The Battle of Chickamauga and its Aftermath

By Robert C. Jones

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The second half of 1863 had been rough for the Confederacy, in the period leading up to the Battle of Chickamauga. In the East, Lee’s invasion of Pennsylvania had been checked at Gettysburg, and in the West, Vicksburg had fallen to Ulysses S. Grant, and William Rosecrans had taken middle Tennessee in the Tullahoma Campaign. A great victory at Chickamauga for the Confederacy could have turned the tide of war back in favor of the South.

The State of Georgia had remained relatively unscathed by the Civil War until the Fall of 1863, when a great battle took place along an obscure creek in North Georgia called Chickamauga. From September 19-20, 1863, Confederates under General Braxton Bragg fought General William Rosecrans’ Union army in one of the most brutal battles of the Civil War (Casualties: U.S. - 16,170; CS - 18,454).

In the weeks leading up to the Battle of Chickamauga, Bragg had been receiving reinforcements from Simon Bolivar Buckner, Joe Johnston, and James Longstreet. The largest amount of reinforcements were from Longstreet, Lee's highest ranking corps commander. Over a three week period, Longstreet shipped 15,000 of his men over 16 railroads from Orange Courthouse, Virginia to Ringgold, Georgia to reinforce Bragg. The last two divisions of Longstreet's force arrived just as the battle of Chickamauga was beginning.
The shipment of the troops was slow and tedious because the South did not have standardized gauges for its railroads, forcing the troops to disembark as they moved from one railroad to another. Also, at the time of the shipment of troops, the Union held Chattanooga, so troops could not be routed to Chattanooga and then south on the Western and Atlantic.

“Lloyd's American railroad map, showing the whole seat of the war”, 1861. Superimposed on the map is the route of Longstreet's Corps. (Library of Congress http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3701p.cw0014000)
Longstreet's shipment of so many men in such a short time via rail was a first in the history of the world.

Fighting at the Battle of Chickamauga after the first day was inconclusive, but on the second day, a poor command decision by Union commander Rosecrans led to a gap in the Union center. Confederate General James Longstreet, whose army had arrived on the battlefield by train from Virginia right before the battle, smashed through the gap in the Union center with 23,000 men, and folded up the Union right. About a third of the Union forces (including Rosecrans) were driven from the field. This may have been the most successful frontal attack since Richard the Lionheart at Arsuf in the Third Crusade.
General George H. Thomas gathered Union forces around Snodgrass Hill, and through the afternoon and into the evening, successfully repelled 25 assaults from Longstreet. After darkness fell, Thomas ordered an orderly retreat from the field, heading back towards Chattanooga. Bragg’s troops followed the next day, and occupied the heights south of Chattanooga. Thomas was later referred to as the “Rock of Chickamauga” for his defensive stand at Snodgrass Hill.
Longstreet describes the moment when the Confederates took Snodgrass Hill, after Thomas had retreated:

The contention by our left wing was maintained as a separate and independent battle. The last of my reserve, Trigg's brigade, gave us new strength, and Preston gained Snodgrass Hill. The trampled ground and bushy woods were left to those who were too much worn to escape the rapid strides of the heroic Confederates. The left wing swept forward, and the right sprang to the broad Chattanooga highway. Like magic the Union army had melted away in our presence. A few hundred prisoners were picked up by both wings as they met, to burst their throats in loud huzzas. The Army of Tennessee knew how to enjoy its first grand victory. The dews of twilight hung heavy about the trees as if to hold down the voice of victory; but the two lines nearing as they advanced joined their continuous shouts in increasing volume, not as the burstings from the cannon's mouth, but in a tremendous swell of heroic harmony that seemed almost to lift from their roots the great trees of the forest.

Before greetings and congratulations upon the success had passed it was night, and the mild beams of the quartering moon were more suggestive of Venus than of Mars. The haversacks and ammunition supplies were ordered replenished, and the Confederate army made its bivouac on the ground it had gained in the first pronounced victory in the West, and one of the most stubbornly contested battles of the war.

