

Confederate Success in the Shenandoah Offset by the Loss of Norfolk

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In the second week of May 1862, Confederate General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson’s Shenandoah Valley campaign was in full swing, while to the east Confederate forces, as a result of Union General George McClellan’s advance up the Virginia peninsula, evacuated the Norfolk Navy Yard. This forced them to scuttle the ironclad C.S.S. *Virginia*, which had won fame just two months before in its battle with the U.S.S. *Monitor*.

The famed Shenandoah Valley campaign had begun two months earlier at the battle of Kernstown. Despite the Confederate defeat in that engagement, Stonewall Jackson had managed to outmaneuver several Union armies while awaiting reinforcements. By early May, General Richard Ewell had arrived in the Valley to reinforce Jackson, and a second force under General Edward Johnson had also augmented the Confederate force there. With these additional troops, Jackson moved against Union General Robert Milroy’s 6,000-man force, encamped near McDowell, about 15 miles from Staunton. When the Federals learned of the Confederate’s approach, a second small force under General Robert Schenck marched to Milroy’s aid.

By the evening of May 7, Jackson’s force, with General Johnson commanding the lead elements, encamped at the base of Shenandoah Mountain. The following day the Confederates approached Milroy’s lines, taking a strong position on nearby Sitlington’s Hill. After making a minor attempt to drive off the enemy and then bombarding the Confederate position with artillery. Milroy and Schenck determined to withdraw. They soon reconsidered their decision, however, and at about 4:30 in the afternoon they launched an attack against the Confederate line. The battle raged for several hours, with the Yankee troops making some advances, only to be

pushed back by Confederate counterattacks. As the fighting continued into the evening, General Johnson suffered a bullet wound to the ankle, and command of the Confederate forces on the battlefield fell to General William Taliaferro. Later that evening as the firing died down, Milroy and Schenck determined to withdraw, destroying or abandoning large quantities of supplies and equipment as they evacuated McDowell.

Jackson's army had won a victory, but had suffered nearly twice the number of casualties as the Union forces, 532 to 259. The battle of McDowell was just one of many engagements in Jackson's Shenandoah Valley campaign. Over the next month the maneuvering and fighting would continue, with Jackson thwarting every Union attempt to destroy him and gain control over the region. His accomplishments would earn him even greater fame throughout the south.

While Union and Confederate forces clashed in the Shenandoah, southern troops continued their withdrawal westward from Yorktown and Williamsburg towards Richmond. As George McClellan's army moved slowly up the peninsula bordered by the James and York Rivers, it had isolated the Confederate positions at Norfolk, including the important Gosport Navy Yard. Reluctantly, the rebel garrison evacuated the location, destroying as much as they could to prevent materials from falling into Union hands. Historian E.B. Long writes that "the loss of this major base was a severe blow to Confederate control of southside Virginia and northern North Carolina." It also led to the destruction of the ironclad C.S.S. *Virginia*, which had lost its home port. The Confederate Navy only had two options for the *Virginia*. The first was to lighten the 22-foot draft *Virginia* so that it could ascend the James River to assist in the defense of Richmond. The second option was to destroy the ship to avoid its capture by Federal forces, as it was not seaworthy enough to attempt an escape into the Atlantic Ocean. Supplies and coal were removed from the ship in an attempt to lighten it, but it remained too heavy to

ascend the James. On the morning of May 11, after the removal of its cannon, Captain Josiah Tattnall ordered the ironclad's destruction. Fires were lit that, when they reached the powder magazine, resulted in a terrific explosion that tore the vessel apart.