



The Battle of Ezra Church and the Struggle for Atlanta by Earl J. Hess.

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Most Americans have heard of Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, if not from history class, then from one of the most famous movies in American history, *Gone With the Wind* (1939, dir. Victor Fleming), in which Sherman and the burning of Atlanta are mentioned. Fewer know anything of his overall strategy, the terrible battles fought before he entered the city, and the many thousands of soldiers who died during the Atlanta Campaign (7 May–2 Sept. 1864).

Roughly three months before his march toward Atlanta, the fiery Sherman had already crossed the state of Mississippi from the river city of Vicksburg to the railroad junction at Meridian on the border with Alabama; he provisioned his army with Southern foodstuffs and destroyed railroads and Confederate property with little opposition. The general believed he could do the same in the Peach State.

Instead of attacking heavily defended Atlanta in a frontal assault, Sherman planned to sever the supply-carrying rail lines into the city and force the Confederate defenders to abandon it. In May, the Union Army of *the* Tennessee (note emphasis) moved south of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and followed the rail lines southeast, to where it would contend with Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's Confederate Army of Tennessee at Dalton, Georgia. Johnston adopted a strategy of withdrawal, hoping to drain the Union army of men who would have to be deployed to protect Sherman's supply lines in his rear. By 9 July, the Union army was within ten miles of Atlanta. Furious over Johnston's inaction, Confederate President Jefferson Davis replaced him with Gen. John Bell Hood on 17 July. Davis demanded aggression from Hood and the one-legged commander complied. Confederate forces lost bloody battles at Peachtree Creek (20 July) and Atlanta (22 July), failing to halt the Union advance.

Historian Earl J. Hess (Lincoln Memorial Univ.) provides a detailed, corrective account of the Battle of Ezra Church (28 July), the last major confrontation between the Union Army of the Tennessee and the Confederate Army of Tennessee before the fall of Atlanta, and its impact on the entire Atlanta Campaign.

Hess argues that, despite the battle's lopsided casualties (632 Union, 3,000 Confederate), Ezra Church was an extremely difficult fight for the Federals, whose lines were more than once pressed to their limits. If not for the confidence they had gained in a series of victories since the Battle of Chattanooga the year before, as well as their elevated and fortified firing positions, secure resupply, and skirmishing experience, Union forces might well have been defeated.

The blue coats also enjoyed an advantage in their superior leadership. Both sides had seen changes at the army, division, and brigade levels in the days before meeting near Ezra Church. After Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson was killed (22 July), Sherman quickly replaced him with Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard in command of the Army of the Tennessee.

On the rebel side, Hood had taken command of the Army of Tennessee only eight days before the battle. He in turn chose Lt. Gen. Stephen D. Lee to replace him in command of his old corps on 26 July. Lee had been transferred from the Department of Mississippi, where he had shown promise in commanding brigade-size units, but he was unfamiliar with his new corps and the terrain around At-

lanta. Hood also had a new Chief of Staff and new Chief of Artillery. His plan to stop Sherman had failed twice and the Union army was less than ten miles from Atlanta.

Hood ordered Lee to secure an important transportation avenue called Lick Skillet Road near the Chattahoochee River. But he neglected to instruct him how to proceed if the Federals reached the road before him. According to Hess, this was only the beginning of command mistakes by Confederate generals. When Lee arrived at Lick Skillet Road, he discovered a few Federals already on site. Hess argues that he should have sent heavy skirmishers to drive them off, but instead he formed up two brigades and hastily attacked. Had he taken the time to assess the situation more carefully with more information, he would have realized he was near the Union flank. He could have shifted his attack farther toward the Chattahoochee and potentially outflanked the Army of the Tennessee.

Instead, Lee advanced recklessly without knowing the enemy's strength or the location of the bulk of the Union army. Throughout the day, he sent his men into the fray piecemeal and without coordination. This allowed the Federals to shift their fire against the Rebel charges. Lee secured Lick Skillet Road, but he continued to send his troopers against an elevated, fortified position.

When Lt. Gen. Alexander P. Stewart, commander of his own corps, arrived at Ezra Church, unaware of the terrain or the reason for the withering repulse of Lee's first two brigades, he led his own men over the same ground—with the same results. Stewart had always favored the offensive and had not hesitated to throw his men into the fight.

Hess points out that when Hood received word of the action at Ezra Church, he did not rush to the battlefield, instead remaining in Atlanta and sending Lt. Gen. William J. Hardee to assess the situation and to take command of operations if he deemed it prudent. Hess contends that Hood should have exercised more personal control over his troops. Hardee, a better commander than Lee, chose not to relieve him of command. Moreover, Hood made critical mistakes in promoting Lee and Stewart to corps commands to begin with, because both lacked experience at that level.

By contrast, Hess observes, General Howard, on the other side of the field, kept his wits and shuffled or reinforced units where needed, maintained his stream of supplies, and held the preferred terrain. In short, superior Union leadership doomed Confederate forces to a crushing defeat.

In a fascinating excursus, the author also emphasizes the Federal troops' exceptional rate of fire. During the five hours of heaviest fighting, they got off a blistering average of 37.6 rounds per hour per man, so many rounds that several times entire companies had to be pulled from the line to clean fouled gun barrels. On the other hand, the Federals' rifled muskets did not confer a major advantage in this fight, because the Rebels were mostly within two hundred yards of them before they were detected.

Hood abandoned his plans to stop Sherman's march on Atlanta and withdrew from the city within a few days. Howard's first victory as commander the Army of the Tennessee cemented his position for months to follow. In a rare move, he had his official report read to every brigade in his army, expeditiously providing accurate information to his troops.

Hood defended Lee after the war, arguing that he had simply come upon the enemy unaware and then engaged. But, writes Hess, Lee could have repelled the Federals and dug in, had he been more circumspect and less aggressive. The Confederates halted the Federal onslaught, but only for a few days. Refuting previous historians, Hess persuasively maintains that Ezra Church was no easy battle for the Army of the Tennessee; one or two slight variations in either army's actions could have resulted in turning the Federal flank.

This thoroughly researched, (mostly) well written book taps the accounts of several participants on both sides to good effect. It will appeal most to readers interested specifically in the Atlanta Campaign rather than the broader question of where it is to be placed in the entire American Civil War.

Both the narrative and the included maps too often lack sufficiently precise indications of troop movements and the time frame of events. These reservations aside, Earl Hess has once again proved his skill in writing meticulous battle narratives that will instruct and captivate his readers.