

Chattanooga Campaign

Table of Contents

	Pages
1. Content Essay	2-5

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In the fall of 1863, following the defeat at Chickamauga, General William S. Rosecrans and his Army of the Cumberland retreated back to Chattanooga, Tennessee. The Confederates, led by Braxton Bragg, slowly pursued and laid siege to the city in the hope that they could starve Rosecrans into surrender. After the horrific fight at Chickamauga, both armies were battle-weary. Bragg, struggling with conflict in his own high command, dreamed of a triumphant recapture of Chattanooga. Rosecrans, on the other side, seemed lost in a haze of disorientation. He had fled Chickamauga while one of his own generals, George H. Thomas, stayed and fought and averted an overwhelming Union disaster. President Lincoln said Rosecrans was “confused and stunned like a duck hit on the head.”¹ Therefore, the commanders of both fatigued armies were themselves plagued with troubles. These details set the stage for the critical fight at Chattanooga and the Battle of Lookout Mountain.

At the start of the siege, the Confederates occupied the heights around the city, notably Missionary Ridge and Lookout Mountain. In the west, they guarded the river roads. The only route for Union supplies to reach the army was over the Cumberland Mountains. Even if the heights could be crossed, the area teemed with Confederate cavalry who stalked the land in pursuit of Union supply wagons.² With the Union Army of the Cumberland on the verge of destruction, Lincoln took action. He founded the Division of the Mississippi, which covered the area from the Mississippi River to the Appalachian Mountains, and placed at its head the hero of Vicksburg, General Ulysses S. Grant. Before Grant had even entered Tennessee, he ordered Thomas to replace

¹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 675.

² *Ibid.*

Rosecrans. Shortly after Grant's arrival in Chattanooga, Union troops skirmished and opened a gap west of the city and began to receive supplies. Soldiers dubbed this route the "cracker line."³ Once Grant had secured a route for supplies, he decided to attack and break the siege. For three weeks, the two armies faced each other and did not blink. During this time, Sam Davis, a Confederate scout, was captured by the Union near Pulaski. Davis was carrying information about Union troop movements near Nashville for General Bragg. Davis, who refused to name his informant, was convicted for spying and executed on November 27, 1863.⁴

While waiting for Grant to attack, the Confederates made a critical mistake. Jefferson Davis had deemed it "essential" to wipe out the Federal troops in Chattanooga, but he also desired to recapture Knoxville, which was occupied by Union General Ambrose Burnside.⁵ Therefore, Davis and Bragg decided to send Longstreet and his men, who had dutifully occupied Lookout Mountain up until that time, north to Knoxville to dislodge Burnside. There, on November 29, Longstreet would be soundly defeated at Fort Sanders. Bragg was left with fewer men to fight Grant. By contrast, the Army of the Cumberland (Union) had added 37,000 men since the defeat at Chickamauga.

On November 24, Grant attacked. Grant had planned to attack both ends of Bragg's army. He intended to leave the center alone and only use Thomas's men as a threat. On the morning of the 24th, Grant ordered Hooker's men to scramble up the slope of Lookout Mountain, which lay on the Confederate left flank. The Federals struck

³ Ibid., 676.

⁴ The Historic Sam Davis Home and Foundation, "Who Was Sam Davis." <https://www.samdavishome.org/sam-davis-boy-hero> accessed 14 June 2021.

⁵ Bruce Catton, *Never Call Retreat, The Centennial History of the Civil War*, Vol. 3 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), 260-61.

at the relatively easy lower section of the mountain and chased the few Confederates guards up the slope to the peak. Through fallen trees and over boulders and crags the two forces clashed. Fog blanketed the peak at times and gave rise to stories which depicted a legendary “battle above the clouds.” Hooker’s soldiers claimed the mountain after suffering less than 500 casualties. In response, Bragg pulled back his men to Missionary Ridge.⁶

Earlier that day, Grant had ordered an assault on a hill north of Missionary Ridge. However, he discovered the hill was not part of the Missionary Ridge. Grant then ordered a “limited assault” against Missionary Ridge by troops led by George H. Thomas. Thomas instead charged the entrenched Confederate lines with 23,000 men.⁷ Thomas’s army ripped through the battle-worn rebels. Then, seeing they were in range of Confederate gunners on the Missionary Ridge heights, they continued the assault. The Federals stormed upward, all the while chanting “Chickamauga! Chickamauga!,” and the terrified Confederate defenders turned and ran. Bragg was puzzled by the “bad conduct in veteran troops who had never before failed in any duty assigned to them.”⁸ Some Union troops referred to their victory as a “miracle at Missionary Ridge.”⁹ Whatever had happened, one fact was certain: the Confederates had been sorely beaten, and Bragg’s army had been kicked out of Tennessee.

The Union victory at Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge was significant for several reasons. First, it improved Northern morale. Second, the victory at Chattanooga showed Grant to be the top commander of Union forces, a title that would be officially

⁶ Ibid, 262-63; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 677-78.

⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 678.

⁸ O.R., Ser. I, Vol. 31, pt. II, p. 666.

⁹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 680.

bestowed upon him the following spring. Third, the defeat placed the Confederate on the defensive for the remainder of the war and opened up the Deep South to Union invasion. Lastly, the loss at Chattanooga once again dashed Confederate morale and made winning the war more improbable.