OPERATIONS AROUND CORINTH

March 1862

"It was the greatest strategic position in the West between the Tennessee and Mississippi rivers and between Nashville and Vicksburg."

Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, writing of Corinth, Mississippi[1]

Less than three weeks after the fall of Fort Donelson, Grant's army moved south up the Tennessee River. In fact, most of the Federal troops in Tennessee, west of Nashville, and most of the Confederate troops scattered in that same area, plus others from as far south as Mobile and New Orleans, were all slowly converging on a small town just across the Tennessee line. In the spring of 1862, Corinth, Mississippi, was six years old with about 2,800 residents. The little town was significant because it was one of the most important railroad junctions in the western Confederacy. The Mobile & Ohio ran north and south while the Memphis & Charleston ran east and west.[2]

By the middle of March, there were at least six columns of troops (four Confederate and two Federal) that had either arrived in the Corinth area or were en route. The first troops arrived in mid-February from New Orleans, commanded by Brig. Gen. Daniel Ruggles. By the first of March, Ruggles, along with Brig. Gen. James R. Chalmers's brigade at Iuka, had about 5,000 men in the area around Corinth.

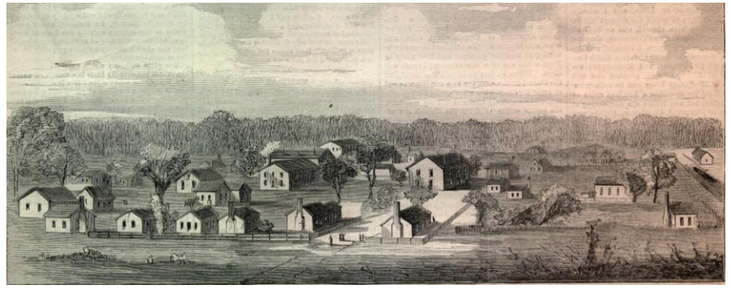
Ruggles deployed several units to watch for Federal activity. He sent two cavalry companies 18 miles north to Purdy, and ordered the 18th Louisiana Regiment with some cavalry and an artillery battery to a vantage point where they could observe traffic on the Tennessee River. Their post was a tiny settlement, which one soldier described as "three cabins and a pigsty," that sat on a bluff overlooking the river. It was locally known as Pittsburg Landing, and in just over five weeks, everyone in the nation would hear of it.[3]

Three other Confederate columns were also converging on Corinth. Gen. Beauregard was moving Maj. Gen. Polk's troops down from Columbus, Kentucky, and temporarily made his headquarters at Jackson, Tennessee. Maj. Gen. Braxton Bragg was bringing his command up from the Gulf Coast at Pensacola and Mobile, and Gen. A. S. Johnston was marching to Corinth by way of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and from Huntsville and Decatur, Alabama, with the troops he had managed to salvage after the fall of Fort Donelson. More than 40,000 Confederate soldiers would be in and around Corinth by the last week of March.

U.S. forces were in motion as well. By March 4th, Grant had his troops back at Fort Henry and Buell occupied Nashville after it was evacuated by the Confederates. Unknown to Grant, however, his commander, Henry Halleck, had been sending a stream of complaints about him to Washington and, upon arriving at Fort Henry, Grant found orders relieving him of command. Brig. Gen. C. F. Smith replaced Grant, with instructions to move the army south up the Tennessee River. The first troops departed two days later –the lead regiments of a new division of Ohio troops under Brig. Gen. William T. Sherman. Sherman's entire division arrived at Savannah, Tennessee, by March 12th, with five more Federal divisions to soon follow.

