

Bigger, and Worse, than Pickett's Charge?

For many people, the so-called Pickett's Charge during the third day at Gettysburg epitomized many characteristics, including foolish gallantry, excessive blood-letting, and debatable tactics, of and about the Civil War. Not only is Gettysburg the most famous of all Civil War battles, but the repulse of Pickett's Charge, following 1,200 dead Confederates, is seen by many as a major tipping point in the entire war. Much of its notoriety is perpetuated by the popularity of the battleground at Gettysburg and the ease by which visitors can visualize, even retrace, almost all aspects of the charge. But was it the biggest, most tactically significant assault of its kind during the four years of the war? To compare let's look at Pickett's Charge along with at least three other similar charges in chronological order. (And it might be useful to refer to maps of the respective battles on the Civil War Trust website.)

Malvern Hill, Virginia – July 1, 1862. This was the last of the Seven Days Battles as the Federal army under George McClellan retreated south from the Richmond area to the James River. (See Seven Days Timetable on this website.) Against the advice of some of his subordinate commanders, R. E. Lee – believing the Union troops were demoralized -- decided to launch an all-out assault in the hopes finally destroying McClellan's army.

Malvern Hill slopes to a plateau 150 feet above the surrounding topography. Its clear hillsides created ideal terrain for a static defense, especially if supplemented with 171 pieces of artillery placed almost hub-to-hub. Once Col. Henry J. Hunt, who undoubtedly became one of the greatest artillerist in American military history, carefully placed these guns, the Union army occupied perhaps the best defensive position of the entire war.

A month earlier Lee – who had only recently assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia -- had made an unfortunate decision when he reported that he had all the artillery he needed and light mobile batteries could be transferred to “some other branch of the service.” As matters would unfold on July 1, 1862, Lee's army could have used all the guns it could muster. The disparity between the respective artillery branches was reinforced by the near incompetence of BGen. William N. Pendleton, a pleasant man who was also Lee's close friend and artillery

chief. Somehow Lee still thought his outnumbered artillery could out duel the Yanks.

After staying overnight at Malvern Hall, by mid-morning McClellan returned to the river, having given up. On the other hand, Malvern Hill had to be one of Lee's worst command blunders ever, being poorly planned and badly executed. A local citizen had warned D. H. Hill, who passed the message along to Lee and James Longstreet, one of Lee's primary lieutenants, that the Rebels would better leave Malvern Hill alone if the Union army was there in force, a warning that Longstreet, in Lee's presence, scornfully disregarded. Lee's ability to discern or gauge his adversary's attitude and/or intentions from across a battlefield was normally one of his great strengths. But in this instance Lee accurately sensed McClellan's unnerved state but also mistakenly projected that attitude upon the men in the ranks, as well for that matter upon McClellan's senior subordinates.

Lee seemingly had little control over his lieutenants, his vague, verbal orders being misconstrued either by his staff or subordinate commanders. Lee accepted Longstreet's proposal to establish two grand batteries but Rebel gunners could not assemble more than a few batteries at a time, which the Federal batteries destroyed in detail. After receiving erroneous reports that the Federals were withdrawing, by mid-day the Confederates began piecemeal frontal assaults. Apparently the Rebels had confused Hunt's adjustments of gun placements with overall movement to the rear; instead, the Union artillery and rifle fire were murderously rendering unabated butchery upon hell-bent assaults. These assaults seemed so senseless that Union defenders surmised that whiskey must have given the Rebel attackers enough courage to continue their heroic charges in the face of such unrelenting, ferocious fire from artillery as well as from infantry muskets. One such charge was led by BGen. Lewis Armistead, who advanced to within 150 yards of the Union defenses before falling back to a safer position. Reflecting Lee's lack of control over his subordinates, Armistead's charge, as were several other such assaults, began after Lee had ordered that the attacks cease and desist.

This carnage lasted a little more than four hours during which the Confederates suffered 5,355 casualties versus 3,214 losses suffered by the Federals. Malvern Hill was one of the few Civil War battles, if not the only, where artillery inflicted more casualties than did infantry. D. H. Hill would later lament about the

frontal assaults, “It was not war – It was murder.” A Virginian later reflected that. “At no other time did I so realize the horrors of a battle field.”

