

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## The Battle of Chickamauga

By **David A. Powell**

The Battle of Chickamauga was the culmination of a month-long cat and mouse game between the Union Army of the Cumberland, led by Major General William Starke Rosecrans, and Confederate General Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee. This struggle played out in the mountains of Northern Georgia, with the ultimate prize being the gateway to the Deep South—the transportation hub city of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Chickamauga was the second largest battle of the war, with the armies involved suffering a combined total of nearly 35,000 casualties. Only the bloodletting at Gettysburg would produce more total suffering.

The stage for this conflict was set in early July of 1863, when Bragg's army was driven out of Middle Tennessee by Rosecrans's well-planned flanking operation against Tullahoma. The Federals succeeded in turning Bragg out of his prepared defensive positions and, badly outnumbered, Bragg chose retreat over battle. While Tullahoma cleared the way for a new Union advance into North Georgia, it was not the decisive action Rosecrans intended it to be.

Any advance on Chattanooga faced multiple obstacles. First came the Tennessee River, wide and fast flowing. Next loomed the long mountain ridges that lay beyond. Two thousand feet high, palisaded and crossable only at a few gaps, each ridge was a significant obstacle in its own right. Simply following the meandering road and railroad into Chattanooga were no good; a small force of defenders might hold some of those choke points for months. Once again Rosecrans turned to maneuver. Feinting north of the town, Rosecrans crossed his main body at Bridgeport and Stevenson and move due east to threaten Bragg's supply line, the Western & Atlantic Railroad.

The plan worked brilliantly. Bragg was completely fooled. His senior cavalry commander, Major General Joseph Wheeler, left only a skeleton force to watch the Tennessee River downstream from Chattanooga. For the better part of a week Bragg was left in the dark about Union intentions. Finally, on September 8, realizing he would have to abandon Chattanooga or be trapped there, Bragg retreated again. Union troops occupied the city the next day. Union Major General George Henry Thomas now counseled a pause in operations to regroup and secure the fruits already won, but Rosecrans scented a larger victory and chose instead to convert his advance into a headlong pursuit. With the Union army spread out over a forty-mile front and separated by mountains, this was a risky decision.

Bragg intended to fight, but not on Rosecrans's terms. Instead, Bragg hoped to turn the tables on his opponent and fall upon one after the other of the Union columns while they were still separated, crushing each in turn. Reinforcements from Knoxville and Mississippi further emboldened the Rebel commander, with more on the way. Lieutenant General James Longstreet's First Corps, Army of Northern Virginia, was also detached to meet the crisis in Tennessee.

The Confederates' first two attempts to organize just such an assault, however, were stymied by miscues of their own. Bragg ordered an attack against an exposed Union column in a mountain valley called McLemore's Cove, but at the crucial moment, his subordinates failed him. Hesitation and miscommunication allowed the Federals to escape the trap. Confederate Generals Daniel Harvey Hill and Thomas Carmichael Hindman both performed poorly here, but for the moment, Bragg remained focused on the campaign. This near-disaster did alert Rosecrans to the need to recombine his scattered forces. Both sides spent the next week maneuvering, but Bragg was unable to prevent the Federals from uniting at Lee and Gordon's Mills.

There was still a chance to cut the Federals off from Chattanooga. On the morning of September 18, 1863, Bragg set a new plan in motion. Three army corps were sent north to cross West Chickamauga Creek downstream from the mills (the creek flowed north, emptying into the Tennessee near Chattanooga) and attack Rosecrans's left flank. Only two Union commands stood in the Confederates' way. These were Colonel Robert Horatio George Minty's small cavalry brigade and Colonel John Thomas Wilder's deadly mounted infantry command, roughly 3,000 Yankees in all, facing 25,000 enemy infantry and another 5,000 cavalry. Despite the long odds, the Federals accomplished all that Rosecrans could have desired of them. Delaying actions at Reed's and Alexander's Bridges prevented the leading Rebels from crossing until late afternoon, alerting Rosecrans to the danger he faced and providing the time to respond. Overnight Rosecrans sent Thomas and two divisions of the Union XIV Corps north to the farmstead of Elisha J. Kelly, beyond the right flank of Bragg's column.