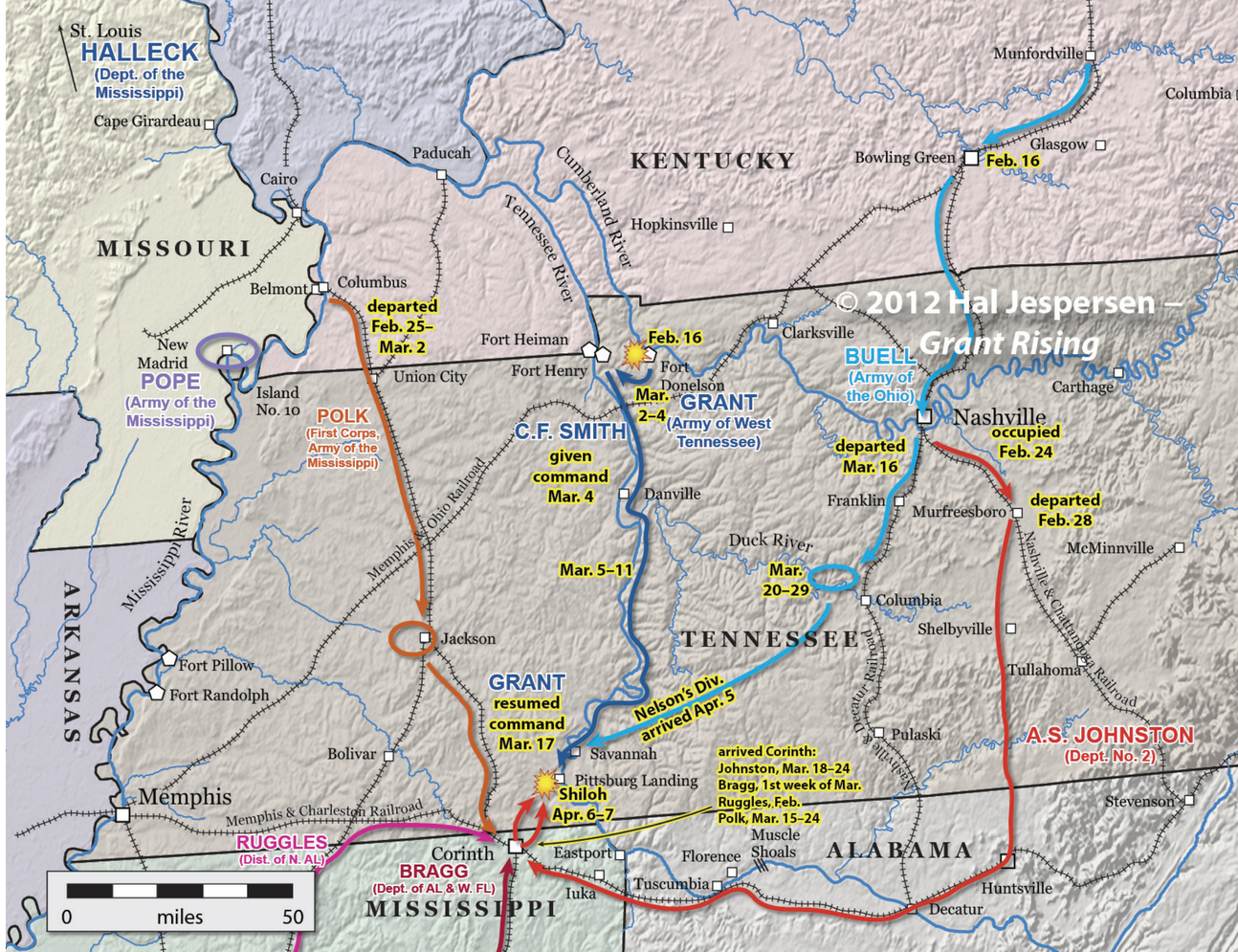
The last column headed toward Corinth was part of Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell's army at Nashville. After some resistance to the idea, Buell had agreed to send troops to support the move on Corinth, and on March 16th, he left Nashville on his way to Savannah. The march of over 100 miles, with rainy weather and swollen streams, took almost three weeks before his first troops reached the Tennessee River.

After relieving him of command on March 4th, Halleck may have thought he was finally rid of Ulysses S. Grant, who was no longer just an irritating subordinate. With his victory at Fort Donelson, and a promotion to major general, Grant was a national hero, and a possible rival. Halleck quickly discovered, however, that Grant had important friends in Washington, not the least of which was President Abraham Lincoln. Always sensitive to political realities, Halleck reversed his decision. On March 17th Grant arrived at Savannah and resumed command.[4]



1 Peter Cozzens, *The Darkest Days of the War*, 19ff.
2 Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh*, pages 69-70.
3 Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh*, pages 69-70.

