

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Lookout Mountain

By **Jack H. Lepa**

After their disastrous defeat at the Battle of Chickamauga on September 19-20, 1863, the surviving troops of the Federal Army of the Cumberland, commanded by Major General William Starke Rosecrans, fled to what they believed to be the safety of the town of Chattanooga, Tennessee. The victor of Chickamauga, Confederate General Braxton Bragg, commander of the Army of Tennessee, followed the Federals to Chattanooga and seized control of most of the high ground around the city, turning what the Union troops thought would be a sanctuary into a trap where they would eventually have to surrender or starve. The two most important points of high ground the Confederates occupied were Missionary Ridge to the east and north of the city and a huge rock known as Lookout Mountain. Located south and southwest of the city, Lookout Mountain overlooked the Tennessee River which ran just past the city together with a single railroad track of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad along the base of the mountain. With these heights under Confederate control, the city was cut off from all supply routes other than an almost useless trail that wound around narrow mountain roads and was nearly impassable in the winter.¹

Chattanooga was a small but strategically important city which was needed for control of Central Tennessee. Aware of the potential disaster facing Rosecrans' army President Lincoln appointed his most successful commander, Major General Ulysses S. Grant, to the command of all the armies in the West. Grant's first assignment was to save the army at Chattanooga and he immediately replaced the ineffective General Rosecrans with Major General George Henry Thomas. After making the arduous trip along the only open supply route to Chattanooga, it was obvious to Grant that finding a way to deliver large quantities of provisions was imperative if the city was to be held. Getting right to work Grant approved a surprise attack by way of the Tennessee River on Confederate positions west of the city that led to the opening of a much shorter and less treacherous route from the Federal supply depots at Bridgeport, Tennessee to Chattanooga. This eliminated much of the importance of Confederate control of Lookout Mountain since

¹ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885, 1986), 2:32-33.

this new supply route was too far from the mountain for the Confederate artillery posted there to interfere with Federal wagon trains.²

Another advantage of the new route was that it opened a link between Chattanooga and reinforcements sent from the Army of the Potomac, who were forced to stay miles from the city due to the shortage of provisions. This relief force consisted of two infantry corps commanded by Major General Joseph Hooker who was now able to move closer to the city with a portion of his command to a position in Lookout Valley, just west of the mountain.

During the night of October 28-29, Confederate Lieutenant General James Longstreet, who was in command of Lookout Mountain and the territory to the west, launched an attack on a small division of Hooker's troops stationed at Wauhatchie under the command of Brigadier General John White Geary to force them back out of the valley. The Confederates were repulsed and the Federals were now firmly in control of Lookout Valley and the ground to the north all the way to the city itself.³

With the new supply route open and secure, control of Lookout Mountain now figured less in General Grant's planning since his main objective was Missionary Ridge and the Confederate railroad east of the ridge that brought supplies up from Atlanta. General Bragg was also aware that he had lost a great advantage over the Federal troops in Chattanooga but did not want to just abandon such a prominent location. On November 12 Bragg placed Major General Carter Littlepage Stevenson in command of the 8,700 Confederate troops on Lookout Mountain. In addition to his own division which occupied the summit, Stevenson had brigades commanded by Brigadier Generals John King Jackson, Edward Cary Walthall, and John Creed Moore to defend the mountain. Stevenson had several batteries of artillery on the summit but due to the angle of the slope they could not fire on much of the western side of the mountain.⁴

Down in the valley General Hooker's command was a diverse group from three different armies. Three of the four divisions that accompanied him from the Army of the Potomac were currently either guarding the supply depot at Stevenson or on the other side of the river. Currently under his immediate command was Brigadier General John White Geary's division from the XII Corps of the Army of the Potomac. Representing the Army of the Cumberland was a division of the IV Corps commanded by Brigadier General Charles Cruft, and the division of Brigadier General Peter Joseph Osterhaus from

² Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2: 18-19; United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 30, part 4, p. 404 (hereafter *O.R.* I, 30, pt. 4, 404).

³ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 113-5; J. S. Fullerton, "The Army of the Cumberland at Chattanooga," in *The Century Magazine*, 34, no. 1 (May 1887): 140; Oliver O. Howard, "Chattanooga," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 38, no. 226 (August 1876): 208; Steven E. Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee: The Chickamauga and Chattanooga Campaigns* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 166-7.

