

**AMERICAN CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE OF AUSTRALIA
(NEW SOUTH WALES CHAPTER)**



THE FORGOTTEN HERO

**MAJOR GENERAL
GEORGE HENRY THOMAS**

THE ROCK OF CHICKAMAUGA

FEBRUARY 2007

Virginia produced many of the leaders of the American Civil War. One Southern hero whose name is forever fixed in American history, Robert Edward Lee, has entered history as the most innovative and daring general in the Civil War. Another is mostly forgotten but his fame came largely in one battle in his stubborn defence of Snodgrass Hill at the Battle of Chickamauga, earning him the nickname of “**The Rock of Chickamauga.**”

His name, **George Henry Thomas**, is obscure to most until his nickname is spoken and then, I presume, many do not recall the name. For all that Thomas, when remembered, is recalled as only a defensive general, but in his own way was as fine and offensive planner and leader as Lee.

While Lee went with his native state of Virginia and, as a consequence, joined the Confederacy, Thomas remained loyal to the Union. Because he became a great military leader of whose services the South was deprived, Southern newspapers questioned his motives even after the War. It is said that Thomas fought for the Union only because he had been refused a commission in the Confederate Army. If any offer was ever made, it came too late. On 13 April 1861 Thomas made his decision from his sense of duty to the flag he served under, the flag which had been fired upon the previous day at Fort Sumter. His sisters, whom he promptly advised, however, were unmoved in their loyalty to the Confederacy. They never forgave him, turned his picture to the wall, destroyed all his letters and never wrote to him except to suggest he change his name. His brother Benjamin, living in Vicksburg, made his peace with George

The personal character of the man distinguished him from many of his peers. In the military politics that prevailed in both armies, ambitious generals had their political sponsors in Congress. Thomas certainly had none as he came from Virginia. His advancement to the highest levels of military rank therefore was on merit alone and was in spite of several envious comrades who sought to discredit and belittle him at every turn.

He rarely saw defeat in battle and never when he was in command, something very few, if any, other commanders could boast. If he were considered to be slow, as Grant and Sherman considered, it is ironic that the only successful frontal assaults on established works during the war were achieved by Thomas at Missionary Ridge and Nashville.

He died at the age of 54 and, in my view, the achievements of his military service are yet to receive their proper acknowledgment.

Terry Cartwright

Early Life

George Henry Thomas was born in Southampton County, Virginia, on 31st July 1816. His father John was of Welsh descent whilst his mother Mary could trace her line to French Huguenots. The family owned slaves who worked on the family's farm and George, despite his parents' wishes, taught the Negro children lessons he learned at church and school and spent a lot of time with them. George was skilful with his hands, but it was thought that he might do something other than farming. In 1831, George and the family were forced to flee the farm to the safety of the local town during the Nat Turner slave revolt.

When he was eighteen years old he joined his uncle's law office at Jerusalem but indicated no particular liking for the law. In 1836, he was nominated for a Military Academy appointment at West Point. He was close to his twentieth birthday and older than the average cadet on admission. The recommendation was accepted and his appointment was signed by President Jackson.

Showing the preparation for which he was later noted he arrived at West Point several weeks in advance of the start of the school year to brush up on his studies. His room mate during his first year was William Tecumseh Sherman who was only sixteen years of age. Dignified, self-possessed and steady in manner, Thomas became known to the cadets as "Old Tom" and "George Washington."

Early Army Service

Thomas graduated from West Point in 1840 with his second lieutenant's commission, and after a furlough, was assigned to Company D Third Artillery at Fort Columbus in New York Harbour. Here he met Lieutenant Braxton Bragg, Class of 1837, who had tales of Florida to relate. With his company he disembarked at Fort Lauderdale, which at that time was a flea and mosquito-infested settlement.

Because of his attention to duty Thomas was appointed quartermaster, adjutant and ordnance officer. In November 1841, however, he was second-in-command in a raid on Seminole Indian settlements. His commanding officer recommended him for brevet to first lieutenant which was awarded.

The following month Thomas and his company sailed to Army headquarters at Tampa Bay and then in February 1842 to New Orleans to refit. July 1842 found his company posted to Fort Moultrie, Charleston where Thomas met up with his room mate at West Point, Sherman, as well as Bragg, John F Reynolds of Pennsylvania and Captain Robert Anderson, a future commander of Fort Sumter.

