

At Atlanta the Cavalries Try Mutual Raiding July–September, 1864

After being chased off Missionary Ridge, which overlooked Chattanooga, on November 25, 1863, the Rebels retreated twenty five miles to Dalton, GA, where they entrenched and waited for the rest of the winter and early spring. In the wake of that disastrous defeat Braxton Bragg was relieved as the Confederate army commander to be replaced by Joe Johnston. In the meanwhile the Union was compiling a massive army under the command of William Sherman in preparation of a drive toward Atlanta. Pursuant to Grant's orders "to move against Johnston's army, to break it up, and to get into the interior of the enemy's country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources..." Sherman's campaign began May 1, 1864, and by late July the Rebels had retreated into and around Atlanta. By that time Johnston had been replaced as commander by John Bell Hood.



John Bell Hood

Hood's Army of Tennessee, after reaching a manpower peak of 77,000 barely two months earlier in late May, was reduced to no more than 50,000 men – one fifth being cavalry – after the cumulative losses from Peachtree Creek (July 20, 1864) and the Battle of Atlanta (July 22, 1864). Leadership losses were especially severe with the loss of 60 majors, colonels, and generals in William Hardee's corps alone. Eight of the fifteen regimental commanders in Patrick Cleburne's division were either killed or wounded.¹ But whether or not Hood realized it the Battle for Atlanta was his last reasonable chance to salvage something other than delay from the entire Atlanta campaign. Hood no longer had, if he ever had, any chance to push the Yankees back to Chattanooga. For all intents and purposes, the loss of Atlanta, with its vital industrial and commercial capacity,

had become inevitable! However much to Sherman's frustration Hood's Rebel army remained entrenched in Atlanta; unable to dislodge the Rebels from their entrenchments, on July 20 Union artillery had begun firing from Bald Hill to begin the siege of Atlanta, which would continue for the foreseeable future.

On July 27, 1864, to ratchet up his attempts to starve out the Southerners Sherman dispatched Union cavalry to disrupt Confederate supply lines by destroying the remaining rail lines into and out of Atlanta. Bluecoat cavalry units under Kenner Garrard and George Stoneman were supposed to meet Edward M. McCook – cousin of the late Daniel McCook – at Lovejoy's Station, south by southeast of Atlanta on the Macon & Western RR line. However Joe Wheeler's cavalry interrupted Garrard at Flat Rock at which time Stoneman – who of course had led a disastrous cavalry raid during Chancellorsville -- decided to try to go alone without Garrard, first to Macon – 85 miles south of Atlanta -- where Union officers were imprisoned before continuing to Andersonville another 100 miles to the south.

At the same time McCook had a good run while burning 1,600 captured wagons and killing 2,000 Rebel mules. But after disposing of Garrard, Wheeler, joined by Red Jackson, another Confederate cavalry commander, surrounded McCook's troopers before scattering the Blue riders to safety back across the Chattahoochee. Although McCook destroyed a good portion of Hood's supply train, McCook also lost 500 men, his own pack train, two guns, and several horses. And although McCook's troopers managed to destroy two miles of the railroad to Macon, the Confederates also managed to repair that section and have it running again before McCook could even return to camp!

Stoneman had intended to raid the notorious Andersonville prison where Federal 34,000 prisoners were held. But Hood cleverly dispatched a brigade after Stoneman by rail. This brigade, working with militia, on July 30 caught and captured Stoneman and 700 of his rear guard at Clinton.ⁱⁱ True enough Stoneman reached the Macon prison but as the Rebels' prisoner of rather than as a liberator.ⁱⁱⁱ

While he had still commanded the Army of Tennessee, Joe Johnston had repeatedly requested additional cavalry to raid Sherman's lines of communications. However the Confederacy's hierarchy always responded to the effect that such cavalry help was not available, and that Johnston should consider using his own cavalry for such purposes. John Bell Hood, with the concurrence of Jefferson Davis, reluctantly came to the conclusion that it was futile for his army to attack the Federals in their entrenchments. Accordingly Hood opted to deploy his only alternative, that being to cut off Sherman's supply lines, hoping to starve Sherman out of his field works if he could not be driven out.^{iv} And so on August 10 Joe Wheeler left Covington, east of Atlanta, with approximately 5,000 riders (half of Hood's cavalry) intending to disrupt, if not destroy, the rail lines, specifically the Western & Atlantic, upon which Sherman's resupply from Chattanooga depended.^v On August 14 Wheeler raided Sherman's supply lines east of Dalton.

Sherman likewise determined that it would be productive to his siege operations to starve those still inside the Atlanta lines. That opportunity seemed to be particularly ripe since Wheeler's cavalry was out of the area. In other words both Hood and Sherman were trying to apply indirect means to defeat their enemy. In slightly different forms each believed starvation might force the other to abandon his Atlanta position to either fight or to flee. But as the historian Thomas Buell has noted "... both Sherman and Hood adopted the same strategy. Like other Civil War generals before them, they failed to recognize that so long as opposing armies remained intact, the war would go on."^{vi} Furthermore in Sherman's case he seemed to have forgotten, or was ignoring, Grant's order to destroy the Confederate army.



