



Bullet'n Backstory

Joint Munitions Command

Volume 11, Issue 9

September 2022

The Battle of Nashville (December 1864) : Franklin-Nashville Campaign, Part 6

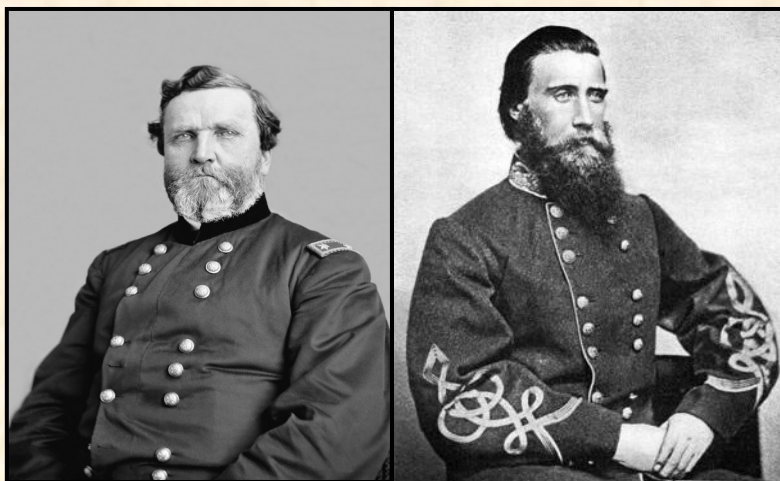
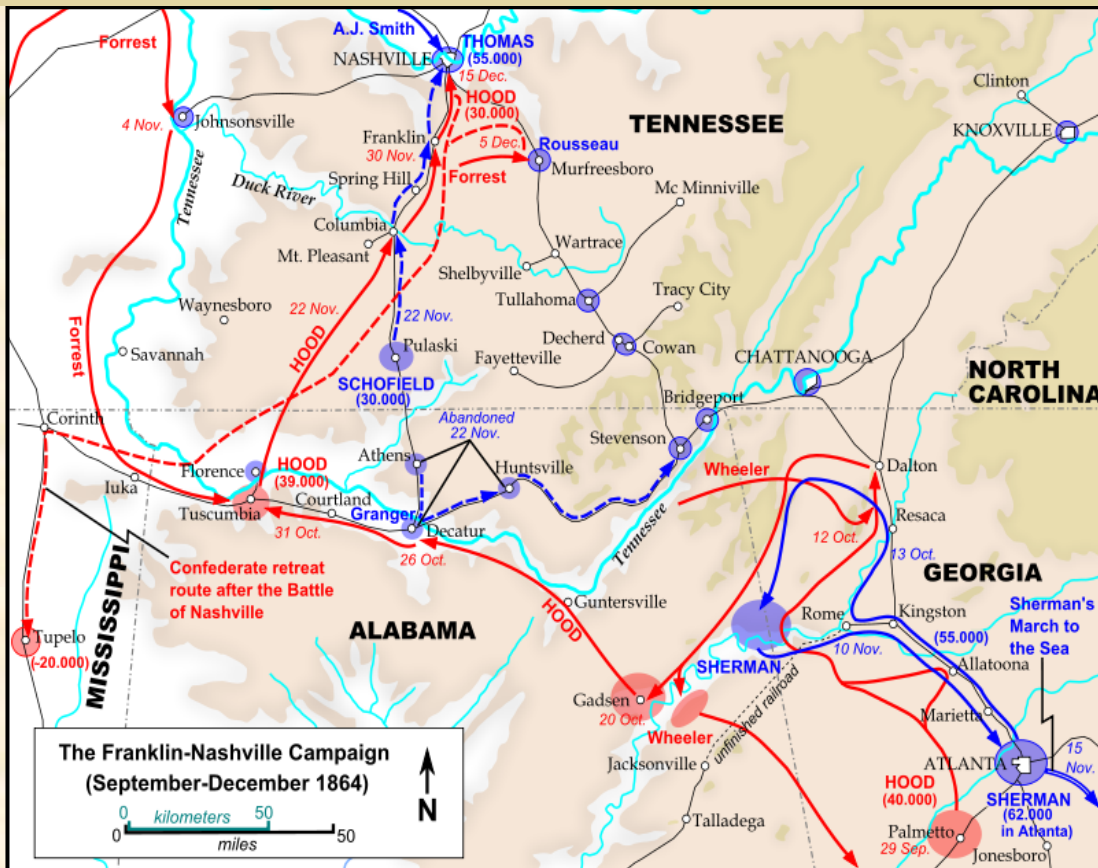
Following the Union victory at Nashville on 30 November 1864, Maj. Gen. John M. Schofield withdrew from the town and took up a position in the well-fortified city of Nashville. This placed much of the Union's Army of the Cumberland in the city, a combined force of 55,000 men, now under the direct command of Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas. Most of Thomas' men were hardened veterans of the Atlanta Campaign, while others had fought at Vicksburg. Few had yet to see combat, including eight new regiments of U.S. Colored Troops.

