

Episode 146: The Battle of Manassas Gap

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Following the defeat at Gettysburg, Robert E. Lee's main concern was finding a safe haven for his battered troops. His enemy counterpart, George Meade, had at first been slow in pursuit but by late July both armies were back on Virginia soil. Lee's men had crossed the Potomac at Williamsport, Maryland and were moving up the Shenandoah Valley. Meade had crossed at Harper's Ferry and was moving in parallel fashion to the east of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Under immense pressure from Abraham Lincoln and others to destroy Lee's army, Meade devised a plan in which his forces would pierce through the Blue Ridge at Manassas Gap and split Lee's forces in two. He would then defeat one half or with luck, both.

Early on the morning of July 23, the Union III Corps under Major General William French began to move toward the gap. Lee, wary as always, had placed defensive positions at all the passable gaps in the mountains and French was met by stiff resistance from Georgia troops under the command of Colonel E. J. Walker. Over the course of the day, the Union troops were able to slowly push the Confederates out of the gap and back toward Front Royal. However, the Georgians were reinforced by infantry and artillery under Major General Robert Rodes and by nightfall the Union assault had become too uncoordinated to continue. During the night the Confederates withdrew into the valley. However their mission was accomplished. While they held off French's forces, the Confederate divisions under James Longstreet and A.P. Hill were able to hurry up the valley past the gap and into safety. This gave Lee the respite he needed and by August both armies were moving back toward their familiar lines of confrontation near Fredericksburg.

Far to the northwest of Manassas Gap, a famous Confederate rider's military career was being interrupted. John Hunt Morgan and several hundred of his men were captured on July 26, 1863 near Salineville, Ohio. In an attempt to divert Union attention from Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Morgan had taken a couple thousand men on a wild month and half rampage across Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana and Ohio. While the raid struck fear in the hearts of many Northern civilians, the capture of Morgan and most of his men just added to the misery in the wake of the more well known debacles earlier in the month.

The resourceful Morgan would not be held captive for long. In November of 1863, he and six of his officers tunneled out of their cells in the Ohio Penitentiary. Hopping a train to Cincinnati, Morgan then made his way across the Ohio River to Kentucky. Southern sympathizers aided him in crossing the state back into Tennessee.

Despite the public notoriety surrounding his raid, Morgan had lost the trust of his commanding officer Braxton Bragg who had ordered him not to cross the Ohio River in the first place. He was assigned to the relative backwater theatre of eastern Tennessee and southwestern Virginia. While planning a raid on Knoxville, Morgan was surprised by Union cavalrymen on September 4, 1864 and gunned down while attempting to escape.