

Setting the Stage: Background to the 1864 Battle of Franklin

In 1864, Ulysses S. Grant was the newly-appointed general-in-chief of the Union armies. The North was tired of the long war and the 1864 presidential election was approaching. Abraham Lincoln stood a good chance of losing to former Union Gen. George B. McClellan, who wanted to negotiate peace with the South. That meant that the South would have become its own nation permanently. Lincoln needed a big victory to stay in office and keep the Union intact.

General Grant planned to tie down the Army of Tennessee so it could not reinforce the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. He also planned to cripple the South by destroying Southern resources which might aid its war effort - this time in the Deep South. He placed William Tecumseh Sherman in charge of operations in the Western Theater. Sherman's men fought their way from Chattanooga, TN (a major transportation center) to Atlanta, GA (attempting to cut Gen. John Bell Hood's supply lines). After long and bloody fighting, Sherman cut the supply lines (especially the Macon & Western and the West Point Railroads). On the night of September 1, 1864, Hood was forced to evacuate Atlanta. This gave Lincoln the victory he needed to win the 1864 election.

After the election, Sherman began his March to the Sea (through Georgia and the Carolinas). A huge swath of destruction was carved through the Deep South. Hood, however, moved to middle Tennessee in an order to cut Sherman's ever-growing supply and communications line to Nashville.

During the Franklin-Nashville campaign of 1864, Hood moved his forces north to threaten the Western & Atlantic Railroad - Sherman's supply line. He tried to cross the Tennessee River in October but was stopped by Union Gen. Robert Granger. Hood then sent Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest to raid the Union supply depot at Johnsonville, TN. Forrest caused \$2 million in damages and forced the Union to set fire to several of its own gunboats, but he did not succeed in stopping the Union army.

Hood tried to create a diversion at Columbia, TN, so that he could cross the Duck River. He wasn't successful in that he didn't stop Union Gen. John Schofield's Army of the Ohio. Both armies marched north to Spring Hill, Tennessee. Again, Hood hoped to cut Schofield's supply and communications lines. Schofield managed to reinforce his position at the crossroads in Spring Hill. Hood ordered a few ineffective scattered attacks against Schofield throughout the day while Union and Confederate cavalry clashed nearby. When fighting ended at night, Schofield moved his forces through Spring Hill to Franklin. Hood had missed an opportunity to damage Schofield's army.

Hood followed Schofield, who reached Franklin on the morning of November 30th. His men reinforced defensive works which had been put in place in 1863, south of town. At 4 PM, Hood ordered a frontal attack against the outer Union defenses. These Union men fell back to the inner defensive line, but this line withstood several bloody Confederate attacks. Fighting continued well into night time. In the end, the Confederacy lost 6 generals (killed or mortally wounded) and about 6000 men. The badly damaged Confederate Army dragged itself towards Nashville, where Hood would face stubborn Union Gen. George H. Thomas. In the December 15-16 battle, Hood's forces were battered once more. The Confederate army retreated on December 16th. Disgraced, Hood went to Tupelo, MS and resigned his commission.