

The Tullahoma Campaign

Underscoring Confederate Differences between East and West

The military pace of the Civil War resumed by the late spring or early summer of 1863. Among other actions Grant at last was making progress in his prolonged, but tenacious, attempts to capture Vicksburg. In the East Robert E. Lee had scored a spectacular victory at Chancellorsville and after a huge cavalry battle at Brandy Station Lee's army was on the march towards Pennsylvania. (See the timetables for Vicksburg and Pre-Gettysburg.) And after the battle at Stone's River at the very beginning of the year William S. Rosecrans had started moving his Army of the Cumberland out of Murfreesboro and toward Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee. (See timetable for the Army of the Cumberland.) Rosecrans versus Bragg helps to see an good example between the tactical capacities of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and Bragg's Army of Tennessee.

After retreating from Murfreesboro Bragg established his headquarters at Tullahoma,¹ five miles from Shelbyville, Tennessee. Bragg deployed his army in a line several miles forward of that crossroads town and rail junction; a series of mountain ridges running southwest to northeast made the gaps through the ridges, and their defenses, critical. However Bragg did not have enough troops to completely defend each gap; indeed his department commander, Joseph E. Johnston, thought Bragg needed another 20,000 troops to properly defend his area.² In lieu of more soldiers, Bragg designed a defensive scheme of stationing enough troops in each gap to delay any attack while providing mutual support from gap to gap, or from reserves, as needed; accordingly he stretched Patrick Cleburne's division -- probably the best Confederate division in the Western theater -- across Bragg's advanced salient.³ Cleburne's left flank was anchored by Leonidas Polk's infantry at Shelbyville⁴ and extended intermittingly fifteen miles northeast to Hoover's Gap. Cleburne's responsibility was to hold the Federals at the passes long enough to allow Polk to get into position to attack the Yankee rear and/or flanks.⁵

At least two major considerations other than guarding the gaps influenced Bragg's disposition of his troops. Finding and acquiring enough food and forage was the first of these considerations; while the Confederacy was taking great pains to assure that Lee's Army of

Northern Virginia was sufficiently supplied Richmond was also letting Bragg more or less fend for himself. Accordingly Bragg was forced to scatter his units, especially his limited cavalry, across wide geographic areas in order to find enough food and forage to sustain his army.⁶ But the barren nature of the country was such that forage and food remained scarce meaning that animals as well as men were becoming malnourished.

Perhaps Bragg had a similar opportunity, and in fact may have briefly contemplated, for a counter offensive that if executed would have been as brilliant as had been Lee's Chancellorsville counter maneuvers of a few months earlier. In the face of superior numbers at Chancellorsville Lee had divided his army two or three times and had sent Stonewall Jackson on a wide turning movement to bamboozle Fightin' Joe Hooker into a retreat. Unfortunately for Bragg there were several important distinctions seriously handicapping any daring intentions. First, while Bragg was able to envision and even plan maneuvers that looked good on paper, he utterly failed to enjoy the same trust and confidence of his lieutenants given to Lee by his subordinates. Indeed many of his corps and division commanders, continued to distrust, even despise, Bragg. Some commanders, especially the likes of Polk, routinely failed to even make token efforts to implement Bragg's orders. Instead Polk – the second most senior general in the Army of Tennessee⁷ -- spent an inordinate amount of time and effort encouraging other subordinates to join the anti-Bragg cabal of the discontented and insubordinate. Additionally even if he had been completely loyal and compliant, Polk had but a small amount of the then late Stonewall Jackson's former energy, resolve and command creativity. In any event Polk vehemently objected to Bragg's proposed plan which, given the locations of Rosecrans' units, could have easily put Polk in Rosecrans' rear astride the latter's supply lines.

Second, Wheeler's cavalry was far inferior to Jeb Stuart's. Ironically cavalry units in the West were proportionately larger than those in the East. While Stuart's cavalry never comprised more than 10% of the Army of Northern Virginia, the cavalry in Bragg's Army of Tennessee comprised almost 20% of his numbers. But the horses available to the Army of Tennessee were suffering for want of forage and maintenance. But as crucial as anything else the leadership of the Confederate western cavalry was deficient in several respects. Wheeler himself, a smallish man from Georgia, graduated last in West Point class only two years before the start of the Civil War but spent a year at the Carlisle Barracks cavalry school drilling new recruits,⁸ possessed many characteristics shared by several Civil War cavalrymen, such as being dashing and daring.

