"Hatch, why in hell didn't you flank them on their right?"-MG William T. Sherman.

THE BATTLE OF HONEY HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA
Wednesday, 30 November 1864
by Lowell D. Hamilton

Union Strategic Objective

In early November 1864, Union MG William T. Sherman was in Atlanta, Georgia, which he had captured in early September, finalizing plans for his next campaign. He was determined to march his "*army right through the South*" as "*proof positive that the North can prevail in this contest*". The plan Sherman proposed and won approval for was a route of march from Atlanta to "*the seashore at Charleston* (South Carolina) *or Savannah* (Georgia)".
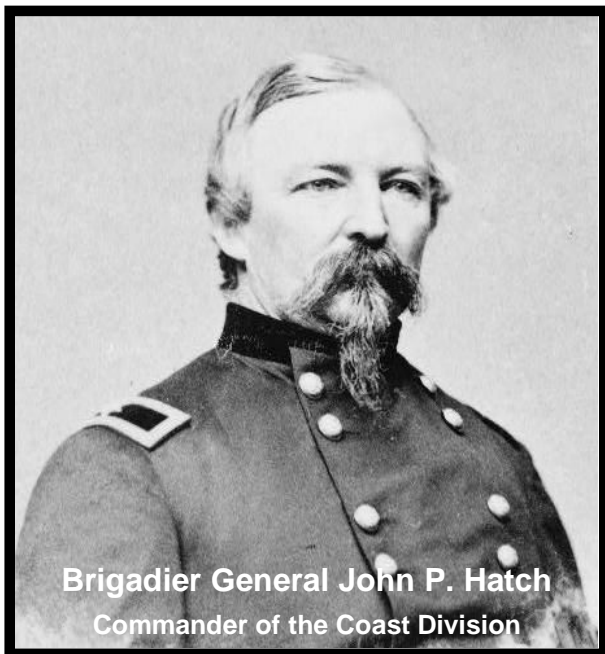
Union Operational Objective

On 11 November 1864, Sherman requested support for his campaign by telegraphing Union Chief of Staff, MG Henry W. Halleck in Washington, D.C. He stated, "*I would like to have* (Major) *General* (John G.) *Foster* (commander of the Union's Department of the South) *to break the Savannah and Charleston* (rail) *road about Pocotaligo* (South Carolina) *about 1 December.*" The Savannah to Charleston railroad was the line of supply and communication for the two objectives of Sherman's campaign. The first objective was to break the 102-mile long railroad to interrupt supplies and reinforcements that could reach the enemy on his front and the second was to cut the rail line to prevent the escape of Confederate *LTG William J. Hardee's* 10,000-man force defending Savannah.

Unfortunately, Halleck muddled Sherman's clear and succinct request when he passed it on to Foster. Writing to Foster, Halleck said Sherman "*wishes you, if possible, to cut the Savannah and Charleston Railroad*" but then Halleck added the muddle, "*at all events a demonstration on that road will be of advantage*". A military demonstration implies a threatening move toward an enemy position but not necessarily the occupation of the position and is used to pin enemy forces in place and/or draw reinforcements away from the true objective. The ever-cautious Halleck had subtly altered Sherman's request, reducing it to a less ambitious and less decisive objective.

The Union Force Assembles, Sails and Deploys

Foster, with the help of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren, quickly organized a force - the Coast

Brigadier General John P. Hatch
Commander of the Coast Division

Division - that included 5,000 soldiers and about 500 Sailors and Marines under the command of Union BG John P. Hatch. The division and brigades were provisional organizations made up of hastily assembled units stationed along the Atlantic Coast from Charleston to Florida. The Coast Division sailed on 27 November 1864 from Morris and Folly Islands near Charleston and headed for Hilton Head, South Carolina. The division rendezvoused with other troops at Hilton Head and then departed in the early morning of 29 November up the Broad River. The plan was to disembark at Boyd's Landing, march the nine miles to the Savannah and Charleston Railroad located one mile beyond Grahamville (present-day Ridgeland), South Carolina and then physically occupy the railroad, tear up the tracks, burn railroad buildings and destroy nearby railroad bridges.

