

Raymond-Vicksburg

An Early 150th Anniversary Reenactment

By Phil McBride

“A successful trail boss is the guy who can get most of the herd headed generally north, more or less at the same time.”

Will Rogers, an American philosopher in the 1930's

Raymond-Vicksburg was a good reenactment sponsored by the Blue-Gray Alliance and The Friends of the Raymond Battlefield organization. It was held on the actual battle ground of the May, 1863, Battle of Raymond, MS, and it was called the 150th anniversary event, even though it was held several months ahead of the calendar anniversary. The early date was for two reasons, the primary one being the Blue-Gray Alliance is also sponsoring a 150th Gettysburg and a 150th Chickamauga reenactment next year, making the BGA's 2013 plate already full. The second reason was the Mississippi heat and humidity in May is much more oppressive than it is in late October. So, this 150th anniversary was celebrated six months early.

Historically, the battle was a precursor to the siege at Vicksburg. The two main engagements of the 1863 battle at Raymond were fights at Fourteen Mile Creek and Champion's Hill. Therefore, the Blue-Gray Alliance leadership developed a plan to redo both of those battles on Saturday, and an assault on the Texas Lunette at Vicksburg on Sunday. The plans and preparations for *Raymond-Vicksburg* were ambitious, as each battle would be recreated on a different location, and a massive amount of dirt would be excavated to construct a replica of the Texas Lunette, where the Yanks almost breached the Rebel defensive line at Vicksburg. As the weekend unfolded one battle at a time, it appeared to me that the implementation of the plan ran the gamut from excellent, to fair, to poor. As things often unfold at big reenactments, and to borrow the words of Will Rogers, there seemed to be an unwillingness by some of the battalion and brigade leaders to *“head generally north more or less at the same time.”* As a result, the Saturday morning battle at Fourteen Mile Creek was excellent, the Saturday afternoon battle of Champion's Hill was only of fair quality, and the Sunday afternoon assault of the Texas Lunette from the Vicksburg siege must be described as “poor.”

Excellence in Planning

Besides the battles, there were some excellent features to the weekend plans that went a long way to offset the mess at the Texas Lunette battle on Sunday.

First, right at 1,500 reenactors pre-registered. Fewer than that showed up, but there were four large Confederate battalions and two smaller Federal battalions present. There were also substantial, but not too many, artillery pieces for the scenarios, and we all know the crowd loves the spectacle of the cannons firing. The standard small numbers of cavalry participated.

Second, although over a thousand infantry registered, the great majority of them were Confederates. Remember that this event took place in the middle of Mississippi, way down south, where Federal reenacting groups are the exception. In response, the event leaders prevailed upon all of the Reb infantry battalions to galvanize for one of the three battles in order to balance the opposing forces. The required-galvanization plan worked fine for both battles on Saturday. The Blue-Gray-Alliance leadership was criticized for not enforcing a galvanizing plan at their Brice's Crossroads, MS reenactment three years ago, where there were only a couple of companies of Federal infantry facing off hundreds of Reb infantry. The battles looked silly because nobody galvanized at Brice's Crossroads. Therefore, it was very gratifying to witness the BGA's correction of that basic shortcoming with effective galvanizing plans at both Shiloh earlier this year and again at Raymond-Vicksburg. It bodes well for their success next year at the Gettysburg and Chickamauga events.

Third, the first fight, at Fourteen Mile Creek, was fought on the actual battle ground of the real engagement. This site was until recently privately owned land where previous reenactments have been held. However, the 2012 version was the last, as the land has become part of the national park system and will no longer be available for reenactments.

Fourth, in the real war, the Rebs marched through the town of Raymond and were met on the town square by the good ladies of the town who offered them food as they marched to meet the invading Yanks. This act of kindness was reenacted in 1998 at my first Raymond event, and done again this year, although this time not on the real town square. Both times we were cheered on by many period-attired southern belles, and I was handed a gingersnap cookie and a piece of fried chicken from the baskets of the patriotic ladies.

