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## “Wrecked cars and suffering humanity”: The Fortunes of the 33rd Illinois

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# “Wrecked cars and suffering humanity”: The Fortunes of the 33rd Illinois

## **Abstract**

The men of the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry were out of their minds with boredom in the closing months of 1864. Those veterans who remained from the campaigns of the year before could recall the proud service of their regiment. Mustered into service at Camp Butler, Illinois in September of 1861, the 33rd has spent the first year of its war fighting minor skirmishes in the trans-Mississippi theater. Then, in the late fall of 1862, the 33rd Illinois was transferred to the First Brigade, First Division, XIII Corps of the Army of the Tennessee.

[*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 33rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | United States History

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### “Wrecked cars and suffering humanity”: The Fortunes of the 33rd Illinois

OCTOBER 8, 2013

By Bryan Caswell, '15

The men of the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry were out of their minds with boredom in the closing months of 1864. Those veterans who remained from the campaigns of the year before could recall the proud service of their regiment. Mustered into service at Camp Butler, Illinois in September of 1861, the 33rd has spent the first year of its war fighting minor skirmishes in the trans-Mississippi theater. Then, in the late fall of 1862, the 33rd Illinois was transferred to the First Brigade, First Division, XIII Corps of the Army of the Tennessee.

Commanded by Major General John A. McClernand until June of 1863, when he was replaced by Major General Edward O.C. Ord, the XIII Corps would take part in one of the greatest military campaigns ever waged on the North American continent: Ulysses S. Grant's Vicksburg campaign. The 33rd Illinois fought with distinction at nearly every major battle of Grant's final push towards Vicksburg in the spring and summer of 1863. They drove through a Confederate delaying action at Port Gibson on May 1 before bloodlessly capturing the Mississippi state capital of Jackson two weeks later. Wheeling to the west, Grant's army and the 33rd along with it then proceeded to drive through Confederate General John C. Pemberton's feeble efforts to halt the Union juggernaut and avoid a siege, first giving battle at Champion Hill on May 16 and at the Big Black River Bridge on May 17. Having finally reached the city itself, the men of the 33rd Illinois would take part in both the failed early assaults on Vicksburg and the month-long siege that followed.

Even greater than the distinction of serving in this crucial campaign was the incredible luck of the 33rd Illinois while it did so. The regiment suffered only thirteen casualties at Port Gibson, three at Champion Hill, another thirteen at Big Black River Bridge, and seventy-two throughout the entirety of the siege. Of these 101 total casualties, only fourteen were killed, all others listed as wounded.

After the capture of Vicksburg, the 33rd Illinois had been transferred down to New Orleans and participated in small actions in the countryside surrounding the Mississippi

delta. Enticed by the promises of the Federal government for men who extended their period of service, the entire regiment re-enlisted as veterans in January of 1864, after which they were promptly assigned to garrison duty around New Orleans. For the next year, the veterans of the 33rd Illinois would guard stretches of the many railroads around the city. It was mind-numbing work, only punctuated briefly by the arrival of new men to the regiment in January of 1865. Thus when orders came in March for the 33rd Illinois to join the XVI Corps and take part in the siege of Mobile, Alabama, the men could not have been happier. The regiment boarded the train to take them to their new post with excitement, eager to finally return to campaigning.

Just when it had appeared that the 33rd's luck had returned, however, tragedy struck. On March 2, 1865, as the locomotive traveled along the tracks towards the regiment's rendezvous with the XVI Corps, one of the soldiers noticed a horse galloping alongside the train. Suddenly, the animal turned and attempted to cross the tracks just in front of the engine, which did not have nearly enough time to stop. Plowing into the horse at a speed of only ten miles an hour, the train did not possess the force necessary to throw the animal's body free of the tracks, and so began to de-rail in the face of the jarring deceleration and blockage. The entire train lifted free of the tracks in a massive wreck, piling the cars behind on the cars in front. The survivors of the wreck were shocked at what had happened as they surveyed the human and mechanical carnage that surrounded them. Nine men were killed outright, while another seventy-two were injured, many severely. The 33rd Illinois's luck had finally run out.

The remainder of the regiment would continue on to Mobile and be actively engaged in the operations there, during which it would suffer only twelve more casualties before being mustered out of service without incident in November. The veterans of the 33rd Illinois would forever remember the horror of that day in March of 1865, as their comrades were laid low not by Rebel bullets but by a freak railroad accident. Yet one man could not simply remember; he would be forced to live with the consequences of that accident for the rest of his life.

To be continued...

#### Sources

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