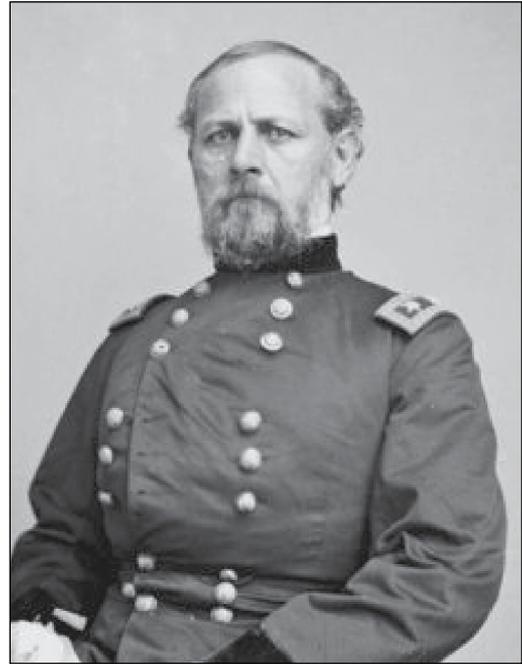


The Battle of Shiloh

By Captain John T. Shelton

Each session of the Engineer Captain's Career Course (ECCC) is required to write an article analyzing a historical battle, and the best overall professional article receives the Thomas Jefferson Writing Excellence Award. This article was judged the best article of ECCC 1-08.

The two-day Battle of Shiloh was fought between the Union and the Confederacy on Sunday and Monday, 6 and 7 April 1862. On the first day, the Union force was composed of the Army of the Tennessee, commanded by Major General Ulysses S. Grant. On the second day, the Army of the Ohio, commanded by Major General Don Carlos Buell,¹ joined Grant's force. Most of the roughly 45,000 Union troops were from Regular Army units and included 19 infantry regiments, 5 artillery regiments, and 6 cavalry regiments.² The Confederate Army of Mississippi, under General Albert Sidney Johnston and General P.G.T. Beauregard, consisted of 4 corps, 16 artillery regiments, and 6 cavalry regiments. There were also 10 legions, or combined arms teams,³ for a total of about 40,000 Confederate troops.⁴ Few of the Confederate Soldiers were as well equipped or battle-tested as their opponents.



Major General Don Carlos Buell

Although the battle was fought over a two-day period, the focus of this article is on the second day, between 0700 and 1600. The Union forces that day consisted of the remnants of Grant's force from the previous day plus late-arriving reinforcements led by Buell and Major General Lew Wallace, which brought Union totals back to about 45,000 troops. Beauregard, who took command of the Confederate side when Johnston died during the first day's fighting, had only the remnants of his force from the day before, totaling less than 30,000 troops.⁵

Analyzing Day Two

There is no dispute that the Army of the Tennessee under Grant won the Battle of Shiloh. However, through the lens of modern doctrine and tactics, the events of the battle can be scrutinized and analyzed. Most of the decisions made by Grant and Beauregard are clearly supported by current United States Army doctrine and show both good and bad examples of how to apply its concepts.

Current doctrine supports Grant's offensive tactics, although he not did plan properly to exploit his success and



Major General Ulysses S. Grant

thus allowed the Army of Mississippi to escape. The battle on 7 April can be divided into three distinct phases:

- Phase I: Grant transitions to the offense
- Phase II: Beauregard retrogrades to Shiloh Church
- Phase III: Beauregard orders a retreat

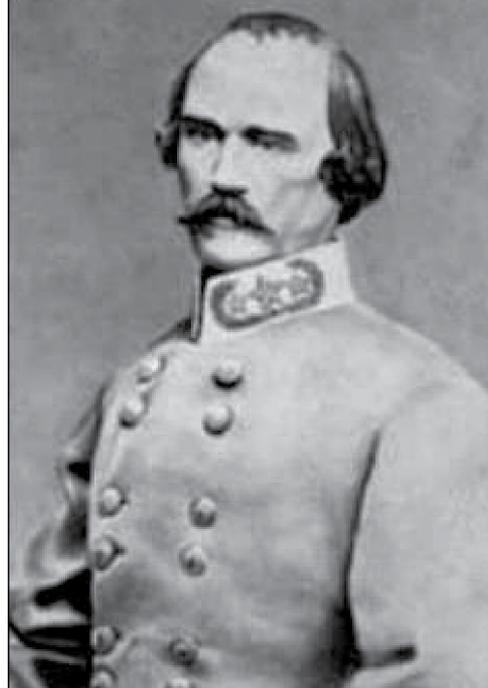
This article will address the current Army doctrine that applies to the actions—resulting in positive and negative outcomes—taken by both sides during these three phases. It also will analyze the implementation of the doctrine.

