

The Battle of Ezra Church and Slaughter at the Crater

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In late July and Early August 1864, the campaigns around Atlanta and the siege of Petersburg continued with the battle of Ezra Church and the horrific fighting at what became known simply as the Crater. General John Bell Hood had taken command of the Confederate Army of Tennessee, replacing Joseph E. Johnston, who had failed to stop the advance of three Union armies under William Sherman which had advanced to the outskirts of Atlanta. Confederate President Jefferson Davis placed Hood in command with the understanding that he would be more aggressive in launching direct assaults to repel the Federals. The new commander attempted to do just that but was repulsed in the Battles of Peachtree Creek and Atlanta on July 20 and 22 respectively. Following his victories in these two engagements, Sherman moved a portion of his forces to the southwest towards East Point, where the two rail lines met that supplied the defenders of Atlanta. If the Yankees cut those lines the city would surely fall.

On July 28, Confederate forces under General Stephen D. Lee attacked Federals troops commanded by General Oliver O. Howard as they advanced towards East Point. Soon a major engagement erupted at Ezra Church, where elements of Lee's Corps attacked a Union corps under General John A. Logan. The Federals were entrenched in a strong position, and stopped three successive rebel attacks. Lee then called up a second corps under Alexander Stewart, which made three additional costly, yet unsuccessful assaults. In the battle the Confederates lost 3,000 men, while Union losses were barely one-fifth of that total. While Sherman was stopped

for a time in cutting Atlanta's rail lines, the battles of late July had, in the words of historian Franklin Forts, "destroyed the offensive power and spirit of the Army of Tennessee."

As William Sherman tightened his grip around Atlanta, the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia remained locked in the deadly siege of Petersburg. Since the failure to capture the city in mid-June, Ulysses Grant had extended his lines to the south and west, forcing the outnumbered Robert E. Lee to extend his defensive lines as well. Along one section of the siege lines the commander of the 48th Pennsylvania, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants, proposed digging a tunnel underneath the opposing Confederate positions, which would then be filled with black powder and detonated, blowing a hole in the lines and perhaps ending the siege. Though Grant and George Meade, commander of the Army of the Potomac, were not enthusiastic, they allowed Pleasants and his regiment of former coal miners to proceed with the plan. The 500 foot long main shaft with two lateral tunnels under the rebel lines took nearly a month to complete, but by July 27, 8,000 pounds of black powder had been put in place. The original plan was for a fresh division of black soldiers to lead the attack after the mine had been exploded, but Meade at the last moment decided to use more experienced white troops in the vanguard, with the black soldiers in support. Allegedly he was also concerned about charges, if the attack should fail, that the black soldiers had been placed in front as cannon fodder.

Shortly before 5:00 a.m. on July 30 the mine was exploded. It tore an enormous hole in the Confederate lines, and the Federal troops advanced to the large crater it had created. Rather than advancing much farther they milled about, wasting precious time until a Confederate division under William Mahone launched a devastating counterattack. The Federals were pushed back towards their original lines, with others being trapped inside the crater itself. Union

division commanders demonstrated little leadership, with one supposedly drunk in a bunker. Enraged Confederates, meanwhile, massacred numbers of the black Federal troops as they tried to surrender. The attack had been a dismal failure, with the Union losses totaling about 3,700. The siege of Petersburg would continue for another eight months.