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Military Order 
of the
Loyal Legion
of the
 United States



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA



WAR PAPER 72.

The Battle of Nashville.



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COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPERS.

72

Battle of Nashville.

PREPARED BY COMPANION

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AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF JANUARY 1, 1908.

2d ed.
1908

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Battle of Nashville.

The object of the invasion of Tennessee by General Hood was outlined in the general orders of Beauregard, to "deal rapid and vigorous blows—to strike the enemy while dispersed, and by that distract Sherman's advance into Georgia." Hood had pledged his troops that they should eat their Christmas dinner in Nashville; and to redeem that pledge and accomplish the declared object of the campaign required rapid movements. Well he knew that to allow his opponent time to concentrate his scattered forces, would render the fulfillment of his pledges difficult, and jeopardize the entire campaign. Hence the rapidity of his movements.

It was General Thomas' design on assuming command, to make the Tennessee River his base of operations, but the tardy movement of the widely-scattered detachments comprising his command, prevented his assuming the offensive and offering battle in the heart of the so-called Confederacy. The three veteran divisions of A. J. Smith and Winslow's cavalry, while on the way to join him, were temporarily diverted to Missouri to assist in the expulsion of Price. Steedman was holding the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad, which it was not prudent to abandon until the enemy's plans were developed and his objective point known. The Fourth and Twenty-third Corps, under Schofield, were to the front, in the vain endeavor to check, or at least delay the advance of Hood.

It was not until the first of December that these detachments were concentrated at Nashville, and that General Thomas

found himself at the head of an army sufficiently numerous to assure him of victory.

His cavalry had been without horses, and in the absence of a mounted force equal in numbers and efficiency to that of General Forest, with which to follow up an advantage. A victory, under such circumstances, would have been barren of permanent results. Hence the necessity for the retreat upon Nashville and the unavoidable delay of two weeks before the attack was made, during which time Hood, confronting him only from the south, was deluded into the belief that the city of Nashville was enduring all the rigors of a siege.

General Schofield's column, after the battle of Franklin, proceeded to Nashville unmolested, the rear guard reaching the city at one o'clock on the afternoon of the 1st of December. On their arrival, the different corps were assigned to positions on the defensive line, selected by General Thomas. The Fourth Corps, under General Wood (who upon the wounding and retirement of General Stanley had succeeded to the command), took up its position on the Hillsboro and Granny White pikes—the key-point and center of the defensive line. General A. J. Smith was posted on the right and General Schofield, now commanding only the Twenty-third Corps, occupied the left. General Steedman, with a considerable force, distributed along the line of the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad, to keep open the communications and guard against flank movements, was ordered to the general rendezvous, as soon as it was rendered certain that Nashville was the object of Hood's attack. His arrival with five thousand men, on the evening of the 1st, completed the concentration of the forces for the defence of the city and for offensive movements.

Numerically, General Thomas' army was now superior to Hood's—numbering quite fifty-five thousand, of all arms;

composed of detachments from almost every district, department and military sub-division known in the west with an infusion of raw, hundred-day infantry regiments and colored troops. Deducting the losses sustained in the engagement at Franklin, Hood's army at this time numbered not far from forty thousand.

The terrible castigation inflicted upon the enemy on the 30th, induced General Hood to proceed with more caution than usual, and it was not until the 3rd of December that his infantry appeared in force and commenced the construction of a line of works along the heights, two and a half miles south of the city. The outer pickets were driven in, after skirmishing with the rebel advance, and the next morning the southern cross was discovered waving from the summit of Montgomery Hill, within six hundred yards of the Federal position. At once, from Forts Negley, Morton, Confiscation and from salient points in General Wood's front, nearest the enemy's position, an artillery fire was opened upon their works. But, intent on making his line secure, and doubtless husbanding his ammunition, the enemy continued to throw up entrenchments, and responded but feebly to the Federal cannonade.