Fifth, our Reb battalion marched wearing our loaded knapsacks and full haversacks. We fought most of the first battle wearing the knapsacks. Wagons, real horse-pulled replica army supply wagons, accompanied us, and all canteen refills were made at the wagons. Likewise, our extra arsenal packs of ammunition were stored in wooden ammo boxes, and carried on the wagons for resupply. We ate all day from our haversacks. After the Saturday afternoon battle, we marched to the Texas Lunette, where we bivouacked for the night at the lunette, sleeping without tents, bedding down under the stars and the blankets we had carried all day. Our Sunday morning breakfasts and lunches were only what we still had in our haversacks.

The modern sutler area was close, but was off-limits to us because we were busy. On Sunday morning, using pioneering tools – shovels, axes, picks, and some bayonets – that had also been hauled in the supply wagons, we improved the lunette earthworks by digging firing steps, putting protective head-logs on top of the works, and cutting and planting stakes on the top of the glacis. To summarize, the Red River Battalion, in the brigade of General Jack King, and commanded by Colonel Fred Yokubaitis, campaigned for the whole event. We lived the weekend a few steps closer to how the real Civil War soldiers lived, than did the rest of the Confederate reenacting battalions. I was proud to be part of that.

Sixth, the expansive Texas Lunette constructed especially for the reenactment, was an impressive representation of the whole semi-circle of Confederate earthworks that protected Vicksburg on the Mighty Mississippi. Additionally, an equally impressive trio of “caves” had been constructed on the slope of the hill behind the lunette. These three caves were home to nearly a dozen civilian women and children reenactors who spent the whole weekend living as the citizens of the real Vicksburg did during the final days of the siege. When the Confederate artillery on top of the same hill fired on Sunday during the assault on the lunette, the civilians hugged each other in the caves as loose earth fell from the ceiling, and they felt the bracing timbers vibrate with each cannon blast. One of the ladies told me afterwards their “magic moment” was real, very real.

The Three Battles: One Step Forward, One Step Sideways, and One Step Backward

Fourteen Mile Creek: The actual battle in 1863 and our reenactment in 2012 were both fought back and forth over a real creek. In 1863, the Rebs met the attacking Yanks behind the natural cover of the trees lining the creek, and the fight centered around the only bridge. In our reenactment, the creek was nearly dry and a dirt “bridge” had been created. The crossing allowed us go in columns down the creek bank and “wade” the creek as the battle surged back and forth on both sides of the meandering waterway. This battle was long and for our battalion included a dandy simulated brief “melee” with a galvanizing outfit also from Texas, men we know from attending most of the same reenactments. This was the engagement that our battalion began while wearing our loaded knapsacks, and we wore them through most of the fighting, finally dropping them as we made our second, failing stand at the edge of the creek. As historically happened, the Confederates’ stand at Fourteen Mile Creek finally dissolved as the Secesh were overwhelmed by the larger force of Yanks and we withdrew from the creek. Our simulated battle was long, and see-sawed enough to give the spectators a good show and provide the reenactors a great opening engagement. Personally, I took three hits, the first a simulated bash to the head with a rifle butt during the hand-to-hand tussle, and then two crippling bullet wounds as the battle went on across the creek. That’s something I’ve never done before in one battle, and it worked OK, as each time

the flow of the battle allowed me to get up while surrounded by reenactors, my improbable resurrections invisible to the spectators,

Champion's Hill: Historically, three divisions of Confederates initially pushed the Union infantry off the hill, but the Rebs failed to get prompt support to reinforce their foothold on the high ground. The Yanks counterattacked and forced the Southern troops to withdraw. In our Saturday afternoon battle, the Yank cannons were on the hilltop with the spectator line right behind them. That looked right for the opening attack of the Confederates. But when the fighting started, the staging seemed to me to be upside down. Rather than defend the high ground where we started, we (our battalion was galvanizing for this one) attacked down the slope. If this was the initial attack, we should have defended the high ground until we were forced off the side of the hill, where there was ample room for a retreat. If this was the Federal counter-attack, the Rebs and Yanks should have switched starting positions so the Secesh held the high ground until they were forced down the side of the hill. We Yanks should have either defended the high ground, or started at the foot of the hill and staged the historical counter-attack uphill.

