



Bullet'n Backstory

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An Abolitionist at War, Part 9: The Battle of Chickamauga (September 1863)

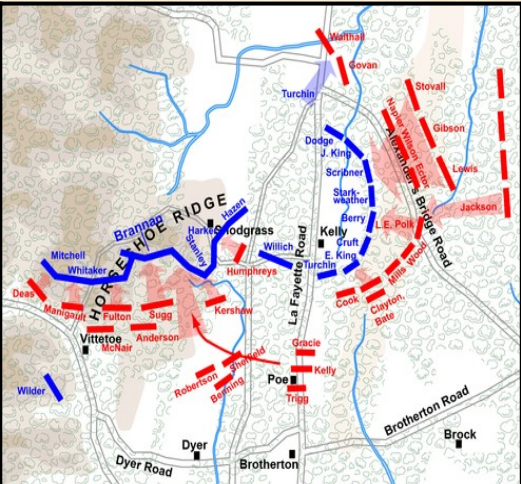
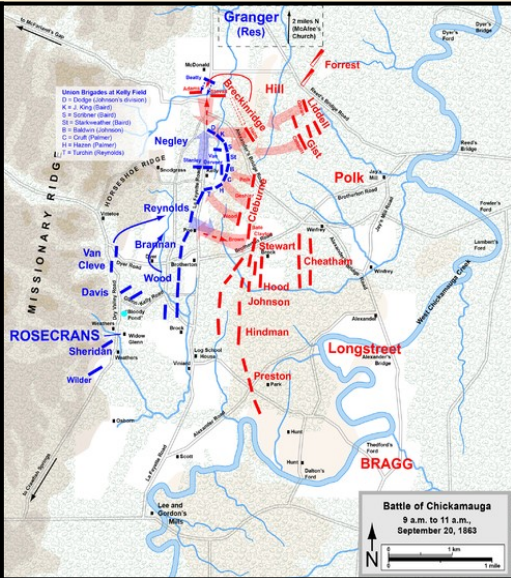
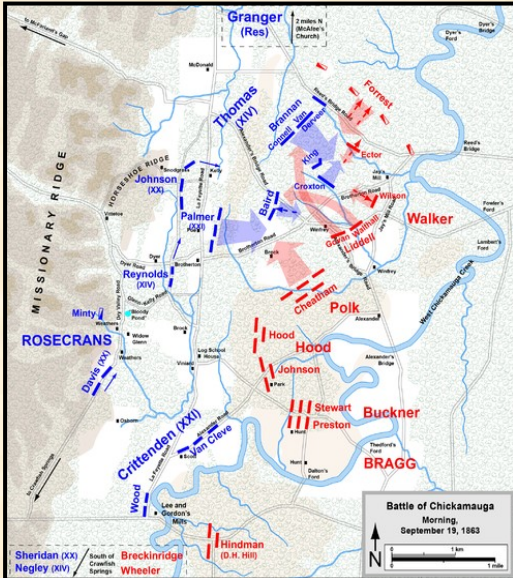
By September 9, 1863, the Army of the Cumberland under Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans had completed a summer of unprecedented success in the Western Theater of the Civil War. After chasing Gen. Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee away from Nashville, the summer's Tullahoma Campaign had driven the Confederate forces to Chattanooga, which the Union captured on September 9. Through the months-long march across Tennessee, Rosecrans had outmaneuvered Bragg at every turn, losing only 569 men on the road to the near bloodless capture of Chattanooga. As Maj. Caleb B. Cox of the 84th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment wrote to his wife on September 16, "Since my last letter we have entered Chattanooga... without a fight... When we reached the top [of Lookout Mountain] we pushed on... and came in full view of the place and could see the rebel army leaving... stretched out for miles on the different roads as they gloomily marched away from their boastful stronghold."

With Union soldiers on the threshold of Georgia, Rosecrans and his men felt like Bragg's army could not hold out much longer, but the Confederate general was not finished yet. Concentrating his forces in LaFayette, Bragg called for reinforcements and prepared to recapture Chattanooga, the key to any effort to move back into Tennessee. This fact was not lost on the Union forces gathered at Chattanooga. As news of Bragg's consolidation reached Rosecrans, the Union men started fortifying the town in advance of an attack, while simultaneously exploring the possibility of crushing the Army of Tennessee it could group. According to Private Louis A. Simmons, another member of the 84th Illinois, "It was evident now that Gen. Bragg was now offering battle, that he was bent upon returning to the surrendered city, unless our force was sufficient to drive him back." Rosecrans sent several regiments into Georgia on multiple paths to chase Bragg, gain intelligence about enemy movements and, given the opportunity, crush the Confederate army. This strategy, based on reports that Bragg's army was fractured and demoralized, backfired. Parts of Rosecrans' army, like Maj. Gen. Alexander M. Cook's XX Corps, soon found themselves isolated and at risk of capture. As Bragg's army advanced, Union forces consolidated on the west side of Chickamauga Creek below Missionary Ridge. By the time Bragg crossed to the west bank of the creek, Rosecrans had reinforced the Union position, setting the stage for a major battle.

