

Charge Met Charge in Bloody Battle of Franklin

Federal Reserves Turned the Tide

By VICTOR HICKEN
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It was one of those tricks of war wherein fate takes an uncertain hand. All that Hood had needed to do, up to that point, was to close the door to Franklin, and victory would have been his. But the trap had failed.

On Up the Road

Schofield disappeared up the Franklin road, trailing Opdyke's brigade behind him as a rear guard designed to fight off any possible sallies by Forrest's cavalry.

He was now free to join the rest of Thomas' force in Nashville for a defense of that city. An angry frustration overcame Hood. He lashed his subordinates as only a raw Texan could. Schofield's escape had been their fault, he asserted. Now he would be forced to catch the escaping Union army and launch a frontal attack. With luck, and the undoubted bravery of his troops, the victory could yet be his.

Schofield, meanwhile, had already reached Franklin. There, on the outskirts of the town, he hurriedly dug trenches and constructed works in the shape of an elongated horseshoe, with both ends anchored upon the Harpeth river. At the apex of the horseshoe, the most vital part of the Union defensive line, was the Carter House—a lovely brick mansion, still standing, which was to become a most significant feature of the battle.

Out in Front

Two other factors should be mentioned concerning the Union defenses. The first concerned the disposition of two Union brigades, which were thrown out in a rather desultory fashion forward of the main defensive works.

It is difficult to assume, even to this day, just what Schofield had in mind when he disposed of these men in this manner, unless he felt they would provide some sort of forewarning of the main Confederate attack. At any rate, both brigade commanders had been given a rather firm set of orders instructing them to fire briefly at any advancing force, then retreat into the main works.

The second factor concerned Opdyke's brigade. These men had done a good deal of hard work in the previous two days, and consequently were marched into the Union reserve, which rested on the slopes to the rear of the Carter house.

Not far away, General Hood lay nearly exhausted on the ground, his head resting upon



A few years ago a Northern visitor stopped at Franklin's Carter House, where the Confederate flag is displayed. "Where's the American flag?" she asked. "Weren't our boys here too?"

Indeed they were. And here is a dramatic account of the Battle of Franklin written by a Northerner—Victor Hicken. Dr. Hicken is a professor of history at Western Illinois University at Macomb, Illinois. His account of the battle, originally written for the Chicago Tribune, appears in this Anniversary Edition with the permission of the Tribune and the author.

his grounded saddle. From this position he issued the necessary orders for the attack. There was to be no fancy hairsplitting strategy to this battle. Hood would merely launch a crushing charge at the Union center, near the Carter House, splintering Schofield's army into halves. Then, with the Yankee backs pinned to the Harpeth river, Hood would save the dying cause of the Confederacy by winning an astounding victory.

The Union troops watched, meanwhile, as their opponents paraded in line of attack. And inside the Carter house, the Carter family, or all that remained of it—a father, son and two daughters—huddled with the smoked hams in the cellar while Confederate shells screamed over their heads. They, as well as the Union soldiers outside, knew that just down the road, wearing the Confederate gray, were two other members of the family.

Furious Exchange

It was after 3 p.m. when Hood mounted his attack, hitting first the two detached regiments forward of the Union line. The men defending these trenches almost made the fatal mistake of the day. Ordered to fire only one or two volleys and then retreat, their colonels held them in line and a furious exchange of fire resulted.

Only for a moment were the Confederates checked. They swept forward in one compulsive surge, tearing the two brigades from their moorings and sweeping them back toward the Carter House.

Union works was that of a thunderclap. Hood's lines hurled with tremendous force against Schofield's defenses, particularly the line of trenches forward of the Carter house.

Three defending regiments were pushed from their trenches, partly from the rush of the attackers and partly

because they were handicapped by the fear of shooting some of the men from the two retreating Union brigades in front of them. Only the 72nd Illinois, a hard-hitting regiment which had just arrived from Louisiana, kept its position, and the black hats of these sturdy defenders could be seen bobbing up and down as the men fired and loaded their rifles. The moment of crisis for Schofield's army had arrived.

The men of Opdyke's brigade, meanwhile, were relaxing in safety behind the Carter House, sipping coffee and broiling bacon over small fires—the first warm food they had had a chance to eat in some time. The staccato drumfire of musketry was a sound to which they were well accustomed.

Then, in a moment, they heard a different and familiarly ominous sound. It was the thin, high-pitched crescendo of cheers and shouts; the indication that the Confederates

had broken the center of the Union line.