Phase I

After the fierce fighting on 6 April, both the Union and Confederate Armies needed resupplies of men, food, water, ammunition, and artillery.⁶ The Union received reinforcements in the early morning of 7 April, and this marked the beginning of Phase I. The Army of Mississippi did not receive reinforcements, and many of the Confederate forces had no command and control higher than the company or platoon level. Grant saw this as an opportunity to retake ground lost the day before and transition into an offense. Beauregard was not aware of Grant's reinforcements and resupply and so did not act fast enough to reconsolidate his command and control. Beauregard still believed he was fighting an offensive battle against Grant. This lack of knowledge allowed Grant to seize, almost unopposed, two landmarks—the Hornet's Nest and Peach Orchard—that had been hotly contested the previous day.

Doctrine states that the purpose of defensive operations is to "buy time, economize forces, or develop conditions favorable to offensive operations."⁸ Grant made this transition from a defensive to an offensive posture flawlessly. He used tactical patience to wait until the conditions were favorable to seize terrain that his forces had lost the day before. His scouts informed him that the Confederates were unable to mass any effects to slow his advance. Grant understood the purpose of the offense (which is to defeat the enemy), evaluated the best way to apply the characteristics of the offense,⁹ and used every one of them to secure his success:

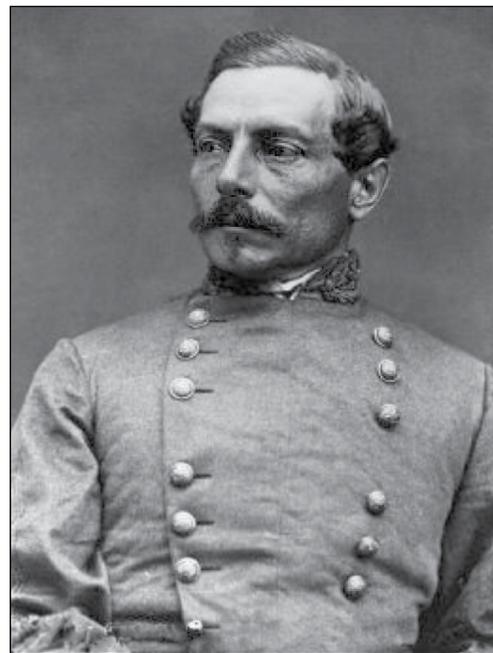
- *Surprise*. Grant used surprise, which in this attack was the most important characteristic, to keep the enemy from knowing he had gained additional men and supplies and launched a frontal assault against unprepared and under-equipped Confederate forces. Surprise allowed him to seize terrain he had lost on 6 April and to do so with little resistance.
- *Concentration*. Grant concentrated his forces and set the conditions to have a much larger force than the Confederates.
- *Tempo*. Grant synchronized the tempo of his forces to allow all subordinate commanders to attack at the same time and at a set speed in order to mass his effects.



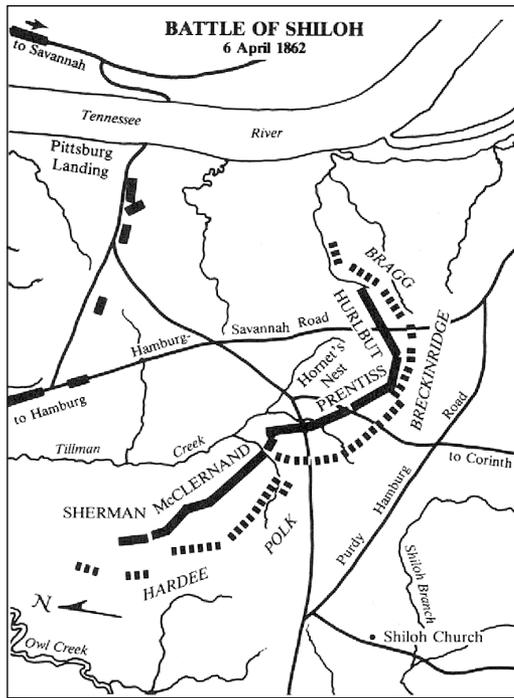
General Albert Sydney Johnston

- *Audacity*. Grant used audacity "to execute violently and without hesitation," rendering any Confederate resistance futile since they could not apply the elements of the defense or consolidate their command.¹⁰