⁴ Steven E. Woodworth, *This Grand Spectacle: The Battle of Chattanooga* (Abilene, TX: McWhiney Foundation Press, 1999), 57, 60; *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 315.

the XV Corps of the Army of the Tennessee. Osterhaus' troops had come east with Major General William Tecumseh Sherman who had just recently arrived with about 20,000 reinforcements from Vicksburg, Mississippi. Osterhaus had gotten stuck on the wrong side of the Tennessee River when flooding destroyed the bridge that was the only way for him to rejoin Sherman so General Grant placed his division under Hooker's command giving him a total of almost 10,000 men. General Grant decided that this was too many men not to put them to use so on the evening of November 23rd Hooker received orders to drive the enemy off Lookout Mountain the next day.⁵

Being entrusted with an important assignment no doubt pleased General Hooker but taking that immense rock from veteran troops who had plenty of time to prepare their defenses was going to be no easy task. The terrain on the slopes of the mountain provided a natural defense without any man-made obstacles. The assault would take place on the Western side of the mountain and the troops making the assault would have to contend with a steep, heavily wooded slope filled with ravines and large boulders. About two-thirds of the way up the mountain was a narrow belt of relatively level land, almost like a shoulder or bench, where a few small farms were located. Above this strip of land rose a sheer rock palisade of several hundred feet. On the Northern end and for a few miles on either side this palisade prevented access to the flat summit which was about two miles wide on the Southern end and narrowed to a point on the Northern end which towered about 1,800 feet above the Tennessee River.⁶

The Confederate commanders, including Generals Bragg and Longstreet, felt that the broken ground and numerous natural obstacles on the steep slope of the mountain would play a major part in defending their positions against attack, but they did not forego adding man-made works to supplement nature. There was an extensive line of defenses built up on the flat shoulder of the mountain with rifle pits and trenches reinforced with logs across the northern end of the mountain and running along both the East and West sides. General Hooker gave an in-depth description of the Confederate defenses in his report, "A continuous line of earth-works had been thrown up, while redoubts, redans, and pits appeared lower down the slope, to repel an assault from the direction of the river." Hooker also noted that along either side on the slopes, "were rifle-pits, epaulements for batteries, walls of stone, and abatis to resist attack from either the Chattanooga or Lookout Valleys." All things considered, assaulting the Confederate positions on Lookout Mountain was going to be a serious affair.⁷

In the plan of attack as originally put together there was no thought of trying to assault General Stevenson's men on top of the mountain. Hooker believed that once his troops took control of the western slope and shoulder of the mountain around the northern

⁵ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 32.

⁶ Thomas B. Van Horne, *History of the Army of the Cumberland its Organization, Campaigns, and Battles*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1875), 1:418; *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 315; Woodworth, *Grand Spectacle*, 57.

⁷ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 315.

end that the Confederate positions on the crest would be untenable and Stevenson would withdraw on his own. Hooker was sending two columns to attack the mountain. Brigadier General Walter Chiles Whitaker's brigade from Cruft's division would join General Geary's division at Wauhatchie and Cruft's other brigade commanded by Colonel William Grose together with Osterhaus' division was to cross Lookout Creek further to the north. Both forces were to converge on the Cravens farm at the northern end of the mountain. Once Osterhaus had crossed the creek his two brigades were to support Geary's attack with Brigadier General Charles Robert Woods' brigade joining with Colonel Grose and advancing up the slope toward the Cravens farm, while Colonel James A. Williamson's brigade remained in the valley to protect the artillery that Hooker had sent to support the attack.⁸

General Geary's command had much farther to go before reaching their assigned point to cross the creek so they left their camps at Wauhatchie around dawn and arrived at Lookout Creek about 8:30 a.m. Here Geary's division and Whitaker's brigade crossed the creek and headed toward the base of the mountain while Colonel Grose's brigade and General Woods' brigade continued north to capture two bridges near the railroad line that ran across the base of the mountain. These bridges were to be used by Osterhaus' command to cross the creek closer to the northern end. Colonel Grose's brigade quickly took control of one of the bridges away from the Confederate pickets but the firing alerted General Moore's Confederates on the lower slope who came down to positions along the railroad which, as Hooker reported, "Enabled them, without exposure, to sweep, with a fire of musketry, the field over which our troops would be compelled to march for a distance of 300 or 400 yards."⁹

With Osterhaus and Grose engaged along Lookout Creek, General Geary took advantage of the fog and mist to advance further up the valley. With three brigades of his division commanded by Colonels Charles Candy, George Ashworth Cobham and David Ireland and Whitaker's brigade Geary's men began the difficult climb up the slope of Lookout Mountain with Cobham in the lead. About an hour after they began the Federal line extended from the shoulder of the mountain down the slope facing north. Geary's troops then began to move across the face of the mountain toward the northern end and their rendezvous at the Cravens farm with Osterhaus' force moving up the slope near the northern end.¹⁰

General Geary's men found that it was slow going due to the broken terrain covered with trees, large rocks and ravines. One of Whitaker's men, Isaac Doan of the 40th Ohio, later wrote that when the line began moving along the face of the mountain they, "swept the slope to the northeast, descending into ravines that furrow the slope, climbing the opposite bank with infinite labor." Geary's men got to about one mile from Lookout Point, as the northern end of the mountain was called, before they met any significant resistance from General Walthall's Confederates. The defenders were

⁸ *O.R.*, I 31, pt. 2, 718-9.