Some of the Union’s corps commanders wanted to hold their positions on Malvern Hill, and indeed Fitz-John Porter – McClellan’s most loyal subordinate -- even urged a counterattack. Nevertheless, per McClellan’s orders Union forces continued their withdrawal – leaving their wounded on the field -- to Harrison’s Landing where they could be protected by gun boats, where they could be resupplied via the James, and where they remained a threat to Richmond, only 19 miles to the northwest as the crow flies.

Upon realizing that Harrison’s Landing was McClellan’s objective, Lee had several options other than chasing the Federals to, and then assaulting the Federals at, Malvern Hill. These options included: (1) Since the James River narrows upstream there were ideal locations on the south bank for Rebel batteries to sink Union transports thus impeding McClellan’s route of retreat and/or means of resupply; (2) Instead of a frontal assault on Malvern Hill, Lee could have by-passed Malvern Hill and headed with the bulk of his army directly for Harrison’s Landing, on McClellan’s rear; or (3) As recommended by Longstreet, Lee could have sent artillery to Evelynton Heights which rises about Harrison’s Landing and dominates miles of surrounding terrain. Unfortunately for the lads clad in gray or butternut, Lee decided to launch frontal assaults against outstanding defensive positions on the slopes of Malvern Hill.

Had Lee decided to by-pass Malvern Hill with the bulk of his army instead to go straight to seize Harrison’s Landing while dispatching his artillery with supporting infantry to Evelynton Heights, not only would he have avoided the debacle and bloodbath of Malvern Hill, he would have placed McClellan’s army in the untenable position of either surrendering or else striking the Confederates who would be enjoying excellent defensive position. But the command philosophy at that period of the war was to assault the rear against a retreat rather than to try to block the path of the retreating army. Blocking the path of a retreat would not have been a new concept but had often been used by Napoleon half a century earlier. Given Lee’s education and experience, including his stint as Superintendent of West Point, it begs the question why he had not given more consideration to Napoleon’s preferred maneuver.

Pickett's Charge; Gettysburg, Pennsylvania -- July 2, 1863. By nightfall of Day Two of Gettysburg, R. E. Lee believed he was at the cusp of achieving a hugely important, decisive victory. Various historians may disagree about Lee's strategic objective for coming north into central Pennsylvania, but for whatever reason or reasons Lee had for crossing the Potomac River less than a week earlier, he was now quickly making plans and preparations to annihilate the Union's largest and most prominent army, a victory that would gain tremendous strategic importance for the Confederacy.

The historian Noah Andre Trudeau claims Lee's reasons for renewing "his offensive on July 3 were largely illusory." Illusory or not, from Lee's perspective during the evening of July 2 and morning of July 3 he still had several reasons to believe his army was in position and capable of gaining a great decisive victory for the Confederacy. For instance at the northern corner of the Union's lines, Dick Ewell's corps seemed to be in position to take Culp's Hill – the barb of the Union's Fishhook -- which if taken would give the Confederates a commanding position of much of the northern sector of the battlefield, including Federal defensive positions.

In order to parlay the Confederates' gains of Day Two into an annihilative victory, Lee planned to complete the capture of Culp's Hill while launching a massive frontal assault that would concentrate against the center of the Union lines, identified then and forever as the Copse of Trees. Lee's aim was that such a massive concentration following a lengthy cannonade would force a breach of the Union line, a rupture that would precipitate a collapse of the entire defenses along Cemetery Ridge. Lee also anticipated such a collapse would result in a mad, uncontrolled scramble to the rear; to prevent the Federal forces from escaping, Lee dispatched the cavalry of Jeb Stuart to go around the northern end of the Union positions – in other words around the Fishhook – and then to get to the Union rear where Stuart would be able to capture or kill Yankees fleeing in disarray.

