

## **REGIONAL SUMMARY: SOUTHEAST ARKANSAS**

**By Dr. Bill Shea**

For the first fifteen months of the Civil War southeast Arkansas was undisturbed by military operations. After the capture of Memphis and Helena by Union forces in the summer of 1862, however, Union gunboats and transports were a common sight on the Mississippi River. Confederate authorities realized that Union vessels could enter the Arkansas River and steam upriver to Little Rock whenever they wished. To prevent this, Fort Hindman was constructed at Arkansas Post near the mouth of the Arkansas River. General Thomas J. Churchill and about 5,000 Confederate soldiers manned the fort and an adjacent line of earthworks that protected the town.

Near the end of 1862 a massive Union amphibious force gathered on the Mississippi River in preparation for an attack on Vicksburg. Union General John A. McClernand decided to eliminate the Confederate position at Arkansas Post before moving against Vicksburg. The Union armada entered the Arkansas River and attacked Arkansas Post on January 10-11, 1863. The naval forces were commanded by Admiral David D. Porter, the ground forces by General William T. Sherman. Union gunboats battered the fort into submission and the remainder of the garrison surrendered after heavy fighting to an overwhelming Union force of over 30,000 men. Approximately 1,100 Union soldiers were killed or wounded, a typically heavy toll resulting from an attack against earthworks. Only about 140 Confederates were killed or wounded, but nearly 4,800 were captured. In addition, Union forces seized a large amount of arms, ammunition, and other supplies.

Arkansas Post was a disaster for the Confederacy. The only defensive position on the Arkansas River was gone along with a huge number of irreplaceable men. The defeats at Prairie Grove (fought five weeks earlier on December 7, 1862) and Arkansas Post gravely weakened General Theophilus H. Holmes, the overall Confederate commander. He abandoned the eastern and western portions of Arkansas and concentrated what manpower and resources he had left in the central portion of the state around Little Rock. He was so demoralized that six months passed before he made any moves whatsoever.

Low water in the Arkansas River prevented McClernand from steaming upriver and capturing Little Rock. With nothing left to do in the eastern part of the state after Arkansas Post, the Union sailors and soldiers demolished

what was left of Fort Hindman, boarded their gunboats and transports, and returned to the Mississippi River. At Napoleon, just south of the mouth of the Arkansas, General Ulysses S. Grant took command of the armada and led it back towards Vicksburg.

The hard-fought Union victories at Prairie Grove and Arkansas Post eventually led to the Union capture of Fort Smith and Little Rock in September 1863. (These operations are described in the summaries for northwest and central Arkansas.) As Union forces moved into the Arkansas River Valley, Confederate forces retreated to the southernmost portion of the state. The citizens of Pine Bluff were that anarchy might follow the departure of Confederate troops, so they asked General Frederick Steele to send Union soldiers to occupy the town. Steele sent Colonel Powell Clayton and 500 men to maintain order in Pine Bluff. Hundreds of refugee slaves poured into the town when they learned of the Union presence.

Confederate General John S. Marmaduke attempted to overwhelm the isolated Union detachment. On October 25, 1863, he attacked Pine Bluff with 2,000 Confederate cavalymen. Union soldiers and freedmen built a barricade of cotton bales around the courthouse square and fought off the Confederates. Military losses were lower than normal because both sides fought from behind cover: 56 Union soldiers and 17 freedmen were killed or wounded, as were at least 40 Confederates. There were no civilian casualties. Most of downtown Pine Bluff was wrecked in the only true urban battle of the Civil War.

Except for the two exceptions noted below, there was little large-scale military activity in southeast Arkansas during the remaining eighteen months of the Civil War. Union forces in Pine Bluff and Confederate forces in Monticello skirmished constantly. A narrow no-man's-land existed between the two occupied areas, but most of the region managed to maintain a semblance of law and order under either Union or Confederate authority. There probably was less lawlessness and destruction in southeast Arkansas than anywhere else in the state, though the danger from outlaws and deserters was ever present.

On March 30, 1864, Clayton led a Union force along the Saline River between Monticello and Warren and won a pair of small battles at Mt. Elba and Longview. A dozen Union soldiers were casualties, but as many as 50 Confederates were killed or wounded and over 300 were captured along with a substantial amount of supplies.

The relative calm in southeast Arkansas was shattered for the final time when a Confederate troops under

Colonel Colton Greene fired on vessels in the Mississippi River near Lake Chicot. A Union amphibious force under General Andrew J. Smith clashed with the Confederates at Ditch Bayou, five miles east of Lake Village, on June 6, 1864. The 600 Confederates were driven off and the 3,000 Union troops returned to their transports and steamed away. Over 150 Union soldiers were killed or wounded along with at least 37 Confederates. Greene made no further attempt to interrupt Union traffic on the Mississippi. The battle of Ditch Bayou was the last significant clash between regular forces in Arkansas.