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COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPER 49.

The Battle of Stone River.



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Military Order of the Loyal Legion
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COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

WAR PAPERS.

The Battle of Stone River.

PREPARED BY COMPANION
Major HENRY M. KENDALL,
U. S. Army,

AND READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF NOVEMBER 4, 1903.



The Battle of Stone River.

After the battle of Perryville, October 8, 1862, a rather leisurely pursuit of Bragg's retreating forces was made on the roads to Cumberland Gap, but no engagement was brought on. It soon appeared that Bragg did not intend to again give battle in Kentucky, but would withdraw into Tennessee and join the force under Breckenridge which had been left to watch Nashville during the invasion of Kentucky. Buell concluded that Bragg would concentrate his entire force near Nashville and endeavor to capture that place and somewhere in its vicinity fight a decisive battle which would determine the fate of West Tennessee and Kentucky. Buell therefore discontinued his pursuit and turned his forces toward Nashville, placing them mainly at Bowling Green, Glasgow, and other points on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad.

A great deal of pressure had been brought to bear upon the Administration to make a campaign in East Tennessee, a mountainous region whose people were mostly loyal. General Halleck in Washington planned a campaign in that region and called upon Buell to carry it out. But Buell declined. His reasons were that such a campaign would place him at a long distance from Louisville, his base, dependent upon wagon transportation alone over almost impassable roads, in a country devoid of supplies and especially suitable to defensive operations. Again, he would be forced to make great detachments to guard Nashville and his lines of communications, since these would be especially open to the attack of the enemy, who was well known to be superior in cavalry.

Buell considered Nashville the vital point of the theatre, and was satisfied that it would be the main point of Bragg's attack. He therefore ignored Halleck's elaborate plan and set about repairing the railway to Nashville and moving his troops in that direction. His previous slowness and indecision had brought him greatly into disfavor, and on the 30th of October he was relieved by Major-General William S. Rosecrans. The district was called thereafter the Department of the Cumberland and the army in the field was designated as the Fourteenth Army Corps. Halleck's plans were urged upon Rosecrans, but he was of the same opinion as Buell, and it had by that time become plain that Bragg was doing just what Buell thought he would do. Rosecrans concluded to go on in the same direction as had Buell, and the events showed clearly that Halleck's bureau-made plans, based upon theory alone and without an intimate knowledge

of the real conditions, were the veriest nonsense, and that Buell and Rosecrans were quite right in ignoring them.

Rosecrans organized the army into right wing, center, and left wing. The right wing, under McCook, consisted of Johnson's, Davis's, and Sheridan's divisions. Thomas commanded the center, which consisted of five divisions under Rousseau, Negley, Fry, Mitchell, and Reynolds. The left wing was commanded by Crittenden, and comprised Wood's, Palmer's, and Van Cleve's divisions. The total available strength of the army formed not more than 60 per cent. of its paper strength, owing to absenteeism. Every endeavor was made to remedy this state of affairs, a condition not peculiar to this army alone, but affecting all the armies almost equally, and constituting a serious evil, for the correction of which severe measures were an absolute necessity.

The army was very deficient in cavalry, and a large portion of its meagre force was very poorly armed. In this condition the army was at a great disadvantage opposed to Bragg, whose cavalry, under Forrest, Morgan, and Wheeler was much greater in numbers and better mounted and equipped.

Rosecrans made strenuous efforts to improve the condition of his cavalry, and succeeded in increasing it to about 4,000 and in obtaining Stanley to command it. But at its greatest strength it was less than half the opposing cavalry force.

Rosecrans' future base of operations was Nashville, but he would be dependent for supplies upon the maintenance of the railroad to Louisville. He hastened to increase the garrison of Nashville, but could not for some time concentrate there owing to the destruction of a railway tunnel near Mitchellsville, which limited him to wagon transportation over bad roads for thirty-five miles. The railway was opened November 26th, and the army was then concentrated near Nashville, with the exception of Reynolds' division and all but one brigade of Fry's, which were assigned the duty of protecting the railway.

