

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Army of the Ohio

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The original Army of the Ohio consisted of all Federal forces in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Tennessee, and the portion of Kentucky east of the Cumberland River, from November 9, 1861, to October 24, 1862.¹ It was led by Major General Don Carlos Buell, under whom it fought in two major battles in 1862, at Shiloh in April and Perryville in October. After the battle of Perryville, Buell was replaced and the army was renamed and reorganized, later becoming known as the Army of the Cumberland.² In its brief but significant history, the Army of the Ohio was given two strategic goals. It achieved the first of these, to secure Kentucky for the Union, but it failed to accomplish its second mission, which was to capture Chattanooga and bring relief to the loyal population of eastern Tennessee.

The Army of the Ohio was one of several field armies hastily assembled by the federal government at the outbreak of the Civil War. The challenge of transforming masses of volunteer regiments into effective field armies was nowhere easy, but it was particularly acute along the Ohio River, where Kentucky's loyalty to the Union was in doubt. The first officer that President Lincoln designated to command federal troops in the Ohio River valley, in May 1861, was Kentucky native Brigadier General Robert Anderson, newly famous for his role at Fort Sumter. Rather than risk provoking Kentucky into secession, Lincoln directed Anderson to stay out of the state and establish his headquarters in Ohio instead. Only after Confederate forces entered Kentucky in September 1861 was Anderson free to cross the Ohio River and openly recruit and organize regiments in the Bluegrass state. By the time he resigned his position on October 8, 1861, Anderson controlled a force of thirty regiments and five batteries of artillery.

Anderson's successor, Brigadier General William Tecumseh Sherman, served for only a month in command of the force that would soon become known as the Army of the Ohio. In his brief tenure, he warned Secretary of War Edwin McMasters Stanton that the government would need 200,000 men just for the Western theatre, an estimate that seemed so outlandish at the time that Sherman's sanity was called into question. He was replaced in November by Brigadier General Don Carlos Buell, a career soldier and Mexican War veteran who distrusted volunteer troops and

¹ The second Army of the Ohio, organized in 1863 under Ambrose Burnside and later commanded by John Schofield, was a completely separate entity.

² See David A. Powell, "Army of the Cumberland," in *Essential Civil War Curriculum*. Blacksburg: Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, August 2015, <https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/army-of-the-cumberland.html>, accessed December 2, 2024.

shared Major General George Brinton McClellan's view that the war should be prosecuted very cautiously (in political as well as military terms) but who lacked McClellan's organizational skills and personal charisma.

The Army of the Ohio was officially born on November 9, 1861, when the War Department established the Department of the Ohio, a massive area that included Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, and eastern Kentucky.³ There were nearly 50,000 federal soldiers in the department, but they were an army on paper only. General Buell's force consisted of dozens of regiments, each organized by its home state and all of them reporting directly to the army commander. Buell's first task was to combine the regiments (each nominally of about 1,000 men, but in practice fewer) into brigades, and brigades into divisions. By the middle of December, he had organized his regiments into sixteen brigades, which were in turn assigned to five divisions. In contrast to other Civil War armies, which were divided into corps of two to four divisions, the five divisions all reported directly to army headquarters. Not until September 1862 would Buell give up this unwieldy system and organize the army into corps.

The Army of the Ohio's leadership was limited in quality as well as flawed in structure. Every Civil War field army in 1861 suffered from shortages of trained officers to lead their brigades and divisions, but the problem was made worse for the Army of the Ohio because of the political dimensions of its mission. Its most important responsibility was to keep Kentucky, a state where human slavery was legal, from becoming part of the Confederacy. "Kentucky gone, we can not hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland," Abraham Lincoln wrote on September 22. "These all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us."⁴ Defending the state against a Confederate military invasion was part of Buell's task, but preventing Kentucky's secession by maintaining the loyalty of its citizens was equally crucial. This meant that the army's officers had to be chosen with regard for their political acceptability to Kentucky's influential slaveholding class, even if those officers lacked military experience or talent. It was not by accident that most of the army's original brigade and division commanders were from the Midwest or South, that none were from abolitionist New England, and that many were politically conservative Democrats who expected to defeat the Confederacy without disturbing its labor system. They shared the views of Brigadier General Mahlon Dickerson Manson of Indiana, commander of the Second Brigade, who assured a Louisville audience in December 1861, "We wage no abolition crusade."⁵ With its pool of potential leaders limited by the exclusion of anyone known for holding antislavery views,

³ General Orders No. 97, Washington, D.C., Headquarters of the Army, A.G.O., November 9, 1862 in United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 4, p. 349 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 4, pt. x, 349).