However, Lee's best laid plans started to go astray from the very beginning. First, during the evening of Day Two George Meade, the still relatively new commanding general of the Federal Army of the Potomac, had anticipated Lee would attack the center of the Union lines and advised his generals to be prepared

for such an attack. Winfield Scott Hancock's 2nd Corps, probably the strongest corps in the Army of the Potomac, and led by the army's most capable commander, manned this portion of the Union lines while Meade took pains to assure reinforcements would be available during the ensuing attack. Second, pre-dawn on Day Three the Federals made a preemptive strike to recapture Culp's Hill thereby denying those potential artillery positions to the Confederates. Next the artillery cannonade – so loud that it could be heard almost a hundred miles away – was largely ineffective in terms of softening Union defenses.

Finally, the frontal assault – famously the so-called Pickett's Charge¹ – apparently was not given Lee's intended full support. Lee never said so in so many words but, according to Porter Alexander, Lee envisioned three assault lines of fourteen infantry brigades – initially extending more than two miles in length – would be formed for the charge but for reasons still not clearly understood only two of those lines of nine brigades participated in the charge. Later in the night Lee purportedly told a subordinate that "...if [Pickett's Division] had been supported as they were meant to have been – but for some reason, not yet fully explained to me, were not – we would have held the position, & the day would have been ours." Alexander's insightful conjecture was that Lee's undersized staff simply failed to prepare or distribute the orders necessary to direct the five additional brigades to form a third line.

But Federal efforts should not be overlooked or ignored. When asked several years later what went wrong, George Pickett² replied he "always thought the Yankees had something to do with it." As mentioned, Meade did correctly anticipate the focus of the Confederate attack and positioned his defenders accordingly. The Union enjoyed enflating positions, not only by the 8th OVI from the north but also by the 13th and 16th Rhode Island from the south; although the Rebels pre-assault cannonade was largely ineffective, afterwards Federal artillery poured devastating fire into the Rebel ranks as they approached the largely entrenched Yankee defenders. The combination of artillery and musket fire decimated the Rebel lines as they kept closing ranks to advance toward the Copse of Trees. But despite all these advantages in favor of the Union, some lead elements of the Confederate assault, led by BGen. Lewis Armistead who was mortally wounded, still managed to force a small breach of the Union line approximately fifty yards north of the Copse of Trees, only to be quickly repulsed

by Federal reinforcements. Meade – with extraordinary individual help from Hancock – was able to amass a larger number of soldiers at the breach, thereby compelling the attackers to relent before trudging back to their original positions where by a distraught Lee met them. The temporary breach by Pickett’s Charge of the Union lines has been remembered forever, and perhaps inaccurately, as the High Tide of the Confederacy.

Chattanooga/Missionary Ridge, Georgia – November 25, 1863. The immediate effect of the Federal defeat at Chickamauga was to drive the Army of the Cumberland back into Chattanooga where the Confederates, commanded by Braxton Bragg, enjoyed commanding positions from the ridges overlooking Chattanooga. But as soon as Henry Halleck, the Federal General in Chief, received word of the Chickamauga defeat he ordered Sherman to take four divisions from the Mississippi River to Chattanooga. Even with the future addition of Sherman’s corps it was painfully apparent that even more reinforcements were necessary but the question remained where would they come from and how would they be transported.

One of the most daring proposals was to send the Union’s 11th and 12th Corps consisting of 23,000 soldiers along with seven batteries from Meade’s Army of the Potomac, a railroad trip of 1,159 miles through six states along railroads of three different gauges, an unprecedented movement calculated to take seven days. Despite Lincoln’s trepidation, fearful that many troops could not even get to Washington in less than five days, these two corps, under the unified command of MGen. Joseph (“Fightin’ Joe”) Hooker, were on their way the next day to Bridgeport, downstream from Chattanooga, beginning to arrive seven day later.

This new army bore considerable familiarity from the Army of the Potomac. Hooker had been sitting on the “awaiting orders” shelf since his removal as commander of the Army of the Potomac a few days before Gettysburg. Hooker had managed to acquire a reputation for drinking, womanizing, and dishonoring his debts. Halleck and Sherman, who were acquainted with Hooker prior to the Civil War, developed a strong dislike for Hooker. Both corps commanders, MGen. Oliver Otis Howard, commanding the 11th Corps, and MGen, Henry Slocum, commanding the 12th Corps, had served under Hooker throughout Hooker’s tenure as army command in the East but neither enjoyed a cordial relationship with Hooker, who believed neither had performed up his expectations.