Even after 100 years, it is not easy to reconstruct the sequence of events at this stage of the battle. Opdyke's men were seasoned veterans who recognized instinctively the seriousness of the Confederate cheers.

They leaped to their feet, quickly unstacked their rifles, and with the seriousness of men who had a distasteful but necessary duty to perform, moved quickly into the line of battle.

Opdyke himself surmised what had to be done and shouted, "First Brigade, forward to the works!" But by the time the order was issued some of his men were already well on their way.

When Opdyke's brigade reached the spot at which the Confederate breakthrough had occurred, an indescribable melee resulted. Bravery became a common commodity in a common place—the yard of a Tennessee home.

There was an element of desperation present on both sides—the Confederates because of Hood's anger at failing to trap the Union force at Spring Hill, and the Union men because they realized, even more than their generals, that the break in the line must be mended. It was later written by a captain of the 72d Illinois, and with a great deal of truth, that this was "a private soldier's battle, the sum of its strategy being to hold and occupy a few square feet upon which the soldiers stood to the last."

Yell and Bound

The regimental historian of the 72d Illinois was to write in later years that Opdyke's men had come into the battle with a "yell and a bound" flinging "epithets" at the retreating Union regiments, and bayoneting and clubbing their way into the Confederate ranks. A Union general, far to the left of the Carter House, compared the charge to a tornado, and said the Union soldiers looked as if they were "breasting a furious gale with strained muscles and set teeth."

What of Opdyke himself? Mounting his horse quickly, he had leaped into the fray. Almost immediately, however, the animal was shot, and its rider pitched directly into the path of the advancing Confederates. Acrobatically, the officer rolled over, grabbed a musket from an enemy's hands, and clubbed him with it.

It was at this moment, commented an Illinois soldier, that the musket firing ceased. "No one could stop to load. No shots were fired; the fight was now hand to hand, breast to breast, and the cold, gleaming, pitiless bayonet was the instrument of death."

Silent War

For one brief instant, this was war as it might have been fought 300 years earlier. There were only the sounds of musket butts thudding against flesh, and the cries of pain, anger or encouragement. Soon, some of the men began to reload their weapons, and the sharp, staccato sounds of musketry began again.

To the right of the Carter House the sturdy 72nd Illinois continued to hold. Two lieutenant were killed while firing their pistols at the charging Confederate line only 20 feet away. One black-hatted member of the regiment, overcome by the emotion of the battle, angrily charged the advancing Confederate line armed only with a pickaxe which he had found in the trench behind him.

Thrown back twice, Hood's brave and frustrated army came on again and again. An Illinois captain would remember two decades later that the roar of musketry quieted at times to an almost absolute silence, "only to be followed by a return 'to the loudest fury.'"

of his men. Another was the undeniably high number of casualties among general and regimental officers on both sides.

Early in the attack the Union general, David S. Stanley, was wounded and taken off the field. And along the Confederate line, as if inspired by a death wish, general officers charged and died with their men.

Cleburne Killed

The brilliant Gen. Pat Cleburne, hero of a dozen fights, was torn from his horse by a musket ball and killed, as was Gen. Hiram Granbury.

Gen. John Adams pitched off his horse and died in the ranks of an Illinois regiment. Generals Otho Strahl and States Rights Gist were killed in front of Illinois regiments. Generals J. C. Brown, A. M. Manigault, William Quarles, Francis Marion Cockrell, G. W. Gordon, Thomas Scott and J. C. Carter were wounded in the savage fighting.

It was the death of young Theodorick (Tod) Carter that added an extra sense of poignancy to the battle. Shortly after sunset, when the fighting had ended, one of the young Carter girls left her shelter in the cellar to go aid to the wounded. There, on the parapet in front of the house, she found her dying brother. He had come home.

In the seven or eight hours of fighting, Hood had suffered 6242 casualties in his army of 27,000 Confederate soldiers, a loss which doomed his attempt to defeat. Thomas at Nashville some time later. Casualties among the 28,000 Union soldiers totaled only 2,326.

32 Flags Taken

Almost as important, from the standpoint of morale, was the fact that 32 Confederate battle flags had been taken at the breastworks by the defenders—10 of them by Opdyke's brigade alone.

As the Union artillery finally ceased firing, and its sounds were replaced by the moans of the Confederate wounded in the fields beyond the Carter house, two Illinois officers were discussing the outcome of the fight. "We ought to remain here and wipe hell out of 'em," one said.

