

The American Civil War was two and a half years old. There were green troops entering the ranks daily, to be sure, but they lined up next to battle-hardened veterans of countless engagements and long, weary marches. One price of war, as always, was the loss of innocence among the nation's youth. Young men not yet out of their teens had already experienced a lifetime's worth of fear, agony, and killing from too many battles, too many marches, too many glory-seeking officers, and too few comforts

The whole complexion of warfare as the world knew it was changing. The days of saber-swinging cavaliers on horseback were over. More cavalymen were killed by bullets while fighting dismounted than were knocked from the saddle by a saber slash. Stand-up fights between two well-disciplined armies drawn up close in an open meadow were of times past. Digging a trench might not seem the manly thing to do, but with the technical advances in weaponry, crouching in a ditch or behind a log helped keep you alive. By 1864 men's hearts and minds had grown cold, their actions machine-like on the march and in battle, and the glory of war no longer held as much fascination as in those early days back in '61. In short, they were better killers now. And a new concept of 'total war' - making civilians as well as soldiers feel the sharp edge of Mars' sword - was put into play in 1864.

One instance of putting harsh necessity ahead of humanitarian instincts was the Union's decision to halt prisoner exchanges in order to exploit the South's manpower shortage. New prisons were built, and old ones expanded in an attempt to accommodate the anticipated influx of prisoners, North and South, as the campaign season drew near. In the North were Camps Douglas, Morton and Chase, Johnson's Island in Lake Erie, Elmira in New York, old Fort McHenry (of Star-Spangled Banner fame) in Baltimore, Fort Delaware, and others. The South had Libby Prison and Belle Isle, Florence and Salisbury in the Carolinas, Cahaba in Alabama and more, but the most notorious of all was the Confederate prison at Andersonville, Georgia, where in the summer of 1864 some 35,000 captive Union soldiers occupied living space of less than 25 acres, without barracks or adequate toilet facilities or sufficient food. Over 13,000 prisoners died at Andersonville, a hellhole by any standards.

Feeding and supplying an army were constant logistics headaches: cut an army's supply line and it would have to retreat. That notion was tested in February and March as General William T. Sherman embarked on a campaign from Vicksburg across the State of Mississippi to Meridian on the Alabama border, generally destroying railroads and other resources in central Mississippi that the Confederacy might need. In the unusual, one-month, statewide march to Meridian and back, Sherman fought several skirmishes, took 400 prisoners, destroyed miles and miles of track, burned countless bales of cotton, commandeered 3,000 horses and mules, and all the while mostly lived off the enemy civilian population. It was a lesson that Sherman learned well and would try again on a larger scale.

Something else Sherman learned was that the South had a remarkable cavalry commander named Nathan Bedford Forrest, who fought from instinct rather than formal training, and whose simple philosophy was War means fight in' and fight in' means kill in'. In conjunction with Sherman's trek across Mississippi he was to have been assisted by a cavalry force of 7,000 under General William Soy Smith raiding south from Memphis. Smith never arrived. Hampered by the pesky Forrest, Smith tangled with him at West Point, Mississippi, on February 20, and he was soundly whipped by the Confederate Wizard of the Saddle on the 22nd at Okolona, one of Forrest's brightest moments. His most controversial fight was the capture of Fort Pillow above Memphis in April.

Black garrison troops were allegedly massacred after they surrendered; the debate continues to this day. Forrest is considered by many to be the best horse soldier in American history. Sherman, who after the war said that Forrest was the most remarkable man our Civil War produced on either side, at the time vowed to spend 10,000 lives and break the treasury if that's what it took to bring him down.

Meanwhile, U.S. Grant was promoted to the revived grade of lieutenant general and placed in command of all Federal armies. He decided to locate his headquarters in the field, in the East with Meade's Army of the Potomac. Now the premier commander in the West would meet the premier commander in the East. Robert E. Lee of course had seen enemy generals come and go. The last one who had come from the West was John Pope. The last anyone had heard of him; he was way up in Minnesota fighting the Sioux.

The Army of the Potomac, under Grant's direction but still technically commanded by General Meade, left its winter

camp around Culpeper, Virginia, and crossed the Rapidan River on May 4, entering a marshy, dense tangle of trees and underbrush known locally as the Wilderness. Lee struck ferociously and this unlikely battlefield set the tone for the rest of the campaign as tough veterans fought desperately at close quarters and some were consumed in flames as the woods caught fire. The usual response to such a brutal and confused match as this was a hasty retrograde by the Army of the Potomac to refit and reorganize. But not with Grant supervising things. He plunged ahead, and the rank and file cheered him. They too were tired of defeat and humiliation.