George Stoneman

Although Wheeler sent occasional dispatches (few of which were received) to indicate his raid was productive, in fact he was having little success, in large part because Sherman had directed cavalry from Nashville to take effective countermeasures. Wheeler's raid had some isolated successes but eventually would have virtually no effect except to placate the Confederacy's politicians who had urged such endeavors.^{vii}



Judson Kilpatrick

Previously Sherman had requested that Judson Kilpatrick be transferred to the Western theater, admitting him to be a “damned fool” but also believing him to be especially audacious, an opinion that had not been shared by many of Kilpatrick's former comrades in the Army of the Potomac.^{viii} As Wheeler's raid took his division out of position “Kilcavalry” departed August 18 with two brigades, totaling 4,000 troopers, to raid and to destroy the Macon & Western RR south of Jonesboro. His troopers were quickly able to tear up a mile and half of track. However rains extinguished the fires set to burn ties and trestles, and on August 22 Red Jackson's Rebel cavalry chased the Yankees back to Lovejoy's Station, six or seven miles south of Jonesboro, where Confederate infantry blocked his path. After fighting through Jackson's cavalry, Kilpatrick finally returned to Decatur, immediately east of Atlanta. Typical of his habits, Kilcavalry exaggerated his modest accomplishments, predicting the Macon line would be

inoperable for ten days.^{ix} But within two days Union signal towers observed Rebel trains once again running along the track.^x

On September 9, Wheeler's cavalry reached Florence, Alabama, the end of his raid that had started August 10. Like so many similar cavalry raids by either side during the war, it sometimes resembled a joyride more than a military operation. Its success was limited, at least in terms of interrupting the Federals' lines of communications. Nevertheless Wheeler's raid was conducted at a substantial cost not only to his troopers and horses but also to Hood who had to operate without much of his eyes and ears. Hood received very few reports from Wheeler, and right up to the end of August, Hood believed that Wheeler was having good success in destroying Sherman's resupply lines.

During the night of September 1-2 Confederate cavalry that remained in Atlanta, serving as the army's rear guard, continued to blow up ammunition and other munitions, the sounds of which could be heard for many miles, as well setting fires to warehouses.^{xi} Sherman, continuing to stay with George Thomas in Jonesboro, was not certain of the origins of the sounds, believing they might be Rebel artillery. During the evening of September 1 when Sherman could hear the explosions he ordered Slocum to go into Atlanta to reconnoiter the situation. Sherman further

ordered that if Hood was abandoning Atlanta, “it is unnecessary for us to go further as this stage.” Except of course more railroad tracks were to be needlessly destroyed.



William Tecumseh Sherman

As the bulk of Sherman’s Grand Army moved south the morning of September 2, continuing to destroy railway track, Slocum’s 20th Corps entered Atlanta, whereupon Atlanta’s mayor surrendered what was left of the town. The Rebels’ destruction of their own railroad cars filled with ammunition, together with other extensive devastation from fires through wide swaths of neighborhoods as the rear guard was leaving, contributed to the Southern mythology falsely blaming most of that carnage upon Sherman. Shortly after that surrender, Sherman learned -- while accompanying Thomas who was moving his units into position against Hardee north of the well positioned and strongly barricaded Lovejoy’s Station -- that the last of Hood’s men had evacuated Atlanta during the night. Sherman then wired Washington with the dramatic, electrifying message,

“Atlanta is ours, and fairly won.”^{xii} But Sherman’s message also included the ominous coda: “I shall not push farther on this raid, but in a day or two will move to Atlanta and give my men some rest. Since May 5 we have been in one constant battle or skirmish.”^{xiii} Sherman, becoming curious about the extent of Atlanta’s devastation, left to return to Atlanta.^{xiv}

ⁱ Symonds, Craig L. *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne & The Civil War* (1997) Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, pg 230.

ⁱⁱ Davis, Stephen. *Atlanta will Fall – Sherman, Joe Johnston and the Yankee Heavy Battalions* (2001) Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, pg 155.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sherman would eventually arrange for Stoneman’s release in exchange for the release of Govan’s Arkansas Brigade.

^{iv} Buell, Thomas B. *The Warrior Generals – Combat Leadership in the Civil War* (1997) New York: Three Rivers Press, pg 374.

^v Davis, pg 168; Longacre, , Edward G. *Grant’s Cavalrymen – The Life and History of General James H. Wilson* (2000), Paperback Edition, Mechanicsburg, PA.: Stackpole Books, pg 281.

^{vi} Buell, pg 374

^{vii} *Ibid*, pg 374

^{viii} Eventually Sherman would try to convince Grant to assign Phil Sheridan to replace Kilpatrick,

^{ix} Longacre, pg 282.

^x Davis, pg 174

^{xi} Woolworth, Steven E. *Nothing But Victory – The Army of the Tennessee 1861-1865* (2005) New York: Alfred A. Knopf,pg 582.

^{xii} Eicher, David J., *The Longest Night: A Military History of the Civil War* (2001) New York: Simon & Schusterpg 714; Ecelbarger, Gary. *The Day Atlanta Died – The Battle of Atlanta* (2010) New York: St. Martin’s Press, pg 223.

^{xiii} Buell, pg 376.

^{xiv} Cleaves, Freeman, *Rock of Chickamauga – The Life of General George H. Thomas* (1948) Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, pg 240.