"There is no hell left in them," said the other. "Don't you hear them praying?" As for Opdyke's brigade, the unit which had saved the day for Schofield, there was some well-earned recognition. Some months later, when Pap Thomas held his last grand review in Nashville, Opdyke's men were halted by the commanding general in front of the reviewing stand. Thomas had a final request to make of these tough westerners. Would they go into formation and make one last charge?

Quickly, the 88th Illinois moved into a skirmish line, followed by the 36th and 44th Illinois, and the other regiments deployed in line of battle. With a great whoop, Opdyke's heroes made a glorious bayonet charge against their air.

THE AMERICAN Civil War was filled with moments of desperation and courage as well as sheer circumstance, when the tipping of the scale of fortune, the carelessness in the giving of a command, or an impetuous incident turned the tide of battle from one side to the other.

There was, for instance, that incident involving the cigar wrapped with Lee's orders to Jackson and Longstreet, which fell into McClellan's hands, tipping off the Union general to Confederate plans just prior to the battle of Antietam.

There was that fateful 20th of September, 1863, when a Union army under Rosecrans was split asunder at Chickamauga because of the commanding general's unfortunate lapse of memory and a coincidental attack by Longstreet's men, who had just arrived on the field.

Unique Battle

Of all such incidents, however, the most fascinating is one which occurred in 1864 at the lesser known Battle of Franklin. This battle was unique. And it had a little of the mystique, the romance and glory of a dying cause, and the odds and ends of little possibilities which were to bring tragedy to one side and triumph to the other.

It also contained a brief moment of destiny for a Union brigade commanded by a dashing Ohio colonel, Emerson Opdyke. This brigade consisted of seven regiments: Opdyke's own 125th Ohio, the "Tigers"; the 24th Wisconsin, commanded by an able young major, Arthur MacArthur, who was later to sire an eminent hero of World War II; and five from Illinois—the 36th, the 44th, the 73rd (oddly known as the "Preachers Regiment"), the 74th and the 88th.

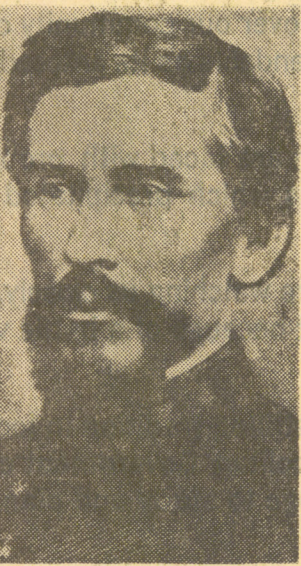
Circumstances built slowly toward the fateful battle. After Sherman's capture of Atlanta, the Confederate general, John Bell Hood, determined upon a seemingly logical method of drawing the invader out of Georgia. He would reorganize and replenish the Army of Tennessee south of Atlanta, then lead it in a whirlwind campaign into Tennessee. He would, so he contemplated, drive toward Nashville, defeat the Union forces there, and, if that did not bring Sherman back in a hurry, he might even go into Ohio.

Sherman Counters

Sherman, preparing for his daring march to the sea, countered by sending two Union corps under Gen. George (Pap) Thomas to check Hood.

By Nov. 27, one of the Union corps and elements of the second, commanded by a phlegmatic Freeport, Ill., general, John M. Schofield, were outflanked and on the verge of being bottled up by Hood's forces. The Union troops were building a series of works on the Duck River. Hood's cavalry, under the ubiquitous Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, had crossed the river above them and begun building a bridge about eight miles north of Columbia.

