

THE FORT HENRY-DONELSON CAMPAIGN: A
STUDY OF GENERAL GRANT'S EARLY TACTICAL
AND STRATEGICAL WEAKNESSES

by

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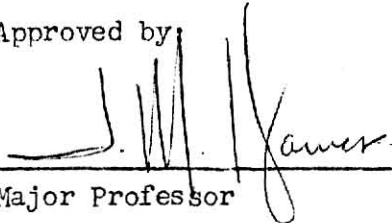
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INTRODUCTION

Just as a victorious war results from one of several successful campaigns, every successful campaign develops from a single victorious battle or from a series of encounters. Often these isolated engagements are the cornerstones for eventual victory. In the case of the Mississippi Valley Campaign in the winter of 1862, General U.S. Grant's victories at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson provided the impetus for a military strategy that eventually led to success in the Confederate West. In many respects Grant's land and river operations on 6 February 1862 can be best described as the "D-day" of the Civil War.

Most Civil War historians have recognized the Union accomplishments in the Fort Henry and Fort Donelson victories. Although these exploits have never reached the status of Shiloh or Vicksburg, they have been viewed as the prelude to, if not the first step toward the Confederate defeat in the West. Aside from the immediate tactical implications of Grant's success in the battles, early historical writers suggested that the victories displayed the military genius and leadership of the Commander.¹ Later on, however, historians began to scrutinize Grant and his campaigns more thoroughly. They noticed many minor as well as egregious tactical mistakes which had been obscured in the rush to proclaim Grant a military genius and a savior of the Union.²

Although recent writers have identified Grant's numerous tactical errors, no one has ever challenged his early ability to map strategy in the West and, thus, effectively use his available combat assets. In

analyzing the events of February 6-15, 1862, this report will attempt to highlight these early weaknesses in Grant's military capabilities and assess their effect on the outcome of the battles. In addition, a bibliographic essay will provide an overview of the historiography on the subject.

INTRODUCTION
FOOTNOTES

¹George Cary Eggleston, The History of the Confederate War, 2 vols. (New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1910), 1:286; A.S. Alexander, Grant as a Soldier, (St. Louis: Augustus W. Alexander, 1887) is not as complimentary, but suggests more political than military rationale.

²A.L. Conger, The Rise of U.S. Grant (New York: Century Co., 1931), chaps. XIII, XIV.

CHAPTER I

PLANNING THE CAMPAIGN

Politics, not military planning can be blamed for the precarious position the Confederate defensive line held at the outset of the war. Had the Kentucky legislature voted to join the Confederacy the South would have had the benefit of defending along the banks of the Ohio river. However, after the Confederates occupied Columbus, Kentucky, Union forces quickly seized Paducah, the gateway to the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. Thus Confederates were denied access to the Ohio river and forced to construct an artificial rather than a natural barrier from Columbus on the Mississippi river to the Cumberland Gap.

Southern strategy called for establishing a line of strong points with a force under General Leonidas Polk in Columbus protecting the Mississippi river and access to the Corinth-Memphis railroads; Fort Henry on the Tennessee river and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland river blocking Union movement on those waterways; and, General William Hardee with a sizable force in Bowling Green, Kentucky restricting Federal access to land and rail routes into Nashville. The responsibility for the Confederate Western theater of operations was in the hands of General Albert Sidney Johnston which was headquartered in Nashville.¹

Opposing General Johnston were two oft-at-odds and rarely imaginative general officers. General Don Carlos Buell commanded the Department of Ohio and posed an immediate threat to General Hardee at

Bowling Green and East Tennessee. On his right commanding the Department of Missouri was the scholarly General Henry W. Halleck who was nose-to-nose with Polk's forces in Columbus. Aside from skirmishes at Mill Springs and Belmont, both departments were relatively inactive prior to February 1862. Military analysts attribute early Federal military sluggishness to the "pepper box" policy which dictated the dispersion of small units of troops across the countryside. These units had no immediate offensive tactical nor long-range strategic mission.² They were merely a scattered defense.

Vulnerable as the Confederate position was along their defensive line, Union commanders seemed to overlook the obvious disadvantages of the Rebel defense. Perhaps they were still dazed by the Confederate victory at Bull Run. Allan Nevins suggests that "A mere glance at the map would seem to reveal that the Tennessee-Cumberland river system offered the North a heaven-sent opportunity to thrust a harpoon into the very bowels of the Confederacy."³ However, it was not until late in 1861 that anyone bothered to take glance.

Despite the common belief that Grant was the first to propose a plan to break up the Confederate defensive line by sending expeditions up the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, such as not the case. Colonel Charles Whittlesy, Chief Engineer on General O.M. Mitchell's staff in Cincinnati suggested the campaign to Halleck in November 1861.⁴ Although he agreed that the plan had merit, Halleck neither discussed the proposed offensive with his subordinates nor attempted any planning measures. The plan stayed in limbo until January 1862 when General Buell raised the question of a combined operation along the rivers to penetrate the Confederate lines.⁵ Since Halleck was apparently suspicious of Buell's motives in

proposing the operation, he vetoed the idea as impractical because of Halleck's fear of General Polk's force in Columbus, Kentucky.

Not long after Buell offered his plan to Halleck, Grant, Halleck's subordinate at Cairo, Illinois, began to see the possibilities for an offensive on the rivers. Together with Brigadier General C.F. Smith, Grant analyzed the results of land and river reconnoissances in the vicinity of Forts Henry and Donelson. Smith helped to convince him that a coordinated strike against the two forts would sever rail ties between Confederate forces in Missouri and Kentucky. In addition, Smith held that Fort Henry was lightly manned and could be taken with two ironclad gunboats.⁶ He weighed this advice seriously since Grant had a great deal of respect for Smith's opinion. Although General Smith was a victim of the volunteer versus regular promotion system, he was not bitter and worked well along side his former West Point student.⁷

Therefore, two months after an abortive attempt to take Belmont, Kentucky, Grant was looking for a campaign. He visited Halleck's headquarters in St. Louis to request permission to attack Fort Henry. Although most interpretations of this meeting side with Grant's statement that he was "received with so little cordiality as if my plan was preposterous," Halleck may have been correct in his treatment of Grant.⁸

Since Halleck was by nature a cautious, calculating, and circumspect person in private as well as public life, he considered thorough military planning a necessity. Therefore, when Grant proposed the movement on Fort Henry, Halleck wanted more than a brief battle plan. He wanted to have the results of a thorough campaign staff action. It was obvious that Grant had come to headquarters unprepared. He suggested a joint naval and land attack on Fort Henry but had not consulted with

Commodore Andrew H. Foote, Commander of Naval Operations in the West. In addition, the plan contained no further objective after the fall of Fort Henry.⁹