4 Grant believed that Halleck was responsible for helping him reclaim his command and was grateful to him. Grant did not discover Halleck's duplicity until after the war.



BATTLE OF SHILOH

April 6, 1862: 5 a.m. to 9 a.m.

"Tomorrow ... we will water our horses in the Tennessee River."

Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, the night before Shiloh[1]

After two nights of rain, Sunday morning, April 6th dawned cool and clear. Johnston's army was finally in position to attack, but the configuration changed. In a telegram to President Davis, Johnson explained that his formation would be one line, with Polk on the left, Hardee in the center, and Bragg on the right.[2] This morning, however, his subordinate commands were stacked narrower and deeper. Hardee's corps was the front line, Bragg's corps a second line, parallel to Hardee but about 800 yards to the rear, followed by Polk's corps and the reserve corps under Breckinridge in column further back.[3] Johnston's basic strategy, however, was unchanged – to sweep around the Federal left, cut them off from Pittsburg Landing, and pin the enemy against Owl Creek.

The Federal forces were not taken completely by surprise. There was increased skirmishing during the last few days, mainly near Brig. Gen. William T. Sherman's 5th Division, and he was aware of Confederate forces of possibly regimental strength within a couple of miles to his front. He did not, however, consider them much of a threat. He sent the following note to Grant about 12 hours before the battle:

The enemy is saucy, but got the worst of it yesterday, and will not press out pickets far … I do not apprehend anything like an attack on our position.[4]

Neither Sherman nor any of the other Federal commanders had any idea that the entire Confederate army was almost within cannon shot on Saturday night, but one of them was about to find out.

SHILOAH MEETING HOUSE

About 3:00 am on Sunday morning, Col. Everett Peabody, commander of a brigade in Brig. Gen Benjamin M. Prentiss's division, sent out a large patrol led by Major James Powell.[5] Less than two miles out, Powell's Missouri and Michigan men flushed a few Confederate riders and then, just after 5:00 am, they ran into Maj. Aaron B. Hardcastle's 3rd Mississippi Battalion. About 500 green troops fired at each other for an hour while inflicting only 30 casualties, but the noise was enough to convince Gen. Johnston that the battle had begun and he ordered a general advance.