Bragg, by contrast, was not as well informed about his opponent. Bragg's attack column, now spearheaded by Major General John Bell Hood, halted that night in the woods a mile or so short of their objective. Behind Hood, Major General William Henry Talbot Walker's Confederate Reserve Corps slept near the Alexander farmstead. A third Rebel Corps under Major General Simon Bolivar Buckner was supposed to cross the creek once Hood and Walker were closed up, but only managed to slip two of his six brigades across at fords upstream from Alexander's Bridge before dark. Brigadier General Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry was supposed to protect Hood's right flank and the road back to Ringgold, which would soon see the rest of Longstreet's men detraining there over the next two days.

Forrest failed to properly execute this mission. Instead of deploying a cavalry screen along Hood's vulnerable right flank, Forrest took his troopers back across Chickamauga Creek to camp for the night. This error was made clear when a brigade of

Union infantry from Major General Gordon Granger's Union Reserve Corps marched from Rossville to Reed's Bridge. This force, commanded by Colonel Daniel McCook, was sent to support Minty, but Minty was gone by the time McCook arrived. Dan McCook, however, was seeking a general's star and chafing for a fight. He had no intention of retreating. Instead he pushed his skirmishers far enough forward so that they interdicted the road leading to Reed's Bridge, and hauled in a net full of prisoners from Hood's column.

Much to his frustration, on the morning of September 19 McCook received orders to return to Rossville, but as he was leaving he visited George Thomas. A lone Rebel brigade was in the woods, explained McCook, and vulnerable if Thomas desired to act. Thomas ordered both Brigadier General John Milton Brannan's and Brigadier General Absalom Baird's divisions to move eastward through the woods towards a place called Jay's Mill.

Forrest had also been up and active early on September 19. Word of McCook's Federals filtered up the Rebel chain of command, so Bragg ordered Forrest to scout the area in that direction. Forrest's men had a brief skirmish with McCook's troops, but after McCook withdrew the Rebel cavalry dismounted in and around Jay's Mill for a morning breather. While they did so, one Confederate patrol rode west through the woods. At about 7:30 a.m. they stumbled onto Brannan's Division, and the battle was joined.

Forrest had on hand only one brigade of the four that normally comprised his corps, that of Brigadier General Henry Bravard Davidson, who had just assumed command of Pegram's Brigade. Davidson was so new to his position that he had only arrived to take command that very morning, having traveled from Virginia, and further, Pegram's division had only been under Forrest's command for about a month. Pegram's other brigade was guarding another bridge of the West Chickamauga Creek, while Forrest's old division (now led by Brigadier General Frank Armstrong) was still off to the south, waiting to be relieved by other cavalry. As a result, Forrest's force was greatly overmatched. Forrest was a fighter, however, and rather than fall back, he sought for help from nearby Rebel infantry.

That help came when elements of Walker's Reserve Corps joined the fight. The brigades of Brigadier General Matthew Duncan Ector and Colonel Claudius Charles Wilson, hastened up and were fed into action against Brannan's Federals. In response, Brannan called upon Thomas to support him with Baird's Yankees. The result was a pushing and shoving contest, with first the Federals giving way, then the Rebels. This initial clash lasted for about two hours, with the commanders on each side expecting more reinforcements all the while.

The terrain over which these men fought was mostly wooded with gently rising and falling ground. The area was only recently settled, dotted with a few small farms with cleared patches that amounted to just a few open fields among the old-growth timber. One or two larger landowners owned larger tracts of several hundred acres, but this was

the exception, not the rule. One main road bisected the battlefield, connecting Chattanooga with La Fayette, Georgia.

For Bragg, this newly raging combat off to his right was disturbing, and the Confederate commander immediately postponed his intended main attack. Only reluctantly did Bragg commit troops towards this new threat, and then, only in enough force to stabilize his flank. As a result, all day long Confederate troops would be fed into the fighting a division at a time, diluting their striking power. At 11:00 a.m. Bragg ordered Walker to take his remaining division under Brigadier General St. John Richardson Liddell into the fight, taking Baird's Federals by surprise and in the flank near Winfrey Field. Baird's men were routed, losing heavily, especially in prisoners.

Rosecrans was less surprised by the fast-developing action. There is some evidence that he and George Thomas were already thinking of a counter-stroke, even before Thomas completed his night march. As the action opened, Thomas sent a message to Major General Thomas Leonidas Crittenden, asking for the loan of a division from XXI Corps, so that the Union could "use them [the Rebels] up." Crittenden was already thinking along those same lines and sent Major General John McAuley Palmer north along the La Fayette Road in anticipation of Thomas's dispatch. Palmer's men reached the Poe Farm, roughly half a mile south of Kelly's along the La Fayette Road, around noon.<sup>1</sup>

Rosecrans upped that ante with another division, Brigadier General Richard W. Johnson's command of the XX Corps. They also reached the Poe Field area around noon, deploying on Palmer's right. Both divisions then advanced due east into the timber. Their arrival allowed Baird's battered brigades to disengage, and now it was Liddell's turn to be flanked.