Although Halleck refused permission to execute the plan, he told Grant to confer with Foote and wire headquarters the result of the conference. The delay allowed Grant to reflect more on the scope of the operation. Two weeks after his visit to Halleck, he informed headquarters that the gunboat Commander concurred with the feasibility of the plan. Displaying flashes of strategic insight, he added that movement from Fort Henry to the Cumberland river, Memphis, or Columbus "will be easy." Aside from the tactical benefits of the operation, Grant reminded his superior that it "will have a moral effect upon our troops to advance them toward the rebel states."¹⁰

Halleck was not so much concerned with morale as he was with impressing Lincoln of his own leadership capability. The joint attack plan seemed feasible. The land and naval force assembled at Cairo could cut the Confederate river defense and Columbus and Bowling Green would fall from the rear. Johnston's force would be severed. On 30 January, 1862, Halleck wired Grant and Foote to take Fort Henry.¹¹

Neither historical accounts nor the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion answer the strategic question concerning the feasibility of attacking Fort Henry first. Nowhere is there any reference to an alternate plan which might have considered an attack on Fort Donelson initially. According to modern planning methods, Grant would be remiss not to have studied all the possible courses of action. Although lacking the modern joint staff organization, he had, nonetheless, all the staff representatives necessary to formulate an accurate tactical picture.

Commodore Foote was an innovative naval veteran, Grant's naval advisor and Commander of the Western Flotilla. Unlike many naval officers of his time, Foote was a firm believer in combined operations. He likened the army and navy as "blades of shears - united, invincible, separated, almost useless."¹² Although joint operations were novel and previously untried, Foote confidently proclaimed their tactical soundness.¹³ He realized that naval activities on the Western rivers would be completely unconventional in comparison to any of his previous naval experience. Both he and the Navy Department saw great potential in the gunboat concept.

Although the navy originally considered the gunboat a harebrained army scheme, they were quick to see an opportunity for service prestige once the fleet was launched. The four iron-clads in the Department of Missouri built in the Eads shipyard in Cincinnati in 1861 were sturdy, maneuverable, and equipped with tremendous fire power. The boats were said to be able to ship out 'on a heavy dew' because by design they drew so little water.

It is true that Grant and Foote had a reasonable good working relationship. However, such was not the case between the services at higher levels. Foote corresponded daily with the Navy Department and provide a status report on his personnel and equipment. A chronic complaint was the delay in receipt of mortar vessels and men. Foote blamed the army and in particular General Halleck, for both shortages.¹⁴ The Commodore was spreading the seeds of inter-service revalry since all of his reports went to the President.

While the telegraph traffic was handling equipment and personnel disputes, Foote was learning the unique characteristics of the gunboat. In October 1861 he began scouting up the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers.

His patrols paid particular attention to Fort Henry.¹⁵ These reconnaissances showed him that the Confederates were meticulously perfecting their defenses on the rivers and had chained tree trunks below the water line. Reports on Fort Donelson indicated the emplacement of two separate batteries for defense of the river. Unlike Fort Henry, reconnaissance of Fort Donelson suggested that mortar boats would be needed to take the works because the trajectory of gunboat cannon would over shoot the target.¹⁶

By the middle of January, Foote was relaying accurate details to Grant concerning Confederate activities on the rivers. At the planning conference suggested by Halleck the Commodore favored an attack on Fort Henry, supporting his plan with specific naval details. Most important was the stage of water on both the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers, which immediately favored naval operations.¹⁷ If the boats breeched Fort Henry, the Union would cut the communication line on the Memphis and Charleston railroad by destroying the bridge over the Tennessee river. Attacks on either river favored the navy because the river current would carry disabled boats downstream and away from the Confederate gun batteries. However, because of the position of the two batteries at Fort Donelson, mortar boats would be more effective than gunboats. Because mortar boats were not due to arrive until sometime in February,¹⁸ Foote concluded that the best use of naval force meant an attack on Fort Henry as soon as possible with a combined land and naval flotilla.

In the interim period between Belmont and the Fort Henry attack good judgment dictated that Grant should have been concerned with equipping his forces, training his troops and organizing a staff, but there is no evidence that he did. Considering the circumstances and confusion at

Cairo, it is probable that he expended his best efforts on administrative details.

During the period after December 1861 until March 1862, Grant grew to rely on General C.F. Smith as his operations and tactical advisor. Unfortunately General Smith was the only key figure in the Fort Henry operation who rendered no official or unofficial report. Since he died of wounds a few weeks after the battle there is no way to ascertain his opinion on the operation. However, prior to the battle he was the most informed officer in Grant's command on the intelligence and terrain in the Tennessee and Cumberland river area. On 16 January 1861 Smith moved by land with 6,000 men to reconnoiter in the vicinity of Fort Henry. This excursion convinced Smith that Fort Henry was lightly manned, untenable and capable of capture by a small gunboat force. In addition, Smith noted that melting snow had raised the water on the Tennessee fourteen feet in one week. In his opinion, if the gunboats did not level the fort soon, the Tennessee would claim the victory for the North before a shot was fired.²⁰ In light of the brief material available on Smith's concept of the campaign, it seems he recommended the small naval attack on Fort Henry in order to support a main attack on Fort Donelson.

Therefore, in order to arrive at a plan Grant had to reconcile the opinions of his two able advisors. If he listened to Foote and struck at Fort Henry, Johnston could reinforce Fort Donelson with 25,000 troops from Hardee's command at Bowling Green. Admittedly, Donelson was the stronger of the two positions. So, an attack on Fort Henry would lose the element of surprise needed at Fort Donelson. But, Fort Henry was vulnerable. A victory at either location would slice the Confederate line of communication between General Polk and General Johnston.

On the other hand, if Grant accepted Smith's assumed advice to attack Fort Donelson with a main force and Fort Henry with a light naval detachment, the possibility for Confederate reinforcement would be greatly decreased. Most importantly, the surprise factor would be effectively employed. This plan depended on delaying until the arrival of essential mortar boats or, less reliance on effective naval support.

Apparently Grant did not see the merit of a surprise envelopment. He did not appreciate that Fort Henry was essentially a naval target and that Fort Donelson was the main objective. Although Fort Henry was important, it was of limited use unless Fort Donelson was taken simultaneously because one fort could reinforce the other.²¹ Had Grant's sense of strategy been developed in January 1862 as he pondered his decision on how, what and when to attack, he would have seen that not only the navigation of both rivers but also the rail center at Nashville and Hardee's forces would have been at his mercy. Only Polk's forces at Columbus could have escaped a bold two-pronged surprise attack on the rivers.

Instead of exercising strategic genius, Grant was swayed by the more conservative advice of Commander Foote. Therefore, on 29 January 1862, when Halleck wired permission to begin the operation, Grant had one thought in his mind - capture Fort Henry. He took events one at a time. This was narrow strategy even for 1862. The cost in time and casualties would suggest Grant erred in his initial concept of the operation.