The "Friction and Fog of War" quickly destroyed the Union plans for 29 November. Early morning fog delayed the start of the convoy and hampered efforts to locate and land at Boyd's Landing. Once ashore, the Union's lack of accurate maps coupled with inept (or devious) local guides lead to aimless marching and counter-marching throughout the day. Union soldiers, sailors and marines marched up to fifteen miles during the day and into the night only to advance a total of three miles toward the railroad, ending the day still seven miles short of their objective. The Coast Division had missed its best opportunity to reach the Savannah and Charleston Railroad virtually unopposed.

Approach to Honey Hill

Map Graphics, George Skoch
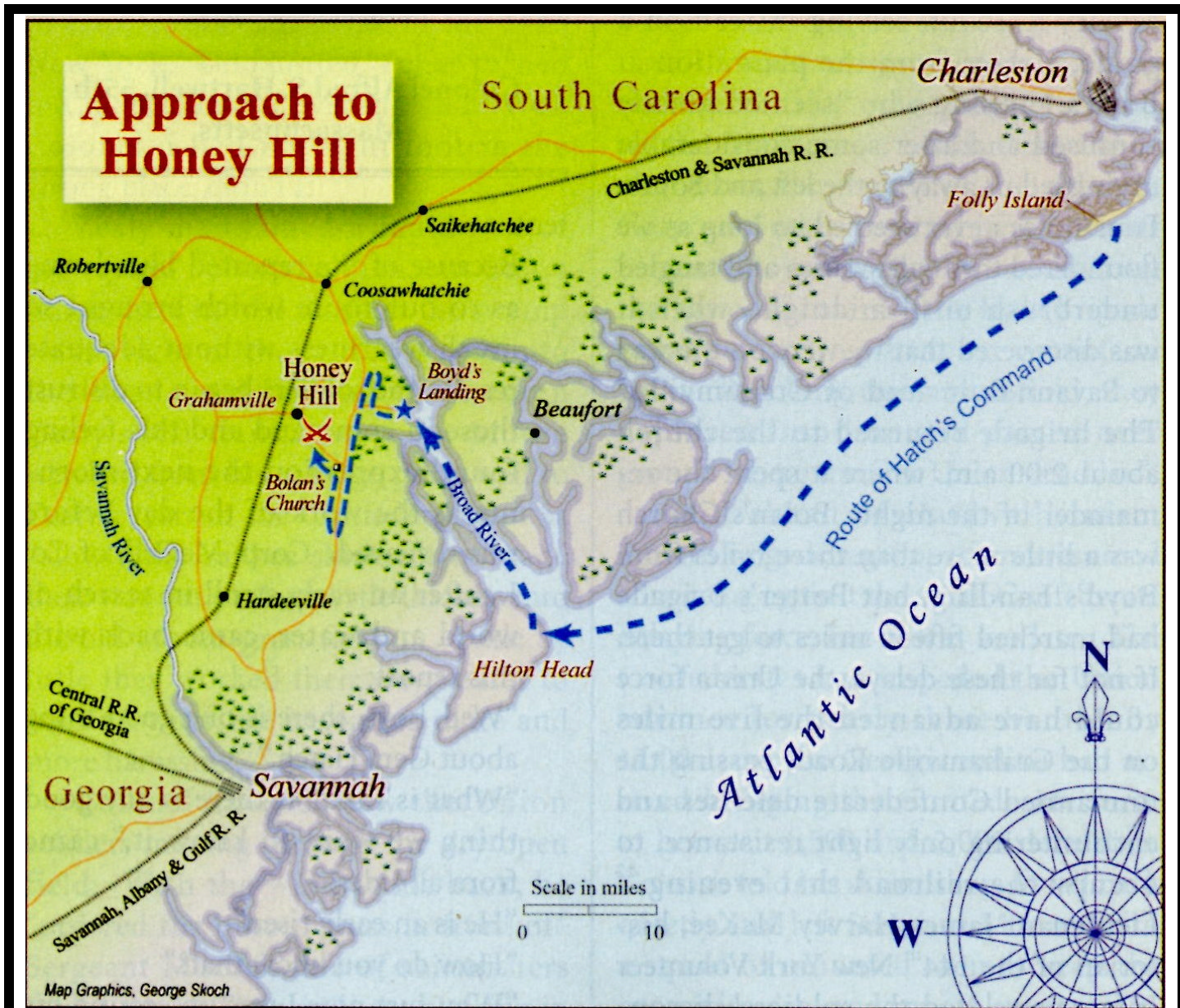
The Confederate Response