⁴ Lincoln to Orville H. Browning, "private & confidential," Washington, September 22, 1861, in Roy. P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 4, 532.

⁵ *New York Times*, December 17, 1861, p. 3, col. 3.

the Army of the Ohio initially fielded a less than impressive roster of generals. Of its five original division commanders (Generals William “Bull” Nelson, Thomas John Wood, Alexander McDowell McCook, Thomas Leonidas Crittenden, and George Henry Thomas), only Thomas would show significant military ability over the course of the war.

Elements of the Army of the Ohio first went into action in December 1861, in a successful skirmish at Rowlett’s Station near the Green River. Through the autumn of 1861, Confederate forces based in Bowling Green in the southern part of the state had struck at bridges on the railroad leading north toward Louisville, where the Army of the Ohio was concentrated. Buell was content to hold most of his army in winter quarters, but he dispatched one division to secure the railroad as far south as the Green River. It was there, on December 17, that the 32nd Indiana regiment was attacked by the 8th Texas Cavalry, known also as “Terry’s Texas Rangers.” Many of the 32nd Indiana were German-American immigrants, including Colonel August Willich, a former Prussian officer. Willich’s well-drilled troops executed a number of tactical maneuvers that kept the Texans at bay and saved the Green River railroad bridge from destruction. This small victory boosted morale in the Army of the Ohio and showed the troops that the long hours of drill they were putting in could pay dividends on the battlefield. In addition, the early success of a “Dutch” regiment may have contributed to the relative lack of tension between native-born and immigrant soldiers in the Army of the Ohio, in contrast to the rampant xenophobia that later emerged in the Army of the Potomac when the German-Americans of the XI Corps were made scapegoats for that army’s defeats at Chancellorsville and the first day at Gettysburg.

A month later, the Army of the Ohio fought its first strategically significant battle, at Logan’s Cross Roads in southeastern Kentucky. After Rowlett’s Station, President Lincoln had continued to press Buell to launch a campaign into eastern Tennessee, a region that Lincoln perceived as loyal to the United States. Buell did not see any military value in such a move, and considered the terrain and weather impractical, but to placate his commander-in-chief he ordered the army’s First Division, led by Brigadier General George Thomas, to advance in the direction of eastern Tennessee. On January 19, 1862, a Confederate force under Brigadier General Felix Kirk Zollicoffer, moving north across the Cumberland River, attacked Thomas’s outposts. In the battle that followed, Thomas’s troops held their ground, then counterattacked and drove the Confederates from the field, leaving behind their dead (among them Zollicoffer himself, who had blundered into the Union line). Thomas pursued the defeated rebels and established his troops on the south bank of the Cumberland. With the river line breached, the Confederates abandoned their untenable position at Bowling Green and fell back to Nashville, 75 miles to the south. At minimal cost, the Army of the Ohio had secured military control of the entire state of Kentucky.

The importance of the victory at Logan’s Cross Roads was quickly overshadowed, however, by U.S. Grant’s campaign against Forts Henry and Donelson in February. The loss of the forts forced the Confederates to abandon Nashville, leaving the city open to occupation by the Army of the Ohio. With Nashville under federal control, Lincoln renewed his call for the army to march eastward, but Buell continued to demur. To Don Carlos Buell, the volunteer soldiers he commanded had still not acquired the discipline and polish to which he was accustomed in the

Regular Army, and he was determined to keep the army in hand until it could be trained to the standard he believed necessary.

When the army finally resumed marching, it was to the west rather than to the east. On March 11, Major General Henry Wager Halleck secured a major bureaucratic victory when he was given control of all Federal troops in the western theatre, including Grant's victorious army as well as the Army of the Ohio. Halleck decided to concentrate his forces by ordering Buell to join Grant, who was camped at Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River. Buell took his time carrying out the order. He first sent the army's Third Division, led by Major General Ormsby MacKnight Mitchel, on an expedition south toward the Memphis & Charleston Railway, an important east-west artery that ran through north Alabama.⁶ The army's newly organized Seventh Division was assigned to capture Cumberland Gap. After garrisoning Nashville and other points, Buell set out for Pittsburg Landing with 37,000 troops in four divisions, about half of the army's strength. At the Duck River, the army halted for almost two weeks to rebuild a sabotaged stone bridge, by which time the river had fallen so low that no bridge was necessary. The one suggestion with which Buell complied fully was that received by the vanguard of the Army of the Ohio from Grant when they approached his camp: "There is no need of haste. Come by easy marches."⁷

