

Phillip L. Secrist. *The Battle of Resaca: Atlanta Campaign, 1864.* Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998. xiv + 102 pp. \$20.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-86554-601-1.



Reviewed by David Eyman

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In the spring of 1864 William T. Sherman moved the Army of the Tennessee away from Chattanooga and into Georgia, heading toward Atlanta. Awaiting the Union troops in the high ground to the north and east of Dalton, Georgia, was Joseph E. Johnston, with a numerically inferior force, but with much better field position. Some sort of contact was inevitable. In an attempt to flank Johnston and cut the railroad between Johnston's troops and Atlanta, Sherman sent McPherson's corps south along the west side of the ridges to Snake Creek Gap to cross through the ridge line and take Resaca, in Johnston's rear. McPherson's troops made the movement, probed tentatively at Resaca, then sat back, defensively, near the mouth of Snake Creek Gap. Only then did Johnston seem to recognize the seriousness of the threat to his flank and hurry south several divisions to protect it. Sherman moved in the same direction. What ensued was the Battle of Resaca, the first full-scale contact between the Confederate and Union forces during Sherman's Atlanta Campaign.

In this slim volume Philip Secrist has provided the reader with a fairly detailed account of the battle which occurred at Resaca, Georgia, on May 14 and 15, 1864. Liberally with maps and photographs, the book follows the flow of the battle from the first probes of the Union forces at the Confederate flank, through the arrival of both sides in force at Resaca on May 13, through two days of fighting, and finally to the timely retreat of Johnston during the night of May 15/16.

Many historians and biographers of Sherman give some credit to his tactical skills in forcing Johnston out of Resaca by attempting to flank him. Indeed, because of Johnston's timely withdrawal from the field, the Battle of Resaca is usually considered a Union victory. Sherman himself, writing in his memoirs, states "I was disappointed not to have crippled his army more ... but ... these rapid successes gave us the initiative ..." [1] Basil Liddell-Hart has described Sherman's actions at Resaca effusively as a "brilliant achievement to have manoeuvred so renowned a master of defence out of two strong positions ..." [2]

Secrist, however, is less generous. He writes, "In a very real sense, the escape of the Confederate army from the trap at Resaca was a major strategic defeat for Sherman" (p. 64). Sherman, Secrist feels, did not possess those qualities usually associated with great combat leaders; rather he demonstrated "mediocrity." Following Resaca, Secrist writes, Sherman "reverted to his proven strength--that of master raider" (p. 64).

Regardless of Secrist's views of Sherman's prowess as a tactician, this volume provides a wealth of detail about the Battle of Resaca not available in most sources. The many maps and photographs, some from 1864, are quite useful in following the author's descriptions of the battle. One should note, however, that most of this is not newly available material; Part I of this slim volume, entitled "Conduct of Battle," is a very slightly altered reprinting of an article Secrist published in the *Atlanta Historical Society Journal* in the spring of 1978 under the title, "Resaca: For Sherman a Moment of Truth."

There is an interesting Part II to this volume as well, entitled "Resaca Rediscovered." In this second portion of the book Secrist has examined the fate of the Resaca battlefield since 1864. Never formally established as a National Historical site, in the manner of, say, Antietam or Kennesaw Mountain, it was poorly treated over the years. Scavengers made off with many artifacts. Part of the battlefield ended up underneath a section of Interstate 75; another portion lies underneath a truck stop. But some reminders of the Civil War were still on the field. The author writes of the existence of military entrenchments. The book includes a picture of the remains of a soldier in a forgotten grave, discovered in 1960 directly in the path of construction for I-75. It seems apparent that part of the value of this volume lies in an argument being made by Secrist for the purchase and preservation of a portion of the Resaca Battlefield.

All things considered, there is a limited usefulness to this book for the general reader of history. Its primary value would be for those interested in Sherman's Atlanta Campaigns; Secrist has written an excellent account of the Battle of Resaca. But the book is too specialized to warrant much attention from other readers.

Notes:

[1]. *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman* (New York: The Library of America, 1990), 504.

[2]. *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American* (1929; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 252.

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