

100 Years Ago: Battle of Nashville

The End Came on Shy's Hill

Granny White Pike, Harding Place Marks the Scene of Hood's Defeat

By HUGH WALKER

A HUNDRED YEARS ago the thunder of heavy guns shook homes around Nashville. Powder smoke curled around proud battle flags of the Blue and the Gray. The cries of wounded men, the harsh commands of officers and the popping of small arms fire echoed off the hills.

At 4 o'clock, on the afternoon of December 16, the artillery fire suddenly ceased around a high hill west of Granny White Pike at what is now Harding Place—farm land then but now in the residential section of Metropolitan Nashville.

As the cannon hushed 25,000 men in the Confederate Army of Tennessee, led by their crippled general, John Bell Hood, drove home their ramrods and waited behind their breastworks. They knew what was coming.

Gen. George H. Thomas' Federal army of 55,000 men took a deep breath, cheered mightily and began to charge. From three sides they came—climbing, stumbling, holding to saplings. Confederate bullets stopped some—but not enough—and as the men in blue jumped into the breastworks, the men in gray were turning.

Turning Point

It was the turning point in the great Civil War Battle of Nashville—the battle that ended the war in the West and foretold the end at Appomattox.

The stage had been set for battle two weeks before when the Confederate Army of Tennessee marched within sight and sound of the city, looking for a fight. Its tattered banners, rising above the knobs, could be dimly seen through the smoke of innumerable campfires.

There was no good reason, most historians say, for the Army of Tennessee to be there. It was a battered but not a beaten army, hoping to change its luck. It had fought at Stone's River, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge and Atlanta in ice and snow, mud and dust, leaving blood on every battlefield. And two weeks before it had lost a quarter of its strength to the picket stakes and minie balls at Franklin.

Gen. John B. Hood, commanding the army, had lost a leg and the use of an arm in previous battles, but he had not lost the will to fight. And it was because he willed it that the army was there, digging into familiar soil, risking whatever the enemy had to offer.

Hood had decided to push on to Nashville after the Battle of Franklin for reasons his biographer, Dyer, said were almost pathetic. "The situation being hopeless, he decided to advance."

Hood put it another way. "Our army was in that condition," he wrote, "which rendered it more judicious than the men should face a decisive issue rather than retreat."

What Hood's men thought about it is another matter. In

Map on back page of section.

the past two years they had faced many "decisive issues." And for the space, time and number of men engaged, Franklin had been the bloodiest of them all. Most were poorly clothed. Some wrapped their feet because they had no shoes. They were not equipped to withstand the bitter weather that sometimes closes in on Nashville in December.

Sam Watkins described the situation of Hood's army from the point of view of a private soldier:

"We bivouac on the cold and hard frozen ground. The earth is crusted with snow, and the wind is piercing our very bones. We can see our ragged soldiers, with sunken cheeks and famine-glistening eyes. Where were our generals? Alas! There were none. General B. F. Cheatham himself was the only surviving general of his old division."

"A few raw-boned horses stood shivering under the ice-covered trees, nibbling the short, scanty grass. We were not allowed to have fires at night, and our thin and ragged blankets were but poor protection against the cold, raw blasts of December weather—the coldest ever known. I can tell you nothing of what was going on among the generals. But there we were."

Having taken up his position in the hills south of Nashville, the Confederate commander had two weeks—although he had no way of

knowing that—to prepare for battle. He did what he could.

First Hood ordered the construction of small redoubts or fortifications on his flanks, intended to check enemy attacks from that quarter. The best known of these, since they were to figure in the battle, were those along the Hillsboro Pike.

Five Forts

There were five of these redoubts, the first two on the east side of the pike near the present Woodmont Boulevard connected by the Confederate line. The last three were detached, and were located west of the pike, about a mile apart, extending southward. The last in line, Number 5, was the present home of Clark Gower.

Hood's next move was to divide Forrest's Cavalry, sending Chalmers' division to his left wing to operate between the redoubts and the Cumberland River. With his remaining two divisions Forrest set out along the railroad to Murfreesboro, destroying track and blockhouses as he went.

