

Episode 233: The Army of Northern Virginia's Last Attack

Week of March 22-March 28, 1865

Just a few days after Joseph Johnston's attempt at taking the offensive against Union forces at Bentonville, North Carolina, Confederates at Petersburg, Virginia attempted their own aggressive attack against the enemy laying siege to them there. After some initial success at Bentonville, Johnston had been driven back by stronger Union forces. The result at Petersburg was similar.

The Confederates at Petersburg, led by General Robert E. Lee, had been under siege since Ulysses Grant's army had enveloped them in June of 1864. In a precursor to later conflicts like World War I, both sides had entrenched and were holding their positions. Lee's army was consistently getting weaker however. Men were deserting to go home and being incapacitated by disease. Supplies and food were getting harder and harder to obtain.

In this increasingly grim situation, Lee asked the advice of one of his most trusted subordinates, the battle hardened Major General John B. Gordon. Gordon proposed three alternatives: negotiate peace terms, retreat to North Carolina and join Johnston or attack Grant. Lee rejected the peace alternative as politically unviable and the North Carolina plan as logistically too difficult. As he told Gordon: "...there seemed to be but one thing we could do...fight. To stand still was death." Lee asked Gordon to formulate a plan to attack Grant.

By March 23, 1865, Gordon presented his plan to Lee. His plan called for the Confederates to break through the Union lines at Fort Stedman, one of the closest fortifications to the Confederate lines. Having broken through, they would then fight their way to City Point and assume control of the supply depot there.

Considering that Lee was outnumbered about 125,000 to 50,000 the plan seems a bit crazy in retrospect, but in the vicinity of Fort Stedman the Confederates could assemble only a few thousand men less than those that opposed them. Given the dire straits facing the South, it was as good a plan as any.

Gordon launched a surprise attack at 4:15 am on March 25. About three hundred men moved stealthily toward the Union works in the initial phase of the assault. Their job was to scale the Union parapet and secure the works for the rest of the Confederates to stream through. Carrying their rifles unloaded to avoid any unintended misfire alerting the Union troops, they caught the enemy completely unaware. Within minutes thousands of Confederates streamed into the fort and a gap of nearly 1,000 feet was opened in the Union line.

Word quickly spread through the Union lines and reinforcements rushed to the scene. By 7:30 am, the Confederates offensive had been stopped and they found themselves nearly completely surrounded in enemy territory. By 8:00 am Gordon had his men retreating and they took heavy casualties. In the end, the Confederates lost 4,000 men in the four-hour battle, men that would be sorely missed in the coming days.

The attack on Fort Stedman was the last offensive action by the Army of Northern Virginia. From the glory days of the summer of 1862 to the high tide in Pennsylvania in the summer of 1863 the Army of Northern Virginia had earned a reputation for courage and fighting ability that would last long past the Civil War. But after Fort Stedman, they were essentially done as a danger to the Union. Within a week, the line at Petersburg would crumble and they would stagger to Appomattox Court House where they would lay down their arms.