⁹ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 315-6, 391.

¹⁰ Howard, "Chattanooga," 213.

significantly outnumbered and about all they could expect to do was slow the Federal assault until reinforcements arrived. For the Federals it was tough going and they were able to advance at no more than a slow walk but as Doan remembered, "We make up for lack of speed, with yells, while the opposite mountain sends back the echoing battle cry, until the rebels afterward captured said they thought there was a million of us." ¹¹

The right of the Confederate line stretched down the slope and the flank was woefully undermanned. At the time that Geary's men were making slow but steady progress across the face of the mountain, Osterhaus and Grose had also been making progress against the enemy along the creek. Once the second bridge was useable Grose's troops moved forward and closed with General Moore's defenders in their front at the base of the mountain about 11:30 a.m. Grose later wrote that his men moved forward, "As fast as the men and officers could climb (for all were on foot), sweeping everything before them." As Geary's men were approaching the northern end of the mountain Colonel Candy's brigade that had been advancing along the base of the mountain came up to join the fight. Hit in the front by Grose's men and the flank by Candy's troops as they moved north the Confederate line facing downhill was pushed back into a prepared line of works that Geary noted as being, "Formidable in natural defense and seemingly impregnable with rocks, stone, and earth breastworks, surrounded by tangled slashings." ¹²

Even though it was clear that the Federals were superior in numbers Walthall decided to make a stand on the western slope rather than falling back to the stronger positions on the northern end of the mountain. But after pulling in troops from other locations on the mountain Walthall's men still could not stop the determined men in blue. General Geary stated that the brigade commanded by Colonel David Ireland joined by the 29th and 111th Pennsylvania Regiments, "hurled themselves upon their flank with furious effort. Our fire was delivered in continuous volleys." Geary also noted that, "The ardor of our men surprised and stultified the enemy, and we punished him severely in his irresolution." Walthall's Mississippians tried their best to stem the Federal attack but they were simply overwhelmed and around noon the defenders who were able to get away fell back to the northern end of the mountain. ¹³

On the shoulder of the mountain near the northern end the Confederates had built their strongest defensive works near the small farm owned by Robert Cravens. It was imperative that the Federals be kept from getting around the point of the mountain to the eastern side where they would have access to the flank of the Confederate positions on Missionary Ridge. The battle for Lookout Mountain would be won or lost at the Cravens farm. The Confederate defenses consisted of rifle-pits and stone walls supported by

¹¹ Isaac C. Doan, *Reminiscences of the Chattanooga Campaign: A Paper Read at the Reunion of Company B, Fortieth Ohio Volunteer Infantry, at Xenia, O., August 22, 1894.* (Richmond, IN: J. M. Coe's Printery, 1894), 13.

¹² Fullerton, "The Army of the Cumberland," 142-3; *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 392; William Grose, *The Story of the Marches, Battles and Incidents of the 36th Regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (New Castle, IN: The Courier Company Press, 1891), 195.

¹³ Woodworth, *Grand Spectacle*, 61-62; *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 392-3.

artillery that could sweep the ground in the front from which an attack would come. Another advantage for the defenders was that the slope of the mountain around the farm was even steeper than further down the western side, making it even more difficult for Grose to advance from below, especially with enemy fire coming down on them from above.¹⁴

Walthall's remaining troops occupied the works near the Cravens farm while General Moore's remaining troops manned a line from the farm down the slope. Walthall's left was in position almost against the palisade to prevent the Federals from gaining that flank but it made little difference. The Federal soldiers came on relentlessly, attacking the entire Confederate position, jumping over logs and climbing over boulders to close with the enemy, Geary at and near the shoulder and Grose from the slope. The Confederate artillery quickly became useless in the close quarters of the confused fighting and the gunners ended up joining the infantry on the lines. General Moore tried to hold his line on the slope but when the Confederates at the farm began to falter he could not afford to take the chance of fighting Grose's men in front and Geary's men on his flank at the same time, so he pulled his men out with some falling back around to the eastern side of the mountain and others heading down to the valley below.¹⁵