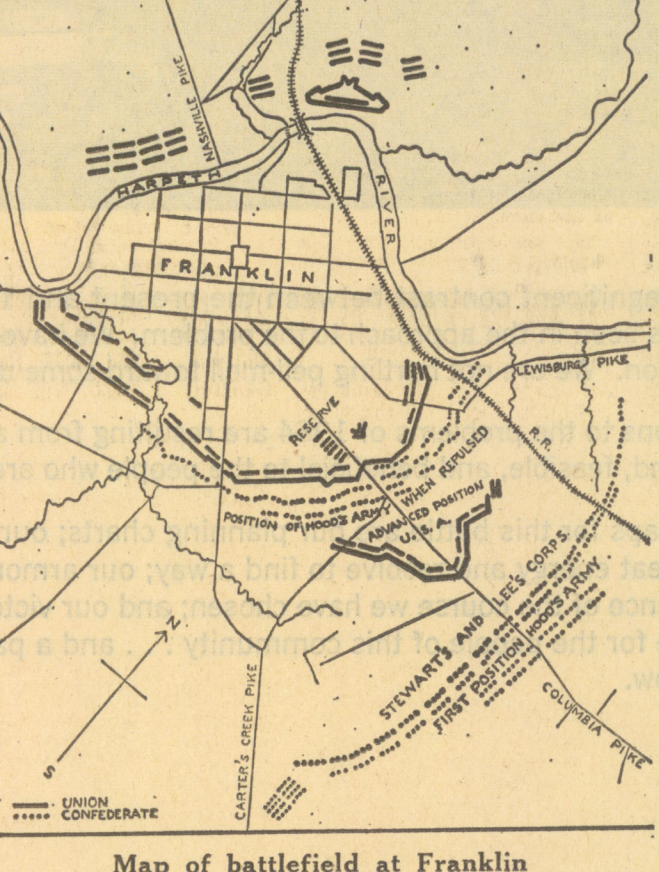
It appeared to most of the Federal officers, excepting Schofield, who was slow to grasp the situation, that Hood would attempt to cut the Union retreat at Spring Hill, a position between Columbia and Franklin. Were Hood to succeed it would result in an astounding victory to the Confederate cause.



Gen. Pat Cleburne, CSA
He charged and died

In the end, of course, Schofield came to comprehend Hood's plan and reacted accordingly, sending an entire Union division on a forced march north to hold open the road to Franklin. One of the three brigades in the division was Opdyke's.

As it turned out, the gesture was just enough to save Schofield's army. There was a little skirmish near Spring Hill and another near Thompson's Station. Then, under the cover of darkness, Schofield marched his men through the uneven terrain within a half mile of Hood's unknowing pickets, so close to the Confederate campfires that Union troops could catch the scent of bacon.



Map of battlefield at Franklin



The Carter House at Franklin

Franklin Was Bloodier Than Shiloh, Stone's River

FRANKLIN is not generally listed as one of the great battles of the Civil War, since the forces engaged were relatively small. It was, however, one of the fiercest and bloodiest battles of the war. Gen. Jacob D. Cox, commander of the Federal

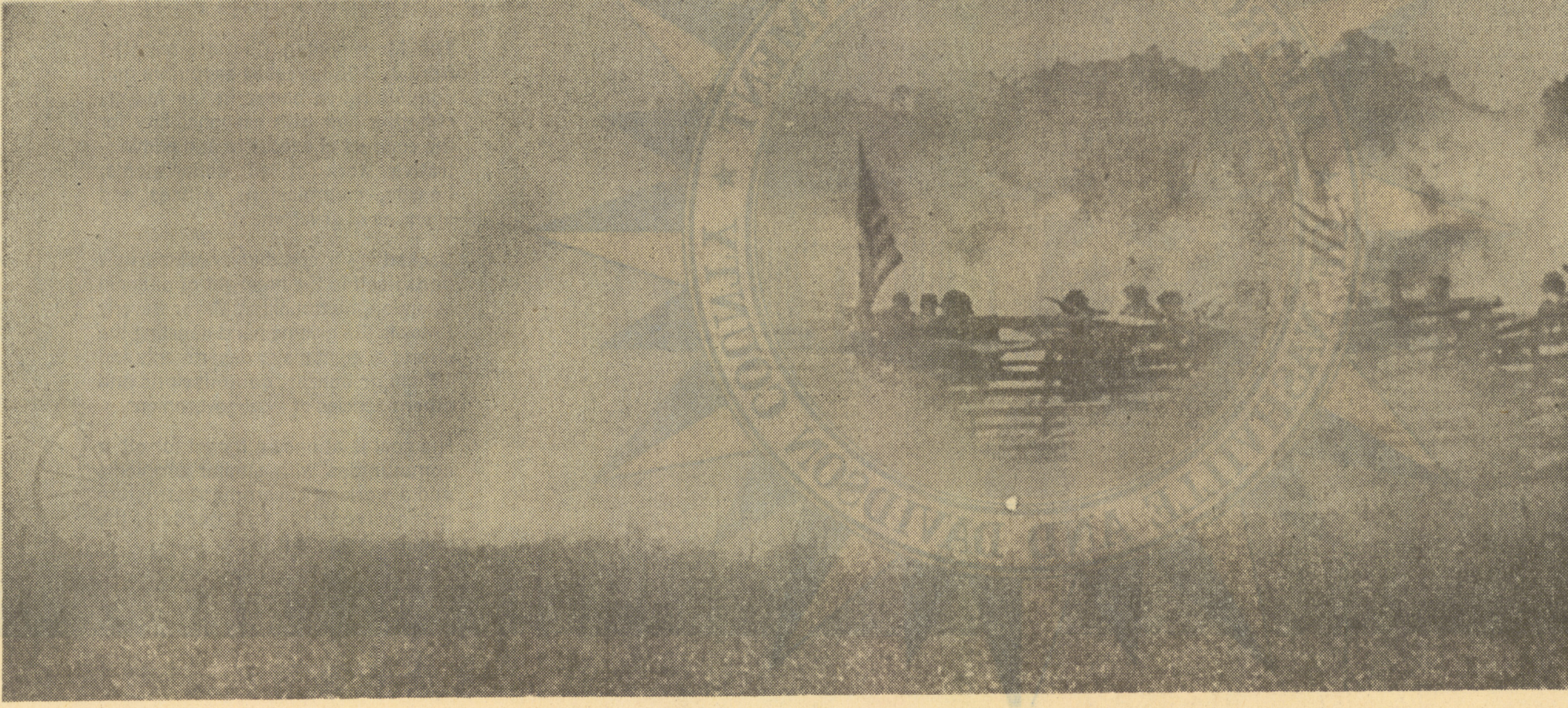
battle line at Franklin, summed it up: "The comparative smallness of the opposing armies is likely to lead to an under estimate of the desperate character of the fighting. . . . It is enough now to note that Hood had more men killed at Franklin than died on one side in some of the great conflicts of the war when three, four, or even five

