



Record Traffic From The Past

WIGGED WHEN HE SHOULD HAVE WAGGED

In March 1862, just as the Peninsula Campaign was getting underway, signaling made its first appearance in combat west of the Appalachians. The immediate result was a cease-fire order on both sides of the battle. Union gunboats were pressing their attack on Island No. 10 in the Mississippi. A Confederate flagman mounted the breastworks of a battery on the river shore and attempted to make contact with a distant battery. At once the guns fell silent all around—the signal flag had been mistaken for the white flag of surrender.

A lieutenant from the Union commander's flagship went forward in a small boat to receive the surrender, and the Confederate general raced his horse madly around the river bend to find out "why the hell the battery was giving up." As the lieutenant was about to land under the truce flag, the general met him at the water's edge and confessed that he himself had also been fooled, but explained it was all the mistake of a new-fangled signal system—and he'd be greatly obliged if the Union commander would kindly resume shooting.

SIGNAL WHAT?

Three or four weeks before the surrender incident, the first signal detachment had been assigned to the Army of the Ohio, and flag telegraphy was first used in the service of that Army, though not in combat, on 25 February 1862. The army was advancing on Nashville then, and at the Big Barren River the flags were used to signal boats and to control the ferrying operations during the river crossing.

This was afterward described as an impressive demonstration of the value of signaling in speeding up an opera-

tion of that kind. But this news was slow in spreading. In April 1862 MG George H. Thomas, while visiting the headquarters of MG William T. Sherman at Pittsburg Landing, noticed the absence of signalmen there. With the aid of his binoculars, he discovered one of Sherman's units dug in on a hilltop 3 or 4 miles distant, but he could see no signal station.

"Where's your signal corps?" he asked casually.

"Signal corps? What's that?" Sherman asked in reply.

SHOULD HAVE STAYED IN BED

On April 6, 1862, the day of the Battle of Pittsburg Landing, a signal detachment arrived for service with the Army of the Tennessee, but the commanding general of that army, MG Grant, was too busy to talk to its commander. So, in a drenching downpour, the signalmen were left to fend for themselves. An artillery officer took them in, and shared his tent, coffee, and salt pork. Back of his display of kindness, however, he had a plan; for as far as he knew, only the Confederate Army had signalmen, and he thought these men must therefore be spies. He fed them only to keep them in one spot while he quietly called the guard.

Within the next few days, however, the signalmen were attached to the Army of the Tennessee and were settling down to work. The flagmen were hampered by the many spectators they attracted, and to overcome this difficulty, the two officers enlisted volunteers to stand guard around the flagging area and keep the crowds back.

This arrangement had barely been set up when one officer, lowering his telescope at the end of an incoming message, found the flagging area invaded by a man on horseback. Exasperated, he yelled an angry "Get the hell out of here!" When he looked closer, he saw that the intruder was MG Grant, getting his first impression of flag telegraphy. Historians failed to record the reactions of either Grant or his horse.