North Carolina as a Civil War Battlefield, November 1864–May 1865,

By winter 1864 the Union was poised to strike from several northwestern points. General William T. Sherman completed his March to the Sea in late December and turned his attention northward to the Carolinas. The Union high command also turned their attention to the Cape Fear region, particularly Fort Fisher and Wilmington, long neglected in favor of numerous failed attempts to subdue Charleston, which the Union viewed as the very seat of disunion, in succession. With the Army of Northern Virginia entrenched around Petersburg and Richmond, the Union realized they could not force the Confederacy to capitulate.

In December 1864 the Union assembled a joint operation to attempt the reduction and capture of Fort Fisher. The plan called for the navy to bombard the fort, while the army landed a force to the north. Once the naval bombardment had effectively damaged the fort, the infantry would begin their assault. Commanding the expedition were Admiral David Dixon Porter and General Benjamin Butler. The First Battle of Fort Fisher took place on Christmas, with the navy opening its bombardment on December 24. On Christmas Day, as Porter anxiously awaited the ground attack on the fortification, Butler’s force instead retreated. The navy victory was largely ineffective and had not dismantled enough of the fort’s heavy guns to allow for an assault without heavy casualties. The weather had taken a turn for the worse and Butler also learned that General Robert F. Hoke’s division of 6,000 men had arrived in Wilmington and would soon be to his rear. Porter was incensed and blamed the failed attempt to take the fort on Butler’s lack of courage and mismanagement.

Following the Christmas debacle, the Union high command replaced Butler with General Alfred Terry and sent the expedition back to Fort Fisher for a second attempt. On January 13, 1865 the Second Battle of Fort Fisher began. The navy once again shelled the fort. General Gillem ordered the garrison of the vessels in the fleet to concentrate their fire on the fort’s gun chambers in order to maximize the bombardment’s effectiveness. The plan of attack this time also called for provisions a naval landing party, supported by marines to put ashore and attack the fort from the beach, at its rear, and from the side. However, just as the Confederate troops and officers were distracted, a naval force occupied the fort’s main guns and then opened fire on the Charleston. This action was of little consequence, but it was the last military action of the war in North Carolina.

Aside from Stoneman’s Raid, major military hostilities ceased once General Robert E. Lee’s surrender became widely known. Raleigh was surrendered to Union forces on April 13. Generals Sherman and Johnston met in April at the farm of James and Nancy Bennett near Durham Station to work out the details of Johnston’s surrender. This agreement was finalized on April 26, 1865, thus officially ending the Civil War in North Carolina.

From March 28 through April 26, 1865, Union General George Stoneman led a destructive raid through western North Carolina and southwestern Virginia. The main purpose of the raid was to disrupt the railroad and Piedmont Railroad. On March 28, troops in Boone burned the jail and destroyed the county records, while at Patterson, a cotton mill was burned and stores of bacon and corn were confiscated. From April 3 to 10, Stoneman’s force was in southwestern Virginia, but they returned to North Carolina on April 10. In order to hit multiple targets, Stoneman frequently divided his force. On April 10, thetown of Salem and Winston were surrendered and a depot and the Piedmont Railroad bridge over Ready Ford was burned, as was another bridge over Buffalo Creek. The 3rd North Carolina Cavalry was routed and a portion of the North Carolina Railroad was cut. Finally, at High Point, steep containing 1,700 bales of cotton was burned. One of Stoneman’s main targets was the town of Salisbury because of the Confederate prison located there. Salisbury was captured after token Confederate resistance on April 12, and on April 12 the public buildings and military stores there were burned.

Stoneman’s raiders then turned back to the west and arrived in Statesville on April 13. Confederate stores, a depot, and the offices of the Piedmont Express were burned. On April 16, a detachment of Stoneman’s force occupied Lincoln, crossed into South Carolina, and burned a railroad bridge over the Catawba River. Stoneman returned to Tennessee on April 17, via Blowing Rock and Boone, while sending General Alvan Gillem on to Asheville. On April 18, Gillem encountered Confederate resistance near Morganston, but was able to overcome it and occupy the town. Gillem was conferred with a military organization partially made up of Cherokee tribesmen from the mountains. This action was of little consequence, but it was the last military action of the war in North Carolina.

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