

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The 1864 Nashville Campaign

By **Richard H. Holloway**

As late as the end of August 1864, hope still existed in the Confederate trenches encircling the city of Atlanta, Georgia. Many Southern soldiers wrote home that they believed this would be their last campaign of the war. Rumors had swirled among the troops of the Army of Tennessee, commanded by General John Bell Hood, that help was coming. This was no random speculation that swept through the ranks like so many others. Newly minted Lieutenant General Richard Taylor had been ordered by the Confederate headquarters in Richmond, Virginia, to bring most of his infantry and artillery across the Mississippi River from Louisiana and join up with General Hood. Much like Lieutenant General James Longstreet leaving the Army of Northern Virginia to join the Army of Tennessee almost a year earlier or Generals Braxton Bragg and Edmund Kirby Smith uniting forces for the Kentucky invasion, the year before that, this grandiose idea might tip the scales in favor of the South.

Unfortunately, the plan to bring Taylor across the river from the Trans-Mississippi Department to bolster Hood did not happen. Despite the aforementioned belief among his command that Hood planned to end the conflict with augmented assaults outside of Atlanta, this was not his true vision at all. Hood set his sights on recapturing Nashville, Tennessee. Once that was accomplished, the offensive minded Hood would continue his advance further north to re-occupy his native Kentucky. Hoping to recruit more soldiers for his army, Hood would then gather much needed supplies for his men further north before turning east. Hood sought to unite with General Robert E. Lee's forces and eventually overcome the Union army then attempt to encircle Lee. It was indeed a bold plan, but first Hood had to capture Nashville.

As Hood broke away from the trenches around Atlanta, he fully expected Union Major General William Tecumseh Sherman to send troops after him. Hood initially expected to draw away Sherman's entire army, but Sherman wisely chose to stay in the area and soon head for Savannah once Hood left the area, while sending a smaller command to support the Union troops currently stationed throughout the Nashville area. Hood's plan was developed at Palmetto, Georgia in late September 1864 after a consultation with Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who had traveled from Richmond to meet with Hood. The two deduced that Sherman would either embark on a mission towards the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean. The big decision was what Hood would do. Davis knew that Sherman outnumbered Hood and had a more secure line of supplies so Hood should pursue other opportunities, hence the northern option to take Nashville. On the way,

he would move to interrupt Sherman's supply depots and destroy the rails delivering the stores south.

Not realizing how quick Sherman would dispatch a large part of his army to reinforce Nashville, the Confederate commander took his time in conquering the Union supply garrisons on his route through northern Georgia. While this maneuver fed the needy soldiers, it allowed Union Lieutenant General John McAllister Schofield to virtually slip past Hood's army in the middle of the night trekking past it northward. The opposing forces did fight at Spring Hill on November 29, but it was not the engagement that Hood envisioned. Due to a series of command failures, the Army of Tennessee was unable to inflict serious damage to Schofield's Army of the Ohio. Worse than that, they could not stop Schofield from safely moving past them. The resulting conflict only cost the Union troops 350 men while the Southern forces suffered about 500 losses. Following this encounter, Hood closely pursued Schofield. The next day, Hood attacked the entrenched Federal forces at Franklin. This debacle caused a large loss of life among Confederate leaders and their commands, including Major General Patrick Ronayne Cleburne. While the Union lost 2,326 casualties in defense of Franklin, the Confederates incurred over 6,250 men lost in a pointless conflict. Already outnumbered, they could ill afford to pursue the retreating Federals to Nashville but did so nonetheless.

Despite the massive loss of Confederate life at Franklin, the largest mistake so far in the Tennessee Campaign occurred when Schofield was allowed to join forces with Major General George Henry Thomas' Army of the Cumberland. United, the Federal forces numbered around 55,000 with which to repulse Hood's approximately 30,000 men. The bloodied Army of Tennessee reached the outskirts of Nashville on December 2. Hood's men started erecting breastworks on the elevated ground south of the town in the hopes of drawing the Unionists outside of their own entrenchments into making costly mistakes by assaulting the waiting Confederates. Thomas, the ranking Federal commander, did not attack but merely occupied his own fortifications. This inaction on Thomas' part caused numerous telegrams from both Grant and US President Abraham Lincoln trying to prod him into attacking Hood. How far had he come that his commanders had dismissed his army-saving heroics at the Battle of Chickamauga, Georgia, the previous year where he earned the well-deserved sobriquet, The Rock of Chickamauga.