Fortune smiled on the Confederates throughout the 29th since the only units available to oppose the Union's 5,500-man Coast Division were small vedettes of the *3rd SC Cavalry* (246 men) dispersed to guard possible landing sites and four batteries of artillery (415 men) deployed to guard the three avenues of approach to Grahamville. The Confederates used this reprieve to organize a defensive force to oppose the Union incursion.
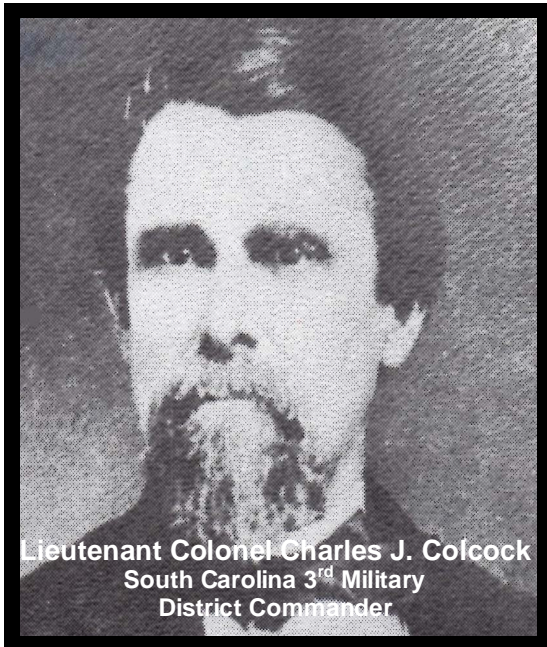
Lieutenant Colonel Charles J. Colcock
South Carolina 3rd Military
District Commander

The defense of the Savannah and Charleston Railroad was the responsibility of the *3rd South Carolina Military District* Commander, *LTC Charles J. Colcock*. Alerted by the vedettes, the *32nd GA* and *47th GA Regiments* were ordered by *Hardee* (in Savannah) from Charleston to Grahamville via the Savannah and Charleston Railroad. *BG Charles Chestnut's* 350-man *SC Reserve Regiment* in Augusta, Georgia was ordered to Grahamville but would not arrive until midnight on the day of battle, while *BG Lawrence S. Baker's* 1,960-man *NC Brigade* traveling from North Carolina would began arriving just before daybreak on the day after the battle. The nearest infantry units that could reach the area in time were the 1,880-man *GA Militia Brigades and Battalions* under the command of *MG Gustavus W. Smith,* presently on a north bound train heading for Savannah. *Smith's* entire *GA Militia Division* was scheduled to make the trip to Savannah from Macon, Georgia but a lack of rolling stock limited all but two brigades and two battalions from making the journey. The train carrying the *GA Militia* units arrived in Savannah at 0200 on the day of battle. Aware of the emergency, *Hardee* ordered the *GA Militia* units to continue with the 50-mile train ride from Savannah to Grahamville.