The question arose about the unification of command of the three armies to be assembled at Chattanooga. Sam Grant was designated for this new post, and was given discretionary authority to replace Rosecrans with George Thomas. Three days later Grant exercised his discretion by relieving Rosecrans from command replacing him with Thomas although Grant had no particular fondness for either general.³

The plan was relatively simple. Sherman would bring his troops up from Bridgeport, cross the pontoon bridge at Brown's Ferry, march upstream and re-cross the Tennessee River at a point across from the northern foot of Missionary Ridge from whence Sherman would launch his attack against the Rebels. In the meanwhile, Thomas, at the western edge of the center of Missionary Ridge, and Hooker, at the other – or southern – end of Lookout Mountain, would execute feints merely to hold Bragg's units in place at those locations. Grant's rationalized not giving a greater role to Thomas' army that "had been so demoralized by the Battle of Chickamauga that he feared they could not be got out of their trenches to assume the offensive." Sherman was to begin his attack on Friday, November 20, a date Sherman agreed was feasible.

But due to several unforeseen circumstances Sherman's army was not in position to begin to re-cross the Tennessee River until the evening of November 23. By noon the next day, Tuesday, November 24, between the use of a captured Confederate steamer and a hastily constructed 1,250 foot pontoon bridge, Sherman's army was back on Rebel territory on the eastern side of the Tennessee River.

Given only token initial resistance Sherman was easily able to capture two high points along the northern slope of Missionary Ridge. Sherman's next objective was Tunnel Hill. At first glance it appeared relatively easy to capture so instead of proceeding further on the afternoon of November 24, with only an hour of daylight remaining when Tunnel hill was being defended by only a brigade, Sherman decided not to advance any further but to give his troops a well-deserved rest. But the terrain of Tunnel Hill made it a difficult target. To Sherman's surprise, the next morning he discovered a deep ravine, a mile and half long, with steep, rugged sides separated his new position and Tunnel Hill that in turn could be transverse only through a narrow gap. Sherman's failure to reconnoiter put him

into a wrong position. Furthermore during the night the single Confederate brigade was reinforced by an entire division commanded by the redoubtable Irish-born Patrick Cleburne, considered by some as the “Stonewall of the West.”

There was always an undercurrent of rivalry between Eastern and Western armies within the Federal military. The Western soldier tended to believe his Eastern counterpart was a dandy while the Easterner viewed the Westerner as being an undisciplined slob. Underscoring these differences was the fact that the Army of the Potomac, with R.E. Lee as its nemesis, had suffered several battlefield setbacks while the Western armies, engaged with the likes of Braxton Bragg, had seldom known defeat. Perhaps the egotistical Hooker sensed that Grant, the Western commander, was taking pains to assure that Sherman, Grant’s Western cohort, would be getting preferential assignments from Grant. Conversely Hooker felt slighted by his supporting assignment of merely making a feint while Sherman was assigned the potentially more glorious mission to advance up and to take Missionary Ridge. Besides, Fightin’ Joe was anxious to redeem the blight on his reputation that had suffered at Chancellorsville six months earlier.

Chopping at the bit, Hooker requested – Thomas concurring – and was given permission to convert his feint mission to an assault, which if successful, should help squeeze Bragg from both ends. It has been said that terrain is a defending soldier’s best friend, and the Confederate defenders at the southern slope of Lookout Mountain could hardly have asked for more favorable terrain. And so as Hooker’s soldiers began their difficult climb up the southern slope on the morning of November 24 the rugged terrain provided a more daunting obstacle than did the meager number of Rebel soldiers.

Not only did the foot soldiers have difficulty climbing and/or circumventing sheer cliffs, the artillery vehicles almost demanded to be hand carried in spots. Wheels had to be chocked with rocks to keep the pieces from rolling back down the slopes. But these Eastern soldiers were not about to be denied and proceed until by 2:00 pm they had advanced far enough, and were so exhausted, that Hooker order a halt while holding their positions, acclaimed as the “Battle above the Clouds.”

