

The Battle of Peach Tree Creek: Hood's First Sortie, 20 July 1864

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Recommended Citation

Stith, Matthew (2014) "The Battle of Peach Tree Creek: Hood's First Sortie, 20 July 1864," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.2.08

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss2/7>

Review

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Spring 2014

Jenkins, Sr., Robert D. *The Battle of Peach Tree Creek: Hood's First Sortie, 20 July 1864*. Mercer University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-88146-396-5

Hood Starts a Downward Spiral

Civil War scholars have long recognized William T. Sherman's 1864 Atlanta Campaign as a critically important turning point in the conflict. Sherman's success in Georgia helped ensure Abraham Lincoln's reelection and, ultimately, Union victory. Yet Sherman's campaign—especially those engagements leading directly to Atlanta's fall—have been overshadowed by events further north and east where, that same summer, Ulysses S. Grant and George G. Meade slowly and brutally whittled away at Robert E. Lee's army at Petersburg. While the high cost of the Federal pressure against Richmond dampened civilian support for the war effort, it had been a tactical necessity. Sherman's push against Atlanta needed to balance such gloomily necessary fighting by refocusing northern attention on Federal success deep in the heart of the Confederacy. But for Robert D. Jenkins, Sr., such success at Atlanta—and the war as a whole—had been contingent upon the tactical steps and missteps at a series of battles north of Atlanta at the heart of which was the intense engagement at Peach Tree Creek. Indeed, Jenkins contends, Confederate loss at the battle “was the beginning of the end for the Deep South and the Confederacy” (xvi). Although similar arguments could be made about any number of engagements during the war, Jenkins's hefty volume is a splendid tactical history and is sure to long remain the most comprehensive account of the Battle of Peach Tree Creek.

Jefferson Davis had relieved Gen. Joseph Johnston from command just days before the engagement at Peach Tree Creek, leading to confusion and miscommunication in an already intense and complex situation. In Johnston's place, the embattled Confederate president promoted battle-hardened and ambitious Gen. John Bell Hood. The July 20 battle served as Hood's first

significant engagement as new commander of the Confederate forces defending Atlanta. For Jenkins, the timing of such a move—only days before the Confederate counter-offensive originally planned by Johnston—set the stage for Confederate defeat. Johnston had hoped to take advantage of the splintered Union invasion force which Sherman had split into thirds. With a rare numerical balance, Hood followed through with Johnston's plan and ordered his 20,000 Confederates to strike Union Gen. George H. Thomas's Army of the Cumberland as they crossed Peach Tree Creek just miles north of Atlanta. The intense fighting throughout the hot afternoon ended in heavy casualties and, ultimately, Confederate withdrawal. By Jenkins's estimation, Hood's defeat "started the South in its downward spiral from which she would never recover" (xviii).

According to Jenkins, Hood's actions at Peach Tree Creek belied the reputation he would receive following his disastrous attack at the Battle of Franklin months later. Although he was forced to fall back, Hood's efforts at Peach Tree Creek and the subsequent battles at Atlanta and Ezra Church temporarily stymied Sherman's rapid advance on Atlanta. For Jenkins, Hood effectively "bought time for the doomed city and a chance for a reversal of her misfortunes" (401). Hood's Confederates ultimately failed, of course. And while a certain level of blame necessarily rests with Hood, Jenkins places ultimate fault with Jefferson Davis. In the end, the failed but tenacious Confederate attack on the advancing Union troops at Peach Tree Creek proved representative of the state of the war more broadly. Political squabbling and ever-changing military strategy in tandem with rapidly declining manpower and civilian support had eroded any hope for the Confederacy by the late summer of 1864. Sherman's ultimate success at Atlanta and subsequent march across Georgia solidified Lincoln's reelection and Union victory.

Jenkins's *The Battle of Peach Tree Creek* is a tactical history based largely on soldier accounts and the *Official Records*. Scholars will find little historiographical or interpretive analysis. For this, and for a broader examination of the Atlanta Campaign, readers should consult work by Albert E. Castel and Richard M. McMurry. However, those interested in a detailed and exhaustively comprehensive account of the Battle of Peach Tree Creek alone should look no further than Jenkins's work.

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