

## **REGIONAL SUMMARY : NORTHEAST ARKANSAS**

**By Dr. Bill Shea**

During the first year of the Civil War northeast Arkansas was quiet. The situation changed dramatically in the spring of 1862. Union naval forces broke through Confederate defenses on the Mississippi River and captured Memphis on June 6. The presence of Union gunboats and troop-carrying transports on the Mississippi River meant that the war had reached northeast Arkansas much faster than anyone had anticipated.

As it turned out, the first Union forces to actually enter northeast Arkansas came overland from Missouri. A Union army under General Samuel R. Curtis had won the battle of Pea Ridge in northwest Arkansas on March 7-8, 1862. After moving eastward along the Arkansas-Missouri state line, Curtis turned south and reached Batesville in early May. At the same time a second Union army under General Frederick Steele pushed into Arkansas from southeast Missouri and joined Curtis. There was little opposition to these Union incursions because all Confederate forces in the state had gone to Mississippi after Pea Ridge. While in Batesville, Curtis authorized the formation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Infantry (Union), the first of several white Arkansas Union regiments to be recruited from pro-Union residents in the northern part of the state.

With Arkansas apparently defenseless, Curtis moved south towards Little Rock. Because his supply bases were hundreds of miles to the north in Missouri, his advance was slow and difficult. By June he had reached the vicinity of Searcy. In the meantime, the new Confederate commander, General Thomas C. Hindman, raised a small force of Confederate soldiers with which he hoped to block the Union advance. He also authorized the formation of irregular soldiers, or guerrillas, to harass the Union wagon trains hauling supplies from Missouri. A series of small battles and skirmishes erupted around Searcy and all along the Union supply line.

Curtis concluded that his supply situation was impossible. He abandoned his attempt to capture Little Rock and turned southeast into the Delta. Curtis intended to take advantage of Union control of the Mississippi River. He arranged for a flotilla of Union gunboats and transports to steam down the Mississippi below Memphis, then up the White River with supplies and reinforcements. In June and July the Union army marched down the east bank of the White River and passed through Jacksonport, Augusta, and Clarendon. Somewhere along the White the Union army

and navy should meet.

On July 7, 1862, Hindman attempted to stop Curtis near Cache River, about three miles north of Cotton Plant. The battle was a disaster for Hindman's inexperienced men. Over 123 Confederates were killed and hundreds more were wounded. Only 6 Union soldiers were killed and 57 were wounded. This was the last time Hindman attempted to halt the Union juggernaut.

Meanwhile, the Union flotilla was moving up the White River in Curtis's direction. On June 17, 1862, the gunboats engaged a Confederate fort at St. Charles while Union soldiers went ashore. The soldiers soon captured the fort from behind, but not before a Confederate shot penetrated the gunboat U.S.S. *Mound City* and struck a steam line. Though the boat was only slightly damaged, scalding steam killed or severely burned 150 crewmen. The Union flotilla continued upriver to Clarendon where it waited for several days before departing. The Union army reached Clarendon the day after the flotilla turned back. Having failed to establish a supply line via the White, Curtis turned east and marched to Helena.

During the long march across the Delta the Union army liberated thousands of slaves, most of whom followed the army to Helena in search of a new life. This development took place six months before President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Curtis eliminated slavery along the route of his army's march as a military necessity. Upon reaching Helena, Curtis established refugee camps for the new freedmen and insured that they were treated properly and paid fairly for the work they did. This was the beginning of the end of slavery in Arkansas, though it would be three more years before emancipation reached every corner of the state.

Curtis also brought "total war" to northeast Arkansas. Moving farther and farther from supply depots in Missouri, his soldiers were compelled to live off the land as they marched across the Delta. The path of the Union army was marked by ravaged fields, slaughtered livestock, pillaged smokehouses and root cellars, and vandalized and burned buildings. Some people made matters worse by poisoning wells and burning bridges in a vain attempt to stop the Union column. Three-fourths of the state would experience similar devastation before the war came to a close.

On July 15, 1862, the Union army reached Helena. A supply line via the Mississippi River was established and Helena remained a Union enclave for the rest of the war. A semi-circular line of earthen fortifications soon

protected the town. Inside the fortifications were army camps, refugee camps for freedmen, and military storehouses. Dozens of gunboats and transports crowded the wharves. Until Vicksburg was captured in mid-1863, Helena was the southernmost Union outpost on the Mississippi River, and it served as a supply depot and a jumping-off point for military and naval operations in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. With so many freedmen in town, Helena also became a major recruiting station for “colored” Arkansas Union regiments later in the war. The first of these regiments, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Arkansas Infantry (Union/African Descent), were formed in early 1863.

Almost a year later, Confederate General Theophilus H. Holmes attempted to recapture Helena. His army marched from Little Rock and attacked the fortified town on July 4, 1863. White and black Union troops fought side by side to repel the Confederates. Assaults against earthworks were rarely successful in the Civil War and this was no exception. The 4,000 Union troops led by General Benjamin M. Prentiss defeated the 7,600 Confederates. Prentiss lost only 239 men killed, wounded, or captured, but the misguided attack cost Holmes over 1,636 of his men, a severe casualty rate. Holmes returned to Little Rock with his shrunken, demoralized army, but he would not stay there long. Union forces from Helena captured Little Rock on 10 September 1863. (This development is described in the summary for central Arkansas.)

The only other regular military operation of note in northeast Arkansas occurred in the spring of 1863 when General John S. Marmaduke led a Confederate cavalry raid into southeast Missouri. The raid accomplished little, and Marmaduke was hotly pursued as he retreated towards Arkansas atop Crowley’s Ridge. At Chalk Bluff on May 1-2 the Confederates fought a delaying action while constructing a bridge across the St. Francis River. The Confederates escaped into Arkansas; the Union forces declined to follow.

After the summer of 1863 northeast Arkansas experienced no large-scale military operations. Battles were replaced by occasional cavalry raids and constant skirmishes between pro-Confederate and pro-Union Arkansans. Helena remained in Union hands, and Batesville and Jacksonport were garrisoned by Union troops for brief periods, but in the absence of any functional civil or military authority most of the countryside became a no-man’s-land where people fought each other and struggled to stay alive until the war was over. (The appalling conditions described in the summary for northwest Arkansas apply to northeast Arkansas as well.)