



Shiloh In Hell Before Night

James Lee McDonough

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Colorful, dramatic, blundering, and tragic – these are some of the adjectives that have been applied to the two-day engagement at Shiloh. This battle, which bears the biblical name meaning “place of peace,” was one of the bloodiest encounters of the Civil War. The Union colonel, whose words give the present book its title, foretold the losses when he told his men: “Fill your canteens Boys! Some of you will be in hell before night....”

Fought in the early spring of 1862 on the west bank of the Mississippi state line, Shiloh was, up to that time, the biggest battle of American history. One hundred thousand men were involved, and major Civil War commanders such as Grant, Sherman, Johnston, Beauregard, Bragg, and Forrest participated. The battle took the life of Johnston and it left a lasting impact on the reputation of other commanders. More-over, it played a significant role in the campaign for control of the Mississippi Valley.

Although hundreds of books have been written about the Civil War and its battle, questions about the disorganized struggle at Shiloh have continued to perplex historians. Why was Grant absent when his army was attacked? Why did Grant and Sherman apparently ignore evidence of a Confederate advance? What happened to Lew Wallace that he never got his division into the fight on the first day of battle? Why did it take the Rebels so long to make their way from Corinth to the battlefield? Did the Rebels really have a distinct opportunity to win the battle, as it seems in retrospect, or were they doomed from the start? Were Johnston and Beauregard working at cross-purposes? Shiloh-In Hell Before Night provides answers or clues to answers of clues to answers for these and other questions arising from this controversial engagement.

The author tells his story by placing Shiloh in the larger context of the war and by exploring the very personal side of the conflict through the words of the Union and Confederate participants, officers and common soldiers alike. Touches of humor and even or romance are revealed in the midst of the carnage, but the overriding element is the specter of death. Among those who survived, the soldiers who had been eager to “see the elephant,” as they commonly referred to combat, could never again feel so eager for a fight.

James Lee McDonough is professor of history at Auburn University, and the author of Stones River – Bloody Winter in Tennessee, Chattanooga – A Death Grip on the Confederacy, and the co-author of Five Tragic Hours: The Battle of Franklin.

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