After the completion of his works General Hood remained inactive in his position, his army one of observation, rather than invasion. But his cavalry was vigilant and untiring in its demonstrations upon the posts still held by us, above and below the city, and upon the block-houses along the line of the Chattanooga Railroad.

The country, unaware of the insuperable obstacles to an immediate attack, grew restive at the apparent delay of General Thomas, and clamored for his removal. General Grant expressed much uneasiness in regard to the situation, fearing that Hood would by a flank movement cross the Cumberland,

march into Kentucky and re-enact the Bragg and Buell campaign of 1862. Conscious of doing all that was in the power of any man in a like situation to do, and of the rectitude and wisdom of his purposes, he was not to be driven into a movement against his better judgment, or forced to commence offensive operations until such time as his preparations were in a state to assure him of success. He preferred to be relieved rather than be responsible for the results of a battle fought under unfavorable conditions.

By the 9th of December, General Wilson had mounted and armed a force of cavalry sufficient for present needs, and all things essential to a vigorous campaign were in readiness and an attack was determined upon. But with the completion of his preparations, came a terrible storm of rain and sleet, which, freezing as it fell, covered the whole country with a sheet of ice, upon which horses and men could with difficulty stand, much less advance up steep slopes and fight to any advantage. In endeavoring to get the cavalry in position, many horses fell upon the hard and slippery ice, some being killed and others permanently disabled. The same cause that delayed the attack, held Hood in a vise—ice-bound on the storm-beaten hills, and he could not, if he would, escape the fate that awaited him.

Death and casualties resulting from the battle of Franklin wrought many changes in the field and line officers of the Fourth Corps. General Thomas J. Wood, brave, intrepid and prompt, commanded the corps after the wounding of General Stanley. General Wagner, also wounded in that engagement, for some time persisted in remaining at the head of his division, but was at last obliged to succumb, and proceeded to Louisville for medical treatment.

On the 14th the weather began to moderate, and by noon

the ice had so far melted as to be no longer a hinderance to army movements, and General Thomas resolved upon attacking the next day, for which immediate preparations were made. General Wilson with the greater portion of the cavalry was sent to the right of General A. J. Smith, to guard that flank and to assist in turning the enemy's position, and to follow up any advantage that might be gained. The corps commanders were called together for consultation, and to receive final instructions regarding the specific movements of their respective commands. The general outline of the plan of action resolved upon, was to throw a sufficient force upon the enemy's left and front to carry the position. At the same time General Steedman was to demonstrate upon their right, to attract attention, hold their forces and prevent, as far as possible, reinforcements being sent to the left, where the principal attack was to be made.

At daylight on the 15th the several commands began to move to the positions assigned them by the orders of the day before. A dense fog curtained the landscape, hiding the two armies from each other, which, with the undulations of the ground, concealed the movements of the national troops as they manuevred for position. The troops in the entrenchments after being relieved by hundred-day men, quartermaster's employes and irregular detachments organized for that purpose took up positions in advance. General A. J. Smith advanced his divisions to the Harding and Charlotte pikes, skirmishing heavily with the enemy's outposts silencing a battery and menacing his left. The Twenty-third Corps, when relieved by General Cruft, moved rapidly from the left to the right, taking position in the interval between the Fourth Corps and General Smith's command, partially in rear and in support of each. After the deployment of the infantry, the cavalry under Gen-

eral Wilson at once assumed position on the extreme right reaching out and lapping around the rebel left. The Fourth Corps, under General Wood, was formed in the following order: The First Division in the center, the Third Division on the left, and the Second Division on the right, in double battle line, the first deployed, while the second in reserve was formed in column by divisions opposite the intervals in the first. In front was a cloud of skirmishers, that under cover of the fog advanced near to and in point blank range of the enemy's first line, keeping up a close fire and picking off those that showed themselves above the works.