At first, *Smith* resisted at sending his Georgia troops beyond the borders of his state to fight in South Carolina. *Smith's GA Militia Division* had recently fought a disastrous battle on 22 November where they made a frontal assault on Sherman's entrenched veteran rearguard at Griswoldville, Georgia. *Smith's Division* suffered more than 600 casualties to the Union's 95. His troops were exhausted having traveled from Macon to Savannah. With the direct path blocked by Sherman's forces, the circuitous route entailed a rail journey of 95 miles, a 55-mile road march in 54 hours and then another 200-mile rail ride to reach Savannah. After *Hardee* explained the situation, *Smith* consented and continued on the 50-mile train ride to Grahamville although without prior approval to move his *GA Militia* units from the state. Georgia Governor *Joseph E. Brown* later approved of the deployment after learning the details.

On the morning of the battle, Wednesday, 30 November 1864, Confederate forces formed around Grahamville and the nearby Savannah and Charleston Railroad Depot. *Colcock* had planned to be married this day but left his bride to be in Savannah the night before. Accompanied by elements of the *3rd SC Cavalry,* he rode nearly 50 miles to arrive in Grahamville at 0700. In addition, other elements of the *3rd SC Cavalry* and artillery were arriving from various points and at 0800 elements of *Smith's GA Militia* began arriving by train from Savannah. The *47th GA* also arrived by train from Charleston in time to march to Honey Hill and form on the Confederate right flank between 1100 and 1200. *BG Robertson's* reinforcements arrived on the field at 1630 as the battle sputtered to a halt. They were held as a reserve in case the battle resumed.

Smith arrived at 0800 and put *Colcock* in charge of selecting and preparing the most advantageous defensive position to engage the Coast Division. *Colcock* was an inspired choice--before the war he was a local planter, had founded the Savannah & Charleston Railroad which he was defending, and was intimately familiar with the area of operations.

Confederate Delaying Actions
Colcock chose to delay the Union forces by deploying two companies of his *3rd SC Cavalry* and two Napoleons of *LT Zealy's* artillery section on the Grahamville Road east of Honey Hill. The Coast Division was advancing methodically along the Grahamville Road as they finally had discovered the correct route to the railroad. Fighting an inspired delaying action from three different defensive positions, the small Confederate force delayed the enemy for two and one-half

critical hours, allowing the *GA Militia* and *SC Artillery* units time to occupy and prepare the Honey Hill fortifications shortly before the arrival of the advancing Coast Division.

Honey Hill-Confederate Main Line of Defense

The site *Colcock* chose as his main line of defense was an old position of fortifications at Honey Hill, located three miles east of Grahamville. The mile-long fortifications were constructed when *GEN Robert E. Lee* commanded the area from November 1861 through February 1862. Two artillery redoubts were built, rifle-pits were constructed on both flanks and trees were cleared from the front of the improved positions to provide clear fields of fire. The fortification had not been maintained since 1862, but it had not deteriorated and was still viable.

Colcock ordered the bridge on the Grahamville Road over Euwah Creek dismantled as his troops finished preparing the fortified position just minutes ahead of the Union advance. He then informed *Smith* that all was in readiness and tendered his resignation from further command, as *Smith* was the senior commander on the field. *Smith* replied, "No*, Colonel, you have prepared so fine an entertainment that you must receive your guests."*

The Confederate position was strong in the center but weaker on the flanks. The Honey Hill artillery redoubt was an open earthwork with embrasures for four guns and extended two hundred feet on each side of the Grahamville Road. The terrain immediately in front of the artillery redoubt was comparatively open. At 150 yards to the front, the shallow, sluggish Euhaw Creek (two feet deep and 20 yards wide) opened up into a marsh on both sides with a heavy growth of trees and dense underbrush that ran along the frontage of the entire position. The obvious approach to the Confederate position was by the Grahamville Road but the Union commanders were completely unaware of the existence of the earthworks despite the fact they had been built over two years before.

For the past day and a half, Hatch and the Coast Division were opposed by small skirmishing elements of the *3rd SC Cavalry* and, at times, two guns. In each action, the Confederates were either repulsed as they skirmished along the line of communication leading to Boyd's Landing or fought a delaying action as the Federals advanced along the Grahamville Road, however this situation was about to change.

