

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

John Bell Hood

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Angry, impulsive, reckless, fearless but brainless. A gambler. Confused. Lacking moral courage. Living in a dream world. An ill-mannered hellion with streaks of wildness and nonconformity. A drinker and drug abuser. A dim thinker. Battered, beaten, discredited and a hopeless cripple. No evidence of mental brilliance. A tragic failure. A sad, pathetic person.

Historians have not been kind to John Bell Hood. A military career marked with early victories unraveled when Hood took the reins of the Army of Tennessee as the Confederacy tottered towards destruction. Confederate casualties mounted under his leadership at Atlanta, Franklin and Nashville. Yet, can a life be simply judged by the course of one year, as historians have done with John Bell Hood?

Born in 1831 in Owingsville, Kentucky, John Bell Hood grew up the son of a wealthy slaveholding physician who routinely held medical classes in the family orchard in Mount Sterling, Kentucky. Rather than follow in his father's footsteps towards medical school, Hood instead garnered an appointment to West Point. Hood recalled: "Doubtless I had inherited this [military] predilection from my grandfathers, who were soldiers under Washington. They were of English origin." As a student, Hood had less than stellar grades, earning average marks in many of his classes. Yet, during the summer military encampments, Hood excelled. Despite a plethora of disciplinary demerits his senior year (196, four shy of expulsion), he earned only a couple during military exercises. Several historians have commented that Hood's average performance at West Point foreshadowed eventual military disaster, an assertion unfounded considering that Braxton Bragg and George McClellan excelled at West Point and Ulysses S. Grant and James Longstreet earned average grades. In the end, Hood graduated ranked 44 out of 52 remaining cadets in 1853.¹

Upon departure from West Point, Hood accepted an appointment with the 4th Infantry Regiment and spent time in California before he snatched a coveted position with the newly formed 2nd Cavalry. The 2nd Cavalry guarded the frontier in Texas, which afforded Hood an opportunity to engage in combat with a group of Comanche Indians on July 19, 1857 along the North Llano River. During the battle an arrow pierced

¹ John Bell Hood, *Advance and Retreat*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1993, p. 5.

Hood's hand but he persevered and led his men to victory. In a letter to Colonel Albert Sydney Johnston, Captain Richard Johnston wrote of Hood that "it was a gallant affair and reflects credit not only upon him, but also upon the Regiment of which he is a member." Hood remained stationed in Texas through the rest of the decade, moving around to several different newly-constructed forts. At the end of 1860, West Point offered Hood an appointment to serve as chief of cavalry at the Military Academy. However, the advent of secession across the southern landscape prompted Hood to turn down the prestigious appointment.²

After resigning his position in the United States Army, Hood returned to Kentucky, only to bemoan the fact that his native state failed to embrace secession. Thus, he adopted Texas as his new home state, which eventually garnered him command of the 4th Texas Infantry when the soldiers rejected Colonel R.T.P. Allen. After several months of drilling and preparing the Texas regiment, Hood earned another promotion to brigadier general over the Texas Brigade on March 3, 1862. As the Texans prepared for a spring military campaign, the regiment presented Hood with the gift of a horse. First Sergeant J.M. Bookman offered the gift and declared: "In you, sir, we recognize the soldier and the gentleman. In you we have found a leader who we are proud to follow - - a commander whom it is a pleasure to obey; and a horse we tender as a slight testimonial of our admiration." The many months of training and the early military engagements forged an unbreakable bond between the Texas Brigade and John Bell Hood. The two names have been synonymous in history ever since.³

Hood commanded the Texas Brigade in a series of brutal fights throughout 1862 and 1863. At Gaines's Mill, Virginia on June 27, 1862, Hood led his men in a frontal assault that produced heavy casualties but ultimately helped General Robert E. Lee dislodge Union commander Major General George Brinton McClellan from the outskirts of Richmond. After the battle, Hood rode amongst the dead and wounded and appeared visibly shaken and sorrowful. Two months later, at Second Manassas, Hood again led the Texans in a spirited charge that assisted in securing another Confederate victory. Again, it came at a heavy price, as Hood lost half of his men. A few weeks later, at Antietam, Maryland, the Texas Brigade attacked again and drove back the Union advance through the bloody Miller cornfield. Once again, Hood's men paid a heavy price in order to prevent a Confederate disaster. Yet, the tenacity and bravery of the soldiers, combined with Hood's strong command skills, earned him a promotion to Major General on October 10, 1862.

