

The March to the Sea

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The week of November 16, 1864, marked the beginning of one of the most important campaigns of the Civil War. After successfully routing Confederate forces under General John Bell Hood, Union General William T. Sherman successfully captured the city of Atlanta, which was known as the key to Georgia. Following this tremendous victory, Sherman designed a new campaign known as the “March to the Sea” in order to rip the guts out of the Confederate homeland and destroy their will to fight. This campaign began on November 16, as Sherman began his march through central Georgia on his way towards Savannah. Not neglecting the fact that he still had the worry of John Bell Hood, in his rear, he left a remainder force to fight Hood so that he could continue towards Savannah significantly unopposed. This strong movement into the Heartland of the South forced Confederate President Jefferson Davis to write to General Howell Cobb who was stationed at Macon, Georgia, to “get out every man who can render service for even a short period.” The Confederacy was in a desperate situation. General William T. Sherman, riding with the Fourteenth Corps, left Atlanta, signaling the real start of the new campaign in Georgia. Behind him was a smoking city, its economy in ruins, what people remained desolate and bitter. Since Sherman had cut communication with the rear, the North would hear little of him for weeks to come. Sherman’s force encountered only light opposition from militia and a few cavalry units. Skirmishing, heavier at first than later in the campaign, occurred at Lovejoy’s Station, Bear Creek Station, and Cotton River Bridge. “My first object was, of course, to place my army in the very heart of Georgia,” Sherman wrote.

Despite this, John Bell Hood launched a daring invasion of Tennessee, beginning on November 18. Instead of launching a pursuit of Sherman, he entrusted that responsibility with his predecessor, Joseph Johnston. Sherman continued his March to the Sea mostly unopposed except for a few raiding parties. Despite Confederate attempts to muster troops to stop him, including a call by Confederate Governor Joe Brown of Georgia for all men between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five to take up arms and fight against Sherman, there was no significant opposition. November 19, the same day that Governor Brown issued his plea for help; President Abraham Lincoln also ordered that the blockade over Norfolk, Virginia, be lifted. This would assist Grant later in allowing a second army to advance through Virginia towards Richmond.

On November 21, John Bell Hood began to move his army out of Alabama and into Tennessee. In total, his army reached nearly 38,000, which was a large number of troops for the Confederacy at this point in the war. Hood faced two more than capable Union generals in his front, those being Thomas and Schofield. Despite his best efforts, the Tennessee campaign would be a disastrous failure, and Hood would lose much of his army in his attempts to regain Confederate ground.

The last significant military event of the week of November 16 came on the 22nd when Union forces under Sherman captured the state capital of Georgia at Milledgeville. The state of Georgia was completely incapacitated and unable to fight back the overwhelming forces under Sherman. President Davis, realizing this, made every attempt to slow Sherman by sending orders to destroy anything that may be of use to Sherman, as well as to destroy bridges and obstruct roads, anything to slow Sherman's devastating

advance. This would prove ineffective, as Sherman would continue to march through the South on a devastating campaign that would bring the people of Georgia to their knees.

During that week, Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter later to be known the world over, although the original manuscript has disappeared.

To Mrs. Lydia Bixby he wrote that he had learned she was the mother
“of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle.

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.”