Before advancing it was absolutely essential to place in Nashville a large supply of rations, ammunition, etc., sufficient to support the army during the longest probable break in the railway, as a result of the forays of the rebel cavalry. This required an entire month, and the administration was greatly dissatisfied at the long delay. Rosecrans went through an experience very similar to that suffered by Thomas at the same place later in the war. But to the threats to relieve him he made the blunt reply that if confidence did not exist he was perfectly ready to turn over the command and abide by the issue. Halleck then explained that it was

not intended to threaten him, but that there was great anxiety in Washington over the slow course of events in Tennessee. He explained that this arose from diplomatic reasons. It had been greatly desired that a decided advantage be gained over the rebels before the opening of the British Parliament, otherwise the advocates of intervention in favor of the Confederacy would be able to point to the possession of Tennessee as a proof that the South was gaining on the North. It would seem, however, that this was only one of the long series of attempts by Halleck to run the war from an office in Washington—a course that never did and never could result in any good.

Rosecrans continued his preparations carefully, and Bragg concluded that he was going into winter quarters at Nashville. Bragg therefore placed his army in winter quarters at Murfreesboro' and vicinity, and detached his cavalry for operations in West Tennessee and against the railway in Kentucky. This was just what Rosecrans wanted. He wanted Bragg to draw near to Nashville so that his own line of communications might be short and a reverse less disastrous. Rosecrans was also anxious that the rebel cavalry should be distant when he advanced, as his army was very deficient in cavalry.

Morgan's cavalry made a raid upon Hartsville, Tennessee, and on the 7th of December captured a brigade of infantry placed there by Thomas to guard the crossing of the Cumberland. The capture of this brigade was due to neglect of the simplest precautions. No outposts or sentinels of any kind seem to have been used, and the rebel cavalry was in line only 400 yards away before it was discovered. The infantry turned out in great disorder and was badly managed, so that it was forced to surrender. No word was sent to a supporting brigade but a few miles away, and Morgan was allowed to get away without any loss. He then started for Kentucky and on the 27th of December captured Elizabethtown and destroyed a large section of railway. He kept on to Muldraugh's Hills and destroyed two trestles, each about 500 feet long and 90 feet high. The railway communication was thus effectually broken, and if Rosecrans had remained in Nashville the condition of his army would have been critical. But having completed his preparations and finding the conditions favorable, owing to the absence of Bragg's cavalry, Rosecrans advanced from Nashville on the 26th of December.

Mitchell's division was left to garrison Nashville so that Thomas's command was reduced to Negley's and Rousseau's divisions and Walker's brigade of Fry's. McCook's and Crittenden's wings were on the pikes south and southeast of Nashville. The main body of Bragg's force, consisting of Polk's corps and part

of Breckenridge's division of Hardee's corps, was at Murfreesboro'. The remainder of Hardee's corps was near Eaglesville, about twenty miles west of Murfreesboro', McCown's division of Hardee's corps, with a division under Stevenson, formed a separate corps under Kirby Smith at Readyville, twelve miles east of Murfreesboro'.

Rosecrans' plan was to advance in three columns, refusing his right. McCook's corps was to use the Nolensville pike, Thomas the Franklin Pike, and Crittenden the main Murfreesboro' pike. McCook was to attack Hardee and if the enemy held his ground and was reinforced Thomas was to support McCook. If, however, Hardee retreated, McCook was to detach a division to pursue or observe him and move with the remainder of his corps so as to come in on the left rear of the main rebel force. Crittenden was to attack supported by Thomas, whose force was to be directed against the enemy's left.

McCook advanced and after skirmishing all day, followed by a brisk fight towards evening, took possession of Nolensville and the heights about one and one-half miles in front. Thomas followed on the right, closing Negley's division on Nolensville and leaving Rousseau's division on the right flank. Crittenden advanced to LaVergne, with heavy skirmishing, through a rough country, intersected by forests and cedar brakes.

On the 27th, McCook advanced on Triune, but his movements were retarded by a dense fog, which made it impossible to tell friend from foe. Stanley, with the greater part of the cavalry, had joined McCook, and in the fog the cavalry was fired upon by the infantry. The march was stopped until the fog lifted, and Triune was therefore not reached until late in the day, although it was only seven miles from Nolensville.

Thomas moved eastward to Crittenden's right. Crittenden moved forward slowly, delaying his movements until the action of McCook's corps should determine the real state of affairs. Thomas was now in position to support either McCook or Crittenden, as the case might require.

On the 28th, McCook made sure by a strong reconnaissance that Hardee was retreating, and Thomas closed on Crittenden, who remained in position, bringing up his trains and making ready for battle.