Bragg responded with Major General Benjamin Franklin Cheatham's big division of five brigades. Cheatham belonged to Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk's corps. At 7:00 a.m., Bragg had already ordered Cheatham to cross the Chickamauga at Dalton's Ford and move up behind Hood's and Buckner's Corps in order to further strengthen his intended main attack. At 10:00 a.m., with Walker committed, Bragg changed Cheatham's orders and sent his brigades farther north as a support for Walker. Liddell's division was already falling back in disorder when Cheatham's five brigades collided with Johnson and Palmer. This collision centered on the Brock Farm. Two of John Brock's sons served in Cheatham's division, and had now come home to fight a battle on their front doorstep. This fight began around Noon and would rage for the next two hours with battle lines trading blows but no one really giving much ground.

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<sup>1</sup> United States War Department. *The War Of The Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 128 Vols. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, Volume 30, part 1, p. 124. (Hereafter cited as *O.R.*); and John M. Palmer, *Personal Recollections of John M. Palmer: The Story Of An Earnest Life* (Cincinnati, OH: The Robert Clarke Co., 1901), 175.

The battle spread steadily southward like a brushfire as each army commander committed additional forces. Bragg was trying to contain an unexpected threat. Rosecrans was looking to find a vulnerable Confederate flank. Both generals dribbled men into action rather than massing them for a solid blow. Even worse, both commanders were showing little regard for proper chain of command. The result was to make an already confusing action even more perplexing for everyone involved.

True to pattern, Bragg now plucked Major General Alexander Peter Stewart's division out of line in Buckner's Corps to move up to support Cheatham. Bragg's orders were so vague that Stewart rode back to seek clarification, whereupon he discovered how limited Bragg's understanding of the battle really was. Bragg could only inform Stewart to go forward and "be governed by circumstances."<sup>2</sup>

At about this time, Crittenden rode north up the La Fayette Road with Brigadier General Horatio Phillips Van Cleve's command in tow, less one brigade left behind at Lee and Gordon's Mills. Crittenden brought Van Cleve up to support Palmer's right flank. The Union line through Brock Field curved back to the west, refused in response to an earlier caution from Rosecrans—who clearly had a better grasp on the nature of the fighting than did Bragg—to watch that right flank and advance in echelon. As a result, Palmer's right faced due south; Van Cleve's line faced east. Opposing them was Cheatham's left-most brigade under Brigadier General Marcus Joseph Wright. Though this positioning was not intentional, Van Cleve's two brigades were perfectly situated to crush Wright's flank.

Van Cleve's men savaged Wright's Tennesseans, forcing them into disordered retreat. Into this mix stumbled A. P. Stewart. Stewart's leading brigade, 1,400 Alabamians under Brigadier General Henry DeLamar Clayton, stopped Van Cleve, but was soon fought to a standstill in turn. Within a half hour, Stewart replaced Clayton with his next brigade under Brigadier General John Calvin Brown. Brown's attack hit hard, breaking Van Cleve's first line, and things now looked perilous for the Federals.

In the meantime, Reynolds was still trying to help. Initially Palmer requested the loan of a regiment to bolster Grose's right flank; Reynolds obliged by sending the 75<sup>th</sup> Indiana of Colonel Edward King's brigade into the woods just south of the Brotherton Road, and east of the field. A short time later, Palmer asked for more help, and Reynolds responded with King's other three regiments. King's men filed down the La Fayette Road, only to discover that Van Cleve's two brigades were ahead of them. As a result, King moved nearly five hundred yards farther south than Reynolds intended him to, and entered the woods on Van Cleve's right.

Serendipitously, Reynolds's help came at exactly the right time. As Brown's Rebels drove in Van Cleve's front line, King struck Brown's left flank just as the 75<sup>th</sup> Indiana did the same on Brown's right. With both flanks threatened, now Brown's

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<sup>2</sup> *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 2, 361.

Tennesseans fell back in disorder, and Van Cleve's line rallied. So far, Stewart's division had made little headway.

