



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

by Earl J. Hess.

Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2018. Pp. xvi, 391. ISBN 978-1-4696-4342-7.

Review by Michael Burns, South Dakota State Historical Society (mikeburns31@gmail.com).

The capture of Atlanta in August 1864 marked a turning point in the US Civil War. When Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman announced his armies' capture of the city's railroad hub, both the administration of Pres. Abraham Lincoln and federal forces enjoyed a major boost in support and morale. Sherman's soldiers previously faced off against the Confederate Army of Tennessee under, first, Gen. Joseph T. Johnston and then Maj. Gen. John Bell Hood. For over two months, US and Confederate units maneuvered across hundreds of miles of northwest Georgia, a landscape scarred by interwoven fieldworks built to protect troops from continual infantry and artillery fire. These trenches, their surrounding terrain, and the tactical decisions related to them are the focus of *Fighting for Atlanta*.

Its author, prolific military historian Earl J. Hess (Lincoln Memorial Univ.), is a leading authority on the Civil War and, specifically, field fortifications and the tactics related to them.¹ Building on his earlier volumes on the battles of Kennesaw Mountain, Ezra Church, and Peach Tree Creek,² he concentrates here on what he calls the "triad relationship" between landscapes, trenchworks, and tactical decisions (xiv) during the Union approach to Atlanta. This, he contends, ensures a more well rounded picture of this vital campaign. He begins by making a key distinction:

While the Confederates learned how to construct impressive fortification systems as the campaign progressed, they almost always used them for *defensive* purposes. The Federals not only built strong defensive works, but more importantly sought ways to use them for *offensive* purposes, too. (xv)

Topographical features of the surrounding land determined the choice of sites for fieldworks.

In chapter 1, Hess breaks down the triad of terrain, tactics, and trenches as it affected operational choices. Unlike primary tactics that deal with how soldiers lined up in the field, operational tactics were the realm of commanding officers striving to deploy their field troops in, for example, well conceived flanking maneuvers, frontal assaults, and defensive positioning. The author stresses officers' need to learn about the terrain and oversee the engineers and military units involved in constructing the lines with appropriate tools. All this sets the stage for the titanic clash in northwestern Georgia in late summer 1864.

The ensuing chapters concern the landscape, fortifications, and operational tactics that decided the campaign's individual battles. Chapters 6–8 recount the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain. Hess emphasizes that the Confederates picked the best plots of high ground from which to fend

1. *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: UNC, 2005), *Trench Warfare under Grant and Lee* (id., 2007), *In the Trenches at Petersburg* (id., 2009), and *Civil War Infantry Tactics* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 2015).

2. *Viz., Kennesaw Mountain* (Chapel Hill: UNC, 2013); *The Battle of Ezra Church and the Struggle for Atlanta* (id. 2015); and *The Battle of Peach Tree Creek* (id., 2017).

off a federal advance. But Sherman, who tended to avoid launching frontal assaults against rebel positions, decided this was an opportunity to fight. After taking heavy casualties in the attacks on 27 June 1864, he ordered his men to dig in close to the Confederate lines to hold them in place and then succeeded in flanking enemy defenses. Consequently, “The tedious, time-consuming operations of flanking were the order of the day for the rest of the campaign” (126). As the landscape became flatter and more open, Sherman’s offensive approach became more effective than it had been before the US forces entered the Appalachians. These tactical adjustments—by both sides—were made, Hess explains, strictly by operational-level commanding officers.

The troops themselves took to strengthening the fieldworks as soon as the engineers sited them. Confederate infantry commanders along one section of the ring of fortifications around Atlanta complained about the weakness of the works until the soldiers dug deeper. Hess notes that the rebels’ array of field obstructions included at some points a fourteen-foot palisade.

The author also describes a Union line developed to allow for further offensive maneuvers. During the stalemate after the 27 June attacks at Kennesaw, troops of the 125th Illinois Infantry Regiment posted along Cheatham Hill were ordered to extend their line closer to the Confederate defenses. They came within twenty-two yards of the opposing works. Initially using hardtack boxes filled with dirt, the federals eventually constructed a “forward parapet ... seven feet tall and twelve feet thick” (128). The federals thereupon prepared to flank the Kennesaw Mountain line and drive the Confederates from their strongest position. Hess’s granular depictions of these various and intricate lines of combat are based upon contemporary photographs and written accounts, as well as his own personal field visits.

The author vividly evokes this strange and perilous world in which troops and construction workers enduring continuous artillery and sniper fire were forced to remain as low as possible. The discomfort of kneeling and lying in the trenches led a number of regiments to call for a truce so they could stretch and emerge from the trenches for a time. Weather posed yet another problem: the blazing Georgia sun beat down on the men, and rainstorms flooded their trenches and filled them with mud. If their officers allowed it, the men sometimes tried to ward off the heat and rain by stretching blankets over the trenches, but mostly they just braved the elements. Lice and other vermin quickly spread illness along the lines. During the Atlanta Campaign, Hess observes, “Trenches became a bizarrely confined theater of life and death for Union and Confederate enlisted men and their officers” (xiv).

In discussing the Mountain Line section of the “Mountain, Gilgal Church, and Mud Creek” position, Hess specifies the varying heights to give a sense of the imposing Confederate defenses. The eleven-mile-long line, he notes, rested on the three-hundred-foot tall Brush Mountain, whose high ridge separated the drainage area of the Etowah and Chattahoochee rivers, and ended at the 1,520-foot-high Lost Mountain. Forest lands near Atlanta were destroyed to open fields of fire for the rebel defenders, an action that transformed the local landscape and had long-lasting baleful ramifications.

Both sides, Hess notes, altered landscapes for their own purposes as the operation progressed. Early on, Sherman’s army found that flat, lightly vegetated fields were ideal for threatening and then flanking enemy positions. By the middle of the campaign, hillier, more forested landscapes were providing the sort of contained battlefields that suited Johnston’s defensive tendencies. The style and intricacies of the fieldworks in each region evolved in response to particular tactics and terrains.

A good appendix clarifies technical aspects of the fortifications, and a full bibliography attests to the author’s decades of research, both archival and on-site. Other enhancements include help-

ful photographs and maps. All serious students of Civil War military history will welcome Earl Hess's absorbing and instructive new study of the relations between terrain, trenches, and tactics in that momentous conflict.