After a tour of duty at Fort McHenry near Baltimore, he was promoted to first lieutenant and transferred to Company E and ordered back to Fort Moultrie where he again met up with Sherman. In June 1845 Thomas sailed for New Orleans before the Company left for Corpus Christi on the Texas frontier where, some six weeks later, General Zachary Taylor and his staff arrived together with several infantry formations. After the battle of Monterey, Thomas was appointed a brevet captain for good conduct and gallantry under fire. Another nickname fell his way "Old Reliable." Again at Buena Vista Thomas performed gallantly and was awarded the rank of brevet major. This was his third brevet rank, an honour of rare precedence.

Thomas arrived back in Virginia in February 1849 and after his furlough rejoined his regiment at Fort Adams, Rhode Island as a member of Company B. However, in September of that year he embarked for Palatka on the St Johns River, Florida. He found duty in Florida more irksome than during his first tour, only relieved by the company of Captain George Meade throughout the survey of sites for forts in that state. They had known each other in the Victoria campaign in Mexico.

After the Seminole had been subdued, Thomas was transferred in November 1850 to Fort Independence, Boston. Leaving sunny Florida for the cold and damp of Boston was going from one extreme to the other but he was becoming used to the army life.

Back to West Point

In 1851 he is posted to West Point as an instructor in cavalry and artillery. He taught cavalry tactics, among others, to Phil Sheridan and JEB Stuart, James McPherson and John M Schofield. He also instructed John B Hood on artillery tactics who was to fail his "final exam" at Nashville in 1864.

The cadets dubbed Thomas "Old Slow Trot." Somewhat heavy for an ideal cavalry commander, although he loved this branch of the service best, he would never labour his mount. During exercises after the command to trot had been given and the cadets began to anticipate a gallop, he would check their ardour with the order 'slow trot.' In September 1852 a new superintendent was appointed – Lieutenant Colonel Robert E Lee. In this same year in November he married Frances Kellogg of Troy, New York. The Virginian was certainly not slow in the courtship of his wife. While on his honeymoon he received notice of his promotion to captain, some ten years since he made first lieutenant. Although married life at West Point was most agreeable, the army three year rule of posting was to uproot him less than six months after his marriage. He was ordered to Fort Yuma the most remote station in the country near the junction of the Colorado and Gila Rivers along the border between California and Arizona. It would appear that General Twiggs who had stood in the way of his promotion was responsible for the assignment.

In May 1854 he took leave of his wife, the Academy and Colonel Lee who he was to serve with later in Texas. On his arrival in San Francisco he caught up with Sherman, now retired from the military and manager of a local bank.

Arizona and Texas

Fort Yuma was one of the toughest assignments in the army with summer temperatures ranging from 115° F to 130° F in the sun. However, Thomas was able to indulge in his hobby of collecting plant and mineral specimens. He also studied the language of the Yuma tribe and after learning to speak it, made an attempt to convert it to writing.

After serving as commanding officer at Fort Yuma for a year, Thomas is promoted to Major and posted to the elite Second Regiment of Cavalry. Leaving Fort Yuma in July 1855 Thomas joined his regiment in September at Jefferson Barracks at St Louis. The regiment was commanded by Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston with Robert E Lee as second in command. Other officers included Major W J Hardee, Captains E Van Dorn and E Kirby Smith with Fitzhugh Lee and John B Hood as lieutenants. Of the twenty five officers holding commissions in the regiment, seventeen were Southerners and twelve later became Confederate generals. It is said that Secretary of War Jefferson Davis appointed the best southern officers to this regiment in anticipation of a rebellion.

In October the regiment made a start for Texas but at Fort Washita. Thomas was detailed court-martial duties which occupied him until January 1856 and, as expected, Thomas prepared himself well for this duty having made a careful and thorough study of military law and precedents. He was then permitted to go to New York on recruiting service and he was able to visit his wife whom he had not seen for nearly two years. When he returned to Texas in May he brought her with him to Fort Mason, Texas, where he was to be in command.

Both Lee and Thomas were heavily involved in court-martial duty throughout Texas and Thomas developed a reputation as an expert on military law. He was again to "cross swords" with General

Twiggs who had arrived in Texas as commander of the department. Thomas got the better of Twiggs, however, by taking his complaints to the Secretary of War who censured the general suggesting he mind his own business and leave the major alone. It would appear that Second Cavalry officers were considered to be a class by themselves and not to be trifled with by a mere departmental commander. Apart from the Twiggs episode the Texas years were the most pleasant of any Thomas spent in active service. His relations with Colonel Lee were always friendly and Lee gave him free rein in the handling of his duties. During a skirmish with the Comanche Indians, Thomas was wounded by an arrow in the chest, but after dressing by the surgeon continued the patrol.