The Battle of Honey Hill-Tactical Level

The Grahamville Road approaching the Confederate position made a sharp turn to the left as it passed through the thick forest and swamp. The improved positions were nearly invisible to the Federals as they entered the turn and advanced along the road in march column. At 1100 the Federal column rounded the turn and the Confederates opened fire on the column with canister and musketry. The Union troops were repulsed and the Battle of Honey Hill had begun.

Hatch spent the next hour forming a line of battle with BG Potter's 1st Brigade on either side of the Grahamville Road and drove the Confederate skirmishers from the thick woods back into their improved position. Then at about noon regimental commanders on their own initiative began to make uncoordinated and mostly unsupported attacks on the Confederate works. These attacks continued through out the afternoon.

The 35th United States Colored Troops (USCT) regiment made one unsupported charge up the Grahamville Road to Honey Hill and was repulsed. The 55th MA (Colored) regiment then charged up the Grahamville Road to Honey Hill three times, each charge with 5 of 8 companies in field column. The second assault received a supporting charge on their left flank from the 127th NY. All three of these charges were repulsed. The 25th OH regiment charged unsupported on the Confederate rifle-pits north of Honey Hill and was repulsed. Each assault was repulsed and defeated in detail as the Confederates were allowed to concentrate sequentially their fire on one Union attack at a time. Between and during these assaults, the front line Union regiments engaged the Confederate position with small arms fire. The Confederates noted that the Union

uphill fire usually passed over their heads and did little damage while their downhill fire was much more effective.

Adding to the confusion of battle, COL Hartwell's 2nd Brigade (Colored) arrived on the field and was thrown in behind Potter's 1st Brigade as (unneeded) supports instead of being deployed as a tactical maneuver element to turn the Confederate position. Command, control and communication (C3) in the thick forest and swamp was difficult enough without further erosion of C3 by the intermingling the two brigades with one another.

The Union artillery was actively employed throughout the day. Battery B, 3rd NY was unlimbered at the "Crossroads" of the Grahamville and Wood roads, the only place from which Union artillery could easily target Honey Hill. The forest was thick and the enemy was invisible until they fired. Union guns, on lower ground, aimed at the discharge of smoke from Confederate guns firing from Honey Hill that were seen over the intervening trees, often firing over their own infantry. Battery F, 3rd NY later replaced Battery B, 3rd NY when Battery B began to run low on ammunition. Both New York batteries were engaged from 1100 to 1600, when their ammunition was nearly exhausted. At 1600 they were replaced with the six-gun Naval Battery that continued to fire until dark.

The after action reports mention the Spencer-armed 4th MA Cavalry Company activities during the battle. They apparently scouted the road network north of the battlefield to protect that flank and perhaps find an avenue of approach to turn the enemy's flank. The 1st NY Engineer detachment was tasked with repairing the docking facilities at Boyd's Landing to expedite the unloading of troops and supplies. Meanwhile, the 26th and 32nd USCT, elements of the 54th MA (Colored) and 102nd USCT, Battery A, 3rd RI and a section of the Naval Battery guarded the line of communication back to Boyd's Landing.

Union Defeat and Withdrawal

At dusk (1720) the Union retreat commenced. The Union forces skillfully withdrew by defensive bounds covered by infantry and artillery taking most of their wounded and equipment with them. The 127th NY and 102nd USCT along with one section of the Naval Artillery formed the rear guard and remained at the front, keeping up a slow fire with artillery. By 1930 the main body of the Coast Division was beyond pursuit and the rear guard withdrew. There was no Confederate attempt at pursuit - the troops were too exhausted from the long trip to the battlefield and the ensuing battle.

