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The Battle Of Peach Tree Creek: Hood's First Effort To Save Atlanta

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Review

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Foreshadowing the Fall: A Prelude

On July 20, 1864, Union and Confederate forces clashed on the northern outskirts of Atlanta in the first of several major battles for the city. At Peach Tree Creek General John Bell Hood, the newly appointed as Commander of the Confederate Army of Tennessee, launched an attack against the right wing of the Union Army of the Cumberland under General George H. Thomas. The stakes were high. As Earl J. Hess points out in his new book on the engagement, “To be driven back to the north side [of Peach Tree Creek] would be rightfully seen as a major military defeat with potentially dire consequences for the Northern war effort as a whole.” (6) Hess’s meticulous research – over fifty archives are listed in the bibliography – reveals some interesting details. Peach Tree Creek, contrary to its name, may not have harbored any fruit trees at all. The name may very well be a corruption of a pine tree that was known to Native American for producing “a good deal of pitch,” which became corrupted to “peach.” The creek on that hot July afternoon amounted to “a relatively small stream, fifteen to twenty feet wide but it had steep banks and a sandy bottom.” (39)

Hood planned to hit the Federals after they had crossed creek thereby pinning the bluecoats against the natural water obstacle. In one spot, an entire Confederate division assaulted a lone Union division. Yet such was the state of Confederate field leadership that its corps and division commanders did not press their numerical advantage to exploit the one-and-a-mile gap in the Union line. As Hess made clear, the battle at Peach Tree Creek had its share of drama and bloodletting, but the Confederates failed to capitalize on their tactical advantages. Union fortitude, doggedness, and not the least, sufficient numbers, meant that the defenders held the field when night came. What Hood and Jefferson Davis hoped for was a dramatic turnaround that would bring to a halt

William T. Sherman's march through the heart of the Confederacy. The outcome proved disappointing to the Confederate leadership, and Sherman's forces retained the offensive initiative at nightfall.

In their victory the Federals lost 1900 out of some 20,000 bluecoats engaged; the retreating rebels suffered 2500 casualties out of the 26,000 men they sent into battle on that hot, muggy day. The battle can be seen as microcosm of the war itself; initial success by the South ultimately became undone before the unbreakable will, steady leadership, and superior manpower of the North.

Six weeks and several battles later, Hood had no choice but to abandon Atlanta to Sherman. The fall of Atlanta on September 2, 1864 unquestionably stiffened the Northern public's will to prosecute the war and helped ensure Lincoln's reelection victory in November. Hood retained command of the Army of Tennessee. His belief in aggressive attack would lead him to wreck his army in the disastrous battles of Franklin and Nashville several months later. By the end of 1864, the Confederate army in the Western theatre had effectively ceased to exist.

Hess offers a critical assessment of the role that leadership and morale played in the outcome of the battle, and indeed, the entire Western theatre. The Confederate army in the West did not solve its longstanding problem with leadership at the top. Disputes, rivalries, and intrigue within the high command proved a persistent problem that ultimately left rebel forces demoralized and debilitated. Hess stakes his ground by criticizing Davis and the leadership vacuum within the Confederate Western army. Writes Hess, "Davis' choices were limited more by his own mind than by the supply of capable officers available. If the Confederate government could not muster a suitable general to command its major army in the West other than by choosing someone [Hood] whose first reaction was to cancel the promotion and who felt so overwhelmed that he could barely cope with it, then something was seriously wrong with the entire Confederate army. There is no comparable story to be found in the history of the Union war effort." (38)

Hess has few kind words to say of both Confederate generals of the Army of Tennessee. Of Joseph E. Johnston, Hess writes, "The corporate spirit of the Army of Tennessee had declined from its willingness to engage in fierce offensive tactics in previous battles to a decidedly defensive mind-set under Johnston's questionable tutelage." (235) Hess has equally sharp words for

Johnston's replacement: "Hood was probably the worst choice Davis and [General Braxton] Bragg could have made. Other than an aggressive, confident spirit, Hood held no other qualifications for such an important position." (236) As much as Peach Tree Creek signaled the decline of the morale in the Confederate rank and file, "the Federal armies opposing Hood were filled with men accustomed to winning on the battlefield." (234)

Hess divides the battlefield, and his book, into sections so as to allow the reader to understand both the particulars of each engagement and how the parts added up to a greater sum. Certain details provided by the author are worth noting. An Indianan brigade commander, Benjamin Harrison, saw heavy action that July day and would later rise to commander-in-chief as the 23rd president. Hood at Atlanta faced his old West point classmates, John M. Schofield, and James B. McPherson, both now Union generals. "Sherman [Class of 1840] took comfort in noting that Hood graduated forty-fourth in the class of 1853, whereas Schofield had graduated seventh and McPherson first." (31) McPherson fell in battle two days after Peach Tree; both his classmates would survive the war. Hess fills his book with not just the thoughts and intentions of officers and the opinions and observations of lowly grunts. Hood put his best spin on the battle in his evening report to Richmond: "[Our] corps drove the enemy into his breastworks, but did not gain possession of them." (189) In contrast, Hamlin Coe of the 29th Michigan wrote of more immediate concerns in his diary post-battle: "I never suffered so from heat before. My clothes were as wet as though I had been in water." (183)

Hess effectively walks the reader through the strategic maneuvering and geographic dispositions of the two opposing armies that preceded the battle. Hess devotes no less than the last fifth of the book to discussing both the immediate aftermath of the battle and the subsequent unfolding of events that led to Atlanta's fall to Sherman six weeks after the veteran bluecoats stood their ground south of Peach Tree Creek. Quite vivid is Hess's description of burying the bodies left on the field and the pitiful sufferings of wounded. In sum, Hess offers both small details (the nature of the terrain, the heat and humidity that sapped the men's strength as the battle raged, the blackberries ripening on the bushes by the Creek, the tears in the eyes of Union General John W. Geary as he looked upon the dead body of his aide at battle's end) and the larger picture (the role of the Atlanta campaign within the larger strategic questions facing Richmond and Washington, the debilitating intrigue and squabbling within the Confederate high command).

In a way, leading the armies into battle at Peach Tree Creek is a lot like writing a book about the battle. Writes Hess in his assessment of Hood's fatal shortcomings as army commander, "To a significant degree, commanding a field army demanded a certain degree of abstract thinking...and a habit of thorough study of a myriad of topics associated with logistics, geography, politics, and morale." (237-238) Where Hood fell short in his craft, Hess got it right in his account of the Battle of Peach Tree Creek.

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