CHAPTER I
FOOTNOTES

¹William Swinton, The Twelve Decisive Battles of the War: A History of the Eastern and Western Campaigns (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1867), p. 57.

²George Cary Eggleston, The History of the Confederate War, 2 vols. (New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1910), 1:273.

³Allan Nevins, The War for the Union, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1960), 2:15.

⁴M.F. Force, Campaigns of the Civil War: Fort Henry to Corinth, 8 vols. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1963), 1:25.

⁵Swinton, p. 61.

⁶Shelby Foote, The Civil War a Narrative: Ft. Sumter to Perryville (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 182.

⁷General C.F. Smith, then a colonel, was the Commandant of Cadets at West Point during Grant's student days. In the early months of the war many Regular Army brigadiers found themselves outranked by volunteer appointees. Few had the positive working relationship as did Grant and Smith. Had Smith not died of wounds prior to Shiloh, many historians believe Smith would have achieved a prominent military position.

⁸Bruce Catton, U.S. Grant and the American Military Tradition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), p. 73.

⁹A.L. Conger, The Rise of U.S. Grant (New York: Century Co., 1931), p. 152.

¹⁰Army documents, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Ser. I vol VII (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882), 7:121.

¹¹Swinton, p. 61.

¹²Shelby Foote, The Civil War a Narrative: Ft. Sumter to Perryville (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 184.

¹³James Mason Hoppin, Life of Andrew Hull Foote, Rear Admiral United States Navy (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1874), p. 190.

¹⁴Naval documents, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies of the War of the Rebellion, Ser I vol 22 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908), 22:522.

¹⁵Virgil Carrington Jones, The Civil War at Sea, 3 vols. (New

York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1960), 1:349.

¹⁶Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, 22:513.

¹⁷Jones, 1:355.

¹⁸Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, 22:526.

¹⁹Arthur L. Conger, "The Military Education of Grant as a General,"
Wisconsin Magazine of History, March 1921, p. 9.

²⁰Jones, 1:355.

²¹Force, 1:33.

CHAPTER II

FORT HENRY BATTLE

Early in the war the Union Army tended to exaggerate Confederate strength, tactics, and competency. The Rebel position at Fort Henry was a prime example. The Henry site was selected by a Tennessee state official while Kentucky was maintaining neutral status.¹ The anonymous bureaucrat was obviously neither a tactician nor an engineer. He chose a location on the right bank of the Tennessee river, fifty miles southeast of Paducah. Situated on a low, flat piece of ground near the rivers edge, the site was commanded by high ground on both banks. This tactical deficiency was compounded by the fact that when the river rose in the winter, the powder magazines flooded inside the fort.² Apparently little notice was placed on the high water marks evolved over the years on surrounding trees. A Confederate officer who visited the fort in September 1861 remarked "the men who selected the site were guilty either of preposterous folly or outright treachery."³

In February 1862 the fort was commanded by a young brigadier, Floyd Tilghman. His 3400 men were poorly armed with hunting rifles, shot guns and old fashioned flintlocks. The canon he employed around the revetments were improperly cast with two pieces having burst in target practice. Therefore, with the rising river surrounding and separating the fort from outside reinforcement and equipped with inferior armament, Fort Henry lived up to General Smith's assesment that two gunboats could easily

capture it.

Commodore Foote began urging the immediacy of the attack shortly after General Halleck's approval of the concept. Foote was concerned that the water level would fall and expose his boats to the possibility of submerged trees and water mines in the river. His arguments were convincing, and Grant hastened to begin his movement. Although an immediate departure was beneficial to Foote, a short delay would have provided more passible roads and the added advantage of four mortar boats in the attack.⁴

If Grant gave any consideration to a delay for optimum ground conditions, he did not display it in his actions. After he dispatched his chief of staff, Colonel Joseph D. Webster, to reconnoiter approaches into Fort Henry, he loaded his first division under General John A. McClernand on board nine transports and moved up the Tennessee river. Accompanied by Foote's four untried gunboats, the transports shuttled Smith's second division up river opposite McClernand's troops. The entire fifty mile move was a three day logistical nightmare which exceeded Grant's timetable and demolished any hope of surprising the enemy.⁵ Still, by 6 February Grant was posed to attack.

Grant's attack plan was simple. The first division would move on the right bank to attack the fort and cut off an eastern escape route. The second division, minus a brigade, would move on the left bank to occupy the high ground southwest of the fort where a fortified enemy position was suspected; the naval flotilla of seven gunboats would begin its attack at noon, one brigade from the first division was in reserve.⁶

Although the plan seemed to include the necessary ingredients for success, it actually contained two major flaws. First, Grant did not

consider the muddy roads in the area and the time necessary to move his forces the three miles to close with the Confederates. He estimated one hour to accomplish the move; it actually took three. Secondly, the plan contained no flexibility to use signal methods to synchronize naval and land movement. Since his plan contained no inherent control measures, Grant became a spectator the moment the attack began.

Perhaps because he realized better than anyone else the defenseless position of the fort, Commodore Foote suggested no control measures, only an attack time. Once the plan was decided, Foote bragged that his gunboats would "reduce the fort in an hour."⁷ At that point Grant would have been wise to remind Foote that not only the fort, but the 3400 man Confederate force was also part of the objective. Victory would be achieved only if Grant captured the retreating confederates.

While Union soldiers were struggling with muddy roads, the navy began the attack on schedule. The fifty-four guns that they leveled on the fort proved devastating. General Tilghman realized the futility of his predicament and ordered all but the artillerymen to retreat to Fort Donelson. In the meantime the Rebel gun crews were suffering from Foote's accuracy and their own defective weapons. The gunboats opened fire at 1700 yards and quickly closed to 600 yards where their rifled shots were extremely destructive. In addition to the effect of Foote's guns, two Confederate pieces exploded and two more were rendered unserviceable. Tilghman and his sixty-man contingent fought for one hour and fifteen minutes before sending up the white flag. Meanwhile all his infantry and cavalry forces escaped to Fort Donelson unmolested.

After requesting terms for surrender, Tilghman reluctantly but realistically accepted Foote's unconditional terms. In total numbers the

navy had lost more than the enemy. One of its four gunboats was disabled in addition to suffering thirty-two casualties. On the other hand, General Tilghman's forces sustained only twenty-one casualties but were totally demoralized by their untenable position. Tilghman wrote General Johnston the following day "the elements even were against us, and had the enemy delayed his attack a few days, with the river rising, one-third of the entire fortifications would have been washed away."⁸

Nearly two hours after Foote had accepted the fort's surrender, McClelland's troops occupied the vacant position. Aside from a rear guard skirmish with the retreating rebels, no significant land action developed. Complaining of muddy roads likened to "porridge of almost immeasurable depth," Grant blamed himself for the escape of the enemy garrison. However, he placed more emphasis on his late start time than on an appreciation of synchronizing the attack.⁹

Obviously chagrined over his performance in the joint operation, Grant did not sulk for long. In a report to Halleck the afternoon Fort Henry fell he confidently forecast "Fort Henry is ours, I shall take and destroy Fort Donelson on the 8th and return to Fort Henry."¹⁰ It seems that Grant sent that report to his commander without an accurate measurement of the situation. The primary target in Grant's mind was the 3400 troops he had allowed to slip through his grasp. Furthermore, he realized that the escaped force plus possible reinforcements could make the capture of Fort Donelson a difficult operation.

