



The Battle of Peach Tree Creek: Hood's First Effort to Save Atlanta

by Earl J. Hess.

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Despite its recognized centrality to the Civil War's outcome, the Atlanta campaign attracted relatively little scholarly attention till the prolific historian Earl J. Hess began producing a succession of discerning studies of the subject. After his essential volumes on the Western Theater and the battles of Kennesaw Mountain and Ezra Church,¹ he has placed William T. Sherman's north Georgia campaigns in the limelight of Civil War military history. Now, with his characteristic probing analysis and engaging narrative style, he has turned his attention to another of the campaign's most significant battles.

On 10 July 1864, the Confederate Army of Tennessee, under its new commander, Gen. John Bell Hood, attacked Union Gen. George Thomas's Army of the Cumberland—part of Sherman's army group during the Atlanta Campaign. Despite securing some initial surprise, the Rebel attackers, hampered by a poor battle-plan, low morale, and capable adversaries, were soon driven back by the Union defenders, enabling Sherman's relentless drive on Atlanta to continue.

Hess situates the engagement at Peach Tree Creek within the broader contexts of the Atlanta Campaign, the Western Theater, and the war in general. His book's opening pages provide needed background on the Atlanta Campaign's political implications, the Army of Tennessee's previous internecine conflicts, and the nature of the Union Army's command culture. There is abundant detail here for military history enthusiasts, but Hess never loses sight of the forest for the trees.

Hess wisely avoids exaggerating Peach Tree Creek's significance to the outcome of the campaign or the war, unlike so many historians, who overstate their subject's significance. Hess argues that

each phase of the Atlanta campaign possessed important aspects to explain the course of events from the May confrontation at Dalton to the final battle at Jonesboro in late August and early September. None of those phases were necessarily decisive in shaping the campaign, but all of them contributed to its contours and results. (x)

The author also implicitly contends that the battle's outcome was determined more by Rebel mistakes than the Federals' wisdom. His discussion of Hood is judiciously critical. Hood and his army had been put in a nearly impossible position by his predecessor, Gen. Joseph E. Johnston. Still, Hood made his own poor decisions once in command.

Commanding a field army demanded a certain degree of abstract thinking, a great deal of anticipation of wants and needs, and a habit of thorough study of a myriad of topics associated with logistics, geography, politics, and morale. Hood was at a disadvantage in all these areas. (237)

1. *Viz., Kennesaw Mountain: Sherman, Johnston, and the Atlanta Campaign* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2013), *The Battle of Ezra Church and the Struggle for Atlanta* (id., 2015), *Fighting for Atlanta: Tactics, Terrain, and Trenches in the Civil War* (id., 2018).

Historians have long claimed Hood was attempting to emulate the command style of his old commander, Gen. Robert E. Lee. In 1864, the Army of Tennessee was woefully unaccustomed to such an approach to fighting, but Hess convincingly shows that, had Hood been put in command of the Army of Northern Virginia at Peach Tree Creek, the result would likely have remained the same.

The book is far from an exclusively top-down military history. Hess marshals considerable evidence that troop morale played a significant role in the battle's outcome. At the outset of the campaign, the Union soldiers fighting in Sherman's army group were accustomed to victory, while the Army of Tennessee had known little but defeat during the war. It was thus a confident Billy Yank who marched into battle against a dejected Johnny Reb outside Atlanta in the summer of 1864.

Battlefield preservationists will find a cautionary tale in Hess's conclusion, which discusses the failure of memorialists to preserve portions of the battlefield. Preservationists were no match for Atlanta's inexorable urban sprawl: today the battlefield is all but obliterated.

In his preface, Hess plainly states his goals: "to detail the battle's history in narrative fashion [and] ... to analyze and evaluate the major features of that history" (x). He achieves both aims in his beautifully written and cogently argued *Battle of Peach Tree Creek*.