The Texas Brigade saw little action at Fredericksburg in December 1862 and missed the battle at Chancellorsville entirely, as they had been on a foraging expedition in North Carolina. At Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 2, 1862, as the Texans marched off to battle, fragments from an artillery shell struck Hood in his left arm. The shell

² "Letter to Colonel Albert Sydney Johnston," *Mrs. Mason Barret Collection*, Archives Department, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University

³ Nicholas A. Davis, *Chaplain Davis and Hood's Texas Brigade*, Donald E. Everett ed., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999, p. 57.

permanently mangled his limb, leaving it intact but rendering it useless for the rest of his life. Private John C. West wrote: “I believe the wounding of General Hood early in the action was the greatest misfortune of the day.” Hood quickly recovered in Richmond, Virginia and rejoined the Confederate army just in time for the battle at Chickamauga, Georgia in mid-September, 1863. As Hood rode along the lines commanding his men, a minié ball smashed through his right femur, ending Hood’s command of his Texas Brigade in battle. He underwent an amputation four inches from his hip, an operation that normally had an eighty percent mortality rate. Yet, Hood lived to fight another day, despite numerous reports of his death. In Richmond foreign observer Henri Garidel expressed relief, writing: “General Hood, so it says, is not dead but is very ill from having his right leg amputated. . . . I pray to you, God, to keep him from dying. We need him.” Hood returned to Richmond for a period of several months to recover from the traumatic amputation. He also received a promotion to lieutenant general, which set the stage for him to continue moving up the Confederate command ladder.⁴

Hood rather enjoyed his recovery time in Richmond, emerging as a prominent figure in social circles, especially as he built a budding friendship with President Jefferson Davis and famed diarist Mary Chesnut. Dozens of women flocked to meet the general and all of the attention overwhelmed Hood. He joked with Mary Chesnut: “So many strangers scare me. I can’t run as I did before.” Yet, one woman caught his eye: Sally “Buck” Preston. The hot and cold romance sputtered along for several months, as Preston expressed concern for Hood in his dilapidated state, but also flatly rejected many of his romantic overtures. At a party attended by First Lady of the Confederacy Varina Davis, Sally Preston shouted, within hearing distance of Hood: “Engaged to that man! Never! For what do you take me?” Hood bemoaned, “Why wince when you would thank God for a ball to go through your heart and be done with it all?” Despite the rocky road of romance, the couple announced their engagement in February 1864, at the same time Hood received word of an appointment as a corps commander under Joseph Johnston with the Confederate Army of Tennessee.⁵

Jefferson Davis requested that Hood keep him informed of Johnston’s actions as a commanding general. The Army of Tennessee had to protect the vital transportation center of Atlanta, Georgia, especially with an upcoming presidential election in the United States that, if Lincoln failed in his re-election bid, could bring the Union to the bargaining table to end the war. Hood commanded from the saddle, with a prosthetic wooden leg dangling from his horse. Some of the soldiers, meeting Hood for the first time, called him Old Peg leg. Although Hood wanted Johnston to move back to re-take Chattanooga, a city General Braxton Bragg lost in November 1863, Johnston remained in

⁴ John C. West, *A Texan in Search of a Fight: Being the Diary and Letters of a Private Soldier in Hood’s Texas Brigade*. Waco: Texian Press, 1969, p. 96; Michael Bedout Chesson and Leslie Jean Roberts, eds., *Exile in Richmond: The Confederate Journal of Henri Garidel*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001, p. 86.

⁵ Mary Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949, p. 332; Woodworth, Steven E. *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990, pp. 269-70.

Dalton, Georgia until May, 1864, when Union commander Major General William Tecumseh Sherman launched an offensive from Chattanooga towards Atlanta.