The Civil War begins

In April 1861 he entrained with the remnants of four Second Cavalry companies for Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and when he heard of the attack on Fort Sumter, sent telegrams to his wife and his sisters advising of his decision to continue in Federal service. While his sisters disowned him, his wife commented:

“... whichever way he turned the matter over in his mind his oath of allegiance to his Government always came uppermost.”

She once wrote:

“... no one could persuade him to do what he felt was not right.”

To renew his officer's oath and to silence some of the prevailing gossip, Thomas approached a local magistrate and again pledged his allegiance to his country and flag. Throughout the War there were always misgivings in the minds of some politicians about Thomas's loyalty and, no doubt, this was the reason why he was not promoted as quickly as he might have been. In addition, being a Virginian he had no one to speak for him in Washington. On April 25, Lee's rank of Lieutenant Colonel fell to Thomas, and ten days later he was made a full colonel caused by the resignation of Albert Sidney Johnston. He led his troops in several minor engagements in the Shenandoah Valley including Falling Waters where he commanded a brigade under General Robert Patterson.

Mill Springs

After Bull Run, Thomas' West Point teacher Robert Anderson who had defended Fort Sumter was placed in charge of the Department of the Cumberland. Among the officers he wished to be made brigadiers was Thomas. A committee of politicians, however, approved the nominations of Sherman and Buell but rejected Thomas, because so many Southern officers had played false. Pressure from Anderson and Sherman, both of whom approached Lincoln, succeeded and on August 17, Thomas was appointed brigadier general. He was assigned the post which he asked for, the training centre at Camp Dick Robinson, Kentucky.

Thomas set to training the recruits who came from many states in the Union, viz., Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and Minnesota, and by October 1861 his army numbered some eight thousand men. One of his officers remarked:

“... The most patient of men ... he attended the dress parades of each regiment, inspected clothing, arms, accoutrements. He instructed the quartermaster and commissary, ordnance officer and provost marshal in their duties. Step by step the process went on.”

The benefit of his vast experience since graduation was beginning to be felt.

In November 1861, Sherman was deposed from the command of this Department and replaced by General Don Carlos Buell. If the authorities had wished to replace Sherman with an officer with more interest in an offensive campaign, then Thomas would have been selected as leader of the Army of the Cumberland. That Buell was a native Kentuckian was obviously the deciding factor. On January 18, 1862, Thomas reached a position known as "Logan's Crossroads" and "Mills Springs" about ten miles north of Confederate General Zollicoffer's entrenched camp on the Cumberland River. At 6.30 am on the following day the alarm was signalled by the Cavalry slowly retreating from the rebel advance. Fighting developed at close quarters and Zollicoffer, mistaking foe for friend in the gloom, was killed in front of his men.

With no reserves Thomas hammered away with all his men in one line. Determined Confederates armed with breech loaders prolonged the fight. Seeing Thomas ride slowly among them, the Union volunteers clung to their positions and maintained their fire. After an hour the reserve brigade arrived to join Thomas who ordered a bayonet charge and the enemy line gave way retreating in disorder. Thomas reformed his lines and after refilling cartridge boxes the advance continued for ten miles to the enemy's fortified camp on the river. After examining the fortifications Thomas decided against storming the camp, not wishing to sacrifice any more men since enough had already been gained. During the night the Confederates evacuated their trenches and fled across the river leaving provisions, wagons, an artillery train of twelve guns and, more importantly, over a thousand or more horses and mules. The rebels scattered far and wide over the border, deserting in large numbers.

This division-sized battle was significant in that it was the first Union victory in the west and denied the Confederates the Cumberland Gap. Thomas received no official recognition in the official order of thanks "... to the gallant officers and soldiers who won this victory."