times as many men were engaged. "His killed were more than Grant's at Shiloh, McClellan's in the Seven-day battle, Burnside's at Fredericksburg, Rosecrans' at Stone's River or at Chickamauga, Hooker's at Chancellorsville, and almost as many as Grant's at Cold Harbor. The concentration in time, in those few hours of a winter's afternoon and evening, makes the comparison still more telling."

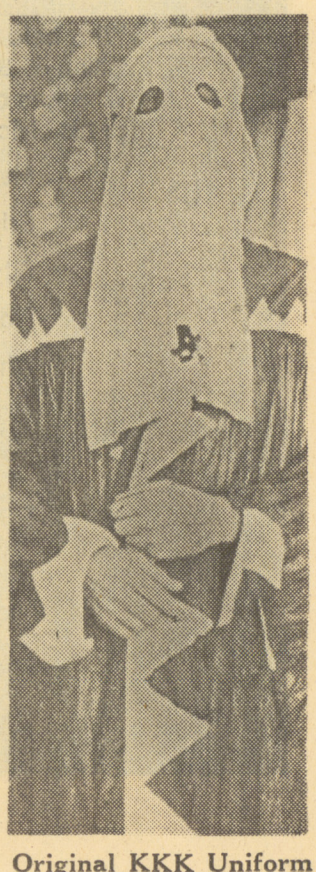
In his "Army of Tennessee" Stanley F. Horn wrote of the Battle of Franklin: "Perhaps its only rival for macabre distinction would be Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. A comparison of the two may be of interest. "Pickett's total loss at Gettysburg was 1,354; at Franklin the Army of Tennessee lost over 6,000 dead and wounded. Pickett's charge was made after a volcanic artillery preparation of two hours had bat-

tered the defending line. Hood's army charged without a n y preparation. Pickett's charge was across an open space of perhaps a mile. The advance at Franklin was for two miles in the open, in full view of the enemy's works, and exposed to their fire. "The defenders at Gettysburg were protected only by a stone wall. Schofield's men at Franklin were protected by carefully constructed works

with trench and parapet. Pickett's charge was totally repulsed. The charge of Brown and Cleburne penetrated deep into the breastworks, to parts of which they clung until the enemy retired. Pickett, once repelled, retired from the field. The Army of Tennessee renewed their charge, time after time. Pickett survived his charge unscathed. Cleburne was killed and 11 other general officers killed, wounded or captured."



This photo, made from a 1923 re-enactment of the Battle of Franklin, shows defense of the Federal right flank by soldiers of the Fourth Corps.



Original KKK Uniform Worn in Franklin