At Fort Henry the Union forces had captured an abundance of Confederate camp equipage and stores, but Grant found that rising water threatened them as well as his own supplies. Road traffic because of rain and snow on the 7th and 8th of February was a potential quagmire.

However, evidence indicates that Grant could have overcome these obstacles had he left his wagons behind on the high ground East of Fort Henry and double-teamed the artillery carriages.¹¹

The gunboat fleet needed minor repairs in Cairo and could not be on station in force until 13 February. Because he did not want to forgo the supporting fire of Foote's flotilla, Grant decided to wait for the gunboats. Had he forgotten Smith and Foote's scouting reports that indicated that gunboats would be ineffective against Fort Donelson? If a delay was necessary, why not wait for the mortar boats which were enroute to Cairo? Whatever the answers to these questions, Grant waited while Fort Donelson was reinforced by the Confederates.

In the meantime, on other fronts, the results of Fort Henry had their effect. In Washington, Gideon Welles reflected the enthusiasm "February 8, Excellent tidings from Tennessee: Fort Henry, a rebel earth-work of the Tennessee River, bombarded and taken. The war news is decidedly encouraging."¹² While in Richmond, President Davis received a message from General Johnston stating that "the capture of Fort Henry gives them control of the navigation of the Tennessee River and their gunboats are now ascending the River to Florence."¹³ The Confederate general recognized that Fort Donelson was now the key to Nashville and he was thankful for the ample warning Grant had given him. Naturally he used the time available to reinforce the fort and realign his troops. Grant allowed him a week to perfect his plans.

If Grant considered by-passing Fort Donelson and exploiting the penetration of the Tennessee river, he displayed no actions to support such a plan. He considered Fort Donelson a critical objective because General Johnston could use his expedient railroad network to reinforce

Fort Donelson and attack the Union forces from the flank and the rear. Confederate tactics of this kind would spell doom for Grant and his command.

CHAPTER II
FOOTNOTES

¹M.F. Force, Campaigns of the Civil War: Fort Henry to Corinth,
8 vols. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1963), 1:28.

²General Sir James Marshall-Cornwell, Grant as a Military Commander
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⁵Shelby Foote, The Civil War A Narrative: Ft. Sumter to
Parryville (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 186.

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Dodd, Mead and Company, 1929), p. 81.

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⁸Army documents, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the
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Printing Office, 1882), p. 143.

⁹A.L. Conger The Rise of U.S. Grant (New York: Century Co., 1931),
p. 159.

¹⁰Foote, p. 191.

¹¹War of the Rebellion, p. 125.

¹²George Templeton Strong, Diary of the Civil War 1860-1865 (New
York: Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 199.

¹³War of the Rebellion, p. 131.

CHAPTER III

FORT DONELSON - PRELIMINARIES

It is an axiom of war that the personality of an enemy leader may have a direct effect on the outcome of a battle. After Fort Henry's demise, A.S. Johnston developed a spirit of caution that bordered on outright pessimism, and as a result his decisions and actions had the effect of aiding Grant's attack.

Johnston assumed that the Federal gunboats were invincible¹ and concluded that "the slight resistance at Fort Henry indicates that the best open earth-works are not reliable to meet successfully a vigorous attack of iron-clad gunboats. . . . I think the gunboats of the enemy will probably take Fort Donelson [alone]".² Therefore, even before the encounter at Fort Donelson the Confederate Commander concluded the fort would fall and feared for his main supply depot at Nashville.

Had Johnston not been so certain of a defeat at Fort Donelson he might have taken other measures to strengthen the important position. Instead of sending 12,000 of Hardee's 26,000 man force to reinforce Fort Donelson, he might have sent the entire force. Many accomplished twentieth century military historians cite this division of force by Johnston as an important factor in the ultimate Confederate defeat in the West. By sheer number and defensive terrain advantage Hardee's forces might have been in a position to defeat Grant.³

Another technique General Johnston could have employed was command

presence. Although he had never commanded troops on the battlefield, his reputation, personal courage and keen intellect could have been put to better use at the scene of the conflict rather than in his Nashville headquarters. In his place he sent Brigadier General John B. Floyd, the former Secretary of War under Buchanan. Floyd was the poorest possible choice. Militarily inexperienced and a political appointee, he was more concerned about suffering the consequences of potential capture than he was about defeating Grant. Reluctant to assume command at Fort Donelson, Floyd finally acquiesced when he understood he was to fight a delaying action while the remainder of Hardee's troops closed in the vicinity of Nashville.⁴ Along with the reluctant Floyd, Johnston might have assigned General P.G.T. Beauregard, a recent arrival from Richmond, to command the garrison at Fort Donelson. But, Johnston considered the fort a lost cause and retained the able Beauregard at headquarters.

Plans for defending Fort Donelson were begun by Colonel A. Heiman, Tilghman's second in command, who had escaped from Fort Henry. Heiman was relieved upon the arrival on 8 February of General Bushrod Johnson and his brigade. This brought the total Confederate forces to 6000 men. Therefore, had Grant attacked on 8 February as planned, he would have outnumbered the enemy nearly three to one, the optimum attack ratio.

The position of Fort Donelson was much more formidable than the one at Fort Henry. Its nine light and three heavy artillery pieces were well dug into a hundred foot bluff on the fort's northern side. The east was protected by the Cumberland river and a series of trenches containing nine field artillery emplacements protected the remaining two sides.

Included within the southern boundary of the fort was the small town of Dover. Although the fort was not impregnable, General Gideon Pillow felt

"very confident of holding it [Fort Donelson] against an assault by infantry" and contended that "if I am allowed time to complete the works and mount all the guns, I have confidence in being able to resist an attack of their gunboats."⁵

On the other hand General Simon B. Buckner, the only Regular Army general officer at Fort Donelson and an old friend of Grant's, felt that "the defenses were in a very imperfect condition."⁶ Nevertheless, Colonel Jeremy F. Gilmer, Johnston's Chief of Engineers, worked feverishly with slaves to perfect the trenches and barriers in the area. He accomplished his job reasonably well, and in less than a week 18,000 Confederate troops occupied the positions.⁷

While the Confederates perfected their defenses, the Union forces seemed to be greatly magnifying their success at Fort Henry. On the 7th Grant reconnoitered to within a mile of the enemy rifle pits. He saw the advantage of an immediate assault but chose not to attack because the gunboats could not support him.⁸ It seems he was placing unjustified emphasis on a supporting attack. Since the fort's weakness was on its trench or western side, this obviously indicated an infantry mission. Grant had sufficient infantry to do the job. Yet he waited for the gunboats to attack the enemy's strength, the river approach batteries.