Shiloh, Corinth, Perryville

March 1862 found Thomas' division at the rear of the Army of Cumberland making its way to Nashville. From there the Army marched towards Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River where it was to rendezvous with Grant's Army at a site which General Sherman had selected. The landing was only twenty miles north of Corinth, Mississippi where General Albert S Johnston had joined Beauregard. Thomas' division did not arrive in time to join the battle, but he was moved by the scope and carnage of the fighting. After the battle General Halleck arrived to take command of the combined armies. Grant was relegated to second in command with little or no authority. Thomas was appointed to command on the right wing of the Army comprising the Army of the Tennessee with Sherman under him. Grant was never to forget this incident and would seem to use it against Thomas for the rest of his career. In fact, Grant was about to resign but was dissuaded by his friend Sherman. On April 25, 1862, Thomas was promoted to Major General of Volunteers.

After a month Halleck finally arrived at Corinth only to find that the Confederates had abandoned the city. Halleck was subsequently moved to Washington as general in chief. On June 10, Thomas handed over command of the Army of the Tennessee to Grant. Thomas left Corinth with the First Division, which he had trained himself, and for nearly a month was engaged in repairing the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, meeting up with Buell at Dechard, Tennessee on August 7.

Buell appeared to lose control of the situation in Kentucky in not taking Thomas' advice on several occasions. On September 29, 1862, Washington ordered Buell to yield command to Thomas. Thomas declined, stating it was not fair to Buell as the army was then preparing to move against Bragg. The War Department suspended the order. Perryville turned out to be an inconclusive affair with the Federals receiving a slightly bloodied nose. Bragg proved to be as inept as Buell and trailed off into Tennessee. A report accurately described the whole affair as being "... a polite and mutually deferential campaign." Really Thomas had made a mistake in not accepting the

command as he most certainly would have been more aggressive in pursuing Bragg and bringing him to battle.

Stone's River (Murfreesboro)

After Perryville, Buell was replaced by General William Rosecrans who looked to Thomas for his support and advice and took action to rid himself of some of the incompetent officers. The two men were a contrast in temperament – one careful, watchful and deliberate; the other somewhat impulsive, subject to moods of elation and depression. On December 26, 1862, the Army moved south from Nashville and by December 30, the various divisions encamped about three miles from Murfreesboro where Stone's River coursed through particularly wooded country, intersected by a railway and several roads. On the morning of the 31st Bragg struck first on the Union right, which was forced onto the centre, thus placing the weight of the battle on Thomas' command. The day was one of furious battle but Thomas organised his men in positions suitable for a stubborn defence that he would maintain throughout the conflict.

Thomas massed artillery around a thick clump of trees known as "Round Forest" and pounded the Confederates in their many charges, turning back each one. The fighting ended for the day and late in the evening Rosecrans called a council of war. One officer remarked of Thomas:

"... as always calm, stern, determined, silent and perfectly self-possessed, his hat sat squarely on his head. It was a tonic to look at the man."

Each man was asked for his opinion on whether to retreat or not and Thomas was the last to be asked for his views. He replied:

"Gentlemen, I know of no better place to die than right here"

and walked out of the room into the rain.

The armies were too weary to fight the next day. Nothing had been accomplished during the fighting save the killing and wounding of many thousands. On January 2, 1863, Bragg arrived at a fateful decision which Thomas, whose abilities he respected, helped him to make. Realising the centre, which backed up the Union right, was impregnable, Bragg ordered an assault on the left which was Rosecrans' strongest position. Over General Breckenridge's protest Bragg ordered the assault which was repulsed with great losses. The next day the Confederates retreated to the south. The losses at Stone's River were nearly as great as those at Shiloh and yet nothing had been decided. The armies would meet again and in stronger force.

Chickamauga

While the Union army was refitting after Stone's River, Thomas continued to maintain his training of the troops, particularly new recruits and reinforcements. He constantly prepared his men for battle through real life sorties in small units rather than with parade ground drill. No general kept as close a watch on the supply department as "Old Pap", a name given by his troops in recognition of his care for them.

Thomas' 14 Corps marched out of camp on June 24, 1863. He was in command of the more important part of the manoeuvres during the Tullahoma Campaign of late June 1863 and the entry into Chattanooga, Tennessee on September 8. By 18th September both armies were converging on the Chickamauga River. Thomas moved during the evening of the 18th to take up his position on the Union left. Bragg, believing that position was occupied by Crittenden, attacked and found Thomas' divisions in place and ready to fight. Fighting was continued all the following day and,

just before darkness, Confederate General Cleburne launched a major assault, but eventually had to retire. An officer with General Forrest described the action:

“... I had been in sixty battles and skirmishes up to this time but nothing like this had I ever seen. Men fought like demons.”