Casualties reflected the results of the battle. The *GA Militia* avenged and reversed the casualties suffered at the Battle of Griswoldville. The Coast Division reported casualties of 88 killed, 623 wounded (of which 147 were slight wounds), and 43 missing for a total of 754. *LTC Charles C. Jones Jr.* in his book *Siege of Savannah* claims Confederate loses of 4 killed and 40 wounded (not all units reporting their casualties). The day following the battle a Savannah newspaper (*Republican)* stated, "Our *loss was between 80 and 100 killed and wounded.*" In his after action report, *Smith* wrote, "*Our loss in every arm of service was 8 men killed and 42 wounded."* If the higher casualty figure is used (more reasonable) then the Confederate casualties represent 4% (100 **/** 2,680) of the committed force and only 13% (100 **/** 754) of Union casulaties.

Participant Assessment of the Battle

Hatch, the Coast Division commander, wrote, *"The affair was a repulse owing entirely to the strong position held by the enemy and our want of ammunition."* Potter, commander of the 1st Brigade, wrote about his troops, "*Nothing but the formidable character of the obstacles which they had to encounter prevented them from achieving success.*"

Not surprisingly, Union Officers in junior commands held a different view. CPT Soule, 55th MA (Colored) in his account of the battle says, *"The generalship displayed was not equal to the soldierly qualities of the troops engaged. There appears to have been a lack of foresight in the preparations."* CPT Luther B. Mesnard, commander of B Company, 25th OH, wrote in his diary,

"Our troops were badly handled, no generalship, strategy or tactics. As a diversion in Sherman's favor the fight may have amounted to a little, but nothing to what it would have if we had brushed the rebs away and cut the Savannah and Charleston Rail Road, as we could have done under an efficient commander."

Confederate viewpoints reflect the positive outcome of the battle. *Smith* praised his troops writing, *"I have never seen or known of a battlefield upon which there was so little confusion, and where every order was so cheerfully and promptly obeyed, and where a small number of men for so long a time successfully resisted the determined and oft-repeated efforts of largely superior attacking forces."*

LTC Charles C. Jones Jr., in his book *Siege of Savannah*, opines, *"The victory at Honey Hill released the city of Savannah from an impending danger, which, had it not thus been averted, would have necessitated its immediate evacuation."*

Historical Assessment of the Union Campaign

Looking back on the battle, CPT Luis F. Emilio wrote in his regimental history of the 54th MA (Colored), *"It would seem with the light of the present that our position was as strong for us to hold as was the enemy's. This granted, the natural criticism is, would not the battle have been better fought to have held the position with a portion of our troops and pushed out the main body well on one flank or the other, drawing the enemy from his work to fight us and preserve his communications?"*

In May 1884, CPT Charles C. Soule, 55th MA (Colored), wrote two articles that appeared in the *Philadelphia Weekly Times*. An eyewitness to the battle, he listed the following shortcomings of the Union leadership.

Port Royal, South Carolina on the Broad River and the base of operations for this campaign was captured on 7 November 1861. A little over three years later, the Coast Division sailed up the Broad River in heavy fog with *one* competent pilot to lead the invasion fleet to Boyd's Landing. Elements of the fleet ascended the wrong rivers, ran aground or waited for the fog to clear before arriving at Boyd's Landing later in the day on 29 November. When they did land, they had no accurate maps of the area of operations to guide them quickly to their objective, the Savannah & Charleston Railroad near Grahamville. Consequently, they wondered around lost the rest of the day and into the night, missing the best opportunity to destroy the railroad.

Reconnoitering US Navy expeditions ascending the river during the three years of occupation would have trained more pilots and familiarized them with the soundings and rivers to avert the problems encountered with the fog. These expeditions could have also carried US Army scouts or engineers to reconnoiter the surrounding road network and create accurate maps. In fact, many slaves in the area of operations "rallied to the colors" and jointed the USCT regiments that operated in the area of operations. These ex-slaves could have been used to guide the leading elements of the invasion.

