

From Atlanta to the Sea

With the spring of 1864, the war was three years old, and still there was no sign of victory for either side. In February, Lincoln took a decisive step: he appointed Grant general-in-chief of the armies. With Grant's promotion, Sherman took over in the West, and the two friends laid plans for the "great campaign" of 1864.

On May 5 the two armies moved — Sherman from Chattanooga into Georgia; Grant against Lee in Virginia. With Sherman there were 100,000 men in three armies: the Army of the Tennessee under Major General John B. McPherson; the Army of the Cumberland under Major General George H. Thomas; and the Army of the Ohio under Major General John M. Schofield. Eighteen infantry, two cavalry, and one artillery regiment from Iowa were in the Army of the Tennessee: the 2nd, 3rd (three companies), 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 13th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 25th, 26th, 30th, 31st, and 39th Infantry; the 5th and 8th Cavalry; and the First Artillery. All had seen service, all were seasoned regiments, and all were led by experienced officers. The two years since Shiloh had made an army out of a mob.

Grenville M. Dodge, who became a major gen-

eral during the campaign, commanded the 16th Army Corps of the Army of the Tennessee. Brigades in the various corps were commanded by other Iowans: Brigadier Generals Charles L. Matthies, Elliott W. Rice, and William Vandever; and Colonels James A. Williamson, Jabez Banbury, William Hall, and William W. Belknap (who was promoted to brigadier during the campaign). Captain Henry H. Griffiths commanded the artillery, and Brigadier General John M. Corse, originally colonel of the 6th Iowa, was inspector general on Sherman's staff.

Sherman moved slowly into Georgia, with Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston retreating before him. Fighting skirmishes and engagements almost daily, the Union army met determined resistance at Resaca, at Adairsville, at Cassville, at New Hope Church, and finally at Kennesaw Mountain, where Sherman was stopped for most of the month of June. Finally flanking Johnston's position at Kennesaw, Sherman proceeded toward Atlanta, coming in sight of the city on July 19. There he learned that Johnston had been relieved and replaced by General John B. Hood. Although Hood had a useless left arm — shattered at Gettysburg — and had lost his right leg at Chickamauga, so that he had to be strapped to his horse during battle, he was an opponent to be feared.

Gradually, Sherman began the encirclement of

Atlanta and by July 21 had his army close to the city on the north, east, and west. With the troops on the east — the left of Sherman's line — were the 11th, 13th, 15th, and 16th Iowa — the "Crocker Brigade." On the night of the 21st they intrenched their positions and waited for morning. Shortly after noon on July 22 the enemy struck these four Iowa regiments on Sherman's left. They fought off the first assault, taking a number of prisoners, but meanwhile the Confederates, under cover of a wood, had flanked the four regiments and now struck them from the rear. The Iowans fought on, facing first to their front and then to their rear, until their ammunition gave out and they were forced to surrender. Some of the men managed to escape, but the 16th Iowa was captured almost to a man. The brigade lost 600 men in the engagement, over 400 of them captured. They in turn took many prisoners before surrendering. Colonel Belknap himself captured an Alabama colonel, during hand-to-hand fighting between the regiments, by dragging him across the entrenchment by his coat collar.

Sherman now settled down to a siege of Atlanta, meanwhile moving his troops slowly around to the right and south of the city. At last, on September 2, after hearing great explosions during the night, the Union army found Atlanta evacuated. Hood, as had so many Confederate commanders before him, escaped Sherman's army, but one of

the great campaigns of the war had closed with a brilliant Union victory.

The victory had been costly, however. Sherman suffered some 31,000 casualties, of whom about 2,500 were Iowans. A compilation from the Iowa Adjutant General's report shows 334 Iowans killed, 1,085 wounded, and 1,096 captured, for a total of 2,515. Many of the captured, sent to Andersonville prison, died of starvation and its attendant diseases.

The greatest loss to the Union army during the Atlanta campaign was one man — Major General John B. McPherson. Of all his generals, Grant respected and trusted McPherson almost as much as he did Sherman. With Sherman near the center of the line when the fighting of July 22 broke out, McPherson hurried toward the sounds of battle and ran into an enemy ambush. He was killed instantly.

During the advance on Atlanta, Sherman was constantly worried about attacks on his supply line from the Confederate cavalry raider, Nathan Bedford Forrest. Several attempts to defeat Forrest in Mississippi had failed. Finally, Sherman sent two divisions of the Army of the Tennessee under General A. J. Smith after Forrest. Sherman had loaned Smith's divisions to General Banks for his ill-fated Red River campaign in March and April, 1864, and had not been able to get them back before his Georgia campaign start-

ed. Early in July, while Sherman advanced on Atlanta, Smith began his search for Forrest, meeting him at Tupelo, Mississippi, on July 13. "Smith's Guerrillas," as the men of his army called themselves, were the first to defeat the redoubtable Forrest. Among the troops with Smith were three Iowa cavalry regiments — the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th — the 2nd Artillery, and the 12th, 14th, 27th, 32nd, and 35th Infantry.