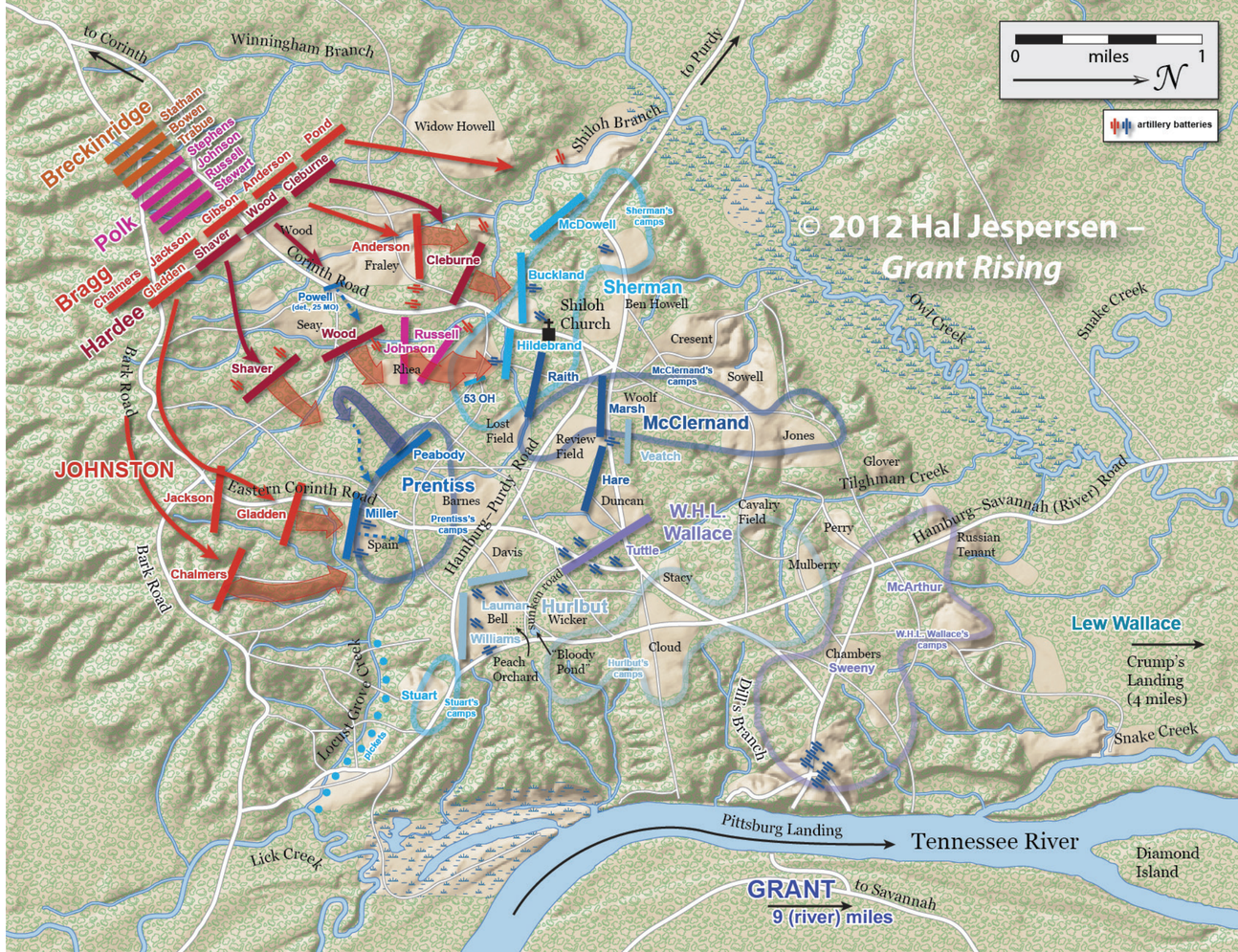
Col. Peabody's dawn patrol deprived the Confederates of complete tactical surprise, but, even with an hour or so of warning, few Federal units were prepared for such a massive attack. Col. Peabody reinforced his original patrol, and by 7:30 am, his brigade was in defensive position. Meanwhile, Brig. Gen. Prentiss alerted his other brigade on Peabody's left, commanded by Col. Madison Miller. Peabody's line was soon hit by Col. R. G. Shaver's brigade and part of Brig. Gen Sterling A. M. Wood's brigade. Miller's Federal brigade was attacked by the brigades of Brig. Gen. James R. Chalmers and Brig. Gen. Adley H. Gladden of Bragg's corps. Within an hour, Col. Peabody was dead and his brigade outflanked, Col. Miller was falling back, and Prentiss's 6th Federal Division was retreating in confusion.

Three of Sherman's brigades held the ground to Prentiss's right, near Shiloh Church (his fourth brigade was detached to the far left of the Federal encampment). The first Confederate unit to hit them was Brig. Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne's brigade, which split into two parts while working its way through the brush. Cleburne's right hit Col. Jesse Hildebrand's brigade while the left hit Col. Ralph P. Buckland's brigade. Here, the Federals fared better, with Cleburne's brigade thrown back and almost wrecked by Federal musket and artillery fire. More Confederate units moved forward to replace Cleburne's broken command, and the pressure continued to mount on Sherman's division.

Sherman refused to believe that Gen. Johnston's entire army was attacking until one of his aides was killed and he himself was wounded in the hand by a volley. By 8:00 am, two of Sherman's brigades were engaged and he requested help from Maj. Gen. John A. McClernand. McClernand sent Col. Julius Raith's brigade from his division, but it could not stop the disintegration of Hildebrand's brigade on Sherman's left.

By 9:00 am, Prentiss's division, on Sherman's left, was shattered. Sherman's line was still holding after two hours, but only just. More Confederate units were pressing his position around Shiloh Church and flowing around his exposed left flank. Sherman's retreat was just a matter of time.

[1] Roland, Albert Sidney Johnston: *Soldier of Three Republics*, page 325.
[2] OR-A volume 10, part 2, page 387.
[3] One of the brigades in Hardee's front line (Gladden) was on loan from Bragg.
[4] OR-A volume 10, part 2, page 94.
[5] For information on the make up and strength of Powell's patrol, see *Cunningham, Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, page 144ff plus notes 3, 5 & 10.