As Sherman advanced, Johnston withdrew from Dalton to Resaca in order to prevent his army from being flanked. After a brief skirmish, Johnston strategically withdrew again, a pattern that persisted for the next several days. Both Hood and Johnston later claimed they wanted to attack Sherman, a theme played out time and time again in the memory wars between the two officers in the post-war years. Johnston, however, did keep his army intact and placed them in slightly entrenched positions at Kennesaw Mountain, just north of Atlanta. On June 27, 1864, Sherman hurled his army at Johnston in a bloody and tough fight that resulted in a Confederate victory. Once again, Johnston abandoned his position and pulled back towards the city. President Davis, frustrated with the state of affairs in Georgia, sent Braxton Bragg to check in on the army and visit with Hood. Hood declared: “We had several chances to strike the enemy a decisive blow. We have failed to take advantage of such opportunities.”⁶

Bragg reported that Johnston deserved to be fired and Hood emerged as the best candidate to replace him. Davis mulled his options and asked Robert E. Lee for advice. Lee provided a less than enthusiastic endorsement of Hood, as he wrote: “Hood is a good fighter, very industrious on the battle field, careless off, and I have had no opportunity of judging his action, when the whole responsibility rested upon him.” Next, Davis asked Johnston for a specific plan on how to save the city of Atlanta. Johnston provided a vague response and Davis ordered his immediate removal. Hood immediately ascended to command of the Army of Tennessee on July 17, 1864. The dismissal of Johnston created a melancholy cloud over much of the army. The southern populace also scratched their heads over the change in command. The *Charleston Mercury* reported that the soldiers felt “disheartened and disgusted.” The corps commanders grumbled, particularly those like William Hardee whom the president passed over for the command position. First Lieutenant John Henry Marsh wrote that the removal of Johnston “caused the greatest gloom that has ever been known to pervade this army.” Hood certainly had his work cut out for him to win over his new army.⁷

Hood, recognizing the high stakes of holding Atlanta and the precarious situation Johnston created, attacked. Jefferson Davis wanted action and Hood delivered a series of attacks that piled up irreplaceable casualties. He hurled the Confederates at Sherman at Peachtree Creek on July 20, a few days after he received command. Despite losing 2,500 men, Hood persevered and attacked again, this time east of Atlanta two days later. Many in the Confederacy applauded Hood’s tenacity and willingness to engage the enemy. Yet Hood lost an additional 5,500 soldiers. On July 28, Hood attacked again at Ezra Church. The battle proved ineffective. In nine days, Hood lost a total of 12,000 men, more than Joseph Johnston lost in the previous six months. As one soldier recalled, “Since General

⁶“JB Hood to B Bragg 14 July 1864,” *Jefferson Davis Papers*, Tulane University Archives.

⁷ Clifford Dowdey, ed., *Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1961, p. 821; *The Charleston Mercury*, 22 July 1864; John Henry Marsh letter to Chaplain Charles T. Quintard, July 26, 1864, Perkins Library, Duke University.

Hood took command (within the past eight days) we have fought three battles with a loss of at least 10,000 men and have gained nothing, so far as I am able to see. No doubt the enemy's loss has been as great as ours, but we cannot afford to swap man for man."⁸

Throughout August, Hood continued to engage Sherman around Atlanta from time to time. By the end of the month, Sherman maneuvered his army to the south and shelled the city on a regular basis. At the end of August, Sherman effectively attacked Lieutenant General William Joseph Hardee's corps at Jonesboro, Georgia. Hardee's line melted and Sherman now controlled all of the railroads and had a chance to encircle the city. Thus, on September 1, Hood ordered his army to explode six train cars worth of ammunition and evacuate Atlanta. Sherman triumphantly marched into the city the next day. An optimistic Confederate home front fell back into a funk of gloom and doom. One paper declared: "General Hood's egregious failures, it appears to us, have proved, beyond question, that what was wanted by our army at Atlanta, was not a change of Generals, but reinforcements." Sarah Louis Wadley wrote, "This is indeed a great misfortune, and we feel it deeply."⁹

What happened at Atlanta? Hood followed the wishes of his president and attacked Sherman's superior army. He also utilized the cavalry to disrupt Sherman's supply and communication lines, which ultimately allowed the Confederacy to hold Atlanta for a longer period of time. While the offensive maneuvers only produced limited success, Hood lost too many soldiers without any clear indication that they could be replaced as easily as Sherman could replace his casualties. Even if his corps commanders had orchestrated their attacks as planned, the Army of Tennessee had surrendered too much territory in the previous months. With Atlanta gone, all was not lost. Hood still had a functioning army with many men who still had the resolve to fight another day.

