



Bullet'n Backstory

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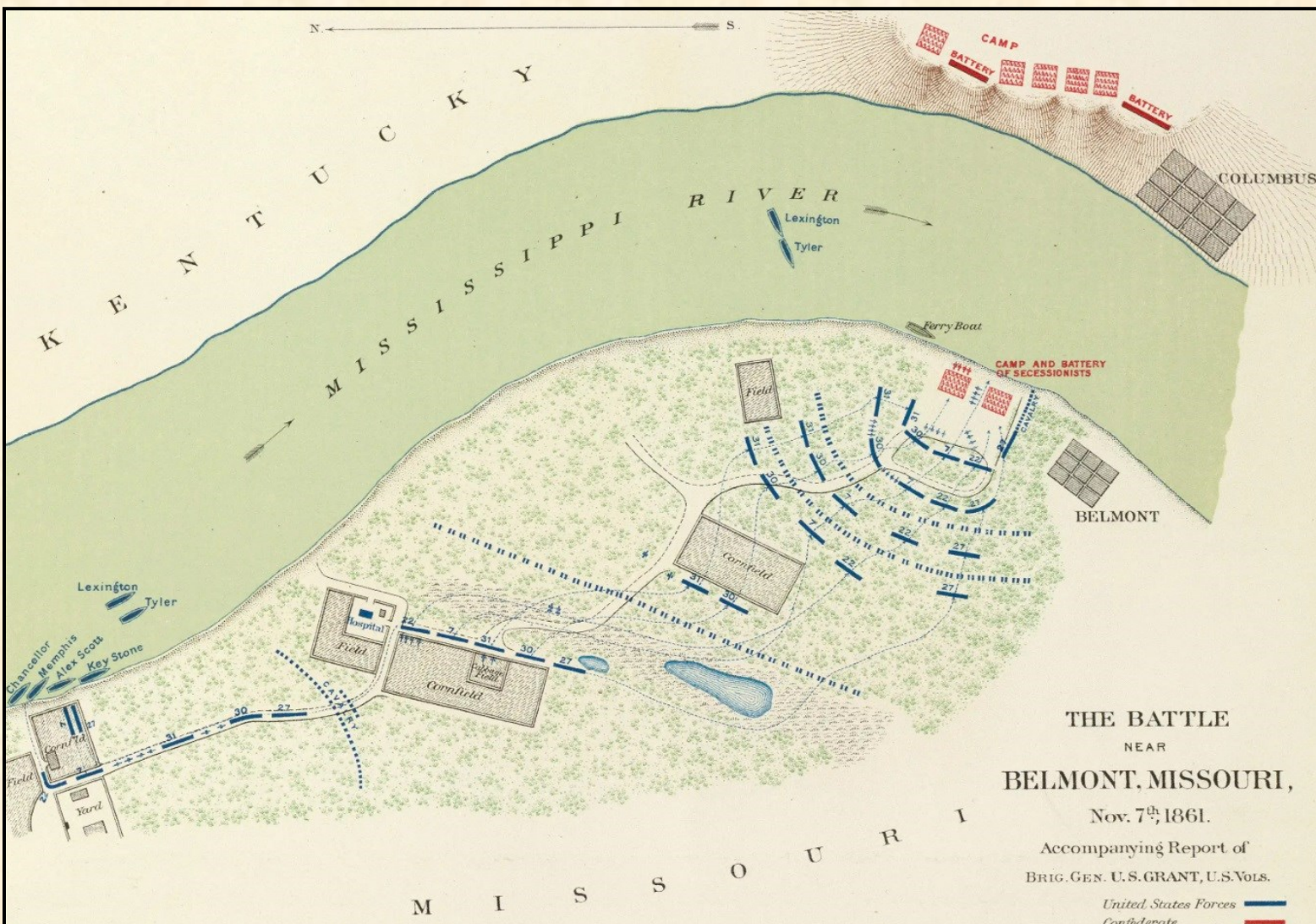
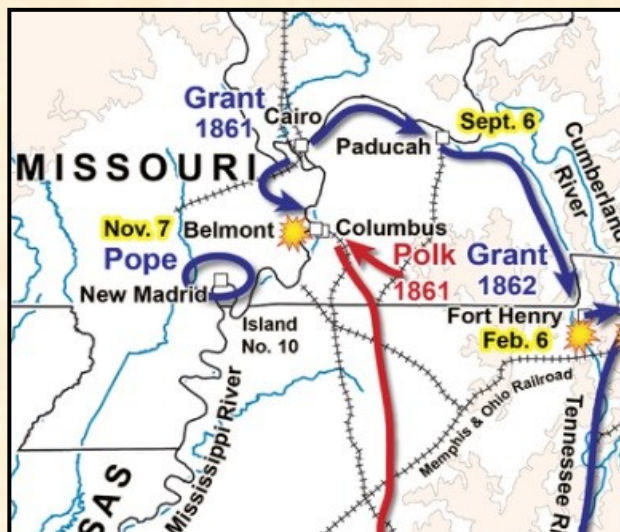
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First Test for a Future Legend: The Battle of Belmont (1861)