In the morning of the 20th, Bragg again attacked the Union left but was hurled back. However, in the early afternoon a gap was left in the Union's right and Longstreet and his men smashed through and routed the Union defences. Rosecrans, in danger of being captured, set out for Chattanooga, followed by corps commanders Crittenden and McCook, then division commanders Van Cleve and Negley.

During this heavy fighting, Thomas was the only general officer left on the field of rank above division commander. Learning of the disaster on his right, he gathered troops from all parts of the field. Posting his men on lines he designated, he refused to be driven from these positions. Here he stayed despite the fierce and prolonged assaults of all the Confederate forces, repulsing every attack. Longstreet, after rolling up the Union right, claimed he made twenty-five separate attacks on Thomas' position but could not move him. Fortunately 3,500 men under General Granger came to Thomas' assistance. After 4 pm Polk again tried another assault, but the barricades could not be taken. At around 4.30 pm, in response to an order from Rosecrans, Thomas ordered a general retreat and with great skill extricated his men. Three regiments left as a rearguard held their positions heroically until they ran out of ammunition, were surrounded and captured. Thomas positioned his men to guard the three roads leading out of Rossville and advised Rosecrans on September 21, to concentrate the army at Chattanooga. Early next morning, the veterans of the battle were safely lodged in the city.

Chattanooga and Missionary Ridge

Charles Dana the assistant Secretary of War notified Secretary Stanton that the idol of the soldiers was “Pap” Thomas, writing:

“... I know of no other man whose composition and character are so much like those of Washington, he is at once an elegant gentleman and a heroic soldier.”

No matter what nicknames of Thomas were used, all meant the same thing – the right kind of man to tie to.

Some ten days after the battle, at a Cabinet Meeting in Washington, promotions and demotions were discussed. Rosecrans was retained for the moment, largely because some northern politicians did not want to see Thomas promoted. Lincoln delayed his decision for three weeks more.

Shortly after Chickamauga, General Grant was instructed to go to Chattanooga as commander of the Military Division of the Mississippi. He arrived on October 23, replacing Rosecrans with General G H Thomas. Grant approved existing plans to restore the Army's supply lines and ordered Sherman's and Hooker's troops to join the forces around Chattanooga. On November 4, General Longstreet left with 15,000 men to attack the Federal army with General Burnside near Knoxville.

Neither Grant nor Thomas ever liked or wholly trusted the other. Thomas was reserved and formal while Grant preferred Ohians like Sherman and Sheridan who were more like himself. However, on October 27, Grant sent congratulations to Thomas on his promotion, effective that day, as Brigadier General in the regular army. Although the promotion was tardy, Grant's communication was not!

On November 14, Sherman crossed the Tennessee River, but for some reason delayed his advance until 1.30 pm. Meanwhile, Cleburne was ordered to move his division to Tunnel Hill. Sherman's actions in the initial stages of the attack were very poor and, in fact, he had mistaken where the attack should have been made and attacked the wrong hill! Rather than press on with his full force, against Cleburne's one division, he ordered his men to dig in for the night. Grant believed that Sherman would carry Tunnel Hill and roll up Bragg's flank and complete the victory. He had instructed Sherman to advance at first light when Thomas and his corps would attack in the centre. However, Sherman did not carry Tunnel Hill and for seven hours the Federals tried to dislodge the Rebels with superior numbers of four to one, but to no avail and thus ended one of the sorriest episodes in this or any other battle of the War. Sherman exhibited an appalling lack of imagination. He attacked Cleburne's position head on with only a fraction of his forces rather than look for a way to outflank the Confederates on Tunnel Hill.

General Grant had arranged his battle plan such that his friend General Sherman with his Union Army of the Tennessee would get a chance for the victory with a flank attack, but when Sherman stalled Grant turned to Thomas to save a deteriorating tactical position. The attack, as planned by Grant, was to be a simple demonstration towards the heights of General Bragg's centre to try to draw troops away from Sherman's sector and so give Sherman a better chance for success. Unknown to Grant however, General Sherman had basically quit for the day.

However, Pap Thomas' boys were looking for retaliation for Chickamauga. They were supposed to stop after they took the first line of rifle pits per Grant's order, but when they got there, they instinctively knew that the rebel artillery would play havoc on their position. Here the training of Rosecrans and Thomas took over. The Army of the Cumberland 'esprit de corps' made them continue up to the steep ridge. This spontaneous charge becomes one of the few successful frontal assaults against an entrenched enemy in the entire war.