In the meantime, General Halleck, fully conscious of the accolades that would fall his way if the Donelson operation succeeded, scraped together 10,000 reinforcements. Grant now commanded three divisions--more troops than any American officer had ever commanded in combat. Yet Grant apparently decided that he had more to gain by waiting than by a hasty attack. The delay was not disturbing to Grant. In fact when he telegraphed Halleck on the 12th to inform him of his departure, he seemed

surprisingly confident. "I hope to send you a dispatch from Fort Donelson tomorrow."⁹ When his force moved out, it was organized to accomodate the poor road conditions. The organization included no transportation and only eight field artillery batteries, and thus gave the defenders an initial advantage in fire power.

Since there were no wagons in the march columns, the private soldier carried his own ammunition and rations as well as those supplies normally carried by the quartermaster. An unusually warm 12 February afternoon spelled potential disaster as Grant's undisciplined ranks disposed of heavy over-coats, blankets, and burdensome baggage along the march route. Therefore, unexpected snow and below freezing temperatures took their toll of casualties over the next four days. Not only were the men undisciplined and uneducated in combat survival, but the majority of the officers were inexperienced volunteers. Grant only had two professional soldiers with him--General Smith and Lieutenant Colonel James B. McPherson.¹⁰

Although Confederate historians credit Colonel Nathan B. Forrest with disrupting Grant's advance with delaying cavalry tactics, Grant himself remembers the advance toward Fort Donelson as completely unobstructed.¹¹ He moved his forces on two mutually supporting roads across the twelve mile stretch from Fort Henry to Fort Donelson and arrived at noon. With him were McClelland's first division and the Smith's second. General Lew Wallace remained at Fort Henry with a small force. Commodore Foote's gunboats and Halleck's replacements had not arrived.

On the eve of the Fort Donelson battle Grant faced an enemy force which recently had risen in parity with his own. His inability to organize an offensive in the seven days following Fort Henry had gained the enemy that parity. Slow to move and quick to fight, Grant elected to

commence his offensive without waiting for the new mortarboats which might assure him the margin of victory. His actions may be summarized by initial hesitancy followed by over-anxiousness and poor decision.

CHAPTER III
FOOTNOTES

¹J.F.C. Fuller, Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship (London: Byre and Spottiswoode, 1932), p. 142.

²Army documents, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies Ser. 1 vol VII (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882) p. 131.

³Fuller, Grant and Lee, p. 142.

⁴M.F. Force, Campaigns of the Civil War, 8 vols. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1963), 1:37.

⁵Virgil Carrington Jones, The Civil War at Sea, 3 vols. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 1:374.

⁶Clement A. Evans, ed., Confederate Military History, 12 vols. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 9:57.

⁷Force, p. 34.

⁸E.B. Long, ed., Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1952), p. 150.

⁹Shelby Foote, The Civil War A Narrative: Ft. Sumter to Perryville (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 198.

¹⁰J.F.C. Fuller, The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1929), p. 85.

¹¹Evans 8:24; Long, p. 152.

CHAPTER IV

FORT DONELSON - THE BATTLE

Grant was not inclined to make detailed plans prior to a battle. The night before his forces departed for Fort Donelson he summoned a council of war. The meeting was called not so much to disseminate information to his commanders as to assess their condition of readiness. In fact the assembled officers left the gathering uninformed of the following days departure time, march order and attack plan. Because of an incomplete intelligence assessment of the Confederate reinforcement at Fort Donelson, Grant told his subordinates that all tactical orders would be given in the field.¹ Clearly Grant intended to repeat the naval success of Fort Henry with the exception that this time the army would be present for the Confederate surrender.²

The main body of Union troops arrived in the vicinity of Fort Donelson in the early afternoon of 12 February. Grant directed Smith to deploy his division opposite the northern sector of the Confederate trenches and McClernand to invest the portion of rebel works to the south. Although he did not specify the type of formation each division should implement, Grant wanted the investment to intersect the river both above and below the fort.

General Smith, the experienced regular officer, organized his troops in depth. In his two line brigades he placed skirmishers, the main firing line, supports and brigade reserves. McClernand, politician turned volunteer general, did not adopt Smith's tactics. Instead, he strung all

three of his brigades in a straight line without a single reserve.³ Grant failed to appreciate the tactical importance of Smith's organization. Not only did he err in not correcting McClernands disposition, but he also detached Smith's reserve brigade to position it on the line. Except for Smith's sector, the investment was unplanned and unimaginative. Grant's tactical failure in this aspect of the battle rendered his forces vulnerable and proved nearly fatal.

For the remainder of 12 February the Federal troops completed their investment. On the morning of the 13th only one gunboat, the Carondelet, arrived where as Grant had expected the entire fleet. He sent the ship's captain a message to attack the fort as a diversion. But, he issued no orders to his two division commanders.

In the absence of orders McClernand decided to show Grant some "volunteer initiative." He issued an attack order to his center brigade to take the enemy artillery position to its front. Unfortunately the attack was ill-conceived, uncoordinated and unauthorized. The brigade was caught in a Confederate cross-fire zone and quickly repulsed after sustaining heavy casualties.⁴

Meanwhile the Carondelet initiated her attack when the sounds of McClernand's rifles grew in intensity. On the whole the gunboat's cannon proved ineffective against the Fort Donelson water battery. Although one shot disabled a Confederate 32 pounder, the sailors received more shrapnel than they dispensed. A single shot from a Confederate hundred and twenty-eight pound seriously damaged the Carondelet's machinery. She quickly steamed out of range.⁵ When Foote, who was thirty-five miles downstream, heard of the encounter, he was visibly upset. Previously Grant had told him that no attack would be considered until the entire fleet

arrived.⁶

When General Smith heard the activity on McClelland's front, followed by the sound of naval gunfire, he concluded that an attack must have been ordered along the front. Therefore, he ordered one of his brigades into action. The unit succeeded in wresting a hill from the Confederates. Later, however, they were forced to surrender the land because of effective enemy sniper fire.⁷ Therefore, at dusk the Federal forces occupied their original line.

Aside from the fact that the attacks of the 13th were unplanned and uncoordinated, Grant still was able to make some important deductions about the enemy. He concluded they were strong, determined and well deployed. Because he was impressed by the Confederate strength he wired back to Fort Henry for General Wallace and the 2,500 reserve force. Although he was disappointed by the ineffectiveness of the Carondelet's guns, he remained convinced that the entire fleet would tumble the fort's defenses. Concerning the high morale of the Confederate forces, Grant was counting on the debilitating effect the sight of his reinforcements from Fort Henry and the six regiments from Halleck would have on the Confederates fighting spirit.

