

Sherman's March to the Sea

Union General William T. Sherman marched through the state of Georgia from Atlanta to Savannah. This was one of the most devastating blows to the South in the American Civil War. Not only did he take control of Atlanta, a major railroad hub and Savannah, a major sea port but he laid the land between Atlanta and Savannah to waste destroying all that was in his path.

After Sherman's forces captured Atlanta on 2nd September 1864 he spent several weeks making preparations for a change of base. He rejected the Union plan to move through Alabama to Mobile pointing out that after Rear Admiral Ferragut closed Mobile Bay in August 1864 the Alabama port no longer had any military significance. Rather he decided to proceed southeast towards Savannah and because he was by then deep into enemy territory and without any backup north of his lines he decided he would live off the land and take from the farmers and any livestock along the way to feed his army. Sherman also decided he could hurt the Confederacy even further by destroying cotton gins, lumber mills and other industries that helped the Confederate economy.

General Hood abandoned Atlanta and moved his Confederate Army of Tennessee outside the city to recuperate from their previous campaign. In early October he began a raid toward Chattanooga Tennessee to try to draw Sherman back over ground the two sides had fought for since May. It didn't work and Hood turned his army west and marched into Alabama abandoning Georgia to the Union forces.

Sherman divided his approximate 60,000 troops into two different forces. This helped to spread out the destruction and give his troops more area to get food and supplies, thus confusing the Confederate army. Sherman had 2,500 supply wagons and 600 ambulances. Prior to army leaving Atlanta the general issued an order outlining the rules of march but soldiers often ignored the restrictions on foraging.

The two wings advanced by separate routes approximately 20 – 40 miles apart the right heading for Macon and left Augusta before the two commands turned and bypassed both cities they then headed for the state capital at Milledgeville. Opposing Sherman's advance was Confederate cavalry, about 8000 strong, and various units of Georgia militia, in charge was William J. Hardee whose headquarters was in Savannah but no one could stop Sherman's advance. Sherman's foragers were quickly nicknamed "bummers" as they raided farms

and plantations. On 23rd November the state capital peacefully surrendered and Sherman occupied the governor's mansion and capitol building.

There were many skirmishes between both sides but only two battles of any significance.

1. East of Macon at the factory town of Griswoldville, 22nd November when Georgia militia faced Union infantry with disastrous results they suffered 650 men killed or wounded in a one-sided battle and 62 Union casualties.
2. Ogeechee River 12 miles below of Savannah, Union infantry assaulted and captured Fort McAllister on 13th December thus opening the back door to the city. The most controversial event involved contrabands (self-emancipated individuals) who followed the liberating armies. At Ebenezer Creek on 9th December Jefferson Davis removed the pontoon bridge before enslaved people could cross. Frightened men, women and children plunged into the deep water and many drowned in an attempt to reach safety. After the news Davis was soundly criticised by the Northern press but Sherman backed his commander by pointing out that Davis had done what was militarily necessary.

After Fort McAlister fell, Sherman made preparations for a siege of Savannah. Hardee realising his small army could not hold out long and not wanting the city levelled by artillery (as had happened in Atlanta) ordered his men to abandon the trenches and retreat to South Carolina. Sherman was not with the Union Army when Major Arnold surrendered Savannah (he had gone to Hilton Head, South Carolina to make preparations for a siege and was on the way back to Georgia) he telegraphed President Lincoln on 22nd December that the city had fallen. He offered Savannah and its 25000 bales of cotton to the president as a Christmas present.

Sherman's march frightened and appalled Southerners. It hurt morale for civilians had believed the Confederacy could protect the home front. Sherman had terrorised the countryside, his men had destroyed all sources of food and forage and had left behind a hungry and demoralised people. Although he did not level any towns he did destroy buildings in places where there was residence. His men had shown little sympathy for Millen, the site of Camp Lawton where Union prisoners of war were held. Physical attacks on white civilians were few although it is not known how enslaved women fared at the hands of the invaders. Often enslaved men posted guards outside the cabins of their female friends and relatives.

Confederate president Jefferson Davis had urged Georgians to undertake a scorched-earth policy of poisoning wells and burning fields but civilians in the army's path had not done so. Sherman however burned or captured all the food stores that Georgians had saved for the winter. As a result the hardships on

women and children increased. Sherman believed his campaign against civilians would shorten the war by breaking the Confederate will to fight and he eventually received permission to carry the psychological warfare into South Carolina in early 1865. By marching through Georgia and South Carolina he became an archvillain in the South and a hero in the North.

NB. Both North and South Prisoner's lived in squalor and were starved of both food and water.

There is a mass grave in Andersonville where 13000 men are buried.

The men were 165lb at the start and when finished they weighed 96lbs.

Sherman's victory made things better for Lincoln to become President and Johnson, Vice President.

Only 3 states voted against Lincoln after Sherman's success.

Sherman estimated that his army did \$100m's worth of damage (1864 dollars).