Thomas' stance evolved from practical reasons as to why he did not assault Hood's position immediately. Charging up a major incline would place Thomas' troops at a disadvantage, but his other concern was a recent ice storm. Thomas forwarded this recent development to his superiors but did not garner any sympathy. Thomas also thought he would receive more men, horses and supplies but this did not happen. Grant grew more impatient, ordering in his telegrams to attack at once. After the war, Thomas admitted that he thought of asking his leader why he did not do the same at Petersburg, Virginia, then besieged by Grant. Grant then decided he would go to Nashville himself to fire Thomas in person. As Grant prepared to leave Washington, the ice around Nashville finally melted enough for Thomas to order his men to attack Hood on December 15. Hood got the attack on his elevated positions he had wanted, but unfortunately not the planned results.

Hood had his forces divided under three infantry corps commanded by Major General Benjamin Franklin Cheatham, Lieutenant General Stephen Dill Lee and Lieutenant General Alexander Peter Stewart as well as a cavalry corps under Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest, although some of the cavalry were detached at Murfreesboro. Hood's defensive works stretched for four miles long and straddled four of the roads south of town. On Hood's left flank, he erected a series of redoubts, by far his strongest defensive area. Thomas' plan of action included positioning a force to distract the Confederates on Hood's weaker right flank, while simultaneously and unexpectedly striking at Hood's obviously stronger left. Thomas started the attack by placing the bulk of his infantry and artillery to conduct the frontal attack on Hood's left while his successful distraction on Hood's right flank began at the early hour of 6:00 A.M. and lasted for six hours. The main Union force on the Confederate left pounded Hood's men until after dark when the Southerners broke ranks falling back two miles south of their initial location. When they halted, Hood's soldiers were hastily erected new breastworks. Thomas resumed his offensive the next morning, sending Hood reeling. The Confederates were able to hold their ground, but their lines were quickly thinning. Hood realized the night of December 16th that if he remained, he would not have an army left. Hood retreated that evening, heading south. While not all Confederate commanders submitted reports of their casualties, it has been estimated that Thomas' assault caused Hood 2,500 killed and wounded. The Federals also captured another 4,500 more Southerners. The Battle of Nashville had been devastating for General Hood, his men and the Southern cause in the Western Theater as well.

However, Hood's men still had some fight in them, and they showed the enemy that on December 17 on the Franklin Pike.

Once he had the Southern army on the run southward, Thomas deployed his freshest troops, namely Major General James Harrison Wilson's cavalry troopers along with a contingent of two brigades of US Colored Infantry, to follow closely at their heels. Wilson split his forces to head south along three main thoroughfares – Granny White, Hillsboro and Franklin Pikes. Waiting for them along the Franklin Pike was a brigade of Louisiana infantry under the command of Brigadier General Randall Lee Gibson. They were a part of Major General Henry DeLamar Clayton's division of Stewart's Corps. Gibson's Brigade had been run off from Missionary Ridge, Tennessee more than a year before where they ended up keeping the enemy at bay while the rest of the army tried to flee into Georgia.

In one of the most definitive actions on December 17, Gibson straddled the pike with his six regiments and two battalions. In the middle of the road, lay the 19th Louisiana Infantry Regiment. Wilson's cavalry units encountered a strong force determined to keep them at bay while the rest of their comrades retreated south. As the 2nd Brigade of the US Colored Infantry advanced along the pike, the Louisianans laid down a heavy fire on them from their Union manufactured Springfield rifled muskets. The 19th Louisiana had captured enough of them at Chickamauga, Georgia, to re-arm the entire regiment. Leading the way for the Union was the 13th USCI. The withering fire caused the 13th to halt their advance down the pike and a foray forward by some

nearby Confederates netted them a valued prize. All along the Southern line, they passed around the captured regimental flag of the 13th USCI, inscribed with the phrase, “Presented by the Colored Ladies of Murfreesboro.” Hood’s rear guard had proven there was still some fight left in the Army of Tennessee.

Finally, Hood’s army crossed back into Mississippi, courtesy of yet another determined Confederate rear guard action. This was performed by eight small, decimated brigades under the command of Major General Edward Cary Walthall. With some carefully positioned artillery batteries up the river to hold off the Union naval vessels, Walthall managed to cover the extraction of most of the Army of Tennessee to the south side of the river. A dejected Hood would soon turn over his command to General Richard Taylor, thus ending the disastrous 1864 Nashville Campaign.

The *New York Times* reported in January 1865, that it received a copy of the telegram that Thomas fired off to President Lincoln stating, “I beg to present you as a Christmas gift, the city of Nashville, with 150 heavy guns and plenty of ammunition, and also about 25,000 bales of cotton. While not having the flair that Sherman did when he presented Savannah, Georgia to Lincoln the previous month, Thomas was able to still hold his head high.