Brigadier General Jefferson Columbus Davis of Major General Alexander McDowell McCook's XX Corps marched his two brigades up to Rosecrans's headquarters at about noon, following Johnson. Rosecrans ordered Davis to move due west from the Widow Glenn's, cross the La Fayette Road, and push out into the woods north of Viniard Field. This movement placed Davis's men another 700 yards or so south of where Van Cleve and King wrestled with Stewart. It also placed Davis's two brigades on a collision course with Hood's corps.

Hood's corps contained two divisions. His own, now commanded by Brigadier General Evander McIver Law, was deployed on the right. The other was a scratched together force of three brigades commanded by the ranking Brigadier, Bushrod Rust Johnson. Johnson's line was struck first. In response, Hood ordered his entire force to advance, but as they did so, they executed a very curious maneuver. Bushrod Johnson's Division angled northward, while Law's men angled to the south. Since Hood was wounded the next day it is impossible to know if Hood intended this move, or if it was accidental. For whatever reason, the two lines crossed each other's paths, sewing confusion and disrupting each formation.

Johnson's attack drove back Colonel Hans Christian Heg's Brigade, of Davis's division. Then part of Johnson's attack drifted farther north, to strike King's Federals, then engaged with Stewart's men. This blow would change the complexion of the fighting around Brotherton Field, and will be addressed shortly. In the meantime, however, part of Law's division swept into Viniard Field.

Law's leading brigade was the famed Texas Brigade of the Army of Northern Virginia, originally commanded by Hood himself. It would do a hard day's work here. The Texans entered Viniard Field from the northeast, engaging part of Davis's command, only to meet yet more Yankees. Four more Union brigades now became involved; two comprising Brigadier General Thomas John Wood's Division, the last brigade of Van Cleve's command, and at the very end of this action, a brigade belonging to Philip Sheridan's Division. Additional Rebels included a brigade from Brigadier General William Preston's Division of Buckner's Corps, Brigadier General Henry Lewis Benning's Georgia Brigade, also of Law, and part of Brigadier General Evander McNair's brigade from Bushrod Johnson's Division. For about three hours charge and counter-charge swept the field and the woods just to the north. Backstopping the whole affair, Wilder's mounted infantry occupied a line of hasty entrenchments on the west side of the field; helping to fend off several Confederate forays. The losses were staggering, but the fighting proved inconclusive.

While Viniard blazed with battle, Colonel John Fulton's small Tennessee brigade drifted north to strike the flank of the Union line opposing A. P. Stewart. This timely appearance sent Van Cleve's and King's Federals into full retreat through Brotherton Field. At 4:00 p.m., the Federals attempted a second stand in the field, but again, Fulton

applied pressure from the south and by 4:30 the Union center collapsed. It was here, as the day was drawing to a close, that A.P. Stewart's men made the farthest penetration of the Union lines on September 19. Henry Clayton's battered Alabamians pushed westward about six hundred yards into Dyer Field, and for a short time it looked as if a Union crisis was at hand. Clayton was not reinforced, however, for the simple fact that no senior Confederate commander on the field had a good grasp of what had been achieved. Union reinforcements arrived to seal the breach, and the Rebels fell back in turn.

One final action marked September 19, no less confusing to those involved than any of the earlier bloodletting. Major General Patrick Ronayne Cleburne's Division reached the north end of the battlefield at about 5:00 p.m., just as action on other parts of the field was winding down. He deployed his men around Winfrey Field, with orders to attack, though nightfall was imminent. Cleburne's men struck Richard Johnson's Federal division, causing disruption and taking some prisoners, until the Federals retreated out of contact. Both side's efforts had been marred by numerous incidents of friendly fire, however, characteristic of night actions, and Cleburne's attack was of no real consequence: the Yankees were intending to retreat anyway.

That night, William Rosecrans assembled a council of his senior officers to discuss their options. By now the Federals clearly understood that Bragg was being reinforced. Retreat was not an option, not until the various supply trains had moved closer to safety in Chattanooga, but there was also no good chance to attack. The generals decided that the Army of the Cumberland must stand on the defensive through September 20, with General Thomas expressing his great concern for his own left (northern) flank. Thomas's command still held the path of retreat open towards Rossville, but he lacked the troops to cover the Reed's Bridge Road. Despite the fact that Thomas already commanded half the army, including a division from each of the other two corps, the burly Virginian asked for more troops. Specifically, he wanted Major General James Scott Negley's division returned to him. Negley had been one of the late-arriving reinforcements that helped seal the breach in the Union center, and was now in line at Brotherton Field. Nonetheless, Rosecrans agreed to send Negley as soon as he could.