The Battle of Chickamauga began after dawn on September 19, with 60,000 men on each side. During the day, Bragg's forces advanced, pushing the Union lines back against Missionary Ridge while lacking sufficient numbers to secure victory. The stoutest Union defense came from Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas' XIV Corps, reinforced by Maj. Gen. John Palmer's Division (Crittenden's Corps). Marching from Lee and Gordon's Mill, Palmer advanced with the three brigades of Brig. Gen. William Hazen, Brig. Gen. Charles Cruft, and Col. William Grose (including the 84th Illinois). As Private Simmons wrote, "Gen. Thomas' corps, reinforced by Gen. Palmer's division, now pressed forward, recovering the ground which they had lost, scattering the rebels at every charge, and retaking some pieces of artillery which had been lost at the opening of the engagement." Countering them were the brigades of Brig. Gen. Marcus J. Wright and Brig. Gen. Preston Smith. They fought into the night, with Smith's brigade taking heavy casualties, including Smith himself. Brig. Gen. Otho F. Strahl's brigade filled this gap, but had to withdraw and fighting ended for the night. The balance changed when Lt. Gen. James Longstreet's divisions arrived at 11 p.m. to reinforce Bragg with an additional 5,000 men. Planning a dawn attack, Bragg reorganized his army into two wings, commanded by Lt. Gen. Leonidas K. Polk (Right) and Longstreet (Left). This necessitated the demotion of Lt. Gen. Daniel H. Hill, who received no official notice of the change and knew nothing of the battle plan until after the attack was to have begun. As a result, Hill recommended delaying the attack, and Bragg reluctantly agreed.



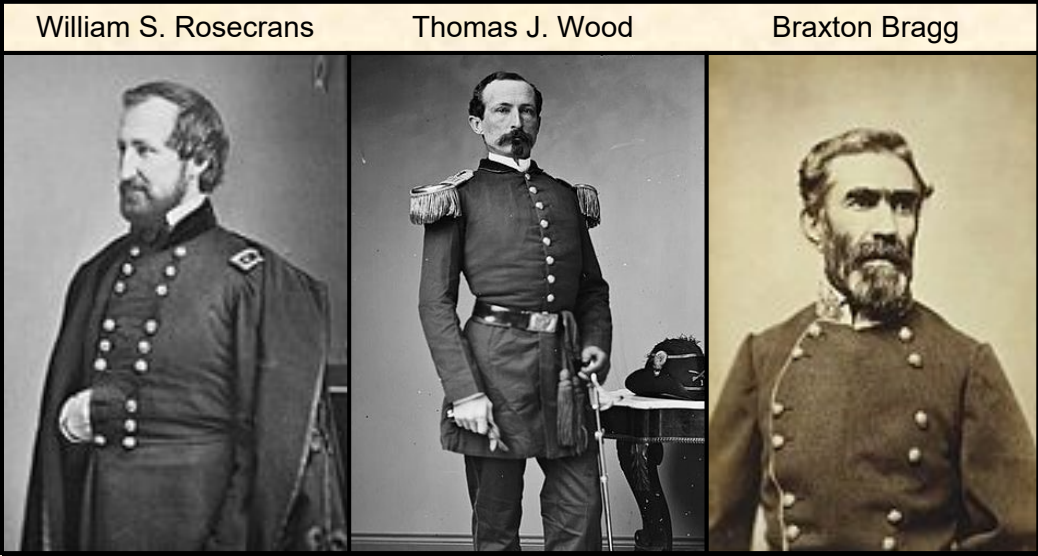
The Battle of Chickamauga (Harper's Weekly)



Defense of Horseshoe Ridge and Union retreat (evening, Sept. 20)