BATTLE OF CORINTH

October 3, 1862

"No army ever marched to battle with prouder steps, more hopeful countenances, or with more courage...."

Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn CSA, on his army at Corinth[1]

In spite of Earl Van Dorn's proud words, written about two weeks after the battle, Confederate soldiers may have felt less confident about their commander than he seemed to think about them. Many of the men present had fought under Van Dorn at Pea Ridge in March, 1862, and some blamed Van Dorn's timidity, not Federal prowess, for the Confederate defeat. This was Van Dorn's opportunity to redeem himself.

Three Confederate divisions camped near Chewalla the evening of October 1st and the next day pressed on toward Corinth, about eight miles away. Leading the advance was Brig. Gen. Albert Rust's brigade of Maj. Gen. Mansfield Lovell's division, and they soon ran into skirmishers from U.S. Col. John M. Oliver's brigade. Oliver's mission was to slow the Confederates and retreat to the outer defenses of Corinth while Rosecrans gathered his troops to meet Van Dorn's attack.

Oliver sparred with the Confederates all through the day on the 2nd, who went into camp that night about 4 miles from Corinth. The next morning, Van Dorn's main body was on the road by 4:30 am, and, by 8:00 am, Oliver's small force was pushed back to Corinth's outer fortifications, built by Gen. Beauregard's Confederate soldiers after the battle of Shiloh. Lovell's division pressed in along the Chewalla Road while Maj. Gen. Sterling Price and his two divisions moved to Lovell's left and prepared to attack between the Memphis & Charleston and Mobile & Ohio railroad tracks.

Col. Oliver's delaying tactics bought Rosecrans critical time. At 10:00 am, some of the Federal troops had still not arrived and others were moving into their positions. Rosecrans could not cover all of the outer fortifications with his available troops, so gaps resulted in the Federal line. The men of Brig. Gen. Thomas J. McKean's division faced Mansfield Lovell's Confederate division on the Federal left while the bulk of Price's two divisions under Louis Hébert and Dabney H. Maury fell on Brig. Gen. Thomas A. Davies's Federal division. Brig. Gen. Charles S. Hamilton's division was out of contact with Davies on the far right and Brig. Gen. David S. Stanley's Federal division was just approaching the town.[2]

Lovell's division began its assault about 10:00 am. Outnumbered, and with a mile wide gap between their right and Davies's left, the brigades of Oliver and Brig. Gen. John McArthur retreated. The temperature was now above 90 degrees and climbing, and fatigue and heat stroke began to pile up casualties in both armies along with the gunfire.

