

Tracing the Civil War

The American Civil War along the Natchez Trace: Mississippi



Summary of the Battle of Tupelo (July 14-15, 1864)

Overall Background

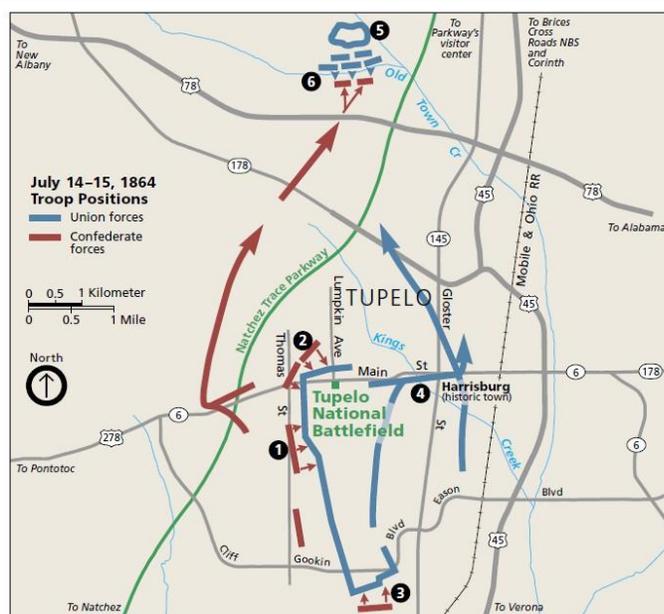
In the summer of 1864, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman's campaign to capture Atlanta, Georgia was in full swing. One of Sherman's main concerns was the safety of his communications and supply lines that stretched from his position near Atlanta back to Nashville, Tennessee. The threat of raids by Confederate cavalry on the Union controlled railway lines in Tennessee and North Alabama were real concerns for Sherman and his army. Disruption of his line of supply could seriously hamper and delay his operations Georgia.

The main Confederate threat to Sherman's rear lines were forces in Mississippi and Alabama commanded by General Stephen D. Lee and his cavalry under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Forrest had conducted several successful raids into Tennessee and had defeated two prior Union raids into Mississippi at the battles of Okolona and Brices Crossroads.

Sherman concluded that Forrest must be occupied to prevent him from moving on his rear lines and ordered another raid into Mississippi. General A.J. Smith was given command of a Union force numbering about 14,000 with orders to bring Lee and Forrest to battle and destroy the Confederate forces in Mississippi.

The Battle

As the Union force marched into Mississippi, Forrest gathered about 6,000 troops and moved to meet them. Skirmishing between the armies began as Smith's force grew closer to the Tupelo area. Smith chose some hills and heights around the town of Harrisburg and ordered his soldiers to build breastworks anticipating an attack from the Confederates. Lee, who had arrived with about 2,000 troops, sent orders for his troops to assault the Union positions. Repeated attacks by the Confederates were driven back on the day and night of July 14. That night, Smith ordered his Union force to begin falling back toward Memphis. On July 15, the Confederates attacked the Union rear guard, which included the U.S. Colored Troops, north of Harrisburg near Old



Town Creek. These attacks were once again beaten off and the Federal troops continued to withdraw back to Memphis.

The Result

The Battle of Tupelo was the last major engagement in Mississippi. The Union claimed a victory for holding their ground both days and not being driven off by the Confederates. The Confederates claimed victory because, as they saw it, they had forced the Union army back to Memphis. While Smith did not destroy Forrest's command, he had achieved his overall mission and badly damaged the Confederates. Strategically, the Federals had succeeded in occupying Forrest and his raiding cavalry, preventing them from moving against Sherman's supply lines in Tennessee. The Confederates also suffered twice as many casualties as the Union, losing over 1,300 irreplaceable troops. Forrest himself was seriously wounded during the fight at Old Town Creek, knocking him out of action for 3 weeks.