General Bragg did not hold a similar conference. Bragg's relationship with many of his generals was not good, and in his experience councils of war produced only dissension and defeatism. Moreover, Bragg's army was a mish-mash of new arrived commands and newly created corps; he needed simplification. Bragg took the extraordinary step of reorganizing his army in the middle of the battle. With James Longstreet now on the field, Bragg decided to create two wing commands, assigning the left to Longstreet and the right to Leonidas Polk. Longstreet now led six divisions, while Polk led five. Polk would attack first, breaking the Union line and driving it south, and then Longstreet's men would deliver the final blow. Lieutenant General D. H. Hill's corps, which so far had seen little action except for Cleburne's night fight, would spearhead Polk's attack at first light.

Bragg met Polk and explained the plan to him, but never met Hill that night. Even worse, Polk made only a lackadaisical effort to find Hill and deliver the new orders. For his part, Hill managed to get lost, wandering around in the dark first looking for Bragg's camp, and then, when informed that he was to report to Polk, searching in vain for that general's headquarters. Far from being ready to launch the main effort at day-dawn, Hill's men would still be trying to round up breakfast on the morning of the September 20.

Longstreet fared better, reaching Bragg's camp at about 11:00 p.m. There he and Bragg conferred for about an hour, with Bragg explaining the overall dispositions and his plans for the next day. Longstreet's mission the next morning would be challenging. He would have to locate his troops in completely unfamiliar terrain, get the lay of the land, and organize his new command into an attack column of sorts, all in time to support Polk's dawn assault. It was a tall order. Longstreet lay down around midnight for some sleep, but was up again before 4:00 a.m.

The Federals arose before dawn, expecting first light to bring renewed combat. George Thomas's line curved around the open ground of the Kelly farmstead, with a flank extending south along the La Fayette Road as far as Poe Field. McCook's sector of responsibility extended along the west edge of Brotherton field, and then angled back towards the Widow Glenn's. Crittenden's XXI Corps formed a reserve on the far side of Dyer Field. Rosecrans rode the lines, inspecting all, until he reached Thomas. Thomas expressed his concerns anew, and Rosecrans agreed, issuing orders to send Negley's division to Thomas as soon as it could be replaced in the line. In the meantime, no Confederate attack materialized. The men in the ranks used that gift of time to construct breastworks.

Many Rebels were also expecting the combat to begin at first light, as they awoke in the cold and foggy pre-dawn. With no attack forthcoming, Bragg sent couriers out to find Polk and Hill. After a short time Major Pollack Lee of Bragg's staff came tearing back bearing an extraordinary tale. Lee claimed he found Polk on the porch of a farmhouse, miles to the rear, finishing breakfast and reading a newspaper.

Lee's story was almost certainly concocted, for reasons unexplained to this day, but this did not mean that Polk was not at fault. Polk's camp was in a stand of trees near Alexander's Bridge, and when dawn came and went without gunfire, Polk began to realize that his orders had somehow gone awry. Polk mounted and rode to the front, looking for Hill, meeting Major Lee on the way. Oddly enough, one of Hill's two divisional commanders, Major General John Cabell Breckinridge had spent the night at Polk's camp, talking at some length with the bishop-turned-general. Never once did Polk mention the orders in question, in which Breckinridge was supposed to play a key role. Just as critically, when the courier bearing Polk's instructions to Hill returned to camp deep in the night, those orders still in hand undelivered, no one saw fit to wake the sleeping general and inform him of the problem. It was only when dawn came without any sounds of battle that Polk turned to his staff and demanded an explanation.

The next several hours were spent sorting things out. Polk issued new orders, this time directly to each divisional commander, instructing them to attack at once, but Hill overruled those instructions. By the time they arrived, the men were drawing rations. Hill's troops had not eaten in almost twenty-four hours, for the supply wagons did not manage to reach the front in the night; and none of the generals wanted to stop those men from eating now. Some shifting of troops also took place as final adjustments were made, and much to Bragg's dissatisfaction, the Rebel infantry did not finally begin their assault until 9:30 in the morning.

