

The Siege of Corinth and the Battle of Seven Pines

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There were two major events during this week, a somewhat comical affair in the Western theatre and a more serious conflict in Virginia. After the battle of Shiloh, Union commander Major General Henry Halleck slowly pursued the Confederates to their new home base at Corinth, Mississippi. Being a textbook general and also reflecting on the losses at Shiloh, Halleck decided to take Corinth through the process of a classic siege. His men would advance by small distances, retrench and then move forward again. Eventually they would be close enough to tunnel under or get over the walls of any fortifications.

Halleck started in early May and by May 25 his men had covered a glacier-like distance of five miles, but were finally in position to mount a serious attack on Corinth. Confederate commander P.G. T. Beauregard decided to retreat his men to Tupelo, but also to trick Halleck to prevent an aggressive Federal pursuit. By telling his men to plan for an attack on the Union army, Beauregard anticipated correctly that inevitable deserters would provide Halleck with this information. During the night of May 29, when trains arrived to take his men away he had them cheer as if reinforcements were arriving. As they left, musicians continued to play and fires to burn. When the first Union attackers entered Corinth on the morning of May 30, they found all the Confederates gone.

Meanwhile, in Virginia a much more serious engagement occurred in late May. Confederate commander General Joseph Johnston had a defensive line to the east of Richmond stretching from Drewry's Bluff on the James River in the south to the Chickahominy River to the northeast of Richmond. His opponent Major General George McClellan had nearly twice as many men, with about two-thirds north of the Chickahominy and one-third south of the river.

Johnston, by nature a somewhat defensive-minded general, was being prodded to do something against the Union before McClellan's numbers became even higher with the arrival of troops from Fredericksburg. Johnston concocted a complicated plan of attack against the Union

forces south of the Chickahominy. Despite the complications, the attack had a good chance of success. The Union soldiers south of the river were the most inexperienced in McClellan's army and torrential rains had swollen the Chickahominy so that it was virtually impassable, thus isolating these troops from potential reinforcements.

Unfortunately for the Confederates, confusion among the commanders about their orders led to a long delay in the attack on May 31. Eventually Major General D. H. Hill became frustrated at the delays and attacked the Union lines on his own around 1 pm. His initial assault met with some success but expected reinforcements did not arrive. Johnston, at his headquarters a couple of miles away, was unaware that the battle had even started and did not send men to aid Hill. Johnston and his staff were experiencing an interesting phenomena called an acoustic shadow where they were fairly close to the fighting but unable to hear it. Eventually, by around 4 pm, winds had shifted and Johnston realized that a fight was really happening nearby.

By this time, Union reinforcements had been able to bridge the Chickahominy and come to the rescue of their comrades under attack. As Johnston made a reconnaissance near the front lines early in the evening, he was struck in the shoulder and chest and fell from his horse. He would be out of action for nearly a year. The battle resumed without a winner on the next morning and both sides retreated to lick their wounds. Later that day, Confederate president Jefferson Davis appointed Johnston's successor: General Robert E. Lee. The battle was also notable for the successful airborne observations of Thaddeus Lowe that helped the Union determine where to send their reinforcements.