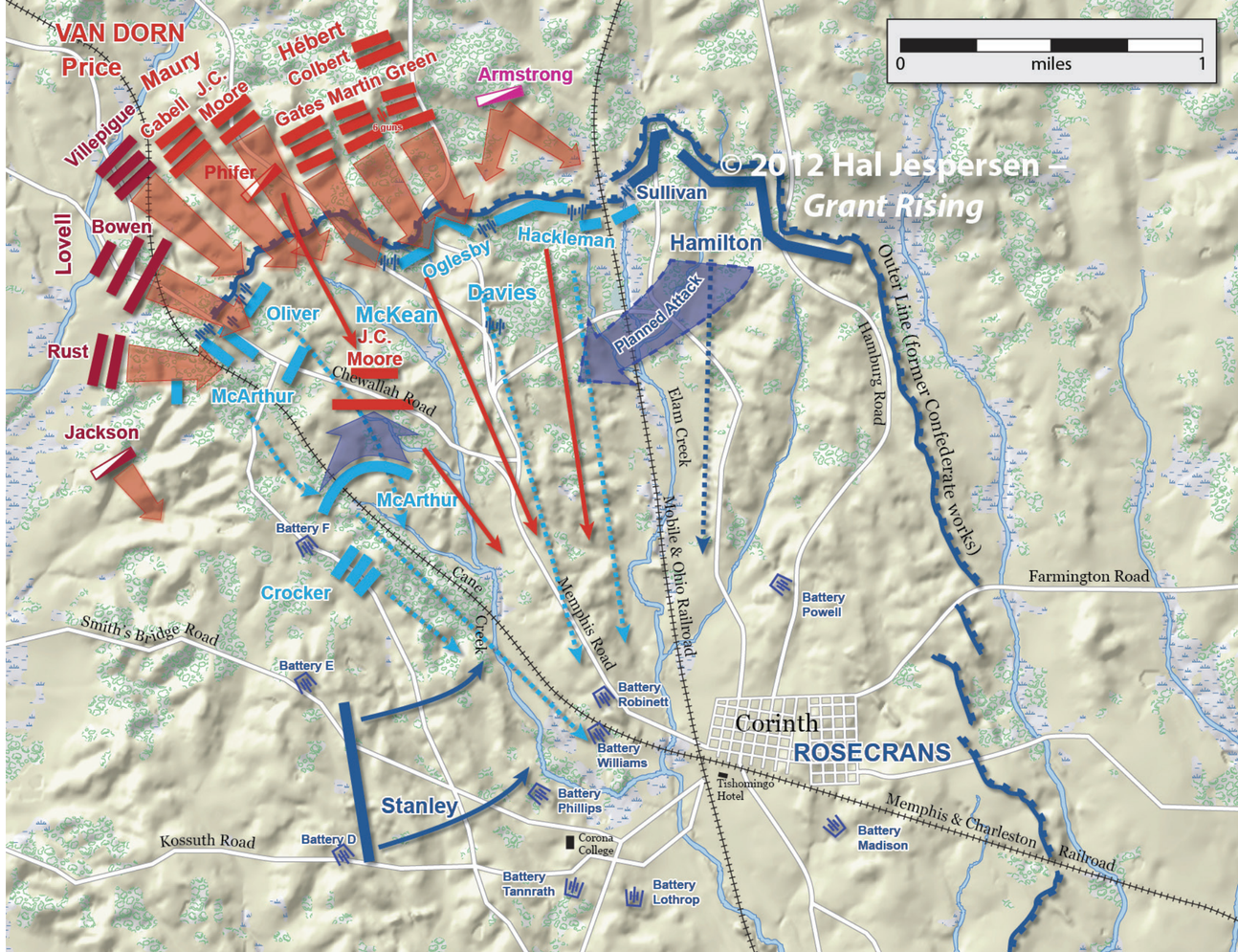
At about 11:00 am, the divisions of Hébert and Maury attacked, forcing back Richard J. Oglesby's brigade of Davies's Federal division. To Oglesby's right, Davies's other available brigade, under Brig. Gen. Pleasant A. Hackelman, was flanked and fell back as well while the Confederate brigade under Brig. Gen. John C. Moore poured through the gap on Davies's left.

Rosecrans planned on fighting a delaying action at the old Confederate outer works and then fall back to a much shorter and more compact line near the town, anchored by several strong points or "Batteries." By 3:00 pm, Davies's division and part of McArthur's brigade formed a line along the south edge of a large open field, about half a mile in front of Battery Robinett. The rest of McKean's division was some distance to the left, across the Memphis & Charleston tracks. About 4:00 pm Price's men attacked across the field in front of Davies, breaking the Federal line once again.

All afternoon, Hamilton's Federal division sat north of town, astride the Hamburg Road, while the battle passed a half mile to the west. Beginning about 3:00 pm, a series of orders passed between Rosecrans and Hamilton, aimed at getting Hamilton to swing to his left and attack the flank and rear of Price's line. Other than some skirmishing by Brig. Gen Jeremiah C. Sullivan's Federal brigade, however, nothing was accomplished.

Shortly after 5:00 pm, Van Dorn and Price decided to halt further attacks, and as darkness descended, both exhausted armies stopped to rest.[3] Confusion, fatigue, and thirst were rampant on both sides, and tired officers spent the night preparing to renew the battle the next morning.

[1] OR volume 17, part 1, page 378. (See Van Dorn's report on Corinth at 376ff.)

[2] Stanley camped near Kossuth the night before, about 8 miles away. The head of his column arrived about 11:00 am, and his first troops went into action just after noon.

[3] Many of the Confederate commanders believed that the inner works and the town of Corinth itself could have been carried had they been allowed to continue. See Cozzens, *The Darkest Days of the War*, pages 214-215.