That night Bragg, believing he was caught on the horns of a tactical dilemma, but considering that Lookout Mountain was no longer of major importance, ordered the withdrawal of the Lookout Mountain defenders, further ordering they hurry to buttress the defense of Missionary Ridge. Thus the next morning, November 25, Hooker awoke to find the Lookout Mountain battlefield had been abandoned, setting the stage for the Battle above the Clouds as the Stars and Stripes – one of the most dramatic moments in America’s military history – was raised to the cheers of the soldiers of the Army of the Cumberland who were witnesses from below. Subsequently after a four hour delay by the end of the day Hooker advanced all the way to Rossville!

Meanwhile at Tunnel Hill Sherman had a four to one numerical advantage over the Southern defenders. But Patrick Cleburne, whose record as a division commander was without equal in the Western theater, was deftly exerting command of battlefield management at its finest to take full advantage of outstanding terrain, interior lines, and effective artillery fire to repulse Sherman’s repeated thrusts. And so despite repeated assaults thrown against the Rebel defenders at Tunnel Hill little was accomplished except to frustrate Sherman and to irritate the impatient Grant. As Sherman’s futility continued without abatement into the late afternoon on November 25, Grant reluctantly turned to Thomas for help with his “demoralized” Cumberlanders. Grant ordered Thomas to demonstrate by advancing Granger’s newly formed 4th Corps – comprised of corps that had been routed at Chickamauga – to the triple line of entrenched Rebel rifle pits at Orchard Knob in front of the western base of Missionary Ridge.

A line of four divisions consisting of 25,000 soldiers, including cooks and clerks, two and half miles long quickly formed and began advancing almost with parade ground fanfare and precision.⁴ Assuming the approaching line was little more than a drill the Confederates watched in disbelief. But as the line came closer and closer Rebel defenders began to fire their rifles and guns, some with devastating effect. But suddenly Federal numbers overwhelmed the defenders in the rifle pits, and those Rebels who were not killed, wounded or captured had no alternative except to try to scramble up the slope for safety.

Some of the ensuing command details have been muddled in history with the biggest mystery being whether Grant wanted Granger merely to move forward to

the rifle pits (the majority view) or did Grant desire Granger's soldiers to continue this assault by scaling the steep slopes in pursuit of the fleeing Confederates. The one certainty was that the newly line of rifle pits not a safe place to be since the line was exposed to rifle fire from above. Retreating back across the open fields would likewise be hazardous. And so against the odds the "demoralized" soldiers from the Army of the Cumberland, mostly pursuant to orders from regimental and brigade commanders, began to scamper up the 600 foot slope, weaving and dodging among rock outcroppings, tree stumps, and sometimes shielded from fire atop the ridge by Rebels trying to scurry away from scaling Yankees. Contrary to usual procedures, lines were no longer centered upon color guards nor did beats of drums provide marching cadences. To be sure there was a mass of Southern artillery but these guns were almost useless because the gunners could not raise the rear of the guns high enough to aim down the slope. In surprisingly quick order the Federal infantry, without artillery pieces or other vehicles, but after fixing bayonets and charging ahead, captured their sector atop Missionary Ridge resulting in one of the most spectacular Federal victories of the war.

Bragg had no tenable option except to withdraw his army from his Chattanooga defenses. Although the number of its killed and wounded was relatively light, Bragg's army abandoned 6,000 prisoners atop of Missionary Ridge along with 7,000 castaway rifles together with 39 cannons.

Taking the western slope of Missionary Ridge was not without a steep price as the four Union divisions suffered about 20% casualties. But there were also some measures of vindication; for instance Thomas Wood's division – the one that created the fatal gap at Chickamauga when it was ordered to fill another gap that didn't exist – purportedly was the first division to reach the crest.⁵ Not to be contained, once he reached the crest Little Phil Sheridan jumped astride and sat on a captured Confederate gun. Then in lieu of any orders Sheridan led his division down the eastern slope of Missionary Ridge to chase after Bragg and the fleeing Rebels. Although under the circumstances Sheridan's chase was ultimately futile his division did capture nine more artillery pieces as well as several Rebel stragglers, also giving Little Phil some sense of vindication for Chickamauga.

Much of the success in overtaking the defenses on Missionary Ridge had been the result of spontaneous, improvised efforts on the part of the soldiers and

small units. Although the Chattanooga combat was not – as measured by casualty rates – as brutal or as intense as many other battles, the charge up the slopes of Missionary Ridge had been daunting, strenuous, and exhausting.

