

Fighting Along the Weldon Railroad and the Capture of Fort Morgan

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In Virginia, the siege of Petersburg had lasted for two months, with General Ulysses Grant lengthening and strengthening his lines, and forcing Robert E. Lee's depleted army to do the same. "Hold on with a bull-dog gripe [sic] and chew & choke, as much as possible," President Lincoln had urged the Union general-in-chief. Grant would do just that, saying to his staff: "The President has more nerve than any of his advisors." In mid-August Grant made his second attempt to capture the Weldon Railroad south of Petersburg. Occupation of this vital supply line might force the Confederates to evacuate Petersburg and Richmond. On August 18, General Gouverneur K. Warren and his Fifth Corps marched west of the Federal siege lines and occupied well over a mile of the Weldon Railroad in the vicinity of Globe Tavern. He then advanced northward towards Petersburg before being stopped by Confederates under General Henry Heth. The next day elements of A. P. Hill's Corps drove Warren back towards Globe Tavern, but the Federals maintained their control over the railroad. On August 20 and 21 Hill's Confederates again tried to dislodge them, but the Yankee troops maintained their positions. Over the four days of fighting Union casualties numbered nearly 4,500, while the Confederate lost perhaps 1,600 men. As a result of the fighting, Robert E. Lee was forced to accept the loss of the northern section of the Weldon Railroad which was considered by the Confederacy to be an invaluable supply line for both Richmond and Petersburg. In the end, however, its loss did not prove catastrophic. The Confederates merely used the railroad to a point south of the break, then transferred supplies onto wagons and hauled into Petersburg via that conveyance. Later in August additional fighting took place around Reams' Station, as Grant sent out another

expedition to destroy more of the railroad. Though a number of miles of track were damaged or destroyed, the Federals were eventually driven back with heavy losses. It was not until December 1864 that yet another Union expedition destroyed the Weldon Railroad to a point some forty miles south of Petersburg. That portion of the railroad was effectively out of operation for the next three months.

In Tennessee, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest launched a bold raid against Union-occupied Memphis. His 2,000 men were able to hold the city for a time and nearly succeeded in capturing two generals before withdrawing with few casualties. The raid embarrassed the northern command and forced them to position additional troops around Memphis, leaving Forrest free to threaten William Sherman's supply lines as the latter general tightened his siege lines around Atlanta.

Meanwhile in Alabama, the final Confederate fortification guarding the entrance to Mobile Bay fell to Federal forces. In early August, Admiral David Farragut's fleet had fought its way into the bay, destroying or capturing a small Confederate naval force in the process. Within a few days, and after a heavy naval bombardment, Fort Gaines surrendered, leaving Fort Morgan the only position at the mouth of the bay still in Confederate hands. Federal infantry soon landed to the east of the Confederate position and besieged it from that direction, eventually establishing artillery positions that hammered away at the fort's brick walls. The Union fleet also commenced a heavy bombardment. Finally on August 23, the fort's commander, General Richard Page, determined to surrender. Though the city of Mobile remained in Confederate hands until April 1865, with Fort Morgan's surrender, the only major port still accessible to Confederate blockade-runners would be Wilmington, North Carolina.