As Hood contemplated his next move, he engaged in a furious letter writing exchange with his military adversary, William T. Sherman. The fascinating conversation between two commanding officers touched on a number of subjects, including race, the causes of the war and how armies should behave amongst civilian populations. Hood chastised Sherman for wanting to evacuate the citizens of Atlanta, writing: "Sir, permit me to say that the unprecedented measure you propose transcends, in studied and ingenious cruelty, all acts ever before brought to my attention in the dark history of war." Sherman fired back and noted how Hood burned homes near his own battle lines and placed his army so close to civilians that "every cannon-shot and many musket-shots from our line of investment, that overshot their mark, went into the habitations of women and children." In the midst of a verbose battle over artillery shells and evacuations, Sherman also blamed the Confederacy for the "dark and cruel war." Hood, of course, responded in a fiery defense of his actions and again rebuked Sherman for his war upon

⁸ Noel Crowson and John V. Brogden, eds., *Bloody Banners and Barefoot Boys: A History of the 27th Regiment Alabama Infantry CSA: The Civil War Memoirs and Diary Entries of J. P. Cannon M.D.* Shippensburg PA: Burd Street Press, 1997, p. 88.

⁹ *The Charleston Mercury*, 6 September 1864; "September 16, 1864" and "September 19, 1864," *Sarah Louis Wadley Papers*, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

civilian populations, writing, “there are a hundred thousand witnesses that you fired into the habitations of women and children for weeks, firing far above and miles beyond my line of defense.” Sherman, being Sherman, did not allow Hood the last word and declared their exchange of letters “profitless” and explained, once again, he had every right to shell Atlanta.¹⁰

With his period of correspondence behind him, Hood decided to invade Tennessee, where he hoped to take Nashville, head north to Kentucky and cross the Ohio River and eventually link up with Robert E. Lee at Petersburg, Virginia. The plan excited some in the Confederacy, as one paper noted: “In either event, Hood’s movement is as promising as it is bold and daring.” Ella Thomas, residing in Georgia, wrote in her diary: “The deep gloom which hung over us just after the fall of Atlanta has been lifted from our midst and the movement of Gen. Hood has brightened both the army and the people.” In order to prepare his army, Hood proclaimed a day of fasting, reviewed the soldiers, and headed northward. He also received Jefferson Davis, who reviewed the army and rallied the troops to prepare for the upcoming campaign. Hood moved northward rather quickly, retracing the steps from the previous campaign. Yet, his army got bogged down trying to cross the Tennessee River at the end of October, which forced many of the soldiers to eat corn and acorns as their source of food. Torrential rains and the delay of Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest’s cavalry precipitated a delay of several days, as the army did not cross the river until November 20.¹¹

At Spring Hill, Tennessee on November 29, 1864, Hood faced an opportunity to flank pursuing Union commander Major General John McAllister Schofield. If Hood eliminated Schofield’s army, he faced a clear path all the way to Nashville. Yet, miscommunication ruled the day, as Hood never effectively spelled out his wishes to his unenthusiastic corps commanders, who, in turn, failed to execute the plan, which, in the end allowed Schofield to slip away in the night. The next day Hood berated his corps commanders over breakfast about the missed opportunity. Communication breakdown, the failure to know the precise location of the Union forces and the lack of a clear bond between Hood and his subordinate commanders, resulted in failure. Yet historians accused Hood of being drunk and disoriented on pain killers at this critical juncture. No evidence exists to support such a strong accusation, which appears in several historical studies as fact.

Even with failure at Spring Hill, Hood moved forward and decided to send his army against a lightly entrenched position at the town of Franklin, Tennessee. The Army of Tennessee slammed into John Schofield’s forces around 4 P.M. on November 30, 1864. The continual, two-mile frontal assaults against the Union army failed to dislodge Schofield. The Confederate army had early success in smashing a hole in the center of the line, but Union troops rushed forward to close the gap. During the battle, General

¹⁰ William Tecumseh Sherman, *Memoirs*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 487-96.

¹¹ *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, 12 October 12 1864; Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas: 1848-1880*, Virginia Ingraham Burr ed., Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990, pp. 239 and 244.