In preparing this article, and wanting to get my facts right, I contacted the adjutant for the Confederate commander. He promptly replied in detail how the reenactment of Champion's Hill did not unfold as planned. Here was the first instance of the weekend where *"the herd failed to head generally north more or less at the same time."* The plan, even if it seemed upside down to me, was clear enough for each battalion colonel to follow. But that plan evaporated with an early "surprise." The Rebs on the Yanks' right flank made their first appearance in a position that was not where the Federals expected them. Instead, they emerged far ahead of the location where the Yanks thought they were to start. When this battalion of Rebs stepped out from a wooded area, they immediately had one of the three Federal infantry battalions well flanked, and under threat of enfilading artillery fire if the Yank battalion changed frontage to meet the just-appeared Reb infantry on their flank. The result was the quick and appropriate "surrender" of one-third of the Union infantry force, taking them out of most of the scenario, and messing-up the plan for the rest of the battle.

At that point, the Confederate commander's adjutant directed the Reb battalion not to advance further, but to shift their position towards the main battle line. This allowed the Union battalion to "de-surrender" and also rejoin the engagement. The battle flowed downhill away from the spectators, and for a time the action was compressed into a gap between two wood lots and the gap was too small for the number of battalions engaged. Finally the Rebs pushed the Yanks back uphill and came in range of the Federal artillery batteries which had their virtual canister rounds ready to put a quick bloody stop to the Rebs' final uphill attack. Dozens of Confederates took simultaneous hits in long rows from the simulated canister fire of the Union artillery on the hilltop. The spectators loved

that spectacle, but whether you were watching or taking part as a fighting soldier, if you knew the real history of Champion's Hill, this one just looked all wrong.

I freely confess that it was a fun battle for me as a Yankee private, but I know the spectators saw nothing similar to the flow of the historical battle at Champion's Hill. We put on a good show, but we didn't recreate the intended bit of history. This battle was a step sideways from the successful morning engagement at Fourteen Mile Creek.

Texas Lunette at Vicksburg: I'll say it up-front, this scenario had immense promise as a memorable engagement for both the participants and the spectators. For some, the promise may have been kept, but for many of us, and to our dismay, the promise turned out to be an empty shell. Two last-minute decisions negated the extensive planning and physical preparations that had been made for a hot, lengthy, and historically accurate recreation of the Union assault on the Texas Lunette. The first decision was made Saturday night at a meeting, at the request of the Union commanders. Feeling that the Champion's Hill scenario had not allowed the Union forces to fully strut their stuff, they asked for a pre-assault battle in the same open field that was used for the Champion Hill scenario. The Confederate commanders consented, maybe reluctantly, I don't know. Nonetheless, over half of us Rebs left the lunette and marched down the hill and fought a fictitious, but hot and energetic engagement that mostly emptied my cartridge box. We retreated under fire back to the lunette, and I resumed my place on the firing step of the lunette, hot, tired, and needing to replenish my ammo supply.

If I was tired and had used most of my ammo, the Yanks had to be in a similar condition. But I got to kneel and rest while we waited for the Yanks' attack. They, however, faced the prospect of assaulting up a hill, then vigorously cross a wide and deep ditch, climb a tall glacis, and try to overcome our line of rifleman protected by a wall of dirt and head-logs at the top of the glacis. That was the plan, and it was still a credible plan, once the Yanks had a few minutes to catch their second wind.

Then a Reb battalion commander made the second decision that really poisoned the scenario. Since he had more riflemen than there was room at the spectator end of the lunette, he led much of his battalion into the ditch that was dug in front of the earthworks. When the Reb commander did that, he effectively eliminated over half the space the Yanks had to cross the ditch and climb the glacis. The presence of the mob of Rebs in the ditch channeled the Yanks into a space that was not wide enough for even one battalion to attack in a battle line, much less two or three battalions, and they couldn't-wouldn't just stand at the edge of the ditch and shoot down at the Secesh, or jump down into the crowded ditch on top of the massed Rebs like the battle at the Petersburg crater in reverse (think about the opening of the movie *Cold Mountain*).

