



JULY 1863: TURNING POINT OF CIVIL WAR

BY DANIEL KOCH



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A Grand Illumination was July 3 at Vicksburg National Military Park with luminaries placed at state monuments representing the number of total casualties from that state. Because Ohio never erected one large state memorial an Ohio regimental monument was chosen to host the 1,313 luminaries representing total casualties at Vicksburg from the Buckeye State.

SANDUSKY

July 1863 is arguably the most important month in American history. Others may argue July 1776, when this nation was founded, or June 1944, when the Allies saved the world. The latter are indeed valid arguments. This country, however — founded in 1776 with the institution of slavery intact — had to be molded into “a more perfect union” than that spoken of in the preamble to the United States Constitution, written in 1787. And the nation that went to war in December 1941, eventually landing at Normandy in 1944, could not have become world power it is today if July 1863 had turned out differently. If the Union victories of July 1863 had instead become Confederate victories, there is a good chance the United States we know today would be under at least two flags.

Twin Union battlefield victories in the third summer of the Civil War at Vicksburg and Gettysburg put the first nails in the coffin of the Southern Confederacy. A third and often-forgotten campaign in Tennessee that summer, the Tullahoma Campaign, may not have been as bloody as the other battles in Mississippi and Pennsylvania, but it had the effect of maneuvering a Confederate Army out of Middle Tennessee and capturing the strategic railroad hub of Chattanooga. In the days before air travel and highways, the railroad was the main way to supply an army.

The middle of the month would also see one of the ugliest chapters in American history: the New York City Draft Riots.

The poor, working class and immigrants of that city rioted against the recently imposed federal draft, striking against both the wealthy — who could buy their way out of the army — and the city’s African American population, who they blamed for the war and therefore the draft.

Troops who had recently participated in the Union victory at Gettysburg, including Sandusky's Company E of the 8th Ohio Infantry, were sent to that city to help quell the riots. The exact death count of those riots is unknown, but roughly a dozen African American men were lynched and least 200 rioters and others were killed. About 2,000 more were injured, with millions of dollars in property damage before the worst of the riots ended.

The victory at Vicksburg is quite possibly the most strategic victory of the Civil War.

When the Rebel troops surrendered to Gen. Grant's Union army there, the Union secured the Bluff City, previously known as the "Gibraltar of the Confederacy."

From a morale standpoint, the victory was a deafening blow to the Confederacy and a great uplift in the North, particularly in the Midwest, where there'd been a growing peace movement.

Midwestern farmers had previously paid outrageous rates to ship their crops east by rail, or via the Great Lakes, rather than down the rivers to New Orleans as they had before the war. As Abraham Lincoln put it, with the capture of Vicksburg the "Father of Waters flows unvexed to the Sea." The farmers were once again able to ship products downriver.

Most importantly, a 30,000-man Confederate Army was captured, along with all their arms and equipment, including 172 cannon that accounted for about 11 percent of the South's entire artillery. The loss was something they would never recover through production or bring through the blockade from England.

Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana were now almost completely cut off from any assistance from the rest of the Confederacy, with the Union Navy keeping them separated. Vicksburg was held by the Union for the duration of the war and became a center of recruitment for the United States Colored Troops, as they were referred to at the time.

By the end of the war, about 20,000 former slaves in the vicinity of Vicksburg would join the Union Army and fight for their freedom. While no troops from Sandusky took part in the Siege of Vicksburg, it was undoubtedly a big morale boost when they first heard about it. A handful of men from Erie County were part of the Fremont centered 72nd Ohio, while some Huron County men of the 32nd Ohio did take part in the campaign.

The Tullahoma Campaign took place in late June and early July. It was launched by the Union's Army of the Cumberland against the Confederate Army of Tennessee. Although no large battles would be fought, the Union army would outmaneuver and outflank the Rebels, using speed to quickly capture and hold strategic passes through the Cumberland Plateau.

At the forefront of these advances was Wilder's "Lightning Brigade," a collection of Indiana and Illinois infantrymen who had been mounted as cavalry and armed with seven-shot Spencer repeating rifles. In an age when most infantrymen were still equipped with single-shot muzzleloaders, this was a distinct advantage. They were joined by the Army of the Cumberland's cavalry, which included the 3rd Ohio Cavalry. The 3rd was recruited almost entirely in Erie and Huron Counties.

Following in the wake of the mounted troops were tens of thousands of Union infantry. Among them were the 65th and 101st Ohio Infantry Regiments. Company G of the 65th was raised in Ashland and Erie counties, while Companies B and G of the 101st were from Erie County. Companies A and D were from Huron County.

Chattanooga and its vital railroads would be captured as a result of the campaign, but the Union army would be beaten in September at the Battle of Chickamauga in northern Georgia, driven back to Chattanooga and besieged there until troops under General Grant arrived to help drive off the Confederates in early November.

In early June, Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia began moving north.

His first invasion had been thwarted at the Battle of Antietam the previous September. One of the main reasons this second invasion was launched was because Lee didn't want part of his army taken away and sent to relieve Vicksburg. Elements of his army would capture part of the garrison of Winchester, including the 123rd Ohio Infantry. Companies G and K were composed of Erie County men while Companies B, C and E were from Huron County. The enlisted men would be paroled quickly, but the officers would be held for close to a year.

The invasion crossed through Maryland into Pennsylvania, where the Union and Confederate armies collided at a small Pennsylvania agricultural town named Gettysburg.

To this day, the three-day battle is the bloodiest in American history.

On the first day, both armies were not at full strength. The Union troops tried to hold back the Confederate Army while the rest of the Union troops moved forward to Gettysburg. One of the Union regiments to suffer greatly on the first day was the 107th Ohio, which had lost heavily at the Battle of Chancellorsville in May. After participating in heavy fighting on the first and second days of Gettysburg, in fact, the 107th would lose more than 400 men. At the battle's end, the regiment's total strength would number just 111 men.

The 55th Ohio Infantry – with Companies A, C, D and I from Erie and Huron counties – would fight all three days of the battle as skirmishers between the two armies.

Charles Stacy, a Huron County farmer in Company D, was later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions in the battle. The 7th Ohio with Company E was composed entirely of men from the city of Huron in Erie County. They would fight on Culp's Hill and defend that location from multiple Rebel attacks.

Playing perhaps the biggest part among any local units in the battle: the 8th Ohio Infantry. Company E was recruited from Sandusky, while Company D was from Norwalk.

The 8th had already seen a great deal of fighting and numbered only about 250 men going into the battle. Fate had placed them on the left of what became known as Picket's Charge. As the Confederates made their last great attack with more than 15,000 men, the men of the 8th waited until the opportune moment to pour a withering fire into the Rebel flank. In the aftermath of the attack, they rushed forward and captured hundreds of Confederate prisoners and multiple battle flags. They would pay dearly for this action, losing more than 100 men.

No matter whether they were in the siege lines at Vicksburg, riding and marching through the passes of the Cumberland Plateau, or fighting a desperate battle in the farm fields and hills of Gettysburg, local men played a crucial part in shaping the course of history in July 1863.

They sacrificed greatly, many with the ultimate sacrifice to keep this nation whole.

In the immortal words of President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which he delivered that November: "It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us ... that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion ... that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain ... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom ... and that government of the people ... by the people ... for the people ... shall not perish from the earth."

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