Hood later detached Gen. William B. Bate's division, along with the small brigades of Sears and Palmer, for an attack on the Federal garrison at Murfreesboro. This "Third Battle of Murfreesboro" was fought on Overall's Creek. The upshot of it was the Federal attack troops behind breastworks. But when the great battle was still in the vicinity of Murfreesboro, and his absence was a sad loss for the Confederates. One of Forrest's divisions, Buford's, was sent back to the vicinity of Hermitage, on the Lebanon Road.

To the west, below Nashville on the river, Chalmers sent Lt. Col. David Kelley with two pieces of artillery to a point opposite Bell's Mill, 12 miles below Nashville, blockading the river. Kelley was one day too late, however, to block major Federal reinforcement coming up the Cumberland.

Within the City

Meanwhile, as all this was going on beyond the suburbs, the Federals in Nashville had problems of their own.

General George H. Thomas, an old army man from Virginia, had made a reputation for himself at Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge. But he was not in the good graces of the Federal commander in chief, U. S. Grant. Thomas, Grant believed, was "slow" on the offensive.

On November 30, the day Hood's attacks were beaten back at Franklin, Thomas had but 5,000 men in Nashville. On the next day he had 50,000.

As the Federal army of two corps streamed in from Franklin, A. J. Smith's corps arrived by river from Missouri, and

Steedman brought miscellaneous forces from Chattanooga.

Thomas now had two men for every man in Hood's army, and within a few days his force had reached 55,000—no more than enough, he thought to attack troops behind breastworks. But the Federal commander had another matter to attend to—he wanted to re-

equip Gen. James H. Wilson's cavalry.

Thomas was an old cavalryman himself, and he appreciated the value of that arm of the service. He recognized the 27-year-old Wilson as an able young general, and he wanted to give him a force that could meet and over power Confed-

erate cavalrymen under that "Wizard of the Saddle," Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Wilson got the best. Thomas scoured the country for horses, taking every one he could find except those owned by the widow of President James K. Polk and teams belonging to the lunatic asylum. Circus horses visiting the city, and the fine teams owned by Governor Andrew Johnson were impressed for service. Across the river, in Edgefield, Wilson shod his horses and drew new clothing and equipment. Within 10 days he had 12,000 cavalrymen organized in three divisions, 9,000 of them

mounted. All of these men were armed with the new Spencer repeater holding seven cartridges in the magazine and one in the chamber. It was a weapon that gave them a tremendous firepower advantage over the Confederates, firing single-shot muzzle loaders. Thomas did well to take his time in equipping this splendid mobile force, for it was to turn the tide of battle when the showdown came.

Hard Lessons

As for Wilson himself, he was one of the most colorful commanders in either army. He had served as a staff officer under McClellan and Grant, and as a cavalry officer had learned some hard lessons in combat with N. B. Forrest. Taking a leaf from the Confederate veteran's book, he used horses to transport his men to the scene of action, left the horses out of range and sent his men into battle on foot. This spared the horses and reduced by two-thirds the size of the target presented the enemy.

Thomas had still another problem in making his army uncomfortable in Nashville as Hood was in the cold hills. He did not enjoy the confidence

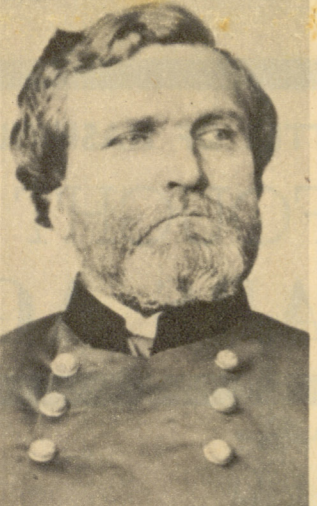
It Turned Cold

On the eighth of December, with little more than a week (Turn to Page 4)



Federal troops charge up Shy's Hill and break the Confederate line to decide the Battle of Nashville.

—Staff Painting by Jim Young



Gen. George H. Thomas The victor at Nashville

What If the South Had Won at Nashville?

By STANLEY F. HORN

IT IS HARD to imagine anything more unprofitable and ineffective than to speculate on the "ifs" of history. Somehow or other, however, such speculation holds an irresistible fascination for those who enjoy studying the by-paths as well as the main-traveled highways of our historical background.

Suppose, for instance, that the Moors had defeated Charles Martel at the battle of Tours in 732 A.D. Would this have resulted in a Moslem Europe, with Christianity reduced to a fugitive splinter sect?