On the 29th, McCook left one brigade of Johnson's division at Triune to cover the right and rear, and advanced to within about six miles of Murfreesboro'. The corps was encamped in line of battle with Sheridan's division on the left, Davis

in the center, and Johnson on the right. Negley's division of Thomas's corps advanced in support of Crittenden's corps, the head and flank of which reached a point about two miles from Murfreesboro'; Rousseau's division remained at Stewartsboro'. It was now plain that the enemy would give battle near Murfreesboro'. During the afternoon a report reached Rosecrans from Palmer that he was in sight of Murfreesboro' and the enemy was running. He therefore ordered Crittenden to occupy Murfreesboro' with a division. Crittenden sent a brigade across Stone's river and surprised a regiment of Breckenridge's division and pushed it back on the main line. It was found that the rebels were occupying a strong position in force, and, it being then dark, the brigade was withdrawn across the river. Fords were prepared by the pioneer brigade. Negley's, Palmer's and Wood's divisions were in line with Van Cleve's division in reserve.

On the 30th, Rousseau moved up and took position in reserve in rear of Palmer's right. Negley advanced slightly as did McCook's corps. The line generally faced east, but part of McCook's right division was retired so that it faced to the south.

Rosecrans now decided to give battle on the 31st, and made the following plan: McCook was to hold strong ground, refusing his right, and make strong dispositions to resist the attack of the enemy. If, however, the enemy did not attack, McCook was to attack sufficient to hold all the force on his front and prevent the enemy from detaching any troops to the right, the real point of attack. Thomas' corps and Palmer's division were to open with skirmishing and engage the enemy's center and left as far as Stone river. Van Cleve's division was to cross the river and advance on Breckenridge, followed by Wood's division by brigades on its right, and carry everything before them into Murfreesboro'. In front of Crittenden's corps across the river was high ground, the occupation of which would enable an enfilade fire to be brought on the remainder of Polk's corps. Palmer and Thomas were to follow the movement, advancing in its support. After taking Murfreesboro', Crittenden was to move westward and getting in on the flank and rear of the enemy drive them off their line of communications. The success of the whole plan of course depended upon McCook's being able to hold on without support, and Rosecrans criticised his line, saying it was an error for it to face so much to the east. He thought it should rather face to the south and impressed the fact on McCook that he must be careful and make a strong disposition. McCook was ordered also to build fires to his right prolonging the general line and simulating the camps of a large force. It was hoped in this way to draw off a large part of the rebel force from the real point of attack.

Bragg formed an exactly similar plan of attack. Hardee with two divisions was to advance on the left and force back the Union right. Then Polk was to push the center. By a steady wheel to the right on the right of Polk's corps as a pivot the Union force was to be thrown back on Stone river, off its line to Nashville, the objective of his campaign. The plans being identical a good deal depended on which army began the movement first. Rosecrans' orders were for the attack to begin at seven o'clock, while Bragg ordered the attack to begin at daylight.

Rosecrans' movement began on time and for a time was going very successfully. But about 6.30 A. M. the enemy in force attacked McCook's right and found that the two brigades were weakly posted, without support, the remaining brigade of Johnson's division being nearly a mile and a half to the rear at Johnson's headquarters. The command was not in any way ready for battle. The horses of some of the batteries were being watered at the stream and the men of one brigade were cooking breakfast. Kirk's brigade, the first attacked, tried to make some resistance and called for help upon Willich's brigade, but Willich was absent at headquarters and his brigade was without a commander and made no effort to support Kirk. Both brigades were quickly rolled up. Baldwin's brigade, in reserve, was moved up, but was too far distant, and the rout of the other two brigades was complete before assistance could be rendered. The weight of the attack then fell upon Baldwin, whose brigade, with Simonson's Fifth Indiana Battery, succeeded in checking the assailants and inflicting heavy loss, but was soon forced to retire to avoid being surrounded.

Meanwhile a severe attack had been made all along McCook's front, and after the rout of Johnson's division the flank of Davis's division was exposed. The enemy's attack was repulsed, but he soon reformed, brought up his reserves and renewed the attack. The attack was again repulsed. Davis's division now formed almost a right angle with Sheridan's, and the rebels directed the next attack on the vertex of the angle. Davis's division was driven out of its position, being greatly overlapped, and Sheridan had to withdraw his right, gaining time to do so by charging with Robert's brigade. His new line was at right angles to his first position. Here he held on desperately, trying to reform the broken division to his right. After repulsing several attacks, his ammunition was exhausted and he was forced to fall back, as was also Negley, whose division had been heavily engaged in front and afterward on the right flank.

