



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Last Grand Charge of the Civil War: The Battle of Fort Blakeley, Alabama

By Mike Bunn, April 17, 2020. Adapted from his forthcoming book, *The Thunder and Lightening of Battle: A Short History and Guide to the Battle of Fort Blakeley*.

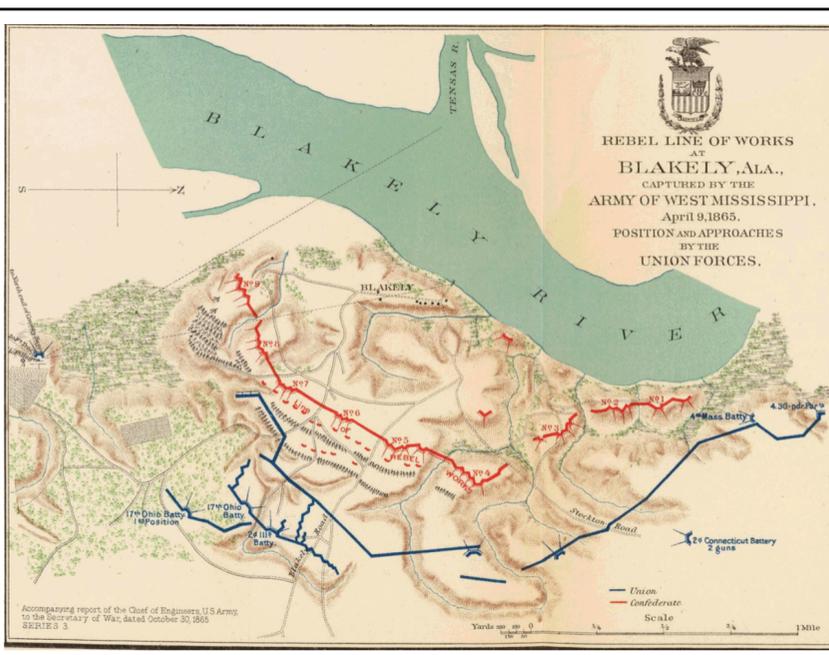
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Battle of Fort Blakeley, *Harper's Weekly* | Library of Congress

The open field charge is perhaps the ultimate hallmark of Civil War battles. These were calamitous moments which became seared into the memories of those who lived to tell the tale for the rest of their lives. They were the very essence of the bravery and dedication to ideals on display by so many men in both Blue and Gray.

The battle of Fort Blakeley took place on the Alabama Gulf Coast in the closing days of the war. Owing to several factors, not the least of which being that it happened to occur on the afternoon of Sunday, April 9, 1865, a date forever etched in America's consciousness for what transpired earlier that day in Virginia, it is barely mentioned in most histories of the war. It was not the war's largest charge, nor was it miles of open ground into the jaws of a figurative death trap. But what happened on the ravine-pocked plains along the Tensaw River opposite Mobile carried with it all the drama, danger, and soul-harrowing sound and fury that its veterans never forgot.



Rebel line of works, Blakeley, 1865 | U.S. War Department

The battle was prefaced by a siege during which Union forces, some 16,000 strong, constructed three parallels of earthworks progressively closer to the 3-mile-long line of Confederate works collectively known as Fort Blakeley. The fort guarded access to the enormous watershed that is the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, and hence interior Alabama, and protected the city of Mobile, 8 miles distant, from approach via that eastern corridor. Hearty, battle-tested Midwestern units were the largest of the number of the attackers, followed by an entire division of United States Colored Troops. Facing them would be a hodgepodge of about 3,000 Confederates, remnants of several veteran armies that had participated in some of the major actions of the Western Theater and also many young boys who recently had been pressed into service and had seen almost no previous military action.

The contending armies were within 300 yards of each other, with the Federals desirous of finally securing the fort's surrender and anxious that its garrison might escape across the Delta and into Mobile. They planned for a crushing assault designed to bring the campaign to a sudden close. With a cheer that rang through the surrounding longleaf pines, the Union troops leaped from their trenches en masse at 5:30 p.m. and headed toward the Confederates at a run. The line they formed, some 3 miles wide with an array of national and regimental flags, advanced over open ground that had been cleared to create a field of fire by the defenders.

Within seconds, the attackers barely had emerged from their trenches, when puffs of black smoke and earth could be seen shooting upward; portions of the Union force had stepped right into areas strewn with land mines, severing legs and arms from bodies and ripping through flesh and bone. Instantly, thousands of Rebel rifles sent heavy lead bullets whizzing downrange and artillery of a variety of calibers launched into action. A heavy cloud of sulphurous smoke from the discharge of all this weaponry soon hung heavy in the spring air, seemingly hastening dusk.



Maj. Gen. Edward Canby, who commanded Union forces at the Battle of Fort Blakeley | Library of Congress

The Federal column steadily advanced into the heart of what one soldier described as an "awful hissing seething roaring fire of flame," slowed only temporarily by the variety of obstructions placed by Confederates designed to arrest their progress: abatis, chevaux de frise, and sharpened stakes. It was all a sublime spectacle and scene that seared into the memories of the participants who survived the brief but intense fight.

"When the line was moving up," one Connecticut artilleryman remembered, "I lived years." Confederates would recall the scene with equal awe. Attempting to describe what he had witnessed in his diary, a Missouri soldier wrote simply that the charge was "an unusual sight, truly ... and one never to be forgotten. ... It appeared to me that all hell had turned loose and that every man in the United States was practicing on us with repeating rifles." An Illinois officer remembered how "for a mile on either side the earth seemed giving birth to men as they leaped up from the works and cheering shouting raging swept on like in color force and effect to a blue ocean wave" as "the thunder and lightening of battle rose above..."

"The scene was picturesque and grand," remembered Brig Gen. Christopher C Andrews. "From different points of view the assaulting lines could be seen for a mile or two. ... The regimental colors, though not in perfect line, were steadily advancing, and the troops were dashing on over and through the obstructions like a stormy wave."



Historic Blakeley State Park, site of last major battle of the Civi War | John Stanton

In his account of the battle penned decades later, a sergeant in the 97th Illinois poignantly reminded readers of enduring power of the memory of the experience on those who lived through it by writing, "Although it is now more than 69 years ago since this happened, as I go back and call to memory those scenes over again the tears are running down over my cheeks so fast they blind my eyes and I have to sop and wipe them away..."

Despite the stout resistance the outnumbered Confederates put up, sheer numbers overwhelmed them in less than half an hour. Once inside Fort Blakeley, the attackers swept the lines, capturing men by the hundreds. The last shots of the battle were fired a little after six o'clock on that April day, but their echoes resonate still today on the grounds of Historic Blakeley State Park, home to Alabama's largest Civil War battlefield.



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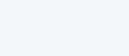
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