The result of the massed Rebs firing from the ditch was that the first attack of the Yanks never got close to the lunette, and that was OK. But on the second effort, the presence of the wall of Rebs in the ditch, allowed space for only one company of Yanks to cross the ditch, right next to the Rebs who ignored them. The small group of Yanks carried one scaling ladder which they propped against the wall, and maybe four or five Federal soldiers climbed the glacis and huddled there, too few to go on. We fired at the squad of Yanks stranded just a few feet from us on the glacis, and wondered when and how they would be reinforced, and how soon the attack would continue over the wall as planned.

In the real attack on the lunette, a Yank planted a US national flag on the top of the earthworks for a brief moment, and the Federals did force their way into the earthworks over the top of the dirt wall. That action was part of the plan as our commanders understood it. In fact, our colonel had a reserve company ready to move to where ever the breach occurred to plug the hole. Additionally, we were prepared to follow history a step further and roll cannon balls with lit fuses down the front of the glacis into the Union infantry as they bunched in the ditch and climbed the glacis. Of course, the cannon balls were styrofoam and held no powder charge, but the fuses were real and the visual impact would have been spot on for the surprised attackers and spectators.

As we loaded and fired, and waited for the expected Union surge of reinforcements that would carry them over our defenses, a bugle began to blow "Taps." The attack on the Texas Lunette was over. Somewhat had decided that was enough, unfinished or not. Union breach of the works or not, we were done for the day. I expect most of the Federals never got close to the earthworks, which was a shame. I've asked, and have not been offered an explanation why the scenario was stopped in what we thought was still the middle of the action. I can only assume the Union commander felt his men were too tired and too few to continue any longer. Again, what a shame, what a wasted promise.

The decision of the Reb battalion commander to lead his men into the ditch in front of the works is a sad example of a disease that plagues our hobby. I'm sure his troops loved it, but his decision to put his one battalion in a better position to be in the action, had a significant negative impact on the other five battalions on the field, and immediately sabotaged the intent of the event organizers to present a reasonably historical recreation of the attack on the Texas Lunette. I really do not understand why the overall military commanders – the big bugs - don't hold battalion commanders accountable for those hasty poor decisions that harm the scenario. If a colonel or general doesn't stick to the plan, don't allow him and his unit into the next event.

Red Flag: All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed the *Raymond-Vicksburg* weekend. But I did see a loss of command and control over individual battalions that had a clear negative

effect on two of the three battles. I am an avid supporter of the Blue-Gray Alliance and the good things they are doing for our hobby in the part of the country which is called “the western theater” of the Civil War. But I hope the last two battles at *Raymond-Vicksburg* raised a warning flag that battalion commanders must better respect the scenario plans and not “ad lib” their way along. “I was just taking care of the boys,” is a phrase that is bandied around a lot when reenacting colonels and generals abandon the script and re-invent the scenario to their personal advantage. But far too often “taking care of your boys” by improving their position in a scripted battle, turns out to spoil the battle for someone else’s boys.

Next Year? I’ve previously reported on five 150th anniversary cycle reenactments: Wilson’s Creek and First Manassas of ’61, Shiloh and Antietam of ’62, and the early bird Vicksburg-Raymond of ’63. Three different organizations put on the five events and each event was a success that overcame man-made and natural obstacles: The blistering heat at *Manassas*, the rain storm at *Maryland, My Maryland* and muddy roads at *Shiloh*, the late loss of battlefield land at *Wilson’s Creek*, and now the overly independent battalion commanders at *Raymond-Vicksburg*. In our great hobby the top commanders will always face the dilemma of commanding volunteer leaders, who are leading volunteer hobbyists, to do things they don’t want to do, for the good of the whole. That’s never easy, but is always critical to the success of the event. I wonder what other challenges will beset the 2013 events?

Photos courtesy of Jeff Hunt and Cindy Beard.