Thomas rode up to the top of the hill. "I fell among some of my old soldiers, who always took liberties with me – who commenced talking and giving their views of the victory," he related. "When I attempted to compliment them for the gallant manner in which they made the assault, one man very coolly replied: "Why, General, we know that you have been training us for this race for the last three weeks." Grant held himself aloof from the general elation. According to Hooker, he was heard to remark, "Damn the battle! I had nothing to do with it." The unaccountable Sherman would not allow himself to be left out: He telegraphed General Stephen A Hurlbut at Memphis. - "We outwitted Bragg and took Missionary Ridge."

The Atlanta Campaign

After the Chattanooga battle the army had to refit, accumulate feed for the horses and mules and to await replacements for the many thousands of officers and soldiers leaving the service and those on furlough. Some of these gaps were filled by Negro troops whose training was one of Thomas' particular duties and he took satisfaction in following their progress.

Shortly after Christmas 1863 Bragg was replaced by General Joseph Johnston who would prove to be more adept than Bragg in developing harmony within the officer corps and lifting morale. In February 1864, Thomas outlined to Grant his plan for an advance on Atlanta. However, Grant and Sherman had been discussing similar plans for some time. In March, Grant was summoned to Washington where he was appointed general in chief of all the armies. On his return Grant placed Sherman in command of the three armies of the Tennessee, the Ohio and the Cumberland under McPherson, Schofield and Thomas.

Thomas was disappointed at being placed under Sherman, his junior in rank as major general of volunteers. He rebuilt the cavalry and watched the progress of the coloured troops, reporting in April that there were six fully organised Negro regiments on duty with three more training. Another of his projects was a national cemetery for veterans laid out on the slopes of Orchard

Knob. A chaplain asked him if the soldiers' remains should be collected and buried in groups according to states. Thomas replied:

"No, no, no. Mix them up. I am tired of state's rights."

Thomas suggested a plan to get the Army of the Cumberland to the rear of Johnston's position at Dalton and destroy his army. Sherman rejected this, proposing instead to use the smaller Army of the Tennessee. However his plan failed and Johnston was able to retire to a strong position at Resaca. If Thomas' plan had been followed, the campaign might have been over in the first week and thousands of lives saved. Sherman later realised he had thrown away his chance. There was almost daily series of encounters, the skirmishing between the two armies hardly ceasing. Frontal engagements at New Hope and Picketts Mill were bloody affairs. Thomas reported 8,426 casualties during the three weeks of campaigning, almost four times as many as among the other armies combined. This gives some idea of the load carried by the Army of the Cumberland in the advance.

Sherman, in a letter to Grant on June 18, wrote:

"My chief source of trouble is with the Army of the Cumberland which is dreadfully slow ..."

This is somewhat precious coming from a man who took such a long time to travel from Vicksburg to Chattanooga. No doubt Grant would believe Sherman, even though he had no first hand evidence of this claim.

An attack on Kennesaw Mountain was set for June 27. The men of Army of the Cumberland, while believing Sherman to be a talented leader of men, were distrustful of a general who had yet to win a battle on his own responsibility. Regardless of Thomas' opposition, Sherman ordered the attack with heavy losses. Thomas was known to comment on the day of the battle –

"... One or two more such assaults would use up this army."

Nevertheless, Sherman again outflanked Johnston who continued to retreat. On July 18, Johnston was replaced by General Hood who was well known to Thomas from their time together in Texas with the Second Cavalry. Hood wasted no time getting into action, concentrating some 30,000 troops against 20,000 on Thomas' left flank at Peachtree Creek. The Confederate's attack was furious but Thomas, with great skill and innovation, directed artillery fire which stopped the Confederates who suffered over 5,000 casualties. On August 31, at Jonesboro, Thomas urged Sherman to allow him to attack in flank but Sherman, hearing that General Slocum had marched into Atlanta, abandoned pursuit of Hood and left him free to plan further trouble. Within two weeks Hood marched north.

Regardless of the success of the campaign one wonders why Grant preferred Sherman to Thomas. Grant later stated in his memoirs that Sherman was more aggressive. His aggression in the Atlanta campaign was missing on many occasions. At best he was a great flanker and organiser. Sherman seemed to be more interested in destroying railroads of no use to the enemy in the circumstances, to the exclusion of his target, the Army of the Tennessee.