This first attack fell on Thomas's line, now much strengthened in most places. However, Breckinridge's Confederate division extended beyond Thomas's left flank, striking at the very sector Thomas had been so concerned about earlier. Delays in bringing up Negley's relief meant that only one of Negley's three brigades was in place, and Thomas's flank was about to be turned.

McCook was originally tasked with replacing Negley, but he lacked the troops. In the meantime, Rosecrans ordered Crittenden to replace Negley instead. Why Rosecrans didn't do this in the first place remains a mystery. While Crittenden's XXI Corps was also short a division, his other two divisions were both in reserve, and would have been a more logical choice than tasking one of McCook's formations. To compound the error, Crittenden misunderstood Rosecrans's initial intent, and sent Brigadier General Thomas Wood's two brigades forward only to act as a support line for Negley. When Rosecrans noticed that Negley still had not been relieved, he finally ordered Wood into line personally, sometime after 9:00 a.m.

Breckinridge's three brigades fell upon Beatty's lone Federal command with shattering force. The Rebels swept away Union resistance in McDonald Field, and then, discovering they had turned the Union left, wheeled to attack south, astride the La Fayette Road, directly into the Union XIV Corps' rear in Kelly Field. Thomas's worst fear had come to pass.

Breckinridge's division achieved the first real breakthrough of the day, and came within a whisker of crushing the Union flank. Thomas, however, was alert to the threat, and soon shifted reinforcements to blunt the Rebel assault. Another of Negley's brigades arrived and counterattacked. Colonel Ferdinand Van Derveer's brigade of John Brannan's Division arrived from Poe Field, and joined in that effort. Other Federals, plucked from supporting positions around Kelly Field, turned and added their weight to the counter-blow. Breckinridge's men, unsupported, were driven back.

The Confederate commanders were having trouble working in harness. D. H. Hill's deployment was faulty. Both Breckinridge's and Patrick Cleburne's divisions were deployed into a single line with no reserves. While Breckinridge was fortunate enough to strike where the Yankees were unprepared, Cleburne's men slammed into the newly constructed Union defenses. In the meantime Hill was quarrelling with William Walker, whose Reserve Corps was supposed to be providing support for Breckinridge. Bizarrely, Hill refused Walker's offered support, claiming later that he wanted only one fresh

brigade, which was just then arriving on the field and not in position yet. Right wing Commander Polk did not resolve this bickering or override Hill, despite the fact that Walker's men and Cheatham's five brigades were both available to sustain Hill's attack. By about 11:30 a.m., all of Hill's men were falling back in disorder, having taken heavy losses,

However, Hill's assaults, especially Breckinridge's success, did have some impact. All morning long, General Thomas sent courier after courier south, asking for aid. Rosecrans seemed to react instinctively to each request, each time shuffling more troops to the Union left. Negley's division was only the first such. At about 10:30 a.m. Rosecrans dictated orders sending Horatio Van Cleve's division, of the XXI Corps, and Philip Sheridan's Division, of the XX Corps, to join Thomas as well. Taken together, these moves were shocking, and suggested that Rosecrans was growing enormously concerned about Thomas's ability to hold on. Van Cleve represented Rosecrans's last reserve, and Sheridan's men held the Union right flank on a rise of hills near the Widow Glenn cabin. So far, the Union right was not under attack, but thousands more Rebels had yet to weigh into the battle.

At 10:45a.m. another of Thomas's couriers rode to Poe Field bearing orders instructing John Brannan to bring his division up to Kelly Field. Thomas mistakenly believed that Brannan's men were also in reserve. This was incorrect: Brannan's troops were in the front line. Brannan had already given up one brigade earlier, (Van Derveer's, which even now was joining in the repulse of Breckinridge) and also helped throw back a Rebel attack on their front. These new orders could create havoc, so Brannan consulted with Reynolds, next in line to the north. Initially the two men decided that Brannan could go, and sent the aide off to Rosecrans to inform the army commander of the move. Shortly thereafter, however, the two generals changed their mind and Brannan's troops were put back into line. Neither officer thought to inform Rosecrans or Thomas of this change.