Although the Federals fared poorly in their first day's combat under Grant, he was not discouraged. In his final message of the day he informed Halleck "I feel every confidence of success, and the best feeling prevails among the men."⁸

The high troop morale that Grant referred to in his wire to Halleck began to diminish during the night. A severe cold front had moved into the area plummeting temperatures into the teens. The coats and blankets strewn between Fort Henry and Fort Donelson were missed by

shivering troops. In addition, the only ration remaining was coffee. Resupply wagons had not yet arrived, and food rations were exhausted. Although the troops were unaware of it at the time, resupply would not be accomplished until the 15th, two days later.⁹

Late in the evening of the 13th the long awaited gunboat fleet and infantry reinforcements arrived. Much relieved by their arrival, Grant began refining his ideas on the battle for the following day. First, he formed a third division under General Wallace. The unit was organized from the six regiments dispatched by Halleck and the reserves from Fort Henry. Once formed, they were assigned a sector in the middle of the line. This repositioning allowed both Smith and McClelland to consolidate their forces. However, it took the entire day of the 14th to reposition the line.

Next, Grant concentrated on the navy. When Foote arrived at Grant's headquarters, he explained that the time it took to replace runaway sailors and complete necessary repairs on the boats had not permitted him to make his final battle preparations. He told Grant, as he had informed the Secretary of the Navy two days earlier, that if the attack could be delayed for one week, eight mortar-boats could support the attack.¹⁰ The Commodore was obviously stalling for time to insure a successful naval operation. However, Grant was confident the gunboats would be effective and were ready. Therefore, he explained his plan to the concerned commodore.

The concept of the plan called for the fleet to neutralize the Confederate artillery on the high bluff, then assume a blocking position opposite the town of Dover and fire on the Confederate infantry trenches south of the fort. At that time, Grant's right wing would cut the rebels off from the fort and force a surrender.¹¹ Unspoken, but nevertheless

implied, was the belief that the operation would be unsuccessful without the superiority of the fleet's guns.

Victory was not to be Grant's on 14 February. Using the same formation that was so successful at Fort Henry, the fleet opened fire one mile from the enemy bastion. The Confederates responded with accurate salvos that took a heavy toll on the Union sailors. Foote mistakenly surmised the closer the gunboats approached the fort, the more effective they would become. However, at close range the gunboat cannon trajectories overshot the Confederate position. Foote had been correct in his early January assessment of the attack - Fort Donelson was a mortarboat target. After an hour and a half of pounding by the rebel artillery, two of the Federal boats were totally disabled; the other two were severely damaged; fifty-four sailors were killed or wounded, among the disabled was Commodore Foote who sustained a serious injury to his foot.¹²

There is a serious question concerning whether the 14 February attack on Fort Donelson was intended as a joint attack or not. Foote commenced his fleet attack by his own command without coordination with Grant. Furthermore, no ground attack was initiated by Union forces to distract the enemy in any way. More difficult to understand than a lack of infantry support, is the total absence of Union artillery fire during the naval attack. In spite of the fact that all eight Union batteries were within supporting range, none were engaged.¹³ Confident of naval success, Grant had left Foote fend for himself.

Greatly disappointed by the naval defeat, Grant wired Halleck, "Appearances indicate now that we will have a protracted siege here."¹⁴ Grant planned to intrench his forces, request reinforcement and repair the damaged gunboat fleet.¹⁵

General Floyd, the Confederate commander of Fort Donelson was elated by the day's events. Not only had he accomplished his main mission by allowing Hardee's forces to retreat unscathed from Bowling Green, but he had also proved that the gunboat was not an invincible weapon.

While imbued with confidence, Floyd called for a council of war. It was the majority opinion that although they were surrounded by a superior force, there was a way to save the Confederate force. The consensus plan called for a vigorous offensive against the southern sector of the Union line. Such an attack would open the road to Nashville and insure an orderly retreat. The plan, translated into specific details called for Pillow's division to initiate an attack at 5 A.M. on the 15th. Pillow would assault McClelland's sector of the Union line and force open a Charlotte road escape route. In the meantime Buckner would leave his position along the Wynn's Ferry road and form a rear guard for the retreat.¹⁶ Both Charlotte and Wynn's Ferry roads were vital for an escape. The Wynn's Ferry road, an east-west road above the fort, had to block the Union counter-attack; Charlotte road ran due south out of the fort toward Charlotte, Tennessee.

In the meantime the Union forces were digging their intrenchments and planning a siege. Grant moved his headquarters to Mrs. Crisp's farmhouse on Hickman's creek which was on the extreme left flank of his forces. Had he occupied a position in the vicinity of Wallace's or McClelland's troops he would have had greater control of the coming events.

Before dawn Pillow's troops were poised to attack, and the 8000 man force moved to the attack precisely at 5 A.M. The surprise attack worked and the poorly organized Federals fell back. Pillow, assisted by Forrest, outflanked McClelland and began rolling back the surprised Union

line capturing a battery of artillery in the process.¹⁷ Pillow's action was supported from the entire Confederate line by seven artillery batteries of assorted calibre.¹⁸ At the same time Pillow was succeeding against McClelland, Buckner was having difficulty establishing a blocking position against Wallace's units.

Since his location was approximately eight miles from the scene of the attack, Grant was totally unaware of the tactical situation when he arose on the morning of the 15th. Shortly after dawn a messenger sent by Commodore Foote requested a meeting on the flagship; Grant rode off for a conference. Prior to his departure he made several significant mistakes that proved costly.

First, he assumed that the enemy would not attack from his present position. Since he had no information to prove otherwise Grant should have considered the Confederates capable of initiating an attack. However, the only orders he left were for his division commanders not to instigate any action, but to hold their present positions.¹⁹ Sometime after the battle he confessed that he had "no idea that there would be any engagement on land unless I brought it on myself."²⁰

In addition to overlooking an obvious enemy capability and issuing a set of restrictive orders to his commanders, Grant made one final error prior to conferring with the navy. He did not name a general officer to temporary command. Had he named C.F. Smith as acting commander the Union forces would have been in responsive and capable hands.²¹

McClelland's division suffered the brunt of Grant's mistakes. By 8 A.M. his troops had been repulsed four miles and were low on ammunition. McClelland requested assistance from Wallace whose division held the center of the line. But as Wallace related later, "My orders, received

from General Grant were to hold my position and prevent the enemy from escaping in that direction: in other words, to remain there and repel any sally from the fort."²² Wallace sent a request to Grant's headquarters for information on McClernand's situation. However, the headquarters staff would not take the responsibility to act in Grant's absence. Therefore, McClernand received no relief since Wallace would not act without an order.²³

McClernand's position became untenable and by 9 A.M. the entire right flank position was in Confederate hands. Pillow had opened a retreat route along the Charlotte road and Buckner was in a position to cover the entire garrison's withdrawal. It seemed as though the Confederates would carry the day. At 11 A.M. Pillow wired Johnston. "On the honor of a soldier, the day is ours."²⁴ Less than two hours later, with victory in his grasp, Pillow fearful of losing his entire force in a Union counter-attack ordered Buckner to return to his original sector in the line. Buckner refused and the two argued the merits of their situation. At that time Floyd arrived and sided with the pessimistic Pillow. Thus, the Confederates under timorous and vascillating leadership surrendered a hard earned victory. The only rationale that can support Pillow and Floyd's decision is that they had a defensive frame of mind and, much to Grant's favor, were unable to adapt to an obvious offensive success.