Hood decided not to use the artillery to its fullest capacity, for risk of killing and injuring the local residents of Franklin. As darkness fell upon a scene of unmitigated horror and carnage, Schofield headed towards Nashville, leaving Hood in control of the field. The morning rays of light confirmed the horrific battle. One Confederate soldier declared: “Thousands lay upon the field, dead or dying. You could see squads of these veterans who had fought together, and slept together, kneeling down around the body of some dying comrade, and their grief was so great that they wept like women.” Hood lost several generals, fifty-three regimental commanders and 7,000 irreplaceable men at this juncture of the war.¹²

Despite the blood spilled at Franklin, Hood held the field, declared victory, and headed to Nashville. As the remnants of the Army of Tennessee moved into position around Nashville, Hood decided to order his men to throw up earthworks and awaited an attack from Union commander Major General George Henry Thomas. Hood also expected to receive additional reinforcements from Memphis that never arrived. On December 15, the battle commenced, with heavy fighting over the course of two days. Hood’s line eventually shattered and the commander had no choice but to fall back. He lost over 4,400 irreplaceable men. Gideon Viars, a Union soldier, stated: “We have drove the rebels all the time and cut them up terribly. They are the worst demoralized army that I ever heard of.”¹³ Hood’s ambitious plan to rally the Confederacy as it teetered on the precipice of destruction collapsed on the frozen landscape along the banks of the Cumberland River.

The Army of Tennessee, a ghost of its former self, limped back towards Tupelo, Mississippi. Despite an optimistic plan that rallied many dispirited soldiers and civilians, Hood faced insurmountable odds against a superior force. The army fought with a high level of tenacity but lacked any meaningful reinforcements to capture Nashville, a city the United States secured back in March 1862. The spectacular failure of the campaign prompted hundreds of soldiers, civilians, and future historians, to point the finger of blame at Hood and even Jefferson Davis, who appointed him in the first place. Hood reflected on the campaign and asked one writer: “Do you know what a forlorn hope is, and what the duty and position of the officer who leads it?” When the author acknowledged that he knew, Hood replied, “then, I have nothing more to say.” Hood faced an impossible situation. Had he succeeded, the acclaim would have been unimaginable.¹⁴

Hood resigned as head of the Army of Tennessee on January 23, 1865. He thanked his men for their service during the campaign and returned to Richmond, Virginia, where he expected to do whatever he could to help the Confederacy still secure victory in the war. He spent time in Richmond where he wrote up a report on the campaign. Then, Jefferson Davis asked him to head to the Trans-Mississippi west and gather any possible men to keep the war effort buoyant. Hood headed west but

¹² David Logsdon, ed., *Eyewitnesses at the Battle of Franklin*. Nashville: Kettle Mills Press, 2000, p. 79.

¹³ “December 27, 1864,” *Viars Family Papers*, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

¹⁴ *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, 31 August 1879, Morning Edition;

eventually surrendered to Union forces commanded by Major General John Wynn Davidson at Natchez, Mississippi on May 31, 1865. In a letter to Jefferson Davis, Governor Isham Harris of Tennessee reflected on Hood’s failure. He defended Hood’s actions and noted that while the campaign had been “disastrous,” he could not see “anything that General Hood has done that he should not, or neglected anything that he should have done.” Harris concluded, “If all had performed their parts as well as he, the results would have been very different.” In many ways, Harris’s letter foreshadowed the extensive debates about Hood’s performance as commander of the Army of Tennessee.¹⁵

At the conclusion of the Civil War, Hood traveled about the South and ended up residing in New Orleans. He married Ana Marie Hennen and the couple produced eleven children, including three sets of twins, over the course of a decade. Hood worked in life insurance and became president of the Life Association of America. In the midst of employment and familial obligations, Hood volunteered with numerous charitable organizations in New Orleans that cared for wounded veterans, widows and orphans. He also worked actively to secure his and the Texas Brigade’s place in Civil War memory through participation in veteran’s organizations and eventually writing his memoir. However, when a second bout of yellow fever struck the city of New Orleans in 1879, it killed Hood, his wife and eldest daughter in the last week of August 1879. Hundreds of citizens contributed to a fund to ensure the survival of the late general’s ten orphaned children. Hood’s descendants, still alive today, serve as a powerful living monument to a Civil War personality who experienced triumph and tragedy during America’s most critical hour.

John Bell Hood

Born	June 1, 1831
Died	August 30, 1879
Buried	Metairie Cemetery, New Orleans, LA
Father	John W. Hood
Mother	Theodosia French
Career Milestones	West point graduate United States Lieutenant Confederate Colonel, Brigadier General, Major General and Lieutenant General with the Army of Northern Virginia Lieutenant General and General of the Army of Tennessee President of Life Association of America

¹⁵ Lynda Crist, ed., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis: Volume 11, September 1864-May 1865*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003, pp. 248-49.