Nashville

On 29 September 1864, Thomas was sent to Chattanooga in order to drive General Forrest out of middle Tennessee. He then continued to Nashville to direct operations and to reorganise the Federal forces in Tennessee. On 11 October Grant gave approval for Sherman to commence his march to the sea. Turning his back on Hood, leaving him for Thomas to deal with, Sherman took most of the veterans of the Army of the Cumberland, plus troops from the Army of the Tennessee and a division of the best cavalry. Apparently Sherman did not think Hood would invade Tennessee.

Thomas picked up an additional 10,000 men when General Schofield opted not to accompany Sherman, together with 5,000 cavalry troops minus their horses and Sherman's surplus artillery. Meanwhile, Forrest was creating havoc some ninety miles west of Nashville and Hood was seeking the most suitable crossing of the Tennessee River. Thomas commenced long lines of entrenchments around the city needing time to collect arms, men and sufficient horses for the cavalry, while on 14 November Forrest joined Hood receiving command of all the cavalry. On November 21, Hood crossed the Tennessee River making forward movement to cut off or destroy Schofield's forces. After repulsing Hood at Franklin, inflicting 6,000 casualties, Schofield was ordered to race for Nashville.

In order to get Wilson ready with the cavalry, Thomas ordered the seizure of every mount to be found in Kentucky, Tennessee and northern Alabama, but it would still take time to accumulate enough mounts. On 2 December Grant sent Thomas a telegram advising an attack "...before Hood fortifies". The following day heavy skirmishing to the south announced the arrival of the Confederate Army. Again on the 6th and 8th Grant demanded that Thomas attack. Then fog settled in and the country was covered with ice and sleet. Thomas tried to explain this to Grant, but Grant continued to press and on December 13, ordered General John Logan, who was then at City Point, to hurry to Nashville and assume command.

By December 13, the ice began to gradually disappear and on the following day Thomas gave his orders to various corps commanders, also telegraphing Washington, that "the enemy will be attacked tomorrow morning." Apparently Grant was preparing to start for Nashville the very next day, but called off his trip when he received a wire from Thomas stating that Hood had been driven back several miles and that on the following day would be destroyed.

True to his word, the rebels threw down their arms and raced from the field as a mob. Thomas ordered the pursuit of the enemy by the infantry while Wilson was charged with continuing the advance with the cavalry during the night and as early as possible in the morning. His battle plan using the cavalry as a key part of his offensive is considered a masterpiece and was the only decisive Union victory of the War in which the cavalry played a major role. Nashville proved Thomas to be far ahead of other general officers in battle tactics. By the 1890s this battle was one of the few Civil War examples studied in European military academies. This is a compliment when European military men generally considered the Civil War as simply:

"... two armed mobs chasing each other around the countryside."

Pursuit

Despite the rout of the Confederates at Nashville, the cavalry and infantry pursued the Confederates for ten days over 120 miles of soggy roads and swollen streams and through rain, snow and frozen mud. Actually Wilson wore out 5,000 horses and it was only due to the fierce rearguard actions by Forrest and his men that the Confederates got away. Grant wrote to Sherman remarking:

"His pursuit of Hood indicated a sluggishness that satisfied me – he would never do to conduct one of your campaigns."

At this time Sherman was in Savannah and spent a full month there while receiving reinforcements from Thomas. Despite all these difficulties Grant could only see clear skies and wide open road for Thomas. The battle for Nashville resulted in Confederate losses of approximately 13,000 against 3,000 casualties for the Union. Hood's soldiers would never fight again as an army. Many were separated from their units and not being able to rejoin simply left for home. Thomas now received another nickname, appropriate in the circumstances:

The Sledge of Nashville.

Thomas received a telegram from Secretary of War Stanton dated December 24 advising of his promotion to major general in the United States Army, saying:

'no official duty has been performed by me with more satisfaction, and no commander has more justly earned promotion by devoted, disinterested and valuable services to his country.'

Thomas' mood could not be changed by praise handing the telegram to his Chief Surgeon Cooper, saying:

"What do you think of that?"

Cooper read the message and replied:

"It is better late than never."

Thomas replied:

"I suppose it is better late than never but it is too late to be appreciated, I earned this at Chattanooga."

Thomas was bitterly disappointed to hear of rumours that he was to have been relieved while getting the army ready at Nashville.

