

## Battle of Nashville

Confederate General John Bell Hood's Army of Tennessee had suffered nearly 7,000 casualties at Franklin. Nevertheless, in December 1864, Hood and his limping troops pursued the Union Army to Nashville. Nashville had been under Federal control since February 1862. William Driver, adventurer and Nashville businessman, had given the Union troops his flag which he nicknamed "Old Glory" to be flown over the state capital. Hood's men besieged the city and 60,000 Union soldiers under George H. Thomas. Hood hoped to receive reinforcements from across the Mississippi River, but the Union navy patrolled the waters and kept any reinforcements west of the river.<sup>1</sup> Hood waited for Thomas to attack.

However, bad weather prevented Thomas from doing so. Thomas's inaction not only dismayed Hood but worried Union leadership as well. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton complained that Thomas had adopted the "McClellan and Rosecrans strategy of do nothing and let the rebels raid the country." Ulysses S. Grant also voiced displeasure at Thomas's perceived half hearted approach at Nashville. "If Hood is permitted to remain quietly about Nashville, you will lose all the road back to Chattanooga, and possibly have to abandon the line of the Tennessee," Grant wrote Thomas. "Should he attack you it is all well, but if he does not you should attack him before he fortifies."<sup>2</sup>

On December 15, 1864, as the fog lifted from the cold ground, Thomas ordered 50,000 soldiers, including members of the United States Colored Troops (USCT), to smash into Hood's 25,000 men. Thomas distracted Hood by launching sporadic attacks

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<sup>1</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 813

<sup>2</sup> *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. II, pp. 15-17.

on his right side, while pounding Hood's left. Hood was confused and postponed reinforcing his left for most of the day. By the time he sent reinforcements, it was too late. As night fell, Hood's battered left side gave way, and his entire force fell back two miles south and reformed in a much shorter defensive line.<sup>3</sup>

The following day, December 16, Thomas's army again surged forward with members of the USCT leading the charge at Overton's Hill. Thomas was one of the few Union generals who believed that Black troops could fight as well as white troops and gave the USCT a chance to prove themselves in battle. The success of the USCT troops' assault on Overton's Hill proved the truth of Decatur Chapin's statement to his brother that "Negro soldiers...make the best we have. They are bold and daring and will hazard anything commanded by their officers."<sup>4</sup>

Another innovative aspect of Thomas' plan was to have his cavalry dismount and then attack using repeating rifles. These weapons fired seven shots compared to the single shot muzzle-loading rifles of the infantry. Amidst rain and a dark sky, Confederate units crumbled. Thousands of defeated troops threw down their weapons to either flee or surrender.<sup>5</sup> Rebel commanders tried to make a new line at Brentwood, but as Tennessee Private Sam Watkins wrote, "the line they formed was like trying to stop the current of Duck river with a fish net."<sup>6</sup> Hood's army was in shambles.

"Hood can't make another day's such fight, while Thomas is in good condition to press him," Union Secretary of War Edwin Stanton reported.<sup>7</sup> For weeks, the pursuit

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<sup>3</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 813-15; Richard M. McMurry, *John Bell Hood and the War for Southern Independence* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 179.

<sup>4</sup> Decatur Chapin, "Letter to his Brother, January 10, 1865." Tennessee State Library and Archives. <http://cdm15138.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15138coll6/id/6844/rec/7> Accessed 10 July, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 815.

<sup>6</sup> Watkins, *Co. Aytch*, 217.

<sup>7</sup> *New-York Tribune*, December 19, 1864.

raged southward, as Union cavalry tramped through thick mud and chased remnants of the Army of Tennessee into Alabama and Mississippi. Confederate armies would never challenge the Union for control of Tennessee again. The Confederate defeat at Nashville was significant because it utterly destroyed any hope for Confederate victory in the western half of the Confederacy. Hood's failure in Tennessee, combined with Sherman's capture of Savannah, made December 1864 a completely disastrous month for the Confederacy.