

OVERVIEW OF THE BATTLE OF GRISWOLDVILLE

November 22, 1864

By John Wayne Dobson

Two days of savage fighting had closed at Jonesboro on September 1, 1864 and when it did, the Confederate forces, almost to a man, left the field that day knowing in their hearts it was all over. Larger battles had been waged but few had a more decisive outcome. This Confederate defeat opened the door to the fall of Atlanta and helped seal the re-election bid of Abraham Lincoln. It also laid the groundwork for Sherman's March to the Sea.

Resistance to Sherman's southeastern onslaught was determined but rarely organized. Ambushes and raids preyed on his columns as they moved further from their new base of supplies in Atlanta and Southerners braced to defend the resources that Georgia still held. Atlanta was not the only big prize, however, as Sherman had tried to take the rich supply source of the Macon vicinity (the Stoneman Raid July 1864) around the same time as he was storming the Gate City. Even before coming to Georgia, Sherman's men had consistently captured Southern supplies traceable to this mid state city until he determined they must put this area out of commission once and for all. No doubt, cutting off the Confederate powder supply in Augusta would also impede vital operations, but the Union Army in Georgia would only make a grand feint in that direction while maintaining a persistent course toward Macon, a heretofore sheltered area that produced "everything from camp stools to cannons."

By November 19th the Federal 17th Corps was in Hillsboro and the 15th Corps in Clinton. Confederate General Hardee reached Macon that same morning with his cavalry counterpart, General Joe Wheeler, who was immediately ordered to Clinton. Cavalry skirmishing between Wheeler and Union horsemen, under Union General Judson Kilpatrick, became fierce and regular but by the night of the 20th Sherman had finally succeeded in crossing the Ocmulgee River. The Georgia Militia was alerted to change its concentration from the western fortifications of Macon to the east side. General Wright was in immediate command of these Macon defenses and he was soon joined by General Richard Taylor, as well as Georgia Governor Joe Brown. Skirmishing continued in the area as Hardee moved the 1st Brigade of his Militia to Augusta, Sherman's expected point of attack. Union Cavalry was guarding all roads approaching Macon where the current population of high-ranking Confederate commanders threatened to dwarf the number of bona fide fighting forces stationed there.

A bitter, cold dawn came to Macon on November 22, 1864 as General Wright ordered about 1,900 soldiers (2nd, 3rd and 4th Militia Brigades, the Georgia State Line and the artillery support of four Napoleon cannons) to march out of Macon under the command of General Pleasant J. Phillips. By 8A.M. they were under way and moving along a line of march that followed the Central of Georgia Railroad tracks. There remains some debate as to whether or not their destination and plan was to march to a designated point and board train cars bound for Augusta or if only a recon of reported Yankee activity near Griswoldville (8 miles east of Macon) was the real objective. At any rate the column reached the outskirts of Griswoldville around noon and found infantry battalions from Athens and Augusta already facing the smoldering town and formed in a line of battle. The town had been a point of contention the two days before by opposing cavalry units before a Union Infantry Brigade under General Charles C. Walcutt pushed Joe Wheeler's riders from the area and sent them on their way toward Augusta. Brigadier Walcutt, however, still thinking that Wheeler might actually be preparing for another attack, relocated about 1-1/2 miles outside of town to a place called Duncan's Ridge and constructed light and hasty fortifications against the possible return of Southern cavalry. This defensive line had been personally selected by Union 15th Corps commander, General Peter Osterhaus. The cavalry of General Wheeler did not return to attack Walcutt's Federals, but, instead, around 1 P.M. Southern infantry, under the overall command of General Pleasant J. Phillips, deployed in line of battle facing the Ridge.

In seven ill-fated charges the gallant Confederate forces hammered away at the Federal line on the high ground before retiring from the field in a state of mangled good order; suffering some 700 casualties and forced to leave their dead and many wounded behind. Phillips' command fell back to the nearest stretch of railroad not ruined by Union troops and arrived in Macon about 4AM the next morning. Ill-advised as this battle might have been, it was the only major opposition to Sherman's March to the Sea.