

# Fighting for Atlanta: Tactics, Terrain, and Trenches in the Civil War

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## Review

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**Hess, Earl J.** *Fighting for Atlanta: Tactics, Terrain, and Trenches in the Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9781469643427

Between 2005 and 2009, Earl J. Hess authored a superb trilogy of books that brought new light to oft-studied campaigns by focusing on the role of trenches and field fortifications in the Eastern Theater. More recently, the prolific historian published the Tom Watson Book Award winning *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (2015) as well as a series of works detailing pivotal battles of the Atlanta Campaign. Thus, *Fighting for Atlanta: Tactics, Terrain, and Trenches in the Civil War* seems to be the natural convergence of years of research and writing.

For decades, Albert Castel's *Decision in the West* (1992) has loomed as the definitive military history of the Atlanta Campaign. Although Hess's book may not surpass Castel's in terms of breadth and scope, it is, nevertheless, one of the most important books on what many historians argue to be the Civil War's most significant episode. In focusing on field fortifications Hess has revealed new turning points in the campaign, new ways to evaluate Union and Confederate leadership, and new appreciations for the lived experiences of Civil War soldiers. The book's aims are stated plainly: "This study attempts to gain as wide a spectrum of views on the use of field fortifications in the Atlanta campaign as possible. That spectrum includes the tactical approach to operations as it related to the use of field-works; an understanding of how terrain and vegetation affected those operations and were linked to field defenses; and a good deal of attention paid to the earthworks themselves" (xiv). *Fighting for Atlanta* is an unqualified success.

Looking through the prism of field fortifications, Hess shows new ways in which historians should evaluate Civil War armies. He is more concerned with how effective cartographers were at plying their craft than he is with evaluating the cooperation of infantry, cavalry and artillery. How officers read the land is of more import here than how they read their opponents and Hess is more concerned with how soldiers wielded shovels and picks than he is

with how they brandished rifles. While readers hoping for detailed discussions of battlefield maneuvers may be disappointed, those looking to strengthen their understanding of the Atlanta Campaign and how armies operated during the Civil War will find Hess's volume richly rewarding.

During its retreat from Dalton to Atlanta, the Army of Tennessee constructed eighteen lines of fortifications. Throughout the campaign, Sherman's army proved effective at countering these Rebel defenses and adapting to the terrain while Joseph E. Johnston proved unable to capitalize on the advantages the fortifications and the north Georgia landscape granted his army. For example, Confederate artillery commander Francis A. Shoup constructed an impressive series of fortifications aimed at preventing Sherman from crossing the Chattahoochee River. Colloquially referred to as the Shoup Line, this network "was one of the most impressive examples of Rebel engineering in the war" (147). While Shoup designed the Chattahoochee River Line to be held by a single division so the balance of the Rebel army could go on the offensive, Johnston ordered his army to retreat when Sherman approached—squandering an opportunity to impede the Federal advance on Atlanta. The author shows that Sherman's crossing of the Chattahoochee River belongs alongside actions at Snake Creek Gap and Cassville as the campaign's most significant contingencies.

Despite the technical nature of the military history found in these pages, Hess is effective at drawing out the human dimension of his story. Trenches, as evident in the book, were "a bizarrely confined theater of life and death" (xiv). The book is peppered with discussions of common soldiers' experiences. Misery, death, and disease were constant compatriots to trench-bound Civil War soldiers. Were the sources cited by the author devoid of contextual elements readers would be forgiven for mistaking them for testimonials regarding the First World War's Western Front. For Confederates, these deplorable conditions, argues Hess, hastened the collapse of morale and a caused a spike in desertions.

In addition to trench life, the book reveals the immense human costs armies suffered due to skirmishing and sniping. For example, one Confederate brigade took part in the battles of Peach Tree Cree, Atlanta, and Jonesboro. Nevertheless, a quarter of its casualties during this period were the result of sniping and skirmishing. While the Army of Tennessee suffered thousands of casualties in pitched battles, it also suffered death by a thousand papercuts in the form of men falling victim to sniper's bullets and small unit skirmishes. Hess understandably

concludes that the Union, due to its manpower advantages, benefited from this aspect of the campaign.

Ultimately, Hess convincingly shows that “fieldworks became an all-important element of operations in 1864, helping to determine which army succeeded in its tactical and strategic goals” (xiii). The Union army emerged victorious in Georgia due in no small part to its superior defensive and offensive use of field fortifications. The book’s argument is effectively encapsulated by a Union soldier quoted on page 278: “The axe, the pick and shovel have done more to bring us success in this campaign than have the rifle and cannon.”

Here, as in his other works, Hess deftly weaves narrative and analysis to provide a compelling addition to the Atlanta Campaign’s now burgeoning historiography. Anyone wanting to strengthen their understanding of how Civil War armies operated should consult *Fighting for Atlanta*—as should those who want a fuller comprehension of how the Union triumphed in north Georgia.

*Robert L. Glaze holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He is currently revising his manuscript, Experiencing Defeat, Remembering Victory: The Army of Tennessee in Civil War Memory.*