Great was the astonishment of the Confederates upon the clearing up of the fog, at seeing long blue lines of Federal troops drawn up in battle array and menacing them in front and flank. At frequent intervals along the line batteries were in position, occasionally trying the effect of shot at long range, or covering the advance of skirmishers. Ammunition and ambulance trains were snugly sheltered in ravines. The work of storming the hills was mainly left to the infantry, who near at hand was massed behind hills or in open fields, impatiently waiting the opening of a conflict that in its effects was to be decisive of rebellion in the west. The enemy's batteries, which during the twelve days of nominal investment had been quietly perched upon the hill tops, pointing toward the city and grimly overlooking the intervening slopes, until now voiceless and still, suddenly aroused from their lethargy, and the roar of cannon, like the sullen bark of watch-dogs awoke answering echoes from hill and valley. The skirmishers, concealed from sight within the enveloping folds of misty fog curtains, advanced well to the front, and established themselves in close proximity to the Confederate lines. When preparations for the attack were completed, and troops in

position to assail the front and flank of the enemy's line, General Steedman was ordered to advance, against Hood's right, in semblance of an assault, with as much display of force and vigor of movement as possible, in order to deceive the Confederate commander as to the real point of attack. General Steedman had already organized a strong column for the purpose, composed of detachments from three brigades, including a large number of colored troops, who for the first time in the west were to compete with white soldiers and veterans of years of experience and discipline, upon the battle field. Prompt to the order, the column marched out and swept gallantly up the slope of a hill in front, on the summit of which the enemy's pickets were strongly posted. These were hurled from their position, and rushing pell-mell down the opposite declivity, were chased to cover behind a line of works, erected on the south of the Chattanooga Railroad. With one bold dash this was carried, and almost before the enemy was aware of the movement, the works were in our hands. This advance was made in the face of a heavy fire, with scarcely a halt. So little reliance had been placed in the colored soldiers' ability to stand fire, that a line was formed in reserve with bayonets fixed for the purpose of holding them to their work. But the result proved there was no necessity for this, as the negroes were not outdone in gallantry and steadiness, and no body of regulars could have been under better discipline, or easier handled.

After capturing the works, General Steedman thought to change his feint to a real attack, and proposed to hold what he had gained. It was only on this flank that the advance of the enemy had been seriously opposed, and resistance offered to the construction of offensive works. The spirited advance and tenacity of purpose displayed by Steedman, completely

deceived the rebel commander to the ultimate purpose of his adversary, and he drew largely from his center and left, thereby greatly weakening the force that was to meet the real attack, and hurried reinforcements to his right—the point threatened by Steedman—but which in reality was only a diversion to attract attention from combinations forming at other portions of the line. Against the preponderating numbers now hurled against him, the exposure to enfilading batteries, stationed on the surrounding hills and concentrated upon this single point, rendering it untenable. General Steedman saw that the position could not be held, and withdrew to the shelter of the hill in front, holding himself in readiness to execute other movements in carrying out the general plan of operations. The object of this first demonstration was fully accomplished, for the continued roar of guns away to the right, indicated that Schofield, Smith and Wood were launching their thunderbolts and directing assaults against a weakened adversary, and executing to the letter their part of the grand plan so minutely set forth in General Thomas' orders.

Directly in front of the Fourth Corps was Montgomery Hill, towering a hundred feet above the surrounding hills, a position strong by nature, fortified and strengthened by Hood and regarded as the principal salient in the enemy's line. The ascent, except on the left and rear, was rocky and precipitous, and covered with thick underbrush and forest trees. The approaches were intersected by abatis and sharpened stakes firmly planted in the ground. The summit bristled with cannon, situated so as to enfilade the approaches and cut down an approaching column. Up this ascent, fronted and flanked by batteries, and these supported by heavy lines of infantry must move the storming column.

Having secured the hill and Hood's advance line, General

Wood brought forward his batteries, advanced his skirmishers, and made preparations for carrying the second line of works.

Smith's charge on the right was throwing the enemy into confusion. A general advance of the Federal line in front increased their excitement, and little squads of panic-stricken rebels were filtering to the rear, and fleeing to the valley to the left of the projecting salient.