On the morning of the battle, Potter's 1st Brigade was under orders to march before daylight to Grahamville and destroy the railroad. The march began at 0900 instead, which permitted the *3rd SC Cavalry* and *Zealy's* artillery section get in position to fight a two and one-half hour delaying action that allowed the Confederates to occupy the Honey Hill position just ahead of the Union forces. Perhaps Potter's men were still exhausted from the prior day of marching and counter-marching which only ended at 0200 that morning. Perhaps he was waiting for the artillery or COL Hartwell's 2nd Brigade (Colored) to appear before proceeding. Whatever the reason, another opportunity was missed to advance unopposed toward Grahamville. A battle might still have been fought but it would have been fought beyond the fortifications of Honey Hill in more open terrain.

CPT Soule went on to criticize the "*irresolution*" of the reaction to the Confederate delaying action, the *"inaction which left a line of battle without orders and made no systematic attempt at reconnoitering and turning the enemy's flanks"*, and the *"bad judgment which ordered"* (or allowed) *"single regiments to charge successively by a narrow road upon a strongly fortified position, defended by artillery and infantry".* The blame rested on Hatch *"who was present at the front and directed operations during the day."*

In January 1865, Sherman toured the battlefield with Hatch and asked him, *"Hatch, why in hell didn't you flank them on their right?"* MG Jacob D. Cox summed up the battle in his 1898 volume, *Sherman's March to the Sea-Campaigns of the Civil War* series; *"It was a fresh instance of the manner in which irresolute leadership in war wasted the lives of men by alternation between an ill-timed caution and an equally ill-timed rashness."*

It is easy to criticize the leadership of Hatch and he deserves much of it. However, remember the muddled orders that Halleck passed on to Foster, Hatch's commander, "…*at all events a demonstration on that road will be of advantage.*" In his mind, Hatch may have believed that he carried out his orders by demonstrating and drawing Confederate forces away from Sherman's March to the Sea. He certainly fought the battle as if it were a demonstration. The 754 Union casualties represent 16% (754 **/** 4,720) of the committed force, a high percentage for a demonstration. If Hatch thought he was conducting a *demonstration*, he apparently didn't keep his subordinates "well in hand" as they attempted to fight a *battle*.

The Union did not coordinate and conduct their attacks in such a manner that might have stretched the Confederates to their breaking point. The Confederates took advantage of the Union mistakes and conducted an excellent defense of their position. The delaying action was inspired, the coordination between the artillery and infantry was flawless and the spirit of the soldiers, exhausted as they were, was superb. Praising his opponents, Soule summed it up thus, *"On their side it was all good generalship and good luck; on ours it was the reverse."*

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   Robert B. McNair
   Western Carolina Historical Research
   557 Highland Park Drive SW
   Aiken SC 29801-3703
   http://sites.google.com/site/wchr97/

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Visit the web-site listed below for written after action reports of the battle, orders of battle, personal accounts of the battle, a summary description of the battle, a complete listing of Union casualties, maps and diagrams, photographs and links to related web-sites.
http://www.dcnyhistory.org/gary/hhbattle.html

Order of Battle, Honey Hill, South Carolina
Union Order of Battle

Coast Division, BG Hatch (Poor) (4,720, 14 guns)

Engineer
1st NY Engineers Battalion (1 company)(Rebuilt docking facilities at Boyd's Landing)

Cavalry
4th Massachusetts Cavalry, CPT Hurlbut (Vet RP 40)(1 company, not engaged)(guarding line of communication on the northern flank)

1st Infantry Brigade, BG Potter (Able) (3,040)
56th New York, LTC Tyler   **(Vet RM 440)**
127th New York, COL Gurney   **(Vet RM 640)**(7 companies)
144th New York, COL Lewis   **(Vet RM 480)**(8 companies)
157th New York, LTC Carmichael   **(Vet SM 160)**(5 companies)
25th Ohio, LTC Haughton   **(Vet RM 520)**
32nd USCT, COL Baird   **(Trn RM 480)**
35th USCT, COL Beecher (Brave Colonel) (Vet SM 320)