Suppose some less towering and indomitable figure than George Washington had been the leader of the ragged, half-starved soldiers of the American Revolution. Would the continent now be one of the brightest stars in the crown of a still powerful British empire?

Suppose Adolf Hitler had had the courage, when France and Belgium had surrendered, to press on across the English Channel and overpower a well-trained British army. Would this have resulted in a negotiated peace which might have averted the tragedy of World War II?

Or, to localize these might-have-beens of history, suppose the outcome of the Battle of Nashville in December, 1864, had been reversed. What if the Federal forces under General Thomas had been defeated and scattered, with Nashville and its vast store of military supplies in the hands of a victorious Confederate army, with no potent force of organized Federal troops to stand in the way of its advance northward?

A fantastic idea? General U. S. Grant, whose military judgment is highly respected, didn't think so. He envisioned the probability of such a Confederate army, flushed with victory, marching on to the Ohio River and occupying the Northern cities—Louisville, Cincinnati, Chicago—virtually unopposed. And would not the Confederate occupation of any one of these cities have

changed the whole military picture a hundred years ago?

With the Confederate flag flying over occupied Cincinnati or Chicago, Sherman's army on its pincer march through Georgia would be hard-pressed to escape capture or dispersal, with the lustre of Sherman's military fame irreparably tarnished. Of necessity, Grant would have had to rush substantial detachments from his army in Virginia in an effort to stop the Confederate invasion of the Midwest; and Lee, relieved of pressure, might have moved on Washington with well-founded hope of success. In such circumstances, it seems safe to surmise that the administration at Washington might have

been glad to accept a peace without victory.

Another Destiny

General Grant said in his "Memoirs" that if the Confederates could have prolonged the war in the West into the summer of 1865, it probably would have been necessary to concede the independence of the seceded states. In such an event, what would have been the destiny of the people and the territory now making up the United States?

Some students of history think that the Confederate States of America, even though it had gained its independence, might have had difficulty in surviving as such. Even though its ship of state did not split asunder on the rock of states' rights, it might have found it desirable eventually, in self-defense, to renege with the Northern states or to seek alliance with some powerful foreign nation.

Admittedly, all such speculation is an idle waste of time, based on guesswork, with one man's guess as good as another's. But, anyhow, it will always be interesting to dream of what might have been the consequent course of the stream of history if Chicago had been awakened some morning in early 1865 by the clatter of Bedford Forrest's horses on its cobblestone streets amid the piercing screech of his troops' rebel yell.

Any such dream, of course, is predicated on the assumption that the Battle of Nashville was THE decisive battle of the War Between the States. In this a reasonably supportable assumption? Before answering too quickly, let us consider the pertinent facts, as recorded in history.

None Better

The Battle of Nashville "has been generally accepted as a perfect exemplification of the art of war," according to one distinguished military authority. In the words of another historian, "No battle of the war was better planned, and none was so nearly carried out to the letter of the plan as the Battle of Nashville. It has been

gained its independence, could have maintained it is, obviously, a question for which there is today no certain answer. One thing that does seem certain, however, is that if the Union had been divided in 1865, instead of being pinned together with bayonets, stretching from ocean to ocean, might well have been organized into two—or three or four—independent republics which could have lived peacefully side by side, perhaps with treaties of mutual defense.

Whether the Confederate States of America, having

refreshment and preparation, and then the two adversaries were at each other's throats again.

And so the war dragged on—until the Battle of Nashville, the climactic engagement. After Nashville there were no more battles of material import. Within four months the war was over.

Turning the Left

To appreciate the supreme significance and importance of the Battle of Nashville, it should be borne in mind that the over-all, big-scale strategy of the Federal armies was to turn the Confederate left. The first effective step in this direction was taken when the Federals captured Fort Henry and Donelson early in 1862, giving them control of the important Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. Later, in 1863, the fall of Vicksburg completed the Federal conquest of the Mississippi and cut the Confederacy in half. But so long as the Army of Tennessee remained in the field as an effective fighting force, the Confederate left flank, however straitened and hard

pressed, could be maintained intact.