At 9:30 a.m. on September 20, coordinated Confederate attacks pummeled the Union left flank. An hour later, Rosecrans ordered Brig. Gen. Thomas J. Wood's division to fill a gap in the Union line. This presented a problem for Wood, who knew there was no such gap, but there would be if he moved his division as ordered. However, Wood had already earned the reputation for not following orders in a timely fashion. Rather than risk charges of insubordination, Wood made the curious and ultimately disastrous decision to follow Rosecrans' orders. As feared, this created a division-wide hole in the Union line. The Confederate forces were quick to take advantage of this mistake. Longstreet's corps, under Maj. Gen. John B. Hood, surged through the gap created by Wood's departure, causing Union defense at the southern end of the battlefield to evaporate. Federal troops, including Rosecrans himself, fled the field, with many retreating without pause all the way to Chattanooga. Yet, many of Rosecrans' men held tight, fighting a vigorous defense in order to cover the Union retreat. Leading this defense was Maj. Gen. Thomas, who took command of scattered Federal forces on the field and consolidated them on Horseshoe Ridge and Snodgrass Hill. Among the men standing with Thomas were those of the 3rd Brigade of Col. Grose, from Palmer's Division, notably the 84th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Thomas and his men formed a defensive position, and although Confederates continued, pressing to within feet of the Union line, the Federals held.

According to Simmons, "Palmer's Division was ordered [to leave a live of breastworks]... to check the enemy ere they should enfilade our lines. The brigade did not relish this movement, and were reluctant to leave their defences; which Col. Waters had been the first to recommend and his regiment [the 84th] the first to put up, but they were too good soldiers to hesitate." Before long, Grose's men were overwhelmed and had to retreat, doing so as slowly as possible to allow the retreating men to reach Chattanooga in safety. In Simmons' words, "Gen. Thomas was now virtually commanding the whole army... and though the great and glorious old General had all the divisions under his control, he was unable for a time to entirely to check the steady advance of Bragg's, Bruckner's, and Longstreet's combined legions... yet not an instant did Gen. Thomas, though driven from ridge to ridge, waver in his determination to hold the field." According to Simmons, as the retreat continued, the 84th Illinois was one of the last regiments to cede the field. "Col. Waters not only had a part of the Regiment, but collected hundreds of men who were lost from their commands, and with this force, sometimes amounting to almost a brigade, was constantly employed and did some terribly hard fighting." Thomas' remaining forces withdrew as darkness fell. Bragg pursued them to Chattanooga and occupied the heights, but made no effort to take the town. Chickamauga was a clear Confederate victory, but the costs were high. With 16,170 Union and 18,454 Confederate casualties, including eleven generals, Chickamauga had the highest losses in the Western Theater, and was second only to Gettysburg for the entire war. The Confederates had defeated Rosecrans, but the Union army still occupied Chattanooga." As Caleb Cox wrote to his wife on September 22, "[We] are now awaiting an attack from the rebels... It will be a terrible battle [against] the whole rebel army... We will give them a hard fight before they can get Chattanooga." They wouldn't have long to wait. (to be continued) ~ ~ PTF



JMC Historical Document Collection

The JMC Public and Congressional Affairs Office (PCA) maintains the JMC Archives, which collects and maintains historically significant records, including: emails, manuscripts, letters, reports, studies, images, videos, films, photographs, oral history interviews, briefings, SOPs, policies, decision papers, memoranda, statistics, newspapers, newsletters, brochures, maps, blue prints, drawings, artifacts, and more. Such records are pertinent to the Army's institutional knowledge of active and predecessor installations, the ammunition industrial base, and JMC missions. JMC regularly uses these materials to research command history, and to answer research queries. When JMC workers leave positions or make physical moves, it is vital that their records be assessed before disposal. If employees are uncertain about the historical value of materials, the best policy is to make the items available to Command Historian Keri Pleasant (keri.j.pleasant.civ@mail.mil) or Archivist Paul Ferguson (paul.t.ferguson14.civ@mail.mil) in Room 661 for assessment.

This Month in Military History

- April 2, 1453: The Ottoman Turks under Sultan Mehmed II besiege Constantinople. The city falls on May 29 and is renamed Istanbul, ending the 1,000-year reign of the Byzantine Empire.
- April 9, 1768: Colonial smuggler and future revolutionary John Hancock refuses to allow customs officials to inspect his illegal cargo in the first overt act of resistance to British authority.
- April 16, 73: At the conclusion of the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE), a Roman army under Lucius Flavius Silva takes the fortress of Masada, ending the Jewish Revolt, at the expense of 960 defenders who committed suicide.
- April 23, 1920: Revolutionary leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk convenes the first session of the Turkish Grand National Assembly meets in Ankara, signaling the end of the Ottoman Empire.
- April 30, 1803: Ambassador Robert Livingston and diplomat James Monroe sign the Louisiana Purchase Treaty in Paris, paying France 15 million dollars, instantly doubling the size of the United States.