

The Battle of Franklin

By the fall of 1864, Union victories at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Lookout Mountain (Chattanooga) had decimated the Confederate armies and dramatically reduced the territory under Confederate control. The Union blockade had created dramatic shortages of everything from salt to shoes that affected soldiers and civilians alike. Despite these challenges, the Confederates refused to admit defeat. Thus, while William Tecumseh Sherman marched his army across Georgia to the sea, Confederate General John Bell Hood, a hero at both Gettysburg and Chickamauga (where he lost his right leg), pushed his Army of Tennessee into a campaign where he hoped to recapture the Volunteer State, move into Virginia, link up with Robert E. Lee, and annihilate both Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant.

Hood's plan was overambitious and, in a sense, delusional. One historian has written that Hood's plan "seemed to have been scripted in never-never land."¹ Moving northward into Tennessee with 40,000 men, Bell tangled with the Federal Army of the Ohio led by Generals John M. Schofield and George H. Thomas. In late November 1864, Hood faced Schofield at Franklin just south of Nashville. The Battle of Franklin was a disaster for the Confederacy both in terms of casualties and morale.

At the start of his campaign, Hood had little problem advancing through Tennessee. He had sent ahead cavalry, commanded by General Nathan Bedford Forrest, to ride around the enemy and cause chaos much like Stonewall Jackson had in the Shenandoah in 1862. After a small skirmish, Union forces held off rebel attacks but abandoned Columbia and looked to be heading north for the fortifications at Nashville.

¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 811.

“The enemy evacuated Columbia last night and are retreating toward Nashville,” Bell alerted the Confederate War Department. “Our army is moving forward. I have had no difficulty about supplies, and anticipate none in the future.”² By the end of November, Schofield had positioned his army at the crossing of the Harpeth River at Franklin, which sat fifteen miles south of Nashville.³

Hood had taken over the Army of Tennessee from Joseph Johnston during the defense of Atlanta. For this reason, Hood believed that the army had been trained only to fight on the defensive and did not possess an attacking spirit. Therefore, to test his troops’ bravery, Hood ordered a frontal assault against Schofield’s entrenched position. Hood’s subordinates protested the attack, but he thought their complaints were evidence of the army’s lack of fighting spirit. Nevertheless, the Confederates faced a larger, well-protected enemy supported by artillery batteries. On the other hand, the rebel artillery had yet to make it to Franklin with the rest of the army. And, yet, despite all of these disadvantages, Hood stood firm on his order to attack. So, on November 30, the assault commenced.⁴

Across the field stormed 22,000 Confederates, many of them barefoot. Contrary to what Hood believed about his army’s offensive capability, his soldiers charged courageously and reached the Union ranks. Sam Watkins, a Confederate soldier from Maury County, later described the desperate combat in his memoir *Company Aytch: Or, a Side Show of the Big Show*:

"Forward, men," is repeated all along the line. A sheet of fire was poured into our very faces, and for a moment we halted as if in despair, as the terrible avalanche

² O.R., Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. I, p. 1254.

³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 812.

⁴ O.R., Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. I, p. 1254.

of shot and shell laid low those brave and gallant heroes, whose bleeding wounds attested that the struggle would be desperate. Forward, men! The air loaded with death-dealing missiles. Never on this earth did men fight against such terrible odds. It seemed that the very elements of heaven and earth were in one mighty uproar. Forward, men! And the blood spurts in a perfect jet from the dead and wounded. The earth is red with blood. It runs in streams, making little rivulets as it flows. Occasionally there was a little lull in the storm of battle, as the men were loading their guns, and for a few moments it seemed as if night tried to cover the scene with her mantle. The death-angel shrieks and laughs and old Father Time is busy with his sickle, as he gathers in the last harvest of death, crying, More, more, more! while his rapacious maw is glutted with the slain.”⁵

The fighting continued well after dark as Hood’s army tried again and again to break Schofield’s line. Finally, near midnight, the Union troops fell back and moved toward the fortifications of Nashville.

While on the surface, the battle appeared a Confederate victory, the heavy toll taken by Hood’s army transformed Franklin into a grievous defeat. The Army of Tennessee (Confederate) had lost almost 7,000 men, nearly three times as many as Schofield’s Army of Ohio (Union). Twelve Confederate generals had been killed. The ones lucky enough to survive were exhausted and crestfallen. As a fighting force, Hood’s army had been rendered insignificant. And yet Hood still lived in a land of delusion. He ordered a proclamation to be read at the head of each regiment.

⁵ Sam R. Watkins, *Co. Aytch, or, A Side Show of the Big Show* (Chattanooga, Tennessee: The Times Printing Company, 1900), PDF e-book, 217.

*The commanding general congratulates the army upon the success achieved yesterday over our enemy by their heroic and determined courage. The enemy have been sent in disorder and confusion to Nashville, and while we lament the fall of many gallant officers and brave men, we have shown to our countrymen that we can carry any position occupied by our enemy.*⁶

Hood would follow the Union army to Nashville and besiege the city. A Union newspaper in Knoxville described Hood's campaign. It read, "Hood, without any base of supplies, without any matured plans of operation, and with the recklessness of a fool, attacked our forces in their strong works at Franklin,"⁷ The Battle of Franklin is significant because it crippled Hood's army. Never again would the Confederates be able to challenge the Union for superiority in Tennessee.

⁶ O.R., Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. II, p. 628.

⁷ *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig, and Rebel Ventilator*, December 7, 1864.