2nd Infantry Brigade (Colored), COL Hartwell (Gallant) (1,040)
54th Massachusetts, LTC Hooper (Crk RM 320)(8 companies, 2 not engaged **(Crk RM 240)**, guarding line of communication at Bolan Church)
55th Massachusetts, LTC Fox (Trn RM 520)(8 companies)
102nd USCT, COL Chipman (Trn RM 200)(5 companies, 2 not engaged **(Trn RM 120)**, guarding rear against stragglers)
26th USCT, COL Silliman (Trn RM 160)(8 companies, not engaged, guarding line of communication at Boyd's Landing)
34th USCT, LTC Marple (Trn RM 320)(8 companies, not engaged, guarding line of communication at Boyd's Landing)

Artillery Brigade, LTC Ames (Able) (160)
Battery B, 3rd New York Artillery, CPT Mesereau (Vet HS 80)(two sections--four X 12-pound Napoleons)
Battery F, 3rd New York Artillery, LT Titus (Vet HS 80)(two sections--four X 12-pound Napoleons)
Battery A, 3rd Rhode Island Artillery, CPT Hamner (Vet LR 60)(one section--three X 10-pound Parrotts, not engaged, guarding line of communication)

2nd Fleet Brigade, CDR Preble (Able) (480)
Sailor Battalion, LT O'Kane   **(Trn RM 160)**
Marine Battalion, 1LT Stoddard   **(Trn RM 200)**(3 Companies)
Naval Artillery Battalion, LT CDR Matthews (Able) (Trn LH 120)(three sections--six X 12-pound light "boat" howitzers)
 (one section--two X 12-pound light "boat" howitzers **(Trn LH 40)**(not engaged, guarding line of communication at Bolan Church)

Confederate Order of Battle

1st Division, Georgia Militia, MG G W Smith
(On the field but relinquished battlefield command)

3rd South Carolina Military District Commander, COL Colcock (Gallant) (3,120, 12 guns)
(Battlefield "division" commander)

Cavalry, MAJ Jenkins
3rd South Carolina Cavalry (Vet RC 240)(four companies, unattached)

47th Georgia Infantry, LTC Edwards (Vet RM 400)(unattached)

1st Brigade Georgia Militia, COL Willis (Able) (1,240)
1st Georgia Militia   **(Trn RM 320)**
2nd Georgia Militia   **(Trn RM 400)**
5th Georgia Militia   **(Trn RM 320)**
Georgia Militia Battalion (Trn RM 200)

Georgia State Line Militia Infantry Brigade, COL Wilson (Able) (320)
1st Georgia State Line Militia (Vet RM 160)
2nd Georgia State Line Militia (Vet RM 160)

Battalions of Infantry Reserves, MAJ Cook (Gallant) (320)
Athens Local Defense Battalion, MAJ Cook   **(Trn RM 160)**
Augusta Local Defense Battalion, MAJ Jackson (Trn RM 160)

South Carolina Artillery "Battalion", CPT Stuart (Able) (160)
Beaufort Artillery, CPT Stuart (Vet HS 40)(one section-- two X 12-pound Napoleons)
Lafayette Artillery, LT Zealy (Vet HS 40)(one section—two X 12-pound Napoleons)
Palmetto Battery A, LT Scruggs (Vet HS 20)(one section-- one X 12-pound Napoleon)**(Vet HH 20)**(one section-- one X 24-pound Howitzer)
Palmetto Battery G, LT Manget (Vet HS 40)(one section-- two X 12-pound Napoleons)

Reinforcements, BG Robertson (Poor) (440) (arrived on the field at 1630, as the Union was withdrawing and formed the reserve)
32nd Georgia Infantry, LTC Bacon (Vet RM 240)(1 battalion, not engaged, arrived after battle, unattached)
Kirk Rangers Cavalry Company (Vet RM 120)(2 companies, not engaged, arrived after battle, unattached)
German Battery, CPT Bachman (Vet HS 80)(two sections--four X 12-pound Napoleons, not engaged, arrived after battle, unattached)