All morning the Federal troops in Chattanooga could hear the sounds of battle coming from the western side of Lookout Mountain but because of the fog, low lying clouds, and the mountain itself nothing of the fighting could be seen from the vicinity of the town. As the morning wore on and the fighting moved north the boom of artillery and the crack of musket fire grew louder but still no one in the valley knew what was happening up on the mountain. While the troops in the valley anxiously watched and waited, suddenly a breeze came up and the fog and smoke drifted away bathing the mountain in sunlight and for a few minutes the men in the valley were treated to a wonderful sight. Around the northern end of Lookout Mountain came hundreds of Confederates and close behind them were swarms of soldiers in blue with flags whipping in the cool mountain air and rifles glistening in the sunlight. General Thomas' men exploded in joy, cheering wildly and throwing their caps in the air. One of those men was Major James A. Connolly of the 123rd Illinois who wrote his wife, "Oh! Such a cheer as then went up in the valley! Manly cheeks were wet with tears of joy." General Hooker reported that when the air cleared and the men in the valley could see the mountainside, "Our true condition was revealed to them, their painful anxiety yielded to transports of joy which only soldiers can feel in the earliest moments of dawning victory." The celebrating did not last long as the fog and mist soon closed in again but the Union troops in the valley had seen enough.¹⁶

Once General Geary's men worked their way around the point of the mountain they began moving down the eastern side during the early afternoon where Confederate resistance stiffened again. On the western side the angle of the slope prevented General

¹⁴ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 393-4; Woodworth, *Grand Spectacle*, 62.

¹⁵ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 394-5; Woodworth, *Grand Spectacle*, 62, 64.

¹⁶ Fullerton, "The Army of the Cumberland," 143; Howard, "Chattanooga, 214; *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 317.

Stevenson's men on the summit from assisting their comrades fighting below but this was not the case on the eastern slopes and Stevenson hurried reinforcements down to assist Walthall's beleaguered troops. General Geary reported that, "about 500 yards beyond Craven's house... the enemy, already reported, appeared in heavy force." The Confederates had established a solid line of works that extended up to the palisade so there would be no more flanking attacks at this new position. It was time for a pause in the fighting that had been going on for hours already.¹⁷

Since about 1:00 p.m. the weather had been getting worse with increasing rain and fog making it even more difficult to see much of anything. The Federal troops had achieved every reasonable objective by 2:00 p.m. and General Hooker decided it was time for his tired men to rest. During the afternoon General Geary established a line of temporary works stretching from the palisade down the slope to near the mouth of Chattanooga Creek. There was frequent firing during the afternoon and evening as Walthall received reinforcements from General Stevenson's division in the form of a brigade commanded by Brigadier General Edmund Pettus. The Federal position on the eastern side of Lookout Mountain was also strengthened by the addition of a brigade from the Army of the Cumberland commanded by Brigadier General William Passmore Carlin who did not arrive until after dark. After a long day of fighting over the rough ground on the slopes of Lookout Mountain General Geary had reason to be pleased with his men and he reported that even though they were exhausted and suffering from the cold that night, "many expressed their impatience for the coming of day that the attack might be renewed."¹⁸

During the night General Stevenson withdrew his troops from Lookout Mountain and moved over to the right side of the Confederate positions. General Bragg assigned most of the blame for losing the mountain to General Stevenson and although the Confederates certainly could have handled the situation better the disparity in numbers at the point of attack was too much for the outmanned Southerners to stop the determined Federal troops. Bragg had decided even before the battle that Lookout Mountain was not valuable enough to weaken other areas to make a major effort to hold the mountain so General Stevenson had to work with what he had which was clearly not sufficient. Described at the time as more like a magnificent skirmish than a battle casualties were light; Union casualties were 406 and Confederate casualties were 1,251, of which 1,064 were captured or missing.

General Grant saw control of Lookout Mountain as an almost open road to the rear of the main Confederate positions on Missionary Ridge which he did not hesitate to take advantage of. With enemy opposition now removed the next morning General Hooker's men moved down into the valley east of the mountain and in concert with the Federal assault on Missionary Ridge successfully moved against the left flank of the Confederate positions contributing to the overall Federal victory. The Union victory at Chattanooga opened the way for General Sherman's invasion of Georgia the next

¹⁷ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 396; Woodworth, *Grand Spectacle*, 64.

¹⁸ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 2, 317, 397-9; Fullerton, "The Army of the Cumberland," 143.

summer, which led to the capture of the important industrial and rail center of Atlanta and his devastating march through Georgia to Savannah.