When the first of Buell's troops arrived at the Tennessee River, they unexpectedly found themselves in the largest battle of the war to date. Debarking from steamboats at Pittsburg Landing on the evening of April 6, the soldiers of Nelson's division were surrounded by refugees from the surprise attack that had driven Grant's army from its camps that day. By the next morning, two more of Buell's divisions were on the field of Shiloh, ready to join the counterattack that Grant planned to launch. There was minimal cooperation between the forces of Grant and Buell on April 7, but their simultaneous advances forced the Confederates back and turned Shiloh into a Union victory. At the end of the day, the Confederates were in full retreat back to Corinth, Mississippi, and the camps of Grant's Army of the Tennessee were back in the hands of their original owners. The Army of the Ohio had contributed substantially to the outcome, but just how much they helped would lead to a second battle, fought two decades later in the pages of *Century* magazine, between Grant and Buell.⁸ Claims by Buell's partisans that the Army of the Ohio had saved Grant from certain destruction were exaggerated, but no more so than claims by supporters of Grant that he would have won the battle just as easily if the Army of the Ohio had not been there at all.

⁶ It was Mitchel's division that supplied most of the volunteers who made up James Andrews' expedition to capture a Confederate locomotive on April 12.

⁷ W[illiam] B. Hazen, *A Narrative of Military Service* (Boston, MA: Ticknor & Co., 1885), 24.

⁸ Compare Buell, "Shiloh Reviewed," in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War. Being for the Most Part Contributions by Union and Confederate Officers. Based Upon "The Century War Series"*, 4 vols. (New York: The Century Co. 1884-1888), 1:487-536, with Grant, "The Battle of Shiloh," 1:465-86.

In the aftermath of Shiloh, the Army of the Ohio briefly lost its independent existence when Henry Halleck combined the field armies of Buell, Grant and Major General John Pope into a single massive Army of the West. Halleck spent a month directing this ponderous force toward Corinth, Mississippi, then detached Buell and his divisions to capture Chattanooga by marching eastward along the Memphis & Charleston Railroad. Politically, the mission was consistent with President Lincoln's long-held wish for the Army of the Ohio to operate in eastern Tennessee, but militarily it was doomed to fail. The railroad upon which the army depended for its supplies was vulnerable to Confederate cavalry and guerillas along its entire length, requiring Buell to disperse his forces to protect it. Buell eventually persuaded Halleck to allow the army to draw its supplies from Nashville to the north, instead of Memphis, making the supply line shorter and more secure, and allowing him to build up a large stockpile at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, but the effort would be in vain. On July 12, 1862, before Buell could launch his long-awaited attack on Chattanooga, rebel cavalry under Brigadier General Nathan Bedford Forrest swept into Murfreesboro, intimidated the garrison into surrender, and destroyed the depot, thus undoing weeks' worth of logistical effort.⁹

By this time, the soldiers of the Army of the Ohio had developed a largely negative opinion of Don Carlos Buell, which he reciprocated. To Buell, the volunteers were mere civilians in uniform, not like the real soldiers of the Regular Army. Their behavior in actions like the sack of Athens, Alabama, on May 2, was evidence to Buell of their hopeless lack of discipline. To the men, on the other hand, Buell's velvet glove policy toward Southern civilians was out of step with their increasingly hard war views. Colonel John Basil Turchin had allowed the men of his Eighth Brigade to loot Athens in retaliation for guerrilla activity in the town, and Buell's attempt to punish Turchin was widely seen as putting the protection of Southern property ahead of the safety of the troops. Further, although most of the men in the Army of the Ohio had volunteered to fight for the Union, not to end slavery, their exposure to the peculiar institution and their recognition that it was critical to the rebel war effort made them less and less sympathetic to generals like Buell who took care to protect the human property of slaveholders. As one Illinois officer wrote in his diary in July 1862, "Oh! for an active earnest leader from the free states! One who sees nothing sacred in negro slavery."¹⁰

The Army of the Ohio was put to its most severe test in the late summer and autumn of 1862. In spite of logistical difficulties, Buell had brought most of the army within striking distance of Chattanooga by early August. Then on August 14, Confederate forces under General Edmund Kirby-Smith marched north from Knoxville, past the Cumberland Gap and into central Kentucky. Two weeks later, General Braxton Bragg's rebel army left Chattanooga, bypassed the Army of the Ohio, and headed north as the second prong of the invasion of Kentucky, just a few days before

⁹ See Gerald J. Prokopowicz, "Last Chance for a Short War: Don Carlos Buell and the Chattanooga Campaign of 1862," in Evan Jones & Wiley Sword, eds., *Gateway to the Confederacy: New Perspectives on the Chickamauga and Chattanooga Campaigns, 1862-1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), Ch. 2.