Our cavalry had failed to close McFarland Gap, and through that General Thomas made his march for the stand at Rossville Gap. The Union army and reserve had been fought, and by united efforts we held the position at Snodgrass Hill, which covered McFarland Gap and the retreat. There were yet five brigades of Confederates that had not been in active battle. The Confederate commander was not present, and his next in rank thought night pursuit without authority a heavy, unprofitable labor, while a flank move, after a night's rest, seemed promising of more important results. The Confederate chief did not even know of his victory until the morning of the 21st, when, upon riding to his extreme right, he found his commander at that point seeking the enemy in his immediate front, and commended the officer upon his vigilance,—twelve hours after the retreat of the enemy's forces.  *(From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America, by James Longstreet (J. B. Lippincott Company, 1895))

As noted above in Longstreet’s description of the end of the Battle of Chickamauga, Bragg has been eternally excoriated for not chasing the Union army after Chickamauga (similar to McClellan after Antietam). Bragg’s failure to press his advantage after the retreat of Thomas caused Nathan Bedford Forrest on September 21 to say, “What does he fight battles for?”
Certainly, if Bragg had pursued, the Union army would have been in a vulnerable position, and possibly could have been destroyed.

Why didn't Bragg pursue? Some of the reasons might have included:

1. Bragg had lost about a third of his draft (artillery) horses, as well as many of his supply horses
2. His troops had had little sleep for several days
3. Bragg had actually lost more men than the Federals
4. Bragg believed that he could easily defeat the Federals at Chattanooga, if he could seize the heights overlooking the town from the south

Who won the Battle of Chickamauga? Using the traditional Civil War measure that the army left standing on the field is the winner, the answer is easy – the South won the battle. But using more modern criteria, the answer is not so clear. The Confederates actually suffered more casualties than the Union forces.

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<th>Wounded</th>
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National Park Service figures at the Snodgrass Cabin

The legend of the “Rock of Chickamauga” was a huge morale booster for the North. Thomas had turned what could have been a devastating Union defeat at Chickamauga into a veritable draw, and had won a huge morale victory for the North. Bragg's failure to pursue and destroy Rosecrans army set the stage for the successful Union defense of Chattanooga, and Sherman's invasion of Georgia.

I'd call the Battle of Chickamauga a draw.

After the Battle of Chickamauga, a series of events occurred in and around Chattanooga that would pave the path for Sherman's invasion of Georgia in May 1864.

By September 24, 1863, Rosecrans abandoned his position on Lookout Mountain, and centered all of his forces in Chattanooga. Bragg quickly seized the heights. As a result, the Union could no longer bring supplies in via the Tennessee River, because Bragg's guns on the heights commanded the river. Bragg's siege of Chattanooga had begun.

On September 25, 1863, Fighting Joe Hooker was dispatched from Virginia with 20,000 troops to reinforce Chattanooga. He would later serve under Sherman during the Atlanta Campaign.
At the end of September 1864, Bragg had stripped Forrest of most of his cavalry unit, and given the men and equipment to Joe Wheeler. After Forrest threatened to kill Bragg, Jefferson Davis assigned Forrest to a command in western Tennessee.

On October 9, 1863, Jefferson Davis met with Bragg and his Corps commanders. While Bragg was given vote of no confidence from his staff, Davis decided to leave him in command.

In mid-October 1863, U.S. Grant was personally given command of the army of the West by Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War. One of his first actions was to sack Rosecrans as commander of the Army of the Cumberland in favor of George Thomas.

On October 23, 1863 Grant arrived in Chattanooga, and approved a daring plan involving an amphibious assault on Brown's Ferry to open up a supply line into Chattanooga. The plan was successfully carried out on October 27, 1863, opening a backdoor supply line to Chattanooga.

On November 13, 1863, William Tecumseh Sherman arrived in Chattanooga.

On November 24, 1863, the Union won a victory at the Battle Above the Clouds (Battle of Lookout Mountain), winning back the heights from Bragg. The next day, at the Battle of Missionary Ridge, the Union won another victory, causing Bragg to retreat South.

Why had Bragg's plan to destroy the Union army at Chattanooga failed? While the Union soldiers in Chattanooga suffered greatly during the siege, the besieging troops weren't much better off in terms of supplies. The Confederates were low on ammunition, shelter, and food. As a result of the latter two, sickness was rampant among Bragg's troops. Also, while Bragg started out facing Rosecrans, he ended up facing much more capable generals in Grant, Thomas, and Sherman.

On November 30, 1863, Jefferson Davis accepted the resignation of Braxton Bragg, replacing him with William Hardee.

On May 2, 1864, Sherman invaded Georgia, with George Thomas as head of the Army of the Cumberland.
The Rock of Chickamauga – George H. Thomas (Library of Congress
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/cwp200300396/PP/)

Sources

- *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America*, by James Longstreet (J. B. Lippincott Company, 1895)
- *Retracing the Route of Sherman's Atlanta Campaign and March to the Sea*, by Robert C. Jones (CreateSpace, 2010)