About the time Floyd was turning his troops around, Grant returned from Foote's flagship. With only a brief orientation on the battlefield situation he ordered Wallace and McClernand to attack. Grant made his decision on the grounds that the Confederates were attempting to escape and would be demoralized at having failed. Thinking quicker on the field than he would in a staff tent, he told his center and right

flank commanders to begin their assault when they heard General Smith attack the lightly held northern positions.²⁵ Grant surmised that Smith would face minimum resistance because the bulk of the rebels had shifted to the south of the fort.

Looking back on the crucial moments in the battle after his return from Foote's boat, Grant later explained to Sherman "I saw that either side was ready to give way if the other showed a bold front. I took the opportunity and ordered an advance along the line."²⁶ Shortly after ordering the infantry to the attack, Grant dispatched an order to Commander Benjamin M. Dove, fleet commander in the absence of the wounded Foote, to advance as many gunboats as possible as a show of force. Dove was able to dispatch two damaged but sea worthy boats to the action.²⁷ This joint operational play of Grant's proved effective. In later testimony General Wallace stated that "It distracted the enemy's attention, and I fully believe it was the gunboats, the awful ironclads especially, that operated to prevent a general movement of the rebels up the river, or across it, the night before the surrender."²⁸

By sunset Grant had scored a significant success. The center and right of his lines had been restored and General Smith had taken the commanding Confederate positions on the left. In addition Grant had successfully coordinated a land and water attack for the first time since his forces had left Cairo. The plans for a siege were gone; Grant, thanks to Confederate indecision and swift action on his own part, would capture the fort.

The afternoon's successes did not come without a high price in pain and suffering. Over two thousand killed or wounded resulted on both sides. In the Union hospital the surgeon complained of numerous

shortages in medicine, bandages and plaster. Hundreds of soldiers suffered when none of the promised supplies arrived. The division surgeon stated "that hospital stores and provisions were not supplied involves criminal neglect or incapacity on the part of those in charge of this department."²⁹ Apparently Grant overlooked this area of supply while he delayed his forces for a week at Fort Henry.

The last advice General A.S. Johnston gave to Floyd was to save the main body of troops if the fort fell. After Floyd returned to the confines of the fort, following his unsuccessful retreat, Johnston's order no longer seemed feasible. The fort was surrounded, and Floyd erroneously concluded that Grant had been heavily reinforced. Therefore, he called another council of war. He proposed the fort be surrendered but requested Pillow do the surrendering. Floyd was fearful of Union recriminations concerning his prior activities as Buchanan's Secretary of War. However, Pillow did not want the stain of surrender on his hands and suggested Buckner transact the surrender terms. Buckner reluctantly agreed. No sooner had he done so than both Floyd and Pillow escaped with a small detachment across the Cumberland river.³⁰ In addition, Forrest refused to be party to the surrender and slipped out of the fort with his entire unit. His escape was made possible because McClernand had not closed off the Charlotte road with his division.

As Grant sat planning in Mrs. Crisp's farm house in the early hours of 16 February, General Smith brought him a surrender message that had been carried through the lines. Signed by Buckner, the message asked for terms of surrender. Not unrealistically Buckner believed that the previous friendship that he had shared with Grant at West Point and in Mexico would induce lenient terms. He was mistaken. Grant had grown

obdurate and uncompromising over the years since Buckner had known him. Grant's reply to terms was "No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted." Buckner reluctantly, but realistically, accepted.

In reviewing the positive and negative aspects of Grants generalship in his first two battles of the Mississippi Valley Campaign certain traits are prominent. First, Grant had professional initiative and personal courage. Without these characteristics, which seemed to be lacking in other theaters of the war, the Fort Henry battle might never have been fought and the Fort Donelson battle would surely have been lost to the Confederates. It is on these traits that Grant was to build his reputation. Secondly, in the negative vein, Grant displayed a certain degree of professional immaturity, poor judgement and lack of imagination in both strategy and tactics in the Tennessee river and Cumberland river battles. An example of a combination of these shortcomings was his professional relationship with Commodore Foote. The naval officer over-emphasized the naval role in the joint operation and convinced Grant of the army's dependence on naval support to achieve victory. Grant was effectively swayed by the old navy veteran and based the whole campaign on gunboat support. Although they were effective in the Fort Henry battle, the gunboats restricted the Fort Donelson activity. Therefore, Grant suppressed any strategic and tactical imagination he might have contributed to the plan in favor of his subordinate's advice.

Many historians in the years following the events in Tennessee in February 1862 have stressed the mistakes in Confederate generalship for allowing Grant his first major victories. If the Confederates had launched an attack on Grant while he was marching to Fort Donelson;

if Johnston had reinforced the fort with Hardee's entire command, if Floyd had not ordered his forces back to the fort after opening the escape route - all of these conditions would have altered the outcome of the battle. On the other hand, however numerous Grant's strategic and tactical blunders at both Forts Henry and Donelson he displayed a tenacity and instinct for victory that his Confederate counterparts lacked. On his return from Foote's flagship; he quickly assessed the tactical situation and directed a simple yet effective battle plan. During the afternoon of 15 February he learned to maneuver divisions and incorporate naval gunfire. Although for the first two weeks of February 1862 Grant seemed to gain victory more by the enemy acts of omission than by his own strategic and tactical accomplishments, he had used this time to develop the confidence and conviction that would take him to Appomattox.

CHAPTER IV
FOOTNOTES

¹Shelby Foote, The Civil War A Narrative: Ft. Sumter to Perryville (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 197.

²Arthur L. Conger, "The Military Education of Grant as a General," Wisconsin Magazine of History, March 1921, p. 12.

³Ibid.

⁴Foote, p. 199.

⁵M.F. Force, Campaigns of the Civil War, 8 vols. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1963), 1:43.

⁶Virgil Carrington Jones, The Civil War at Sea, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1960), 1:375.

⁷Foote, p. 200.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Army documents, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Ser. vol VII (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882), p. 185.

¹⁰Charles B. Boynton, History of the Navy During the Rebellion (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1864), p. 531.

¹¹Foote, p. 202.

¹²Naval documents, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, Ser. I vol 22 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908), p. 586.