In a line of battle miles in extent, composed of separate divisions and army corps, the movement and details cannot be taken in from a single standpoint, and the battle of Nashville was not an exception.

The booming Steedman's guns on the extreme left was the signal for A. J. Smith to commence the initiative of battle on the right. The division moved rapidly behind its skirmishers, upon the Harding and Hillsboro pikes, gradually wheeling to the left, until his line was parallel to, and in advance of, the Harding road.

The converging lines of advance brought the wings of A. J. Smith and the Fourth Corps together, and the interval being closed, General Schofield rapidly passed in rear of A. J. Smith with the Twenty-third Corps, and forming on his right, moved in conjunction with it against the enemy's left. A number of minor positions, situated on a group of hills near the Hillsboro pike, were carried after slight opposition, and the enemy driven, with loss of prisoners, across the road and the valley beyond, to a second range of hills overlooking the Granny White pike. The Confederate commander having partially recovered from his surprise, collected a heavy force with which to deal a counter blow, or at least check the sweeping charges which Smith, Schofield and Wilson was hurling on his left.

One of Schofield's brigades, under General Cooper, crossed the valley and commenced the ascent of the hills, when a heavy force coming up the left appeared in his rear, and there was a danger of the brigade being crushed between two opposing forces, but Generals Cox and Couch promptly advanced against the latter, giving them sufficient occupation in warding off their blows, as to divert attention from Cooper and his brigade, which was in no wise endangered, but gallantly executed the movement it had commenced, and carried the left of a series of hills overlooking and commanding the Granny White pike. In the valley the resistance was obstinate, and a furious engagement continued until dark, attended with considerable loss on both sides. The enemy was eventually forced to retire, and occupied the hills extending south from the position occupied by Cooper. Darkness put an end to further movements in this quarter, and after entrenching the positions gained, the troops bivouaced for the night.

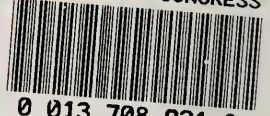
The Fourth Corps moved simultaneously with General Smith against the second line of works, in rear of Montgomery Hill. The reserves were brought up and formed in line of battle, with the intention of engaging the enemy with the entire corps. In front of General Kimball's Division was an elevation strongly fortified. The fire of Wood's batteries was concentrated upon this hill for an hour, during which time Smith and Wilson were assailing the enemy's left, crushing their lines and capturing one after another of their salients and batteries. All being in readiness, the order to charge was given, and swiftly the column moved to its appointed attack. Scarcely had it started, when word was given to double-quick. Cheer upon cheer swelled up from the ranks; the fatigues of last night's anxious watching; the strain upon the mind and muscle, incident to the excitement of the occasion were for-

gotten, and Kimball's whole division, with an impetuosity which nothing could check, ascended the hill, stormed the ramparts, and captured colors, cannon and prisoners. There was no pause from the commencement of the charge until its brilliant and successful termination.

No defeat was more crushing to the Confederate cause in the west, or victory to the Federal arms more complete, than this last struggle of the rebellion about Nashville. Its army had fought with distinction, and covered itself with glory on many a historic field. In all the battles of the west, from Perryville, Shiloh, Stone River, Chickamauga, Atlanta, Franklin to Nashville, where it found an honored grave, it had fought with distinction. Its patient endurance of hardships, its persistence, bravery, fortitude in defeat, and the tenacity with which it had clung to their cause, from friend and foe alike challenged admiration and respect. Lee's army in the east and Hood's in the west were the only remaining supports of the rebellion. One of these was now broken, its remnants fleeing southward as a disorganized rabble, and from the crushing effects of this defeat it never again recovered. The immediate fruits of this victory were four thousand four hundred and sixty-two prisoners, including one major general, three brigadiers, two hundred and eighty officers of lower grade, all the wounded upon the field, fifty-three pieces of artillery, thousands of small arms, and twenty-five battle flags.

Mill Springs and Nashville, the only battles of the war in which Major General George H. Thomas held supreme command, were alike in their results—the annihilation of the opposing army.

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