Grant's after action report failed to mention Hooker's accomplishments. Additionally during the evening of the 25th Sherman and Grant sent each other messages implying that Sherman's attacks at Tunnel Hill were responsible for the success of Thomas' attack. In their respective memoirs, published after Thomas was dead, Sherman and Grant further embellished the truth by suggesting that, against the weight of several contemporaneous accounts, Sherman's attacks were mere feints to support Thomas's assault toward and on the slopes of Missionary Ridge.

The withdrawal from Chattanooga nullified all the gains and sacrifices of Chickamauga but more significantly gave the Yankees control of the Gateway to the South and a position from which to launch a strategic thrust in the Deep South. The Federal victory at Chattanooga was a devastating loss for the Confederacy, and when coupled with Lee's retreat from Gettysburg as well as the surrender of Vicksburg, both less than five months earlier, greatly dimmed the diminishing chances of military victory or even the fading chances of a favorable settlement of the seceding states' differences with the Federal government. Chattanooga was indeed a turning point in the war in the Western Theater.

Franklin, Tennessee -- November 30, 1864. After relinquishing Atlanta, and failing to entice Sherman to chase him, John Bell Hood led his Confederate army west before turning to the north, hoping to reach the Ohio River. But before he could do so he had to get past George Thomas, then assembling an army at Nashville. John Schofield was leading a small Federal army intended to join Thomas at Nashville but Schofield and Hood were each trying to get ahead of the other. Hood thought he had gotten ahead to trap Schofield at Spring Hill, Tennessee, but somehow the Federals were able to get past the sleeping Rebels at Spring Hill. Hood became infuriated when he awoke to discover that somehow the Federals had escaped from his grasp to be well on their way to Nashville via Franklin.

Franklin – 15 miles south of Nashville -- was (and still is) nestled in a loop in the Harpeth River, a northwesterly running tributary of the Cumberland River.

When he departed Spring Hill that morning Schofield did not want to fight at Franklin, instead intending to cross the Harpeth to continue to Nashville without delay. But when he arrived at Franklin early in the morning of November 30 Schofield found bridging material but no bridges across the Harpeth River. Thus while his engineers were repairing bridges the Union infantry and artillery began to occupy and improve fortifications that had been previously constructed as part of the Nashville defenses.

By noon Schofield's soldiers had erected and began occupying an arc of three lines of earthworks around the south and west of Franklin and anchored on either end on the banks of the Harpeth. Additionally artillery batteries were placed east of the Harpeth thereby providing safe locations from which the batteries could fire enflating rounds. From these new lines of entrenchments Union riflemen and artillerists had a clear view of the broad plain over which the Confederate attackers would have to traverse. There were but only a few isolated farm buildings to obstruct the fields of fire. And so while Schofield had not intended to stop at Franklin where he might have to accept battle he could have hardly asked for better, more formidable defensive positions.

Upon arising the morning of the Federals' escape from Spring Hill Hood was enraged to discover his units were having breakfast instead of forming battle lines. Of course there was no sense in forming battle lines since his soldiers knew Schofield had already passed through the Rebels' position. Purportedly a private had the courage to tell Hood, "General, the whole dang Yankee army passed by here last night, and we just let 'em go." Hood then concluded his entire army, officers and soldiers, had lost its fighting spirit and accordingly had to be disciplined to renew its sense of pride and esprit compelling it to obey even in the face of certain death. And so Hood, still without his main artillery or Stephen Lee's infantry corps, ordered an immediate march in search of Schofield's army. By 2:00 p.m. Hood arrived at the plain below Franklin and promptly began to deploy available units in battle lines about two miles in front of Schofield's newly occupied works.

By three o'clock in the afternoon of the 30th, and after examining the Union lines through field glasses, Hood abruptly decided to immediately launch a straight-ahead attack. His commanders were incredulous arguing that neither Lee's

infantry corps nor the army's artillery had yet to arrive making it foolhardy to attack with less than full strength. Even the normally hard-charging Bedford Forrest, having seen the Union fortifications close-up, voiced his objections to a frontal assault, claiming among other things that the Confederacy could ill afford to sacrifice so many soldiers. To his credit Forrest also proposed to take his cavalry across a ford to the east and swing around the Federals' left flank. Insisting that he intended to crush the Federals with a frontal attack, Hood permitted Forrest to take only one of his three cavalry divisions to the Federal rear.