Following the outbreak of the Civil War, Kentucky emerged as a state with critical strategic importance to both sides of the conflict. As a border state and a slave state, its residents were split down the middle over the question of remaining in the Union or joining the Confederacy. Not even the state government could agree, with its pro-Confederate governor opposed by a pro-Union legislature. Landing in the middle, Kentucky announced its intention to remain neutral in the conflict. This position did not last long with the populace. Many residents streamed into Tennessee to volunteer for the Confederacy, while pro-Union recruitment camps appeared throughout Kentucky, in violation of state law.

To prevent the state from becoming Union territory, Confederate Maj. Gen. Leonidas Polk invaded Kentucky on Sept. 3, 1861, and seized the crucial town of Columbus. This town, situated close to a high bluff, overlooked a bend in the Mississippi River, making it a valuable position in support of maintaining control over the waterway. Polk immediately started reinforcing the position, establishing an anchored chain of rafts across the river to Belmont, Missouri, building Camp Johnston on the bluff, and anchoring the site with a powerful artillery emplacement. Though Polk's move made strategic sense, it angered the government of Kentucky, pushing them closer to supporting the Union. Three days after Polk took Columbus, Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, as Commander of the District of Southeast Missouri, loaded his men on transports and moved from Cairo, Illinois, to seize Paducah, Kentucky, at the juncture of the Tennessee and Ohio Rivers. The Confederate garrison fled south in advance of the Union approach. The Union forces entered Paducah and seized it without firing a shot. Following this success, Grant asked his superior, Maj. Gen. John C. Frémont, for permission to seize Columbus, but no such orders came. Union forces in the region made few moves over the next few months.

By late October, Frémont learned that Confederate forces planned to reinforce Arkansas from positions in Missouri. He ordered Grant to fake a move toward Columbus to keep Confederate forces from moving south into Arkansas. Grant sent 3,000 men into southeastern Missouri under Col. Richard Oglesby and ordered Brig. Gen. Charles F. Smith to move from Paducah into southeastern Kentucky. At the same time, Grant made his move turning a feint against Columbus into an attack on the corresponding river town of Belmont. He loaded over 3,100 men onto six steamboats, escorted by two gunships, and left Cairo on Nov. 6. Polk assumed Columbus was Grant's goal, but sent 2,700 of his 5,000 men to guard Belmont, under the command of Brig. Gen. Gideon J. Pillow. The two armies would meet the following morning.



First Test for a Future Legend: The Battle of Belmont (1861), cont.