¹⁰ Paul M. Angle, ed., James A. Connolly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 17.

Robert E. Lee began his invasion of Maryland. With Confederates seemingly on the march everywhere, Buell faced a difficult strategic challenge in keeping Kentucky for the Union. To stop Kirby-Smith, he detailed Major General William Nelson to go back to Kentucky and take command of a group of untrained regiments that had just been organized there, following the July 1862 call for volunteers. With the rest of the Army of the Ohio, Buell set off in pursuit of Bragg.

Nelson's force would be the first to fight, and the results would be disastrous. At Richmond, Kentucky, in possibly the most lop-sided outcome of any battle of the war, Nelson's 7,000 green troops were routed by an approximately equal number of Southern veterans. Federal casualties numbered close to 6,000, most of them captured, while Confederate losses were fewer than a thousand. Nelson, a former naval officer with a volcanic temper, suffered a minor wound during the battle and was unable to keep his men from surrendering in droves. Following the battle, Kirby-Smith occupied the state capitol at Frankfort, where he waited expectantly for Bragg's army to join his in a display of military dominance over the Bluegrass state.

At first, Buell assumed that Bragg's objective was Nashville, not Kentucky. He directed the Army of the Ohio to abandon the campaign for Chattanooga and to fall back toward Nashville, to the dismay of many officers (and the War Department) who wanted Buell to act more aggressively and to strike at Bragg's army while it was on the move. After a few days in Nashville, it became clear to Buell that Bragg was pursuing a much more ambitious objective, the invasion of Kentucky. On September 7, the Army of the Ohio set out on what became known as the Race to Louisville, hoping to get there before the Confederates could do so.

The forced marches they made over the next two and a half weeks were the most strenuous ones the army's soldiers had to endure in the entire war. A severe drought had persisted through the summer of 1862, forcing the men to go without water for hours or even days. The limestone soil of Kentucky, pounded by thousands of marching feet, produced a fine, powdery dust that hung in the air and stuck to the men's lips, making their constant thirst even more torturous. The army's supply wagons were soon left behind, leaving the men with no rations beyond the meager results of foraging in the impoverished countryside. Had Bragg chosen to do so, he could have reached Louisville first, but for strategic reasons of his own he veered off to the northeast toward a junction with Kirby-Smith. On September 25, the vanguard of the Army of the Ohio reached Louisville. The race for the city was over and won, but the troops' morale was low, their physical condition weak, and their confidence in the army's commander non-existent.

The campaign paused for a week as the Confederates pondered how to turn their presence in Kentucky into a political victory, while Buell set about restoring the Army of the Ohio to fighting trim. He finally organized its divisions into three corps, to be led by Alexander McCook, William Nelson, and Thomas Crittenden. Before Nelson could take command of his corps, however, he was shot and killed by Brigadier General Jefferson Columbus Davis, who had taken exception to one of Nelson's typically offensive remarks. To replace Nelson, Buell selected a Regular Army staff officer, Captain Charles Champion Gilbert, under the mistaken belief that

Gilbert was a major general.¹¹ Even had Gilbert actually held such a rank, his appointment would have been questionable, since he had no experience at all leading troops in the field. Unfortunately for the army, neither McCook nor Crittenden (both of whom did have some experience) would perform much better. The army's most competent general, George Thomas, was given the post of second-in-command, where he would be powerless to do anything. On September 29, the War Department issued an order relieving Buell and putting Thomas in his place, but Thomas persuaded Halleck to withdraw the order on the grounds that Buell was just about to set his campaign in motion and should be given the chance to carry out his plans.

Over the first seven days of October, the Army of the Ohio fanned out from Louisville in search of Bragg's army, following Halleck's earlier injunction to Buell, "March where you please, provided you will find the enemy and fight him."¹² Water was still scarce and the marching was difficult, but the men were in better spirits now that they were the aggressors, looking for Bragg and ready to fight when they found him. They encountered a portion of Bragg's army on October 7 and were ordered to spend the next day preparing for a full-scale attack, to be made on October 9, but as was so often the case, matters did not work out as Buell intended. Instead of attacking, the army was assaulted by the Confederates on the afternoon of October 8, near Perryville.