We of course are not in any position to evaluate Hood's mental or emotional state but it certainly seems plausible that Hood was seeking some level of command comfort by reverting to the battlefield tactic that he knew best while punishing his army to instill pride and esprit. Hood may have also taken false hope from isolated signs, such as the debris left by retreating Federals along the road, that the Blue coats were demoralized and/or panicked. Whatever, and true to reasonable predictions, Hood's decision would result in horrific, irreplaceable losses, including the deaths of six generals.

Fortuitously James Wilson's Federal cavalry received two breaks that day: first, when more troopers from remounted camps arrived and, second, when Hood decided to split Forrest's cavalry, sending most of the Gray riders where there would be no significant action. Wilson deployed most of his cavalry east of the Harpeth to help protect Schofield's rear and left flank. Forrest arrived at Franklin at approximately the same time as did the early elements of Hood's infantry. True to form Forrest immediately attacked Wilson in an attempt to cut off Schofield's possible retreat to Nashville. But this time Wilson's strengths matched those of Forrest's, and while the cavalries battled for several hours eventually the Gray riders were forced to withdraw, the first time in the Civil War when Forrest had to withdraw from a battlefield of equal odds!

On the other side of the Harpeth by 4:00 p.m. -- about a half hour before sunset -- the Rebel bands played various tunes including "Dixie" and "The Bonnie Blue Flag," the guides had unfurled their battle flags (at least 100 of them), and the ranks -- perhaps as many as one-fourth without shoes -- had formed into orderly formations of perhaps 18,000 men⁶ in preparation of Hood's orders to assault the Federals across the open fields to their front. The Confederate lines were almost

two miles long, half again larger than the infamous lines for Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg and expected to charge twice as far. As soon as the battle lines started to move forward Hood removed himself from command control when he retired to the rear where an orderly prepared a fire for the general's comfort .

Initially the attack seemed to succeed. The Rebels, at least those in the middle of the formation, advanced upon, and indeed breached, the middle of the Union defenses where the turnpike passed. However without orders Union reserves quickly came to the fore counterattacking to close that breach and to repulse any further advances to the Yankee rear.

Winston Groom wrote:

In all its bloody four years, the war had rarely – if ever – seen fighting so ferocious on so large a scale in so confined a space. For nearly an hour, thousands of men within an area no larger than a few acres shot, bayoneted, gouged, and bludgeoned one another to death with rifle butts, axes, picks, guns, knives, and shovels.

But the battle continued with indescribable fury as the Confederates made as many 16 charges – described by one Union soldier as “the brown seaweed carried by the white-capped waves” -- with reserves hustled to the front countering any breakthroughs.

In the meanwhile Union artillery, enjoying the relative luxury of not having most of its Confederate counterpart in the arena, was laying down devastating canon fire upon the Confederate infantry exposed in the killing fields. One Confederate division commander, MGen. Edward C. Walthall – who had two horses shot under him during the battle – described the Confederate struggle as follows:

There was an extensive, open, and almost unbroken plain ... across which we must pass. ... This was done under far the most deadly fire of both small-arms and artillery that I have even seen troops subjected to. [The advance continued] terribly torn at every step by an oblique fire from a battery advantageously posted at the enemy's left, no less than by the destructive fire in front. ... [Still] the line moved on and did not falter till ... it reached the abatis fronting the works. Over this no organized force could go, and here the main body of my command ... was repulsed in confusion; but over this obstacle, impassible in a solid line, many officers and men ... made their way, and some, crossing the ditch

in its rear, were captured and others killed or wounded in the effort to mount the embankment.

When the battle was over almost six hours later, Hood's army lost approximately 25% of engaged numbers, or 6,300 men. Six Confederate generals were killed or mortally wounded on the battlefield; most notably Patrick Cleburne was killed after having two horses shot from under him but nevertheless advancing on foot to within fifty yards of the breastworks. 59 other division, brigade, or regimental commanders were either killed, wounded, or captured.