By the first of December 1864, the Union army had occupied Nashville for nearly three years. During that time, the Union had developed extensive defensive works on the south and west sides of the city, which, combined with the natural barrier of the Cumberland River to the north and east, made any proposed assault a daunting task. Angry at his recent series of defeats, Confederate Lt. Gen. John Bell Hood urged what remained of the Army of Tennessee (less than 30,000 men) to pursue the withdrawing Union force. Hood's army reached Nashville on 2 December and took up a defensive position, entrenched along a four-mile line south of the city. Knowing a direct assault would be fruitless, Hood's strategy was to prepare for an attack by Thomas, after which Hood could counterattack.

In an effort to draw Thomas out of Nashville and eliminate a potential threat to his right flank, on 2 December Hood sent three brigades, consisting of most of Maj. Gen. William B. Bate's Division of Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Cheatham's Corps, to attack both the railroad connecting Nashville to Murfreesboro and the garrison protecting latter city. Anticipating a victory, Hood later dispatched the bulk of his calvary under Maj. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest to reinforce Confederate troops at Murfreesboro. The Third Battle of Murfreesboro took place 6-7 December, with Forrest leading 8,000 Confederate attackers against a 7,000-man garrison commanded by Maj. Gen. Lovell H. Rousseau. After a day of posturing and weak artillery barrages, Rousseau sent two brigades to feel out the enemy. A firefight erupted, during which Bate's troops broke and ran. Forrest and Bate attempted to rally the Confederate force, but the damage had been done. The battle was technically a Union victory, with Confederate forces unable to take Murfreesboro. However, Forrest had successfully disrupted the railroad, which keeping the Murfreesboro garrison isolated from events at Nashville.

From the Union perspective, the assault on Murfreesboro was neither surprising nor significant. Thomas was confident that he could proceed without the support of the Murfreesboro garrison. Moreover, he was not fooled into leaving Nashville to protect it. Instead, Thomas remained behind his defensive works, planning an assault under his own terms. Forrest's cavalry, involved in protecting the Confederate right flank, was essentially out of the picture. Even so, Thomas worked to reinforce his own cavalry prior to any attack. His caution made his delicate political situation worse. While Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman engaged in his March to the Sea, he was happy to have Hood' distract himself in Tennessee. However, both President Abraham Lincoln and Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant feared that the Confederate army might roll through Tennessee and threaten

Kentucky or even Ohio. As always, Washington wanted swift action, while one of its commanders - in this case Thomas - favored cautious planning. When an ice storm hit the Nashville area on 8 December, followed by extreme cold weather, Thomas informed his superiors of the situation and his inability to act. This was the last straw for Grant who, on 13 December, ordered Maj. Gen. John A. Logan to proceed to Nashville and relieve Thomas of command. The next day, Grant started the journey to Nashville, intending to take command of the Army of the Cumberland himself. These moves proved unnecessary. On 15 December, Logan reached Louisville and Grant reached Washington, only to learn that the Battle of Nashville had begun.



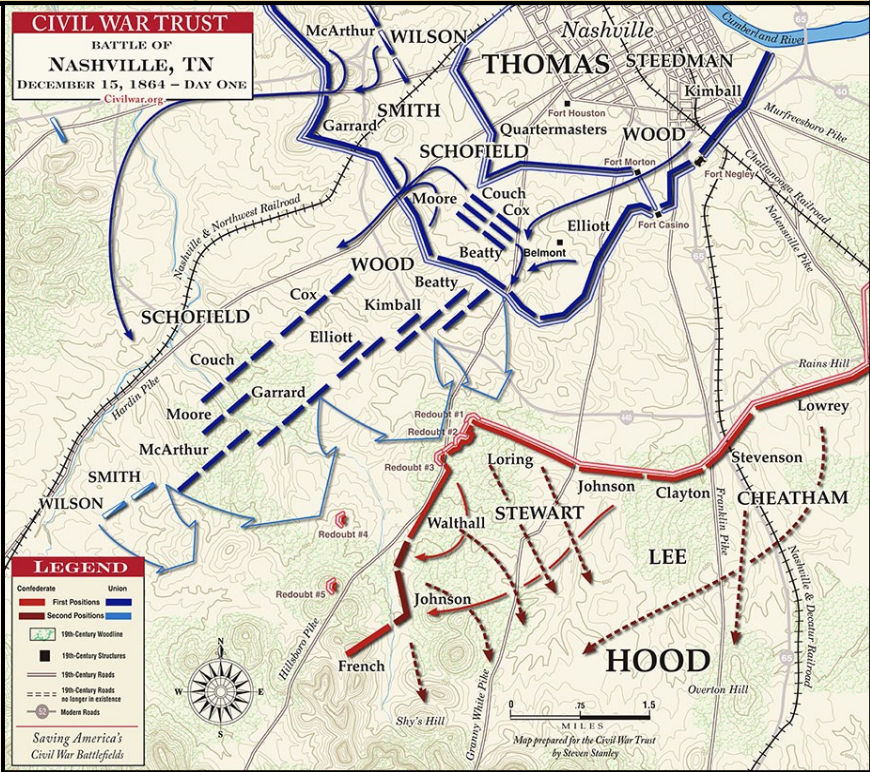
Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas and Lt. Gen. John Bell Hood