The Battle of Perryville engaged little more than one-third of the Army of the Ohio. Alexander McCook's I Corps, which formed the left wing of the army, was the closest to the Confederates, with Gilbert's III Corps occupying the center and Crittenden's II Corps on the army's right. Philip Sheridan's division, at the head of Gilbert's Corps, began the fighting just before dawn when it was ordered to advance and secure a position on Peter's Hill, which would give the unit access to a nearly dry stream called Doctor's Creek. Since both sides were short of water, the Confederates were equally desirous of controlling whatever water was left in the streambed, and a firefight broke out. This accidental meeting engagement did not immediately lead to more fighting, however. Instead, McCook's divisions marched up the Mackville Pike to a position next to Sheridan and remained in the road, awaiting orders. None arrived, but shortly after 1:00 P.M. several divisions of Confederate infantry did. McCook's corps was thrown back in confusion and nearly routed. Sheridan, on McCook's right, also came under attack but held his position.

While McCook's corps, and Sheridan's division of Gilbert's corps, were fighting for their lives, the rest of the army remained idle. Gilbert, a punctilious martinet, followed to the letter Buell's orders to prepare to fight a battle the next day, while refusing to react in any way to the desperate fighting taking place to his left. Crittenden's corps was too far away to be able to lend assistance. As for the army commander, Buell's headquarters was not far from the fighting, but an acoustic shadow prevented any sounds of the battle from reaching it. It was three hours after the

¹¹ Gilbert had in fact been "promoted" to major general of volunteers by Major General Horatio Gouverneur Wright a few weeks earlier, and had made himself visible in Louisville wearing the insignia of a major general, notwithstanding the fact that General Wright had no authority to make such a promotion.

¹² Halleck to Buell, Washington, September 2, 1862, *O.R.*, . I, 16, pt. 2, 471.

Confederate assault began that Buell was finally made aware that a portion of his army was at risk of destruction. At 4:00 P.M. Buell ordered reinforcements forward. They arrived in time to turn back the attack, which by that time was nearly spent, and to recover the ground lost by McCook's corps. As happened at Shiloh and many other Civil War battlefields, the attackers suffered heavy casualties in the process of gaining their temporary success, leaving them vulnerable to a counterattack that would drive them back to their starting position and even beyond. When night fell, the Army of the Ohio could claim a tactical victory by the fact that it was still on the battlefield while the rebels were falling back.

Perryville revealed the depth of the dysfunction running through the army's command system. Buell, whose mobility was limited by a painful leg injury suffered a few days earlier, had spent most of the battle in his headquarters unaware that a battle was even taking place. McCook had left his command strung out in a road column where it could be taken by surprise when the Confederates attacked. Gilbert had exercised no initiative and was apparently prepared to see McCook's corps swept from the field without doing anything to help. George Thomas, who would demonstrate at Chickamauga his ability to stand strong in the face of disaster, had no troops under his command and was powerless to redeem the situation. What saved the army from defeat at Perryville were the actions of its regimental commanders and their men, who put up fierce resistance even when their superior officers stationed them in vulnerable places and deployed them in tactically inefficient formations.¹³ The individual units of McCook's corps and Sheridan's division were resilient enough to absorb the Confederate attack until it ran out of momentum, creating the opportunity for fresh troops to turn the tide just as they had done on the second day at Shiloh.

Perryville, like Antietam three weeks earlier, was a tactical draw that counted as a Federal victory because it ended an invasion of the North. Bragg and Kirby-Smith retreated back to Tennessee in the weeks after the battle, but Buell (like McClellan) took no action to exploit his victory. For both Union generals, the failure to pursue a defeated enemy would be the last straw. Buell was replaced as head of the Army of the Ohio by Major General William Starke Rosecrans on October 24, a decision greeted with cheers by the army's rank and file. The orders that appointed Rosecrans also changed the name of the Army of the Ohio to the "XIV Army Corps" and created a new Department of the Cumberland encompassing the territory where it operated. The army would soon become much better known as the Army of the Cumberland, the title it bore for the rest of the Civil War.¹⁴

¹³ See Gerald J. Prokopowicz, *All for the Regiment: The Army of the Ohio 1861-1862* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), Ch. 7.

¹⁴ Powell, "Army of the Cumberland," ECWC, <https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/army-of-the-cumberland.html>.