Reflecting his lack of comprehension of the severe damage to his army, that night Hood ordered another attack the next day. However arising the next morning his soldiers were stunned to realize, first, Schofield's army had already withdrawn from Franklin, and, second, leaving a battlefield strewn with gruesome gore of bodies, some of them stacked in heaps, of dead, dying, and moaning and groaning wounded Rebel soldiers. Incredibly Hood sent a message to regiments, his message reading in part:

The commanding general congratulates the army upon the success achieved yesterday over our enemy by their heroic and determined courage. The enemy have been sent in disorder and confusion to Nashville, and while we lament the fall of many gallant officers and brave men, we have shown to our countrymen that we can carry any position occupied by our enemy.

Notwithstanding this lopsided battle, it was not decisive. Hood's army was horribly crippled but not quite mortally. It was still had enough viability to at least try to fight again even though its commanding general failed to recognize its limitations. But despite Hood's illusions the harsh reality was that after its disaster in Franklin the Confederacy would never be able to muster the strength to launch another offensive attack in the Western theater. Furthermore, Franklin was little short of being a calamitous harbinger for at least one more battlefield disaster, that being when Thomas launched his attacks against the remains of Hood's army at Nashville a couple weeks later.

James Lee McDonough has argued with considerable persuasion that Franklin is the most underappreciated battle of the Civil War, even among many Civil War readers. Until about seven or eight years ago there was little evidence of the Franklin battleground. However since then extensive efforts are being made to re-establish significant portions of the battlefield so that visitors can gain an

appreciation of the scope and character of the battlefield. Perhaps that re-creation will enhance the appreciation of the historic significance of the horrific battle that occurred there in 1864.

Summary – Although Pickett’s Charge is probably the most famous, even glamorized, frontal assault charge in the Civil War, it is probably not the most significant and certainly not the biggest such struggle. At least two other charges, Missionary Ridge and Franklin, consisted of larger numbers of soldiers while Franklin involved a longer advance to the fortified defenses. Missionary Ridge resulted in the most significant strategic turning point while Franklin resulted in the most damage to the army making the charge. Once the assault reached the defensive positions, Pickett’s Charge lasted probably little more than fifteen minutes while Malvern Hill and Franklin continued for hours before the assaulting army began to withdraw. The three failed assaults were launched against fortified positions supported by artillery enjoying nearly total superiority; none of the assaults were under unified and effective command.

As is well documented, frontal assaults in the Civil War were seldom effective, especially against fortified positions. Indeed Missionary Ridge might have been the only truly successful frontal assault in the Civil War, and that might have been aided by the topographical quirk that prevented the defenders from using their artillery effectively. And while there were other frontal assaults of smaller scales, such as Kennesaw Mountain and Cold Harbor, they demonstrated that it would almost always require a massive stroke of luck in order for frontal assaults to succeed, a lesson that would take years and a world war to learn.

Selected Sources:

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¹ This charge is named for George Pickett who did not actually lead the charge but instead formed brigades from his division as they came onto the field. Other brigades were under the command of James Pettigrew and Isaac Trimble

² Prior to the Civil War Pickett's most notable feat was occupying an island whose ownership was disputed with Great Britain. Pickett was immediately commissioned as a Confederate colonel upon resigning as a captain in the Regular Army in June 1861. After being wounded at Gaine's Mill, Pickett returned to command a division in Longstreet's corps during the Antietam campaign.

³ Grant was fond of dismissing Thomas as a strictly defensive general but as Bruce Catton observed about Thomas' performance at Mill Springs, "... Thomas, who looked so ponderous, could strike swiftly and powerfully once battle had been joined. His whole campaign, as a matter of fact, had been well handled, despite the wastage of the hard march down from Lebanon." *Terrible Swift Sword* Paperback Edition (1963) London: Phoenix Press, pg 140.

⁴ This line contained almost twice the number of soldiers than in Pickett's Charge.

⁵ An honor that would forever be contested by Sheridan who had also ascended to the crest. According to legend, the cannon was still hot causing Little Phil to have a very hot seat.

⁶ Compared to the estimated 13,000 men in Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg