



Engineering Victory: The Union Siege of Vicksburg

Justin S. Solonick

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On May 25, 1863, after driving the Confederate army into defensive lines surrounding Vicksburg, Mississippi, Union major general Ulysses S. Grant and his Army of the Tennessee laid siege to the fortress city. With no reinforcements and dwindling supplies, the Army of Vicksburg finally surrendered on July 4, yielding command of the Mississippi River to Union forces and effectively severing the Confederacy. In this illuminating volume, Justin S. Solonick offers the first detailed study of how Grant's midwesterners serving in the Army of the Tennessee engineered the siege of Vicksburg, placing the event within the broader context of U.S. and European military history and nineteenth-century applied science in trench warfare and field fortifications. In doing so, he shatters the Lost Cause myth that Vicksburg's Confederate garrison surrendered due to lack of provisions. Instead of being starved out, Solonick explains, the Confederates were dug out.

After opening with a sophisticated examination of nineteenth-century military engineering and the history of siege craft, Solonick discusses the stages of the Vicksburg siege and the implements and tactics Grant's soldiers used to achieve victory. As Solonick shows, though Grant lacked sufficient professional engineers to organize a traditional siege—an offensive tactic characterized by cutting the enemy's communication lines and digging forward-moving approach trenches—the few engineers available, when possible, gave Union troops a crash course in military engineering. Ingenious midwestern soldiers, in turn, creatively applied engineering maxims to the situation at Vicksburg, demonstrating a remarkable ability to adapt in the face of adversity. When instruction and oversight were not possible, the common soldiers improvised. Solonick concludes with a description of the surrender of Vicksburg, an analysis of the siege's effect on the outcome of the Civil War, and a discussion of its significance in western military history.

Solonick's study of the Vicksburg siege focuses on how the American Civil War was a transitional one with its own distinct nature, not the last Napoleonic war or the herald of modern warfare. At Vicksburg, he reveals, a melding of traditional siege craft with the soldiers' own inventiveness resulted in Union victory during the largest, most successful siege in American history.

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