The Franklin-Nashville Campaign, Part 6, continued

Thomas' plan involved sending a diversionary attack against Hood's right, while the main attack would come from the left. The troops in charge of the diversion were all new or untested and included Maj. Gen. James B. Steedman's Provisional Division: the First Colored Brigade, as well as a brigade of white troops made up of new soldiers, recovering wounded men, and deserters. The attackers came under heavy artillery and broke several times, thought they continued to attack all day. The Union plan failed, however, in the sense that Hood was not distracted from the potential threat to his left.

Union forces conducted a wide sweep against the Confederate left. Leading the way was Brig. Gen. James H. Wilson's cavalry corps, which drove off opposing cavalry patrols. Next came Maj. Gen. A. J. Smith's detachment of XVI Corps and Schofield's XXIII Corps. While these forces hit the far left flank of the Confederate line, Brig. Gen. Thomas J. Wood's IV Corps led a frontal assault against Hood's center-left. In coordination with Smith's detachment, the IV Corps moved against an opposition that steadily fell back as the Confederate left collapsed.

December 16 dawned with Hood's line stronger and more compact. On the right flank was Lt. Gen. Stephen D. Lee's corps, which was strong, having seen little action at Franklin or Nashville. Lt. Gen. Alexander P. Stewart's corps (center) and Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Cheatham's corps (left) had both ben decimated by the fighting at Franklin and on December 15. Thomas used the same strategy as on the 15th: a diversionary attack on the right and the main attack on the left. However, this time he sent a larger force. Four brigades led the diversion, with the 13th U.S. Colored Troops overwhelming the Confederate right, at the expense of 40% of their own strength. As his right flank faltered, Hood sent two brigades to reinforce them, thus falling into Thomas' trap. As the Union cavalry flanked the Confederate right, Cheatham overextended his line to the south in an effort to counter the attack. Thomas directed Schofield to launch a full assault, but Schofield, fearing his men were outnumbered, delayed. Brig. Gen. John McArthur, 1st Division commander in Smith's detachment, seeing disarray along the Confederate line, informed his commanders he would lead an attack unless ordered not to do so. McArthur attacked with three brigades at 3:30pm at which point the Confederate left disintegrated. Hood had no choice but to retreat south along Franklin Pike. The Confederate army crossed the Suck River at Columbia on 19 December and returned to Alabama on 28 December. The Battle of Nashville resulted in 3,061 Union casualties and up to 6,000 Confederate casualties. Hood had entered Tennessee with 38,000 men. By 13 January 1865, as a result of casualties and desertions, Hood's army numbered less than 15,000. On that day, Hood resigned, never again to hold a field command. Writing to his wife five days after the battle, Maj. Caleb B. Cox of the 84th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment declared, "We have had the greatest victory of the war... I think we have won the last great battle in the West." He was right. ~ ~ P.T.F.



This Month in Military History

September 5, 1781: At the Battle of the Chesapeake, in support of American Revolutionaries, a French fleet, under the command of Rear Admiral François Joseph Paul, the Comte de Grasse, defeats a British fleet, under Rear Admiral Thomas Graves, thus trapping Lt. Gen. Lord Cornwallis without the ability to reinforce or evacuate Yorktown.

September 12, 1624: Scientists in England conduct the first public test of a submarine, remaining submerged in the River Thames for three hours then resurfacing to the surprise of King James I and hundreds of spectators.

September 19, 634: Muslim forces under Khalid ibn al-Walid capture Damascus for Caliph Umar (r.634-644), making it the first Eastern Roman Empire city to fall to the expanding Rashidun Caliphate (632-661).

September 26, 1862: The New Marine Band, later led by John Philip Sousa, makes its first public appearance at Stillman Music Hall, in Plainfield, New Jersey.

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@army.mil) or Archivist Paul Ferguson (paul.t.ferguson14.civ@army.mil) in Room 661.