Word had been sent to Rosecrans soon after seven o'clock that McCook's corps was heavily pressed and needed assistance. But he did not realize the extent of the disaster, and it was not until informed by a second messenger that the right

wing was being driven that he realized the true state of affairs. He found then that he must abandon his plan and take every means to prevent the terrible disaster that seemed imminent. He directed the movement on the left to be suspended and placed Rousseau's division in the cedar brakes to the right and rear of Sheridan. As soon as it became plain, from the great amount of fugitives, that McCook's wing was routed, Van Cleve's division was placed on the right of Rousseau's, and a brigade of Wood's division to its right. Negley's and Sheridan's divisions fell back upon this new line. Upon this line the rebels made four distinct attacks, but were repulsed with very heavy losses. The fighting was almost hand to hand, and the losses on both sides were heavy. That of the regular brigade was especially severe, being 637 out of a total of 1,566. The new line succeeded in holding its ground and driving back the enemy from its front.

The left had also had severe fighting, becoming gradually engaged as Bragg's turning movement went on. As the change of front went on the left became more important until when the final line was formed, close to the Nashville turnpike, the left became the vital point, since a disaster there would have permitted the line to be enfiladed and the stragglers would have carried any resulting disorder along the whole line. During the afternoon Breckenridge made several heavy assaults on Palmer's division, but was repulsed.

Rosecrans succeeded in placing his troops in rather a strong line near the road, and the subsequent assaults of the enemy were repelled. The army slept in the position, spare ammunition was issued and found to be sufficient for another battle. The left was withdrawn slightly to more advantageous ground, and Rosecrans determined to await the attack of the enemy in his new lines, but if Bragg did not attack to do so himself.

During the morning of the 1st of January the rebels made repeated attempts to advance on Thomas's front, but were repulsed. During the afternoon the enemy massed a large number of troops in front of the right but did not attack. Bragg's object was evidently to feel the Union lines and find out if Rosecrans was retreating. Satisfied that he was not, he felt himself unable to attack in view of the heavy hammering his army had received the day before. Rosecrans passed Van Cleve's division across the stream and occupied some hills which threatened Polk's lines in enfilade. Next day Bragg tried to drive back Van Cleve's division, which was commanded by Colonel Beatty. The movement failed after severe fighting. During the night Bragg massed his force on his former right and Rosecrans greatly strengthened his left.

On the 3d Bragg caused a constant picket firing to be kept up to determine if Rosecrans was still holding on. Finding that such was the case he concluded, after consultation with his generals, to retreat. He retreated in good order, his cavalry holding Murfreesboro' until the 5th. On the 5th Thomas's entire command, preceded by Stanley's cavalry, marched into Murfreesboro'. The object of the campaign had been accomplished. Up to the 31st everything had gone favorably for the Union Army; the fighting of the morning of the 31st had been all in Bragg's favor, and had almost resulted in the total defeat of Rosecrans; but from that time on, everything had again been in Rosecrans' favor. His losses were on the whole greater than those of Bragg, but the latter's retreat gave the victory to Rosecrans.

Rosecrans' force on the battlefield was 43,400; his losses were 13,249, more than thirty per cent. Bragg's total force on the field was 44,750, and his loss 12,334, about 28 per cent. Rosecrans lost 28 pieces of artillery and a large portion of his wagon train, but Bragg lost only three pieces of artillery.

While the result of the campaign was attained the army had nevertheless been very severely handled, and for a time was on the verge of utter ruin. Rosecrans' plan was not at all carried out. The reason for this was the faulty posting and handling of McCook's wing and the fact that Bragg started in earlier in the execution of his attack. Rosecrans knew on the night before the battle that McCook's wing was not correctly placed and ordered changes in it. These were not carried out and Rosecrans made no apparent effort to see that they were.

There has been a great deal of controversy about this matter. One of McCook's division commanders, Johnson, stated in his report that McCook told him that his left was opposite the rebel center, and he expected to be attacked in great force next day. This was, in fact, true, yet McCook certainly did not make such dispositions as to resist any such attack even for a short time, and was compelled to call for such assistance as to wreck the whole plan of battle. If he had placed his corps in a strong defensive position and entrenched it he might have resisted for such a length of time that the main attack could make such progress as to compel Bragg to give up his plan and conform to Rosecrans' movements; just as, in fact, Rosecrans was forced to comply with those of Bragg. The battle is singular in that the opposing plans were identical. It has been called Stone's River by the Union forces and Murfreesboro' by the Confederates.

For the next six months little was done—the Union Army occupying Murfreesboro' and the Rebel army a position near Tullahoma.

Then followed the campaign which terminated in the battle of Chickamauga.

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