¹³Army documents, War of the Rebellion 7:185.

¹⁴Foote, p. 205.

¹⁵Army documents, War of the Rebellion, 7:185.

¹⁶William Swinton, The Twelve Decisive Battles of the War: A History of the Eastern and Western Campaigns (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, Publishers, 1867), p. 72.

¹⁷Clement A. Evans, ed., Confederate Military History, 12 vols. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1962), 8:24.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁹E.B. Long, ed., Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant (Cleveland: World

²⁰Foote, p. 207.

²¹Arthur L. Conger, "The Military Education of Grant as a General," Wisconsin Magazine of History, March 1921, p. 13.

²²Army documents, War of the Rebellion, p. 236.

²³Force, 1:50.

²⁴Foote, p. 206.

²⁵Force, 1:54.

²⁶Swinton, p. 77.

²⁷Jones, 1:381.

²⁸Naval documents, War of the Rebellion, p. 242.

²⁹Army documents, War of the Rebellion, p. 242.

³⁰Swinton, p. 79.

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Although there are no major works which deal specifically with a critical analysis of Grant's early campaigns in the West, a number of works touch on various aspects of Grant's handling of his initial battles. In the years immediately following the Civil War historians tended to address Grant with awe and unquestioning tactical reverence. William Church, William Swinton and James G. Grant are examples of the uncritical school of thought which tended to exaggerate Grant's capabilities. However, some authors such as Augustus W. Alexander in his Grant as a Soldier seemed to be politically motivated by a caustic analysis of Grant's shortcomings.

After the publication by the Government Printing Office of the War of the Rebellion and Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, twentieth century historians developed a better appreciation of Grant's tactical and strategic weaknesses based on official reports. George C. Eggleston's The History of the Confederate War presents a factual and more critical view of the Fort Henry and Fort Donelson battles. After World War I Arthur L. Conger analyzed Grant's tactics in light of World War I generalship in his The Rise of U.S. Grant and "The Military Education of Grant as a General." Less critical and more complimentary of Grant as a tactician is Colonel J.F.C. Fuller who viewed Grant as superior to the tactics and generalship of Robert E. Lee.

Contemporary historians present a more balanced approach to Grant's military expertise. Shelby Foote, for example, understands the difficulties

both in experience and training that faced U.S. Grant, Allan Nevins and James Marshall-Cornwell effectively assess the strategy and realistic tactical necessities facing the Union forces in the Western Department in 1862.

A thorough treatment of all aspects of the gunboat involvement in Grant's campaigns is contained in Virgil C. Jones' 3 volume The Civil War at Sea. Robert McBride compliments Jones in his Civil War Ironclads: The Dawn of Naval Armor which deals specifically with the early Eads boats and their capabilities.

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THE FORT HENRY-DONELSON CAMPAIGN: A
STUDY OF GENERAL GRANT'S EARLY TACTICAL
AND STRATEGICAL WEAKNESSES

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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Purpose. The study of Fort-Henry Donelson campaign was undertaken for two reasons. First, understanding and strategic concept of General Grant's desire to sieze the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers explains his later drive to open the Mississippi river. Secondly, it is important to understand that Grant was not infallable. He made mistakes. However, inspite of the errors he was a winner.

Background. In late 1861 the Congress and the President were clamoring for an offensive by McClellan in the East. At the same time, in the West, Halleck and Buell were vying for overall command of the western armies. By 1862 the North had not yet succeeded in winning a major victory. Then Grant and Commodore Foote developed a plan to combine army and navy forces to capture Fort Henry on the Tennessee river and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland river. The capture of these two forts would sever General A.S. Johnston's command in two and control the waterways to Florence, Alabama.

The strategy of the Confederate forces in early 1862 was to defend along a line from Columbus, Missouri, through Bowling Green, Kentucky, to the Cumberland mountains. Their defensive concept since September 1861 was the "Manassas Theory". They believed in building great entrenched camps that were virtually impregnable. Then, sit and wait for a Union invasion.

As can be seen from reflection on the Confederate tactics, they allowed the Union forces considerable time to build up their strength and material assets. Furthermore, the rebel generals did not capitalize on their superior rail and communication net-work. Most importantly, the principle of the offense was totally lacking in their strategy.

Tactical mistakes. Although the campaign was successful, tactical errors on Grant's part caused undue delay and numerous casualties. The following are the principle errors.

A. Failure to coordinate the Fort Henry attack. Commodore Foote initiated his phase of the attack on schedule. However, Grant's troops had not departed on time which caused the army to arrive an hour after the battle had ended. This resulted in the escape of 3,000 Confederates.

B. Failure to attack Fort Donelson on schedule. Grant had planned to march the 10 miles distance between Forts Henry and Donelson on 8 February. However, he delayed to stock up on unneeded supplies. In the meantime the roads became impassible because of poor weather. Had he advanced as planned the Confederate force at Donelson would have been only 3,000 strong. However, he waited for four days and Donelson was reinforced by 12,000 rebel troops.

C. Undue reliance on a supporting attack. The success of the gunboats at Fort Henry overly impressed Grant. As a result he also planned his attack on Fort Donelson to include the gunboat support. However, he was forced to delay the attack for two days while the boats repositioned on the Cumberland river. The delay cost Grant casualties. When finally his gunboats were ready, it was discovered that they were ineffective because of Donelson's accurate artillery. At that point, Grant had to re-evaluate his entire battle plan. He had expected an easy victory at Donelson. Lack of intelligence on the rebel artillery capability, unnecessary delays and over-reliance on the effectiveness of a supporting attack prevented a swift victory.

D. Lack of contingency planning. When Grant departed his command post to visit the wounded Commodore Foote on the morning of 15 February, he left no instructions in case the Rebels attacked. Moreover, he did not appoint a second in command. His excuse, in effect, was that he did not expect the enemy to attack. That planning oversight almost cost Grant the battle. Only the initiative of General Lew Wallace saved Grant's command from a rout.

Summary. The fall of Forts Henry and Donelson was critical to the Confederate army in the West. As a result of their loss, General Johnston was forced to evacuate Bowling Green and fall back to the northern bank of the Cumberland river. Finally, he had to abandon Nashville and retreat to Murfreesboro. Polk's army in Columbus formed an untenable salient and he withdrew to a line along Island #10. In effect, Grant's slice into Tennessee ended the Confederacy's "system" of defenses. After February 1862, the rebels could only manage an uncoordinated reactionary defense.

It must be remembered that the success in the Henry-Donelson campaign was the first major Union victory of the war. So, it should not be surprising to find some mistakes in generalship in the planning and execution of the battles. Grant was directing a volunteer army which was largely untried and considerably untrained. In addition, he was employing new naval tactics with recently acquired gunboats. And, of course, Grant himself had never directed an army of this size before. When Grant's tactical errors are viewed in light of the above mitigating circumstances, they are more readily appreciated.