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Grant's men disembarked at a farm three miles upriver, out of range of the Confederate battery on the bluff above Columbus. The Union infantry, made up of volunteers from Iowa and Illinois, lined up a mile west of Belmont, opposite Confederate forces drawn from Tennessee and Arkansas. The battle raged back and forth for several hours, with Grant leading every charge from the front. By midafternoon, the Confederate line started to break, forcing Pillow's men to withdraw to their shoreside camp. Once the Union artillery was in range of the camp, they opened fire, killing dozens of Confederate defenders. This led to a small rout, with defenders moving to the river to board transports for Columbus, leaving Belmont and the accompanying camp in the hands of the Union.

This victory, the first for Grant's mostly inexperienced troops, went to the heads of the Union soldiers, who immediately started celebrating by drinking, plundering, and otherwise whooping it up. In an effort to gain control of the chaos, Grant ordered the camp set ablaze, which inadvertently killed several wounded Confederate soldiers housed in the camp. The victory, however, was short lived. As Grant and his men marched back to their transports, with two pieces of captured artillery and over 100 prisoners, they came under attack - first by the Confederate artillery above Columbus and then by Polk, who had crossed the river with reinforcements. This forced a hurried withdrawal back to Paducah.

The results of the Battle of Belmont were mixed. On paper, each side suffered roughly the same number of casualties: 641 Confederate and 607 Union. In addition, the map had not changed, with Polk's forces retaining control of both Columbus and Belmont. These facts, combined with Grant's forced retreat, and his subsequent decision to pull back the men sent forward under Oglesby and Smith, led the Confederacy to consider Belmont a victory. From Grant's admittedly self-serving perspective, Belmont was a success. After all, the object had been to prevent the Confederate reinforcement of positions in Arkansas. Thanks to the Union attack on Belmont, no move would be made to remove the men guarding Columbus. More importantly, the Battle of Belmont gave Grant his first battle experience in the war, beginning his climb to eventual command over all Union forces.

This Month in Military History

Nov. 3, 1783: Upon the conclusion of the American Revolution, Gen. George Washington formally disbands the Continental Army, one day after publishing his *Farewell Orders issued to the Armies of the United States of America*, in which he thanked his officers and soldiers for their service.

Nov. 6, 1865: After circumnavigating the globe and sinking or capturing 37 enemy ships, the CSS *Shenandoah* becomes the last Confederate combat unit to surrender to Union forces.

Nov. 9, 1494: Sixty years after Cosimo de' Medici established a familial dynasty in Florence, his great grandson, Piero II, is forced to flee in the wake of an invasion by French king Charles VIII. The Medicis remain out of power in Florence until 1512.

Nov. 12, 1893: At the end of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the Durand Line Agreement establishes the international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Nov. 15, 655: King Oswiu of Bernicia defeats King Penda of Mercia at the Battle of Winwaed, marking the end of Anglo-Saxon paganism among the ruling kingdoms of England.

Nov. 18, 1803: Following the death of revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture, Haitian rebels under Jean Jacques Dessalines defeat French forces at the Battle of Vertières, leading to the establishment of the independent Republic of Haiti two months later.

Nov. 21, 1918: Ten days after signing the Armistice to end World War I, the German High Seas Fleet, consisting of five battlecruisers, nine battleships, seven cruisers, and 49 destroyers, surrenders to the British Grand Fleet.

Nov. 24, 1221: Mongol leader Genghis Khan defeats the army of Shah Jalal ad-Din, completing his conquest of the Khwarezmian Empire.

Nov. 27, 1095: In an effort to reduce infighting among European states, Pope Urban II, at the Council of Clermont, calls for Christian knights to descend upon the Holy Land and wrest it from the control of the Seljuk Turks. The resulting First Crusade accomplished this goal and sparked two centuries of crusader invasions.

Nov. 30, 1700: After defeating Denmark to open the Great Northern War (1700-1721) Charles XII of Sweden leads a victory over a Russian force that outnumber his men 3-to-1 at the First Battle of Narva. Russia swiftly recovers, however, and Tsar Peter I "the Great" will personally lead the capture of the city at the Second Battle of Narva in 1704.



Ferryboat chain anchor - Columbus-Belmont State Park (KY)

JMC Historical Document Collection

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