

Battle of Nashville

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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.¹ 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."²

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 on his right side, while pounding Hood's left. Hood was confused and postponed

¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 813

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

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.³

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."⁴

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.⁵ 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."⁶ 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.⁷ For weeks, the pursuit raged southward, as Union cavalry tramped through thick mud and chased remnants of

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 815.

⁶ Watkins, *Co. Aytch*, 217.

⁷ *New-York Tribune*, December 19, 1864.

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.

Sam Watkins on Battle of Nashville

When the battle began, Watkins found himself on the extreme left of the battle. After watching two of his friends die, Watkins is himself shot in the finger and thigh. He then makes his way back to the main line of battle

When I got back to where I could see our lines, it was one scene of confusion and rout. Finney's Florida brigade had broken before a mere skirmish line, and soon the whole army had caught the infection, had broken, and were running in every direction. Such a scene I never saw. The army was panic-stricken. The woods everywhere were full of running soldiers. Our officers were crying, "Halt! halt!" and trying to rally and re-form their broken ranks. The Federals would dash their cavalry in amongst us, and even their cannon joined in the charge. One piece of Yankee artillery galloped past me, right on the road, unlimbered their gun, fired a few shots, and galloped ahead again.

Hood's whole army was routed and in full retreat. Nearly every man in the entire army had thrown away his gun and accouterments. More than ten thousand had stopped and allowed themselves to be captured, while many, dreading the horrors of a Northern prison, kept on, and I saw many, yea, even thousands, broken down from sheer exhaustion, with despair and pity written on their features. Wagon trains, cannon, artillery, cavalry, and infantry were all blended in inextricable confusion. Broken down and jaded horses and mules refused to pull, and the badly-scared drivers looked like their eyes would pop out of their heads from fright. Wagon wheels, interlocking each other, soon clogged the road, and wagons, horses and provisions were left indiscriminately.

The officers soon became effected with the demoralization of their troops, and rode on in dogged indifference. General Frank Cheatham and General Loring tried to form a line at Brentwood, but the line they formed was like trying to stop the current of Duck river with a fish net. I believe the army would have rallied, had there been any colors to rally to. And as the straggling army moves on down the road, every now and then we can hear the sullen roar of the Federal artillery booming in the distance. I saw a wagon and team abandoned, and I unhitched one of the horses and rode on horseback to Franklin, where a surgeon tied up my broken finger, and bandaged up my bleeding thigh. My boot was full of blood, and my clothing saturated with it.

I was at General Hood's headquarters. He was much agitated and affected, pulling his hair with his one hand (he had but one), and crying like his heart would break. I pitied him, poor fellow. I asked him for a wounded furlough, and he gave it to me. I never saw him afterward. I always loved and honored him, and will ever revere and cherish his memory. He gave his life in the service of his country, and I know today he wears a garland of glory beyond the grave, where Justice says "well done," and Mercy has erased all his errors and faults.

I only write of the under _strata_ of history; in other words, the _privates' history_ --as I saw things then, and remember them now.

The winter of 1864-5 was the coldest that had been known for many years. The ground was frozen and rough, and our soldiers were poorly clad, while many, yes, very many, were entirely barefooted. Our wagon trains had either gone on, we knew not whither, or had been left behind. Everything and nature, too, seemed to be working against us. Even the keen, cutting air that whistled through our tattered clothes and over our poorly covered heads, seemed to lash us in its fury. The floods of waters that had overflowed their banks, seemed to laugh at our calamity, and to mock us in our misfortunes.

All along the route were weary and footsore soldiers. The citizens seemed to shrink and hide from us as we approached them. And, to cap the climax, Tennessee river was overflowing its banks, and several Federal gunboats were anchored just below Mussel Shoals, firing at us while crossing.

The once proud Army of Tennessee had degenerated to a mob. We were pinched by hunger and cold. The rains, and sleet, and snow never ceased falling from the winter sky, while the winds pierced the old, ragged, gray back Rebel soldier to his very marrow. The clothing of many were hanging around them in shreds of rags and tatters, while an old slouched hat covered their frozen ears. Some were on old, raw-boned horses, without saddles.

Hon. Jefferson Davis perhaps made blunders and mistakes, but I honestly believe that he ever did what he thought best for the good of his country. And there never lived on this earth from the days of Hampden to George Washington, a purer patriot or a nobler man than Jefferson Davis; and, like Marius, grand even in ruins.

Hood was a good man, a kind man, a philanthropic man, but he is both harmless and defenseless now. He was a poor general in the capacity of commander-in-chief. Had he been mentally qualified, his physical condition would have disqualified him. His legs and one of his arms had been shot off in the defense of his country. As a soldier, he was brave, good, noble, and gallant, and fought with the ferociousness of the wounded tiger, and with the everlasting grit of the bull-dog; but as a general he was a failure in every particular.

Our country is gone, our cause is lost. "_Actum est de Republica_."*
*"It is all over with the Republic."

Source: Watkins, Sam. Co. *Aytch or Sideshow of the Big Show*. Project Gutenberg. 2014. Web. 3 July, 2014. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13202/13202.txt>>