Grant's Overland Campaign stalled for two weeks in May at Spotsylvania Court House as Lee's army constructed elaborate fieldworks and prepared to fight and die. Many did, and casualties mounted on both sides at a staggering rate as Grant vowed to fight it out on this line if it took all summer. The worst killing occurred in a 20-hour fight around a portion of the Confederate works that the men called the Bloody Angle, a battle fought partially during a driving rainstorm. Finally, Lee pulled out and gave ground slowly as the Army of Northern Virginia fell back. The two armies battled constantly from Spotsylvania to the North Anna River, then Cold Harbor - where Grant was severely criticized for the appalling losses he suffered in a futile, ill-advised frontal attack on June 3 - then, by mid-June, to the James River and Petersburg, below Richmond, where the Confederates dug in for a do-or-die stand to protect their capital. Grant resorted to siege operations and he would spend the next nine months confronting Lee on this line.

Considerable drama was provided along the siege lines on July 30, when the Federals exploded a mine under the Confederate works where the lines were very close together; Pennsylvania miners had dug the tunnel to the planned explosion site, then it was packed with black powder and a fuse run to the mouth of the tunnel. The blast tossed humans, parts of fieldworks and huge chunks of earth into the air. The resulting attack, in which a number of black units participated, was horribly unsuccessful and Lee's troops quickly sealed the breach in their line. The whole affair entered the history books as the Battle of the Crater.

Grant's cavalry was under another commander brought from the West, General Philip Sheridan. Dispatched toward Richmond while Grant was stalled at Spotsylvania, Sheridan fought Stuart's cavalry at Yellow Tavern, north of the Confederate capital, on May 11 - a year and a day after Stonewall Jackson's death. Stuart was mortally wounded at Yellow Tavern and died in Richmond the next day. A month later Sheridan was defeated by Stuart's successor, General Wade Hampton of South Carolina, at Trevilian Station as the Union force raided railroads in Lee's rear.

In the West, where General Sherman assumed overall command with Grant's departure for the East, the invasion of Georgia was about to begin from the Federal base at Chattanooga. The key to the campaign was control of the railroads. Several of them crisscrossed at Atlanta, bringing in and shipping out supplies to points all over the South. One railroad, the Western & Atlantic, led south from Chattanooga to Atlanta. Along this route Sherman would advance. He had three armies under him: George Thomas' Army of the Cumberland, James B. McPherson's Army of the Tennessee, and John M. Schofield's tiny Army of the Ohio. All told, the three armies were still smaller than the Army of the Potomac, but larger than the Confederates' Army of Tennessee, still at Dalton. But Braxton Bragg had long since departed, resigning after the Missionary Ridge debacle to become President Davis' military advisor in Richmond. Bragg's replacement was Joe Johnston, who had made appearances in both major theaters of the war, was a capable commander, but who had never won, or lost, a significant battle (he outranked, but deferred command to General Beauregard at First Manassas, and was wounded at Seven Pines on the first day of that battle).

In a series of engagements through North Georgia, from Rocky Face Ridge to Resaca, then in and around Dallas, to the Kennesaw Mountain line, Sherman skillfully outmaneuvered Johnston by constantly thrusting at the Western & Atlantic Railroad, Johnston's supply link to Atlanta. President Davis and an anxious South watched through May and June as Johnston fell back from one defensive position to another, much the way he had done on the Peninsula facing McClellan back in '62.

The president and the general had never seen eye to eye, but now they must reach an understanding. When or where would Johnston strike back at Sherman? Did Johnston have a plan to defeat Sherman? When Johnston evaded the question once too often, Davis relieved him, in mid-July, and appointed General John Bell Hood to command the army.