Confederate raiders closer than Forrest also gave Sherman trouble. On July 30 the Union cavalry, including the 5th and 8th Iowa, were overwhelmed at Newnan, Georgia, southwest of Atlanta. After desperate fighting, the 8th, covering the retreat of the brigade, was captured. Colonel J. B. Dorr reported that of the 292 men and 24 commissioned officers of the regiment, only 20 returned to the safety of the Union lines. The 5th Cavalry suffered equally with the 8th, losing a total of 116 men: 13 killed, 3 wounded, and 100 captured.

After the fall of Atlanta, Hood tried to lure Sherman away by repeated assaults on his line of communications with the North. Sherman had stationed brigades and divisions along the railroad from Atlanta to Chattanooga, and these positions were under constant threat.

On October 5 the enemy struck at Allatoona, halfway between Atlanta and Resaca. Iowa's General J. M. Corse had been given command of

the 4th division of the 15th Army Corps and had gone north to Rome, Georgia. From a vantage point on Kennesaw Mountain, Sherman could see the enemy marching toward Allatoona. Since his telegraph was cut, he sent a message to Corse by signal to hurry to Allatoona. Corse had with him four Illinois regiments and one Iowa — the 39th



JOHN M. CORSE

— and these he loaded on cars and hurried to the relief of the small force at Allatoona. The message sent by flag from Allatoona, "Corse is here," greatly encouraged Sherman.

There were some 900 men at Allatoona; Corse brought 1,900 more. The enemy had between 4,000 and 5,000 for the attack. About 8:30 A. M. on October 5, the Confederate

General S. G. French sent a message to Corse, suggesting that he avoid a "needless effusion of blood" and surrender, giving Corse five minutes to decide. Corse's prompt reply was that he was "prepared for the 'needless effusion of blood' whenever it is agreeable." Allatoona consisted of two forts on each side of a deep railroad cut. Regiments were placed outside the forts to hold

back the enemy — among them the 39th Iowa and the 7th Illinois. For two hours, these regiments, assisted by the 93rd Illinois, held back the attackers until flanked and overwhelmed. Lieutenant Colonel James Redfield of the 39th Iowa was killed, as were First Lieutenants Andrew T. Blodgett and Oliver C. Ayers, among others. Of these men, Corse wrote that “the names of Redfield, Blodgett, and Ayers must prove as immortal as the holy cause for which they sacrificed their lives.” A few of the 39th managed to escape into the fort; the rest were either killed or captured. In all, the 39th lost 40 men killed, 52 wounded, and 78 missing or captured.

While the men of Iowa and Illinois hung on outside the forts, Corse organized his men inside the bastions and prepared to withstand assault. Corse later reported: “The extraordinary valor of the men and officers of the Thirty-ninth Iowa and of the Seventh Illinois saved to us Allatoona.” From the two forts Corse poured volley after volley into the enemy troops, until he himself was wounded. Unconscious for about a half hour, Corse aroused himself when he heard a command to “Cease firing.” He then sent for more ammunition and fought on. About 4 o’clock the Confederates withdrew, completely routed by the handful of men in the two forts. The following day Corse signalled Sherman’s aide-de-camp: “I am short a cheek-bone and an ear, but am able to

whip all hell yet!" For his stubborn defense of Allatoona, Corse was brevetted a major general.

A few days later, at Tilton, Georgia, the 17th Iowa suffered a fate similar to that of the 39th. The 17th, Lieutenant Colonel S. M. Archer commanding, was stationed in a blockhouse at Tilton, a few miles north of Resaca. Attacked on October 13 by an overwhelming force of the enemy, the regiment resisted stubbornly. Archer had replied to the enemy demand for surrender: "I will not surrender; if you want my garrison you will have to take it." The 17th held out for several hours, until the blockhouse was about to crumble as a result of repeated artillery bombardment. Only then did Archer give up. He himself was paroled, but many of his men who were imprisoned died in captivity. Hood struck at the rest of the brigade at Resaca, but was repulsed. Colonel Clark R. Weaver had replied to Hood's demand for surrender: "If you want it come and take it."

Convinced by these repeated assaults on his line of communication to the north, Sherman proposed to cut loose and head for the sea. After some persuasion, he convinced Grant and Lincoln to let him try. Therefore, on November 16 Sherman's army, trimmed down to the bare necessities, marched out of burning Atlanta singing "John Brown's Body." The men had complete faith in the "Old Man" — their "Uncle Billy" — and would follow Sherman anywhere.

The killing and the dying were now almost over. Cutting a swath 60 miles wide and 300 miles long across Georgia, foraging for food, destroying railroads, burning property, Sherman reached Savannah and the sea on December 10, having met no appreciable opposition. This destruction, so appalling to the inhabitants of Georgia, seemed to make little impression on the men of Sherman's army who later wrote accounts of the march. They had been fighting for three years and living off the land a good part of that time; they had become hardened to the havoc they could wreak on an undefended countryside. They had been ordered by Sherman to "forage liberally," and although only selected men were supposed to make up the foraging parties, much unauthorized pilaging went on.

On December 21 Savannah was evacuated, and Sherman's march to the sea was over. On December 22 he wired President Lincoln: "I beg to present you as a Christmas-gift the city of Savannah."

The Atlanta campaign had brought three more Congressional Medals of Honor to Iowans: to Private George W. Healey of the 4th Cavalry, for capturing five prisoners at Newnan, Georgia; and to Privates Pitt B. Herrington and William B. Mayes of the 11th Iowa for rescuing wounded comrades at Kennesaw Mountain.