



The First Chapter of the Atlanta Campaign

Jim Burran and Robert Jenkins, February 19, 2021

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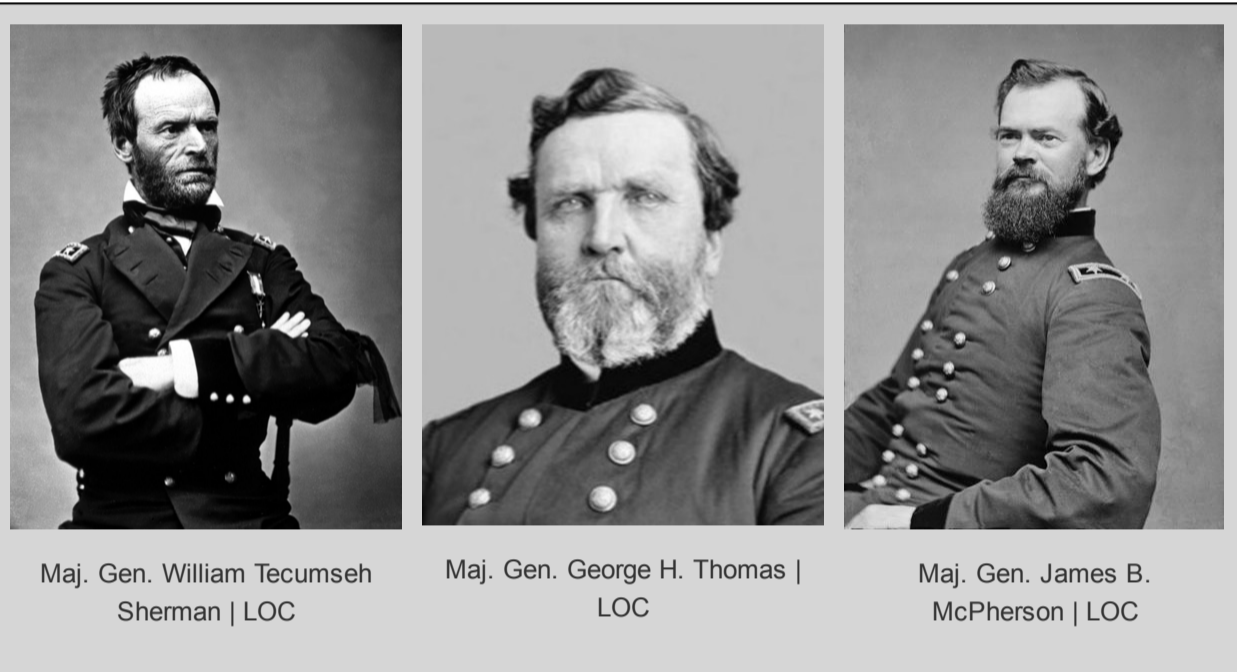


Attack of Rocky Face Ridge, lithograph by Alonzo Chappel | U.S. Army, Center of Military History

The Atlanta Campaign began during the first two weeks of May 1864 in and around Dalton. Union Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman's strategy was to target two of his armies, about 80,000 men, against Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's Army of Tennessee at Dalton. Then, while Johnston's attention was diverted by these forces, he would secretly send his third army, about 25,000 troops under Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson, in a flanking movement to the southwest through Snake Creek Gap. Sherman's goal was to break Johnston's railroad supply line some 15 miles south at Resaca and trap Johnston's Confederates in Dalton.

Sherman ordered his two armies under Maj. Gens. George Thomas and John Schofield to demonstrate or to make probing attacks on the Confederate lines north and west of Dalton, targeting Potato Hill, Crow Valley, Rocky Face Ridge, Mill Creek Gap, and Dug Gap. Opposing them were Johnston's Confederates, about 40,000 infantry and about 5,000 cavalry. Though the Confederates anticipated reinforcements of about 15,000 infantry from Alabama and Mississippi, these would not arrive for another week, and by then both Union and Confederate armies would have departed Dalton.

