

Battle of Atlanta

Date: July 22, 1864

Principal Commanders

- Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman [US]
- Gen. John Bell Hood [CSA]

Forces Engaged

- US: Military Division of the Mississippi (34,863)
- CSA: Army of Tennessee (40,438)

Estimated Casualties

12,140 Total (US 3,641 | CSA 8,499)

Overview

Following the Battle of Peachtree Creek, Hood determined to attack Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson's Army of the Tennessee. He withdrew his main army at night from Atlanta's outer line to the inner line, enticing Sherman to follow. In the meantime, he sent William J. Hardee with his corps on a fifteen-mile march to hit the unprotected Union left and rear, east of the city. Wheeler's cavalry was to operate farther out on Sherman's supply line, and Gen. Frank Cheatham's corps were to attack the Union front. Hood, however, miscalculated the time necessary to make the march, and Hardee was unable to attack until afternoon. Although Hood had outmaneuvered Sherman for the time being, McPherson was concerned about his left flank and sent his reserves—Grenville Dodge's XVI Army Corps—to that location. Two of Hood's divisions ran into this reserve force and were repulsed. The Rebel attack stalled on the Union rear but began to roll up the left flank. Around the same time, a Confederate soldier shot and killed McPherson when he rode out to observe the fighting. Determined attacks continued, but the Union forces held. About 4:00 pm, Cheatham's corps broke through the Union front at the Hurt House, but Sherman massed twenty artillery pieces on a knoll near his headquarters to shell these Confederates and halt their drive. Maj. Gen. John A. Logan's XV Army Corps then led a counterattack that restored the Union line. The Union troops held, and Hood suffered high casualties.

Results: Union victory

Source: United States National Park Service

ATLANTA CAMPAIGN

May 7-13, Rocky Face Ridge

May 13-15, Resaca

May 17, Adairsville

May 25-26, New Hope Church

May 26-June 1, Dallas

May 27, Pickett's Mill

June 9-July 3, Marietta

June 22, Kolb's Farm

June 27, Kennesaw Mountain

July 5, Pace's Ferry

July 20, Peachtree Creek

July 22, Battle of Atlanta

July 28, Ezra Church

Aug. 14-15, Dalton

Aug. 20, Lovejoy's Station

Aug. 31-Sept. 1, Jonesborough

On July 21 Sherman's three armies were still more or less separated. Better yet, Wheeler reported that as McPherson's army marched in on Atlanta from the east, it had its left flank "in the air" (Sherman had sent Kenner Garrard's cavalry east to wreck the Georgia Railroad). This situation presented Hood with an opportunity to launch a flank attack, like the one made famous by Jackson at Chancellorsville. Hood planned for his forces to drop back from their outer lines north of the city into the main fortified perimeter around the city on the night of July 21-22; Stewart and Cheatham would hold the works. Hardee's corps would march through and out of the city, southeast then northeast toward Decatur, guided by Wheeler's cavalry and jump into McPherson's left-rear, while Wheeler attacked McPherson's wagon trains. It was an ambitious plan, calling for a 15-mile night march by Hardee's troops and a dawn attack on the 22nd. But a late start, exhaustion of the men, a hot night, dusty roads and poor service from the cavalry combined to bring the four assault divisions not nearly far enough into McPherson's rear when Hardee, well behind schedule, decided to deploy. Then rough terrain added further delay—Confederate Maj. Gen. W. H. T. Walker was shot and killed getting his division into place. Hardee's surprise attack did not begin till shortly after noon.

The Federals were blessed with a lot of good luck that day. By chance, a Union division under Brig. Gen. Thomas W. Sweeny happened to be in just the right position to meet Hardee's opening assault. Instead of overrunning hospital tents and wagon trains in McPherson's rear, Walker's and Bate's troops ran instead face-to-face into a division of veteran enemy infantry.

General McPherson, having left Sherman's headquarters at the Augustus Hurt house (now Carter Center) just before the firing started, was on this part of the field watching Sweeny contend with the Rebels. Then he rode off to see how Frank Blair's Seventeenth Corps was doing; by now it had been struck by Cleburne's hard-hitting division. McPherson and his staff were riding down a wagon road when they unexpectedly ran into part of Cleburne's line. "He came upon us suddenly," remembered Capt. Richard Beard of the 5th Confederate:

"I threw up my sword as a signal for him to surrender. He checked his horse, raised his hat in salute, wheeled to the right and dashed off to the rear in a gallop. Corporal Coleman, standing near me, was ordered to fire, and it was his shot that brought General McPherson down."

McPherson's subordinates dashed off. One Union officer struck a tree in his flight; the blow smashed his pocket watch and froze the time of the general's death—2:02 p.m. Confederate Captain Beard came up to the body and saw a bullet hole in the back, near the heart. He stayed only long enough to identify the fallen enemy officer as McPherson before continuing his advance. Later, one of McPherson's staff officers led an ambulance back to the scene, retrieved the general's corpse, and bore it to Sherman's headquarters. Sherman was moved with grief for his friend, only the second Union army commander killed during the war.

Cleburne's attack initially overran part of the Union line, capturing two guns and several hundred prisoners. Then the Southerners ran up against infantry and artillery on a hill occupied by Brig. Gen. Mortimer Leggett's division, and were stopped. Maney's Confederate division joined in the fight, but Leggett held onto his hill.

Around 3:00 p.m. Hood ordered Cheatham's division to launch an attack from Atlanta's eastern line of works. Cheatham's assault against the Federal line held by Logan's Fifteenth Corps met with initial success, overrunning the Yankee line at the Troup Hurt House and capturing artillery, until a Union counterattack forced it back. Cleburne's and Maney's divisions gave up their fight, too, as at the end of the afternoon the Confederates retired to their initial positions. The Battle of Atlanta was ended, save for sporadic artillery and rifle fire into the night. General Logan, named to replace McPherson for the moment, reported 3,722 killed wounded or missing in the Army of the Tennessee. Hardee counted 3,299 casualties in his corps, while Cheatham's lost probably half that number. Adding in several hundred casualties in Wheeler's cavalry (from its unsuccessful attack on the Union wagon train at Decatur) Confederate losses on July 22 adds up to about 5,500. Hood's effort to roll up Sherman's left flank had failed.