Hood was a known fighter, schooled as a tough division commander under Lee in Virginia. Hood sought to emulate the

battle-winning exploits of his mentor and the great Stonewall Jackson. But his best laid plans for July attacks at Peachtree Creek, and along the Georgia Railroad east of the city (called the Battle of Atlanta), and at Ezra Church, outside the western defenses of Atlanta, all proved disastrous, and Sherman tightened his grip on the vital supply, rail and manufacturing center. A month more of skirmishing and maneuvering, and a hard-fought, two-day battle at Jonesboro (August 31-September 1) on the Macon & Western Railroad south of Atlanta, and the city fell. Mayor James Calhoun formally surrendered Atlanta to Sherman's men on September 2, but the Federals had failed to destroy the Confederate army. Hood's battered and bleeding command marched south to regroup.

While the first day's fighting raged at Jonesboro, in Chicago the Democrats nominated General George B. McClellan for president on the so-called peace at any price platform. Much of what transpired in Georgia over the next 48 hours led to McClellan's defeat in the November election, as a war-weary North could finally see victory in sight. Lincoln was re-elected for another term. Other contributing factors to Lincoln's victory at the polls were Admiral Farragut's victory (damn the torpedoes) at Mobile Bay in August, and Phil Sheridan's successful campaign of destruction in the Shenandoah Valley. Back in Georgia during October, Hood had become restless and decided an offensive into Tennessee and perhaps Kentucky might erase Federal gains in the theater. He marched north from Palmetto, swung wide around Union-held Atlanta, crossed the Chattahoochee River, and tangled with Sherman's troops at Big Shanty, Acworth, Allatoona and Dalton, all north of Atlanta on the Western & Atlantic Railroad. Thus, the armies had changed places from the opening of the Atlanta Campaign.

Sherman pursued Hood through North Georgia and into Alabama, then decided that whatever threat Hood posed could best be handled by troops gathering in Tennessee. He sent his trusted lieutenant George Thomas to Nashville to take command and dispatched two corps under General John Schofield to assist in Tennessee. Sherman then abandoned his long and vulnerable supply line for a new base on the Atlantic coast. In mid-November he put the torch to Atlanta's warehouses, factories, railroad buildings and all other structures that might be used for war-making. Fires raged out of control and burned many private homes, churches, schools, the city hall, and other public and private buildings.

The March to the Sea across Georgia by 60,000 veterans, living off the land and the civilian population, and burning anything that could aid the Confederacy's war effort, ended with the capture of Savannah on December 21, which Sherman thought was a fitting Christmas gift for President Lincoln. Meanwhile, Hood's Tennessee Campaign met disaster at Franklin on November 30, after a missed opportunity at Spring Hill, below Franklin, allowed Schofield two corps to get between Hood's army and Nashville. Any hope of Confederate success in Tennessee was dashed at the Battle of Nashville, December 15-16, where Thomas routed Hood's forces. But a remnant of Hood's army slipped away with a little fight left in it.

As the last winter of the war approached, the Confederacy had little hope of making up for the losses of 1864, in territory, strategic cities, and, most of all, in manpower. Lee had his back to Richmond; Atlanta was lost as a vital manufacturing and supply base. And west of the Mississippi, a last-ditch effort to take Missouri by Confederate General Sterling Price had failed. But, when all seemed lost to Southerners that year of 1864, there were incidents that had stirred the heart, such as the tiny Confederate submarine Hunley sinking the Federal sloop Housatonic near Charleston, South Carolina, in February; Virginia Military Institute cadets charging in a fight at New Market; yet another stunning victory for Forrest at Brice's Crossroads in June; a July raid by General Jubal Early that took his Confederates to the edge of Washington's defenses and brought President Lincoln himself under fire while inspecting Fort Stevens on the defense perimeter; and Confederate cavalry commander John McCausland taking the war back into Pennsylvania and burning the town of Chambersburg.

But most of the news was bad for the South. In addition to setbacks already described, the famous Confederate raider Alabama was sunk by the Kearsarge off the coast of France; the raider Florida was captured off Brazil; and the ram Albemarle was sunk at its moorings in North Carolina. Confederate operatives in Canada launched several raids along the border and North Coast, with little success. A September raid on the Johnson's Island prisoner of war camp in Lake Erie ended in failure. The October raid on St. Albans, Vermont, was a dramatic affair as three banks were robbed and one citizen lay dead, but merely showed just how desperate the Confederacy was. The next month an attempt was made by Rebel agents to burn New York City, and this time a raider went to the gallows. Coincidentally, in New York performing in a production of Julius Caesar as the Confederates set fire to the building next door, was John Wilkes Booth, a young actor who passionately hated Lincoln. The two were on a collision course.