

Fighting Continues Around Charleston

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The week of August 25-31, 1863 saw military activity in West Virginia, South Carolina, and far to the west in the New Mexico Territory. Federal troops were busy on the offensive in western Virginia, while they continued their siege of Battery Wagner in attempts to capture Confederate positions on Morris Island, South Carolina, and conducted operations against Navajo Indians in the southwest.

In coastal South Carolina, the long Union siege against Charleston continued unabated. A massive Federal bombardment of Fort Sumter had begun August 17 and ended briefly on the twenty-third. In all, more than 5000 rounds had been fired by the Union forces, which left only one serviceable gun inside the battered, Confederate-held fort. Despite the ferocity of the northern bombardment, the Confederate defenders grimly maintained their rubble-strewn positions. On August 26, President Jefferson Davis confirmed General P.G.T. Beauregard's decision to hold the fort and not evacuate its defenders. He recognized the position as the key to the entire defense of Charleston and it would remain in rebel hands until near the end of the war.

As the Confederates hung on to control of Fort Sumter, the Federals again focused their attention on Battery Wagner on nearby Morris Island. In July they had launched two unsuccessful assaults against the fort, one led by the famous Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry, the first black regiment to be raised in the northern states. Following these defeats the Union forces lay siege to the garrison, moving their entrenchments closer and closer to the rebel position. On August 25 they failed to capture advanced Confederate positions located approximately 240 yards in front of the fort, but they resumed their attacks the following day and

this time succeeded in taking those outlying rifle pits, with the Twenty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry in the vanguard. This put the Confederate defenders in a tenuous position, and would lead to their evacuation of Battery Wagner early the following month.

As these operations took place in the vicinity of Charleston, Union General William Woods Averell, led a 1,300-man force from northwest Virginia into West Virginia, hoping to capture Confederate-held Lewisburg and destroy the Virginia-Tennessee Central Railroad. His command destroyed Confederate saltpeter works on Jackson River the day before he would encounter a Confederate force under Colonel George Patton, the grandfather and namesake of the famous World War II general. On August 26, Patton's 2,000 Confederate troops clashed with Averell's men near White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. The Federals launched several attacks throughout the day, but failed to break the rebel lines. The following day, being low on ammunition, Averell withdrew, leaving the field in Confederate hands. Total casualties for the engagement numbered about 375. Though the operation had limited success, Union forces would remain in control of most of the new state of West Virginia for the remainder of the war.

Far to the west, operations against the Navajo Indians were being carried out by Colonel Christopher H. "Kit" Carson. Under the orders of the commander of the New Mexico Territory, Brigadier General James Carleton to secure the region for the United States, partly because of the belief that it contained gold, Carson began a series of operations that eventually broke the tribe's resistance. Carson used a scorched earth policy, burning fields, homes, crops, and supplies of the Navajo in order to pressure them into surrendering. It was another indication that the Civil War had not deterred America's desire for western expansion at the expense of American Indians.