Union generals



Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman | LOC

Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas | LOC

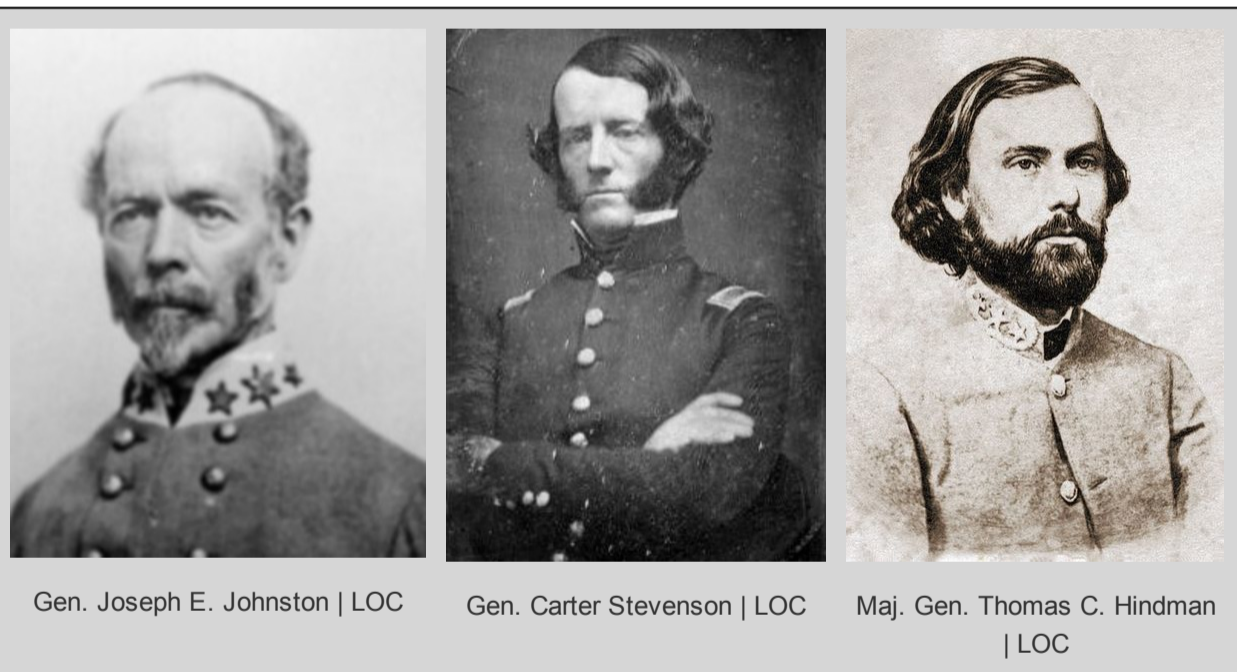
Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson | LOC

Federal movements against Johnston's heavily fortified defenses around Dalton began on May 8 with an assault at Dug Gap by Brig. Gen. John Geary's division of Thomas' Army of the Cumberland. Then, on May 9, Sherman opened the attacks against Rocky Face Ridge, Mill Creek Gap, Crow Valley, and Potato Hill. At Rocky Face Ridge, Brig. Gen. John Newton's division, also of Thomas' army, attacked the northern end of the ridge, while Schofield's Army of the Ohio (the XXIII Army Corps) entered Crow Valley and approached Potato Hill.

Schofield's force, roughly 13,500 strong, received Sherman's orders to "feel the enemy's position." Schofield's three infantry divisions were stretched across the valley between Rocky Face Ridge and Potato Hill, a distance of about 1 mile. Two of his divisions, those under Brig. Gens. Henry Judah and Jacob Cox, formed the advance force, while the third, Brig. Gen. Alvin Hovey's inexperienced division, stood in reserve. Brig. Gen. Edward McCook's cavalry division covered Schofield's left flank. Opposing Schofield's demonstration were two Confederate divisions under Maj. Gens. Carter Stevenson and Thomas Hindman, numbering about 12,400 effectives in strongly entrenched positions.

Early on May 9, Judah's and Cox's divisions moved south toward the Confederate lines. Supported by Newton's division atop Rocky Face Ridge, the Federal advance pushed the gray skirmishers back and, in Schofield's words, "finally drove the enemy into their main works, pressed them closely, and occupied their attention until dark." The Federals were impeded by several lines of barricades and by concentrated artillery batteries, most notably on Potato Hill. Brig. Gen. Milo Hascall, commanding the 2nd brigade of Judah's division, reported that the Confederate position was "too strong to be carried without great slaughter."

Confederate generals



Gen. Joseph E. Johnston | LOC

Gen. Carter Stevenson | LOC

Maj. Gen. Thomas C. Hindman | LOC

Meanwhile, McCook's cavalry encountered Confederate cavalry and infantry at Poplar Springs and was repulsed with serious loss, threatening to expose Schofield's left flank. Schofield sent one brigade of Hovey's infantry division, plus additional cavalry, to strengthen McCook's position and to protect his exposed left flank from any Confederate attack which might come from the east via the Cleveland-Dalton Road.

About 15,000 soldiers from both sides were engaged at Crow Valley. Federal infantry losses in Schofield's Army of the Ohio at Crow Valley were 7 killed, 56 wounded, and 1 missing, for a total of 64 losses. During the week of fighting along Rocky Face Ridge, Gen. O. O. Howard's IV Corps of the Army of the Cumberland lost some 321 men. Additionally, McCook's cavalry reported losses at about 140 men. Confederate reports estimated total casualties during the week at around 130 at Rocky Face Ridge and in Crow Valley.

Sporadic skirmishing continued in Crow Valley over the next three days while the Federal and Confederate armies marched south toward Resaca. Schofield shifted his army north of Rocky Face Ridge on May 10, before following McPherson's army south through Snake Creek Gap on May 12. Johnston abandoned Dalton during the night of May 12, thus closing the first chapter of the Atlanta Campaign. The next chapter, the Battle of Resaca, would begin the following day.



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