

Battle of Stones River

The fall and early winter of 1862 was a difficult time for the Union army and northern morale. Although he had stopped a Confederate invasion, General George B. McClellan had failed to cut off the fleeing Confederates and destroy Robert E. Lee's army after the Battle of Antietam. Instead, Lee's army slipped quietly back into Virginia where it would continue to cause frustration for the Federal army. In December, the Union Army of the Potomac, commanded by General Ambrose Burnside, was soundly defeated at Fredericksburg. Also, General Ulysses S. Grant, the hero of Fort Donelson and Shiloh, had failed to capture the Mississippi River post at Vicksburg. This failure was largely due to Confederate cavalry raiders, such as Nathan Bedford Forrest and Earl Van Dorn, who ran circles around Grant's plodding army cutting communication lines and confiscating supplies. Although a Confederate invasion of Kentucky had been repulsed at Perryville, General Don Carlos Buell seemingly refused to deploy his Army of the Cumberland to attack Confederate General Braxton Bragg's Army of the Tennessee. In October, Buell was replaced by William S. Rosecrans. Lincoln made it clear that if Rosecrans wanted to keep his job, he had better march against Bragg.¹ In essence, the Union needed a victory, and Lincoln hoped Rosecrans would provide it.

In December, President Jefferson Davis visited Bragg's headquarters at Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Citizens of the small town showered the beloved president with balls and dinners. While there, Davis sent a large number of Bragg's men westward to slow Grant's approach to Vicksburg. Nevertheless, Bragg considered using his

¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 579.

weakened force to recapture Nashville. When he received news that Rosecrans was advancing from Nashville, however, Bragg decided to stay put and prepare for his enemy's arrival. In the meantime, he dispatched "Fighting Joe" Wheeler's cavalry to harass Rosecrans. Wheeler rode around Rosecrans, tore apart supply wagons, and stole ammunition.² Despite Wheeler's attacks, the Union continued to advance.

By December 30, Rosecrans was in place along the Nashville Turnpike just northeast of Bragg, who was positioned by a creek called Stones River. Both Rosecrans and Bragg planned to attack the next morning. "A fierce battle is expected to-morrow [sic] by the full force of both armies," predicted Confederate Governor of Tennessee, Isham G. Harris.³

That night, as soldiers from both sides bent over their campfires tensely anticipating battle the next morning, the army bands entered into a contest of their own. Trying to outplay one another from across the front, the Union band's version of "Yankee Doodle" was countered by a Confederate concert of "Dixie." When the Union piped "Hail Columbia," the Confederates answered with "The Bonnie Blue Flag." Finally, one band played "Home Sweet Home," a song enjoyed by both armies. Both bands eventually played the song together with thousands of troops singing in unison.⁴ The evening's camaraderie was forgotten when the soldiers found themselves pitted against one another in fierce combat.

In the early hours of New Year's Eve, Bragg struck first by charging the union's right where many soldiers were eating breakfast. The Confederates pushed back the Union

² *Ibid.*, 579

³ *Chattanooga Daily Rebel*, January 1, 1863

⁴ James L. McDonough, "Stones River, Battle of," *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War*, Vol. IV, ed. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2000), 1877.

flank through a thick cedar wood and out into a cotton field. The battle continued there. Many of the Confederates, overwhelmed by the sound of guns, stuffed their ears with cotton.⁵ Fighting was terribly fierce as the Southerners tried to bend back the Union flank and get between Rosecrans and Nashville, cutting his supply and escape route. Rosecrans, however, coolly rode up and down the battle line wearing a blood-splattered uniform. The blood belonged to a staff-officer whose head had been blown off by a cannonball.⁶

When Rosecrans examined the battlefield and the Confederate thrust against his right, he called off his own attack plans and concentrated on defense. As reinforcements came up to fill the torn Union line, the rebels continued to sweep back the Federals. All would have been lost had it not been for a sturdy division commanded by Brigadier General Philip Sheridan. Sheridan had predicted Bragg's intent and therefore positioned his men in defensive positions at 4:00 a.m. In some exceptionally savage combat, Sheridan was able to hold the Confederates at bay. All three of Sheridan's brigade commanders were killed. His division lost a third of its men. The Confederates, as well, suffered heavy losses.⁷ After the initial assault, Rosecrans found his right side bent back at a right angle. At that angle was a dense patch of wilderness called the Round Forest. Bragg thought the area was of strategic importance and ordered a division, under former Vice President of the United States John C. Breckinridge, to cross Stones River from the east and charge the position. The division charged but, after a murderous engagement, fell back. At an enormous cost to

⁵ "Battle of Stones River Campaign," *Tennessee Civil War Sourcebook*, 1862, Part IV, ed. James B. Jones (Nashville, TN: Tennessee Historical Commission, 2005), 173.

⁶ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 580.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 580.

themselves as well as the enemy, the Federals held. Afterward, Round Forest became known as “Hell’s Half-Acre.”⁸

Near Murfreesboro, the year 1862 had concluded with a “very obstinate and bloody” fight.⁹ Following December 31, Southern newspapers declared a great victory. Bragg, in a dispatch, talked about how he had driven the Union troops from every position except the extreme left. “With the exception of this point,” Bragg said, “we occupy the whole field.”¹⁰ Whether or not victory could be declared, one thing was certain: the fighting had been costly. “The bloodiest day of the war has closed,” declared a Chattanooga newspaper.¹¹ Rosecrans, however, refused to withdraw; more blood was to come.

On New Year’s Day, after a small fight, a Union division moved east of Stones River and occupied a formidable hill. The following day, Bragg ordered Breckinridge to again cross the river and attack a strong Federal position. Breckinridge, under protest, carried out his orders. His division ran through the Union line. But on the other side of the river was a ridge blanketed in Union guns. The cannons opened fire and tore Breckinridge’s division to shreds. After losing a third of his men, Breckinridge pulled back.¹² The following day, January 3, Rosecrans’s army was reinforced. Seeing the strengthened enemy in front, Bragg thought it wise to retreat. The Confederates abandoned Murfreesboro and fled south to Tullahoma. The two armies suffered an estimated 24,645 combined casualties. The Battle of Stone’s River was significant because it gave the Union the victory it so badly needed.¹³ After the first day, the situation looked dire for

⁸ McDonough, “Stones River, Battle of,” 1879.

⁹ Nashville *Dispatch*, January 1, 1863.

¹⁰ *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. 20, pt. I, p. 662

¹¹ Chattanooga *Daily Rebel*, January 2, 1863

¹² McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 582; McDonough, “Stones River, Battle of,” 1879.

¹³ McDonough, *Ibid*

the Union and promising for the Confederates, but the Federals stood firmly, and forced Bragg and his Army of Tennessee to withdraw.