Rosecrans, thinking that Brannan's departure created a hole in his center, sent an order to Wood to "close up on Reynolds and support him." Unlike Rosecrans, Wood knew that Brannan's men were still in line; there was no gap. He could only interpret the order as instructions to move up behind Brannan, find Reynolds, and go into position behind him. Wood balked, knowing that this move would leave a dangerous gap in the front. Colonel Lynne Starling, chief of staff of the XXI Corps, suggested that he ride back and seek clarification.<sup>3</sup>

That might have happened had Wood and Starling been alone. However, Major General McCook was present as well, and had just received his own orders from Rosecrans, which seemed to suggest a larger movement was underway. McCook's instructions came in the form of two missives: the first, to prepare to draw in the Union right and send as many troops as possible to Thomas, and the second, the order sending Sheridan north. With both instructions received simultaneously, to McCook it seemed

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<sup>3</sup> *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 1, 635.

obvious that the shift to the right had begun. Thinking there was no time to lose, McCook authorized Wood to move at once, promising to replace his men with men from the XX Corps. McCook's reaction was too hasty by far. McCook had no XX Corps troops available to replace Wood.

Wood would later get the lion's share of the blame for executing this "fateful order of the day," supposedly acting vindictively for imagined slights from Rosecrans earlier. In fact, Rosecrans and McCook must bear the bulk of the blame. The army commander now had three divisions all hustling towards Thomas at once (for he was still assuming Brannan was moving) and his hasty orders created chaos on his own right flank. McCook's assurance that he would replace Wood's men was an impossible one, and he never should have given it. The result was disaster.<sup>4</sup>

The time was approximately 11:15 a.m. The battle had been raging for nearly two hours, and James Longstreet's Confederate left wing had yet to enter the fray. Fearing that his command would be committed in a piecemeal fashion, Longstreet instead ordered his main body forward. His center column, nearly 11,000 men arrayed in five lines, was poised to strike directly into Brotherton Field. Longstreet had not arranged things entirely to his satisfaction, for his leading troops were Bushrod Johnson's men, not his own First Corps, and he had no way of knowing that Wood's men would suddenly abandon their own defenses, but his luck couldn't have been better. His main line smashed through the gap, savaging Union formations on each side, and suddenly, the Union right was faced with disaster.

Union General Jefferson C. Davis's two brigades were overwhelmed and routed. Wood's last brigade was caught while moving, and shattered. John Brannan's division had their flank turned and both brigades all but routed. Even the last of Horatio Van Cleve's brigades, yet to move north, was caught out of position and crushed. Farther back, McCook diverted Sheridan's men and flung them into the breach a brigade at a time. Each brigade was shattered in turn by powerful blows from Confederate General Thomas Hindman's division. Within an hour, all hope of holding the Union right was gone, and so were McCook, Crittenden, and Rosecrans; all swept away in the rout.

The rest of the Union army might have been similarly handled or worse, assailed from the rear and destroyed, had resistance not coalesced on a series of high hills just south of the Snodgrass farm. These hills offered an ideal rally point for the broken elements of Brannan's and part of Wood's Divisions. A sharp counter-attack delivered by Charles Harker's brigade checked Longstreet's men, and bought additional time for the Union to rally. The position became known as Horseshoe Ridge. By 1:00 p.m. the line was strong enough to resist initial Rebel efforts to overwhelm it.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 363.

Longstreet decided he could not pursue those Federals who had fled the field up the Dry Valley to Rossville, westward, if it meant ignoring this growing threat to his right flank; moreover, if he took Horseshoe Ridge, he would be able to strike at Thomas's rear. Initially pulled northward by the independent reorientation of Bushrod Johnson and Brigadier General Jerome Kershaw's two brigades, Longstreet elected to reinforce those troops initially with Hindman's men and, later, his last reserve division under Brigadier General William Preston.

These reinforcements were matched by troops unlooked-for on Thomas's part, but welcome nonetheless. First came Van Derveer's excellent brigade, marching over from their earlier successes in Kelly Field, and then, at about 2:00 p.m., Major General Gordon Granger with 4,000 men of the Union Reserve Corps. Both units arrived of their own volition. Granger, tasked with defending Rossville and helping Thomas where possible, interpreted those orders especially loosely, finally deciding to march two of his three brigades to join the battle he could see raging a few miles to his south. His arrival could not have been timelier, blunting another Rebel flank attack in the nick of time. The battle on Horseshoe ridge raged furiously for the rest of the afternoon.