During Phase I, the Army of the Tennessee executed a perfect transition from the defense to the offense. This fact is clearly supported by Grant's use of the characteristics of the offense and his understanding of the purpose of the defense. Further, Grant's choice of a frontal assault, usually the least-preferred method of attack, produced a decisive result. Beauregard was unaware of the success of Grant's attack, illustrating Grant's successful use of surprise. Grant's effective

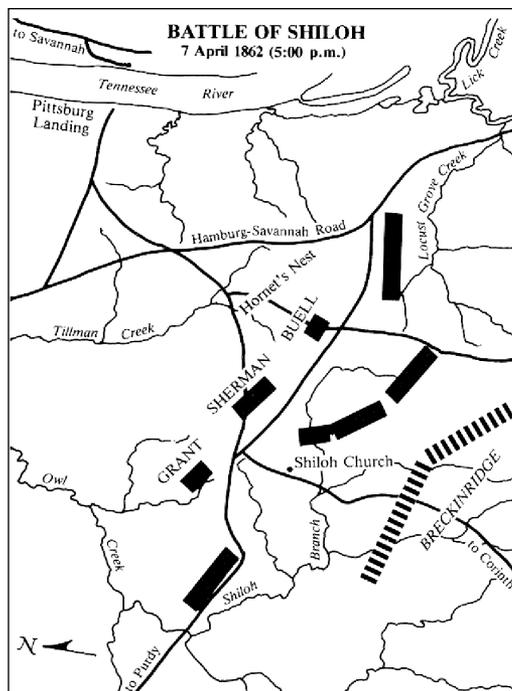


General P.G.T. Beauregard



use of his reconnaissance elements let him understand how and when to exploit Confederate weaknesses. Beauregard's lack of command and control and his inability to use his reconnaissance assets to get situational awareness caused his forces to fail in Phase I.

The tactical lesson here is to always have situational awareness as a commander and always use reconnaissance assets. Beauregard demonstrated that operating on an outdated and inaccurate common operating picture can have catastrophic results. His reconnaissance assets could have



let him know that the Union forces had been resupplied and repositioned. However, since he didn't know this, Beauregard thought he had plenty of time to reconsolidate his forces and even believed he was still on the offensive. This lesson directly affected everything that happened during the rest of the battle.

Phase II

Beauregard started receiving reports of Grant's success at about 1000 hours and now understood that he was conducting a failed defense. Further, his commanders were following orders that were 24 hours old and no longer applied to what was happening on the battlefield. Beauregard needed to coordinate his actions and prepare a defense. Confederate scouts reported that Grant had split his forces into three elements, each advancing independently but well synchronized. Beauregard analyzed the terrain that he still held and saw an advantage at Water Oak Pond, a hotly contested water feature on the battlefield. He decided to reconsolidate his forces and used some of them to stall Grant's advances and ordered the rest to retrograde to Shiloh Church. This plan succeeded in disrupting the tempo of Grant's advance.

Beauregard used his knowledge of the defense to buy time, economize his forces, and set up conditions to resume offensive operations. His plan was to—

- Retain decisive terrain, which in Beauregard's mind was forward of Shiloh Church and up to Water Oak Pond. This terrain left him a sizable footprint on the Shiloh battlefield.
- Fix Grant's forces using Water Oak Pond and nearby swamps. This would slow the tempo of the Union forces and perhaps desynchronize their efforts.
- Concentrate Grant's forces by getting him to commit his left flank at Water Oak Pond.

The Army of Mississippi executed defensive principles well, but Beauregard's plan failed in its use of surprise. Grant knew where Beauregard put his forces and understood what the Confederate forces were being used for. Grant could clearly see that Beauregard was trying to execute a retrograde, "a type of defensive operation that involves organized movement away from the enemy."¹¹ Grant believed he had forced Beauregard to initiate this action, but Beauregard believed he had done this on his own accord, so his confidence in his plan was still intact. Grant recognized the Confederate force as a rear guard, so he acted accordingly to reestablish the Union tempo. Beauregard thought he had slowed the Union force enough to accomplish his reorganization. The biggest problem Beauregard had in his plan to retrograde to Shiloh Church was in the determination of the Confederate main battle area. His forces did not concentrate their efforts enough to slow Union advances to buy the time needed.

