momentary negligence of duty at Shiloh was the result of bad leadership and an anomaly in comparison to the rest of the war. When considering a more complete version of the Fifty-Third Ohio’s history at Shiloh, it is clear that the Ohioans fought as well as possible given the circumstances of the regiment’s creation and were unjustly labeled as

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 190.

¹⁶⁰ Lindsey, *Ohio at Shiloh*, 24.

cowards by early Civil War historians who relied exclusively on the writings of the war's biggest names.

For too long, histories like the Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh were told exclusively through the interpretation of traditional military history. The regiment was generally presented as only a piece of the larger Shiloh narrative without any consideration to its background. This interpretation undoubtedly assisted in solidifying the regiment's negative portrayal in battle's early historiography. However, with the advent of new military history techniques, the Fifty-Third Ohio's Shiloh story can be interpreted within the larger contexts of social, political, religious, and cultural histories of the Civil War Era.¹⁶¹

The Fifty-Third Ohio was not a failed regiment that fled in the face of the enemy on the morning of April 6, 1862, but a regiment betrayed by a lack of leadership, poor supplies, inadequate training, and hindered by the negative factors facing all regiments in the Union and Confederate armies. Furthermore, the Fifty-Third Ohio was a regiment dedicated to defending its honor from the accusations that followed the battle with the same dedication that prompted Dawes, Jones, Percy, and Fulton to stay in the fight long after Colonel Appler fled the scene. The story of the Fifty-Third Ohio at Shiloh is a history of Civil War Era honor, courage, and masculinity as well as of reputation and memory.

Furthermore, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry's Shiloh story did not begin on the morning of April 6, 1862 and did not end with the last shots of the battle. Every event that brought the regiment to the banks of the Tennessee River is vital to understanding how the Fifty-

¹⁶¹Joseph T. Glatthaar, "The 'New' Civil War History: An Overview," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 115, no. 3 (July 1991): 340; John A. Lynn, "Breaching the Walls of Academe: The Purpose, Problems, and Prospects of Military History," *Academic Questions* 21, no. 1 (2018): 23-26; Robert M. Citino, "Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction," *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (October 2007): 1070-1090.

Third Ohio responded to its first sight of hostile Rebels charging its line. Similarly, every printed debate and paper read before veterans' committees that fought over control of the Shiloh narrative in the battle's immediate aftermath as well as in the postbellum era are essential to understanding the full picture of the Fifty-Third Ohio at the Battle of Shiloh.

Conclusion

Arguably, John K. Duke's *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion* was the culmination of the regiment's effort to combat the assault on its honor caused by the lingering accusation of cowardice at Shiloh. Before presenting his full defense of the Fifty-Third Ohio, Duke's second chapter set the stage for the arguments that followed. Chapters three through seven could be viewed as a closing argument in the regiment's defense. Duke called upon the words of Sherman, Ephraim C. Dawes, Confederate Basil Duke, and others as evidence that the Fifty-Third Ohio performed admirably in the face of the enemy at Shiloh.¹ In addition, Duke insisted that the regiment was left improperly prepared and ill-equipped for fight that surprised Grant's army on April 6, 1863. Duke was not presenting his evidence in a formal judicial setting, but fighting for his regiment's honor in the court of public opinion.

The Fifty-Third Ohio was unjustly labeled as cowards in the immediate aftermath of the battle by General William Tecumseh Sherman. The accusation haunted the regiment long after the last of its members passed away. Even though the majority of the blame for failing to hold its initial position was transferred to Colonel Appller, the stain of Shiloh remained. In the Civil War Era, accusations like Sherman's were devastating to the period's concepts of honor, manhood, and duty. For these reasons, the regiment fought as hard with the pen and the speaker's podium to erase the stain of Shiloh as it had on that battlefield during the spring of 1862. The newspapers of southern Ohio, as well as the papers written for the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the

¹ John K. Duke, *History of the Fifty-Third Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the War of the Rebellion* (Portsmouth: The Blade Printing Company, 1900), 8-9.

United States and the *Grand Army of the Republic War Papers*, provided the men of the Fifty-Third Ohio with the opportunity to tell their Shiloh experience.

Overall, the story of the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry at Shiloh is a story of Civil War honor, manhood, and duty. But it is also a story of reputation, memory, and historiography. The lack of major historical works focused on Shiloh during the first half of the Twentieth Century ensured that the regiment's place in the battle's historiography was cemented in the negative portrayal of major figures like William Tecumseh Sherman and Don Carlos Buell. The Fifty-Third Ohio was at the mercy of the interpretations of the war's most visible and popular generals.

After reviewing the overall story of Shiloh, the evidence portrays the Fifty-Third Ohio as a collection of able soldiers who performed admirably in the face of daunting circumstance. The regiment came to Pittsburg Landing without proper training and under the command of the unqualified J.J. Appler. Still, Appler repeatedly warned his superiors, including General Sherman, of the impending danger before the first the shots of the battle of Shiloh were fired. The Fifty-Third Ohio met the Rebel onslaught, changed its command in the midst of battle, and overcame its deficiencies only to be publicly berated by General Sherman and used as a scapegoat for Union high command. After examining the evidence, the Fifty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry was wrongfully criticized for its perceived failure at Shiloh, and became the subject of unjustly critical historiography that failed to take into account poor leadership, inadequate training, supply-chain issues, and General Sherman's scapegoating of the regiment.

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