The higher commissions had been granted to Sherman 12 August 1864 during the siege of Atlanta, to Meade on 18 August and to Sheridan on 8 November for the battle of Cedar Creek which had caught him napping twenty miles away at Winchester. Thomas could feel justifiably peeved at some of these appointments.

On 31 December, Thomas received orders from Grant that the army was not to go into winter quarters. Sherman had suggested that the western army should advance into middle and southern Alabama and Thomas was agreeable to campaign in the spring. However, Grant did not agree in a telegram to Sherman, saying:

"Thomas is too ponderous in his preparations and equipments to move through a country rapidly to live off it."

I consider Grant had already made up his mind not to give Thomas an opportunity to shine again. In fact Thomas was ordered to send Schofield's 23 Corps to Sherman, A J Smith's troops and a division of Wilson's cavalry to General Canby in the Gulf and another detachment for a campaign into East Tennessee and the Carolinas. Thomas is promoted and then his army is basically cut up and dispersed; only Grant could provide an answer to this situation.

In the meantime, Thomas was preparing to build up a corps of cavalry and infantry under Wilson to campaign in the heart of the Alabama coal and iron region. The corps of 27,000 men, of whom 20,000 were mounted with 15,000 armed with the Spencer magazine rifle. This was the largest body of cavalry collected on the continent. Wilson was most successful destroying Confederate government stores at Tuscaloosa and at Selma defeated Forrest forcing him to flee as the Union troops stormed the city, seizing 2,700 prisoners, many guns and tons of munitions. He also captured the original Confederate Capitol at Montgomery on 12 April, and four days later took Columbus, Georgia taking 1,200 prisoners, 52 guns and vast amounts of munitions, stores and cotton. On 9 May 1865 Thomas bade a formal farewell to the men who had fought for him in so many battles.

War's End

After the cessation of hostilities, it was proposed to allocate to Thomas a military department within Sherman's division. He appealed to President Johnson and was given the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. This would appear reasonable as Thomas considered he should have charge of reconstruction in the various states in which he had served during the war. He supported the reconstruction policies of Lincoln and Johnson and is recognised as being probably the most effective of all the military governors. In 1867 the Tennessee State Convention nominated Thomas for President. He promptly declined the honour. Early in 1868 President Johnson sent Thomas' name to the Senate for confirmation as army commander. He was prepared to promote Thomas over Generals Grant, Sherman, Meade and Sheridan. Thomas, ever the gentleman and soldier, however, sent a wire to the President declining the nomination as he knew it was inspired by politics.

When Grant was elected President, Sherman was promoted to general and Sheridan appointed lieutenant general. Thomas took the news calmly:

“His commission as major general was older than mine and I always supposed the President would exercise the right to appoint his friend to an office in preference to another whom he did not particularly like.”

It was obvious that the President could never like or accept such men as Meade or Thomas, preferring a rough-hewn and cruder mould. Still Grant was not supportive of Thomas. Thomas heard that General Schofield was to be assigned the Military Division of the Pacific on General Halleck's transfer from the West Coast. Thomas angrily reminded Sherman that his rank should not be degraded, otherwise he would publicly protest against it. Thomas would have preferred the Division of the Atlantic, but this was to be Meade's and Sheridan was to be given the Division of the Missouri. “Although he did not complain in public he felt humiliated at the treatment he had received from the military power of the Government.” For this, read Grant.

The command in the West entailed considerable travel and people were concerned over his health. At 7 pm on 28 March 1870 Thomas died of a stroke on duty at his headquarters in San Francisco. His body was transferred back east and buried in Troy, New York, attended by President Grant, Generals Sherman, Sheridan and Meade and thousands of soldiers and veterans. However no member of his own family was present. “Our brother George died to us in '61” his sisters told their neighbours.

In Oakwood Cemetery, Troy, a massive granite tomb surmounted by an American eagle marks his burial place. In Washington a bronze equestrian monument oversees the busy intersection known as Thomas Circle. Here **The Rock of Chickamauga** gazes over the Potomac River towards his native South.



Thomas made matters difficult for future biographers by destroying all his personal papers, saying:

“All that I did for my government are matters of history, but my private life is my own and I will not have it hawked about for the amusement of the curious.”

A very private person he had no intention of leaving memoirs, but was content that, in the fullness of time, history would do him justice. He still waits.

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