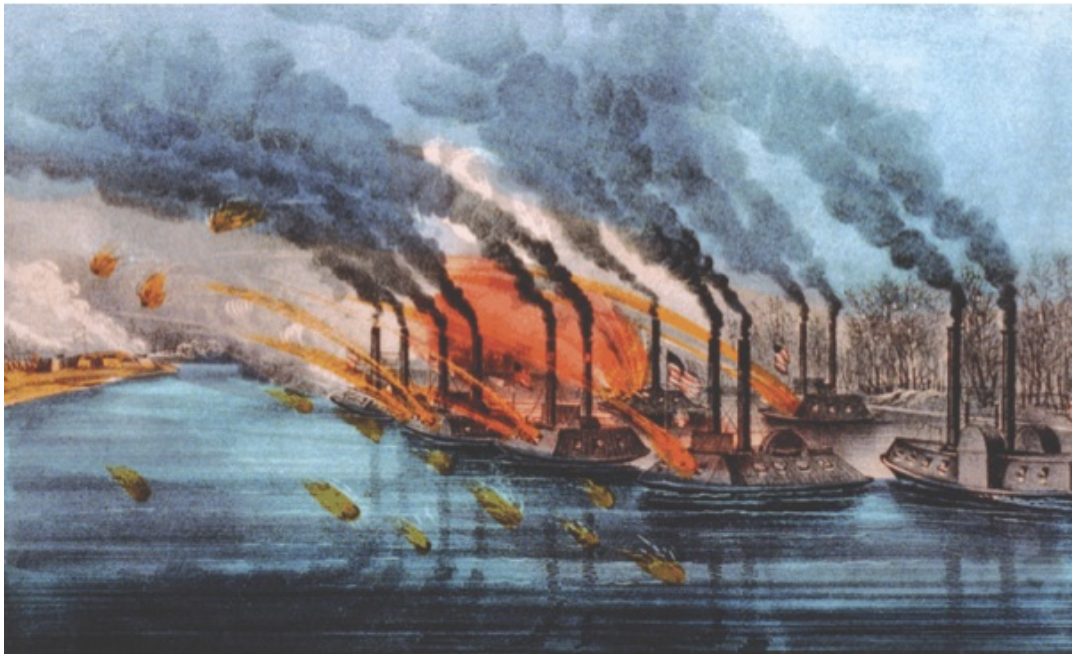

What has been most fascinating about writing about the Civil War month by month is that I never knew some of the campaigns that went on in the western theater. Also, it has almost been 50 years since I studied the Civil War in history class. We all know the names Gettysburg, Antietam, Manassas (1st and 2nd), Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. But the names of the earlier battles like Fort Henry, Fort Donelson and Roanoke were the battles that changed the tide of the war.

Last month in 1862, the Federals attacked the Confederates at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and defeated them. The Federals continued their march and broke the strength of the Confederates in eastern Kentucky. From these victories, the Federals carried the war into Tennessee.

Siege of Fort Henry, Feb. 6, 1862

Fort Henry was an important part of the Confederate defensive line in Northern Tennessee in the first year of the Civil War. The fort was to block the Tennessee River and thus preventing Union forces from using the river to enter the heart of the state. Unfortunately, the forts design was a poor design as it was built on low lying ground and thus prone to flood whenever the river were to rise…such as what happened to New Orleans during hurricane Katrina. The fort was also overlooked by high ground, which made it very venerable to attack. The Confederate garrison of only 2,500 soldiers was nowhere near enough to withstand a determined attack.

Union general Ulysses S. Grant, the commander of the Federal forces at Cairo, where the Ohio and Mississippi rivers meet, saw that he could use the Ohio River to attack Fort Henry on the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River. Grant moved 15,000 men along the rivers to Fort Henry, supported by a flotilla of the river navy under Andrew Foote.

Unfortunately, the attack did not go as planned. Grant landed his men several miles downstream from Fort Henry with the intention of attacking the fort from the rear while the gunboats bombarded it from the river. Heavy rain meant that Grant's men made slow progress. The same rain folded the lower levels of Fort Henry. On the morning of February 6th, Foote's gunboats found themselves attacking the fort without infantry support. With the poor design of the fort, only nine Confederate guns could effectively fire on the fleet. The commander of the fort realized that his position was hopeless, so he ordered his men to embark on the short journey to Fort Donelson, leaving an artillery company to defend the fort from the gunboats. Within two hours the artillerymen were overwhelmed and surrendered to the fleet. The loss of Fort Henry shattered the Confederate position in Tennessee. Three of the gunboats continued south along the Tennessee River, reaching as far as Alabama, capturing nine Confederate ships and destroying a key railroad bridge. Meanwhile, Grant was turning his attention towards Fort Donelson.

[redacted]

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