It was not until the Army of Tennessee was crushed at Nashville that the fate of the Confederacy was sealed. After that it was merely a matter of time; the ultimate outcome of the war was then beyond question. On the other hand, had the Confederates won the Battle of Nashville and thereafter carried their battle-flags to the banks of the Ohio in a vigorous offensive movement, as they would have been able to do, the whole aspect of the military situation would have been changed.

There has been an inclination on the part of too many historians and writers to assume that the Confederate defeat at Nashville, and that Hood's plan to capture the city and its rich store of ammunition and supplies were fantastic. It can not be too strongly emphasized, however, that nobody seemed to think it fantastic at the time. On the contrary, General Grant's almost hysterical telegrams to General Thomas, the Federal commander at Nashville, revealed a very genuine fear that Hood's plan of campaign would be successful—an apprehension that was shared by Chief of Staff Henry W. Halleck, Secretary of War Stanton and President Lincoln.

Grant, then in supreme command of all the Federal military effort in all theaters of action, was keenly aware of the dire consequences to the Federal cause if Nashville should fall, thereby freeing Hood's Army of Tennessee to operate offensively through Kentucky to the north and west, with Nashville as a well-stocked base of supplies. Grant not only did not consider Hood's plan impractical or foredoomed to failure, but in discussing it after the war attributed its failure to Hood's lack of enterprise. "If I had been in Hood's place," Grant said, "I would have gone to I came to Chicago. . . . I was

erated cavalrymen under that "Wizard of the Saddle," Nathan Bedford Forrest.

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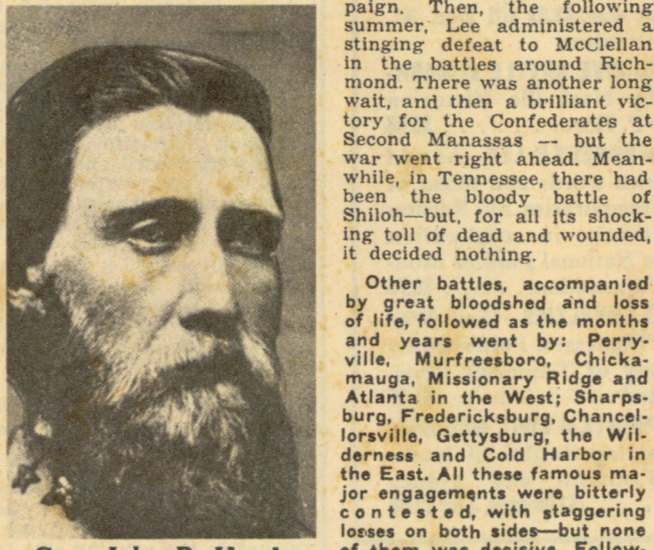
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N. B. Forrest in Chicago?

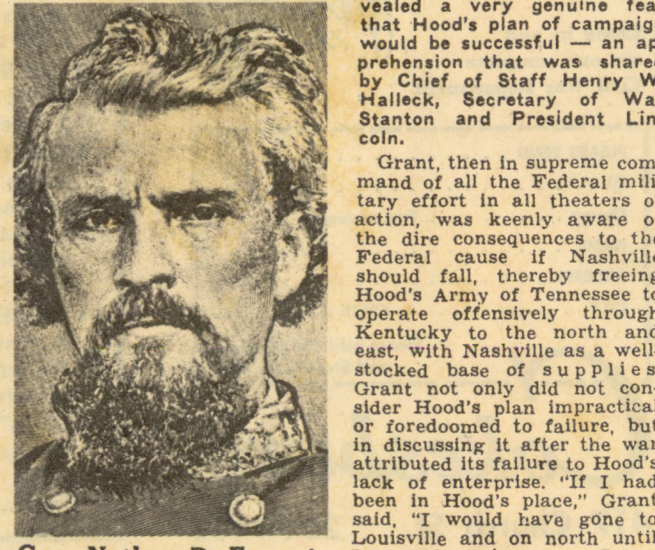


Stanley Horn

Stanley F. Horn, author, editor and chairman of the Tennessee Civil War Centennial Commission, is one of the nation's foremost authorities on the Civil War and the Battle of Nashville. In this article, based on years of experience and study, he examines a startling hypothetical question: "What if the South had won?"



Gen. John B. Hood If they had reached...



Gen. Nathan B. Forrest ... The Ohio River!

(Turn to Page 4)