Longstreet also appealed to Bragg for reinforcements from the by-now inactive Confederate right wing when he met his new commander that afternoon. Longstreet was nonplussed to discover that Bragg seemed pessimistic, even defeatist, and Longstreet's request for help went unmet. "There is not a man in the right Wing who has any fight in him," snarled the army commander. The two men parted with considerably different views of the ongoing fight.<sup>5</sup>

Bragg was frustrated by the fact that for the past several hours, he had been trying to get Polk moving again, to no avail. Hill, Polk, and to a lesser extent Walker remained at loggerheads, each letting anger overcome reason. Despite repeated orders to renew the attack, not until 5:00 p.m. did Polk's men re-enter the fray. When they finally did so, they found the Union lines around Kelly Field to be vulnerable, for Thomas had already initiated a retreat.

At about 3:30 p.m. Union chief of staff Brigadier General James Abram Garfield returned to the field, bearing news (finally) about what had become of Rosecrans and the Union right. In turn, Garfield was able to send word back to Rosecrans that, far from being shattered, most of the Federal army was still on the field fighting under Thomas. That did not mean that the army's situation was not precarious, however. Ammunition was becoming dangerously scarce, and only through pure luck had the Confederates so far not been able to exploit vulnerabilities in the cobbled-together Union position. By 4:30 p.m. Thomas decided he must retreat to Rossville, and began issuing the necessary orders. The final Rebel attacks caught some of those Union troops in motion, but for the most part, the retreat was executed successfully. In the growing darkness, the Rebels

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<sup>5</sup> James Longstreet, From *Manassas To Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America*, 1984 Blue and Grey Press Edition (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1896), 451-452.

were even unsure whether or not the Federals had left the field entirely or just pulled back into the cover of the nearby woods.

On Horseshoe Ridge, in the final act of the drama, three Union regiments were left behind. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Michigan, 21<sup>st</sup> Ohio, and 89<sup>th</sup> Ohio were abandoned to the Confederates through confusion and the mistaken order of an aide, who halted the three regiments in their tracks as they tried to withdraw. As a result, more than five hundred Federals were captured, an ignominious affair that left those Federals resentful at their fate. Despite this setback, however, Thomas's remaining forces established a new line at and around Rossville Gap in Missionary Ridge, still blocking the direct road to Chattanooga.

The Confederates were initially unsure of where the Yankees had gone. Dense woods and morning fog again made visibility difficult. On both the right and left wings, Generals Polk and Longstreet sent out patrols to discover the enemy's new positions, but it wasn't until nearly 9:00 a.m., according to Polk, that the Federal retreat was confirmed. A famous dispatch by Nathan Bedford Forrest urged an immediate pursuit, but in that dispatch Forrest failed to mention the Union army standing in the way. Instead Forrest focused on the Union preparations to hold Chattanooga in case of a prolonged siege, mistaking those efforts for a Union army "retreating as fast as they can go." This information turned out to be wrong, though Bragg would later bear much blame for failing to heed Forrest's missive.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the battle was a tremendous victory for the Army of Tennessee. A third of the Union army was driven from the field, and the rest fell back at nightfall. Trophies in the form of cannon, flags and prisoners were hauled in. Losses had been frightful on both sides, about 18,500 Rebels and 16,000 Federals, but now the Union survivors were trapped in Chattanooga, and possibly in further peril. For a short time, the Confederate disasters of the summer appeared to be reversed. That sense of success would not last, however. In response to the crisis, Union reinforcements and a new General—Ulysses S. Grant—were rushed to the scene, and won a stunning victory of their own two months later, in what came to be known as the Battle of Chattanooga.

Union Generals Rosecrans, McCook, Crittenden, and Negley lost their commands over their role in the disaster, with most holding no important commands for the rest of the war. Thomas took command of the Army of the Cumberland, which in turn was reduced from four corps to two due to losses. Thomas led that army for the rest of the war. On the Confederate side of the ledger, with a victory at last in hand, Bragg attempted to clean his own house of unwanted subordinates. Polk and Hindman were arrested for their blunders. Hill was relieved and sent back east. Longstreet was dispatched into east Tennessee on a forlorn hope of a campaign, ultimately to return to Lee in Virginia. Divisions and brigades were shuffled to break up political blocks within the army, much to the troops' dismay, and dissension ruled the day. President Davis himself had to come to visit Bragg's army and try and sort things out, but he only

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<sup>6</sup> *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 4, 681.

managed to paper over the crisis. He quashed military trials of Polk and Hindman, reassigning them instead, but the quiet lasted only a few weeks. When Bragg was soundly defeated by Grant at the end of November, he was at last relieved of command of the Army of Tennessee and summoned to Richmond. His greatest victory on the battlefield had led directly to his greatest defeat.

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