The tactical lesson here is that communications make or break an operation. This lesson came from the Confederate Army's inability to employ all the aspects of a defense and its failed attempt to use a retrograde movement as the means

to regain the offensive. Beauregard understood how to execute the retrograde and his plan was solid, but his lack of coordination with subordinate units cost him the ability to use the retrograde properly. Beauregard's intent changed from a retrograde as a way to reestablish an offense to a retrograde as a way to withdraw. Because his intent changed in the middle of the battle, his forces were slow to react to his new plan. Beauregard knew how to do a lot of things well; he just did not do enough to regain the initiative and transition back to an offense.

Phase III

Reports continued that Grant's push was extremely successful, and Beauregard was shocked that his common operating picture was not accurate—again. However, Beauregard's scouts reported that Grant's men would not be able to pursue because Grant had stretched his lines too thin to maintain his tempo.¹² Once again, Beauregard analyzed his position and decided his best option to retain combat power was to withdraw from Shiloh. This effort would be a lot easier to coordinate since the Confederate communication lines were no longer stretched out, and what was left of his force was in the vicinity of Shiloh Church. Further, the Army of Mississippi's remaining artillery could cover the withdrawal. Beauregard positioned his rear guard in plain sight of the Union Army and began his withdrawal from Shiloh. Grant recognized what the enemy was doing and knew that by letting them retire from the field he had met his intent. The Union Army made no effort to pursue Beauregard's withdrawal and set up camp in the area around Shiloh Church. This ended the Battle of Shiloh.

Today's doctrine supports both Beauregard's and Grant's decisions in Phase III. However, neither the Confederate nor the Union leader executed their plan well. Beauregard's plan never put him in a position to destroy the enemy's ability to synchronize or stall his will to fight.¹³ As before, Beauregard did not have good situational awareness. It would have been better to execute the Confederate withdrawal from Shiloh at the end of Phase II, but Beauregard continued to try to retake the initiative. His execution was weak; he only minimally met the criteria for a defense and could not synchronize his efforts with his subordinate commanders. The Confederate withdrawal worked well, but this owed more to Grant's weakness than to Beauregard's plan. Beauregard used his fire support well, not so much by inflicting casualties but as an effective means to give his withdrawal support by fire. The coordination during the Confederate disengagement was strong and the only reason his rear guard was not defeated. But ultimately, Beauregard met his last intent—to preserve his combat power.

Grant's weakness in Phase III was based on stretching his supply lines too thin and exhausting his troops. If he had attached his resupply assets to his units in direct contact with the Confederates, they could have made sure those units did not run out of ammunition, and so could have continued their pursuit. Also, Grant's infantry and cavalry moved too fast to

integrate the Union artillery, keeping Grant from using one of his key battle systems. Grant did not set phase lines to control his tempo in Phase III, so Union troops pursued the Confederates until they were unable to continue. Stopping pursuit when they had the Confederates on the run was a direct result of this poor planning. Grant had the opportunity to destroy the Army of Mississippi but failed to do so—not for lack of mass but for lack of planning.

The tactical lesson learned here is at the expense of the Union. Failure in the combat, service, and support fight will stall an attack just as thoroughly as defeat by an enemy force. The end result of outrunning supply lines is a halt to the battle. When the enemy is conducting a retrograde with the intent to retire, it means the enemy was not defeated. In addition, Grant did not use his combat multiplier because his artillery could not keep up with his infantry and cavalry. The artillery could have destroyed Beauregard's rear guard and laid counter-battery fire on the Confederate guns.

Summary

The history books report that Grant was satisfied with the results of the Battle of Shiloh, but failing to defeat the enemy is not acceptable in today's Army, and it was not acceptable in the Civil War. 

Captain Shelton was commissioned through the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps, served with the 36th Engineer Group and the 11th Engineer Battalion at Fort Benning, Georgia. He deployed to Iraq with the 36th Engineer Group in 2005. He graduated from the Engineer Captain's Career Course in April.



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- ⁵ *Ibid*, p. 241.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 177-178.
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- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 3-1.
- ¹¹ FM 3-90, p. 8-5.
- ¹² Daniel, p. 241.
- ¹³ FM 3-90, p. 8-12.