By this point in the war Wheeler – who began his Civil War career as an infantry officer⁹ – had been engaged in as many as two hundred battles plus hundreds more skirmishes and smaller encounters. In true cavalry tradition he always led from the front of the column while seeming immune to being wounded. Nevertheless Wheeler was also prone to be neglectful of cavalry's work-a-day responsibilities such as gathering intelligence while screening the command's main army.¹⁰

The troopers under Wheeler's command often lacked basic military discipline, sometimes committing depredations upon Southern communities to seize food, other commodities, and even luxury items.¹¹ Some of Wheeler's units had such bad reputations for their lack of discipline that Nathan Bedford Forrest refused to accept them into his command.¹²

John Hunt Morgan, one of the Confederates' more flamboyant and glory seeking cavalry raiders, was wasting his talents as well as the assets of his men and horses on a meaningless, catastrophic raid after deceiving his leader to cross the Ohio River.¹³ Had Morgan not been off on his foolish frolic north of the Ohio River, his division of 2,500 troopers would have been available to screen Bragg's right.¹⁴

And when given independent command, Forrest, a self-made millionaire, slave trader, and planter prominent in prewar Memphis business and social circles,¹⁵ might have been the most exceptionally successful cavalry leader in the entire Civil War; he was totally dedicated to the cause of secession while being endowed with extraordinarily courage and brilliant tactical sense with unmatched leadership skills. On the other hand, Forrest was relatively inexperienced as a cavalry corps or division commander within a larger army. As a subordinate commander Forrest was prone to quarrel with almost anyone and could be lax, or even indifferent, about finding and reporting intelligence to his commanding general; because of Forrest's personal animosity toward Wheeler, each had his own corps command rather than designating unified cavalry command. Additionally Forrest was still recovering from a gunshot wound inflicted from an attempted assassination by one of his junior officers.¹⁶

Furthermore the Western Confederate cavalry was losing much of its superiority over its Yankee counterparts. The C.S.A. policy requiring troopers to provide their own mounts often meant potential cavalymen brought inferior horses that were not capable of performing under the rigors of cavalry duty.¹⁷ In contrast the Federal quartermasters were shipping 68 fresh horses per day from Chicago. The Yankee horse riders were also better armed since many of the Rebel

troopers still carried muzzle-loading long arms, much better suited for infantry use. And while the Union supply wagons were providing ample food and forage the lack of enough forage in the countryside was taking an evident toll upon the Rebels' mounts.

Accordingly the same quality of cavalry-generated intelligence that Lee had been able to enjoy at Chancellorsville was seldom available to Bragg prior to and during the Tullahoma campaign. While Stuart scouted areas of the Chancellorsville battlefield to detect the vulnerability of Hooker's exposed right flank, Bragg's cavalry detachments were unable to determine accurately the disposition of Rosecrans' army even while it sat still on June 25 waiting for all units to get into position.¹⁸

And once Rosecrans launched his attack the defenders were caught completely off guard. Rosey had devised a complex series of feints before sending his newly formed mounted infantry regiments through the gaps before Bragg had a chance to send his reinforcements as had been planned. With his scattered defenses collapsing Bragg had no choice to consolidate his army at Tullahoma where once again Rosecrans outflanked the Rebels, forcing another retreat, this time across the Elk River, thus setting the stage for the Chickamauga campaign later that fall. Although Bragg would score a victory at Chickamauga, the South's only meaningful victory in the West, the fact that he had not been able to capitalize upon a potential opportunity prior to Tullahoma, as Lee had done at Chancellorsville, and was soon forced to continue retreating out of Tennessee, underscored the differences between Confederate military operations in the West and the East.

¹ "Tullahoma" is Greek for *more mud*.

² Hess, Earl J., *The Civil War in the West – Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (2012) Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, pg 180.

³ Symonds, Craig L. *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne & The Civil War* (1997) Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, pg 128.

⁴ Woodworth, Stephen E., *Six Armies in Tennessee – The Chickamauga and Chattanooga Campaigns*, pp 14-15

⁵ Symonds, *supra*, pg 129.

⁶ Woodworth, *supra*, pp 13-14

⁷ Woodworth, *supra*, pg 8

⁸ Powell, David A. *Failure in the Saddle – Nathan Bedford Forrest, Joseph Wheeler, and the Confederate Cavalry in the Chickamauga Campaign* (2010) New York and California: Savas Beatie, pp xxii. 9.

⁹ Powell, *supra*, pg 11.

¹⁰ Woodworth, *supra*, pg 29.

¹¹ Powell, *supra*, pg 13

¹² *Ibid*, pg 17

¹³ Woodworth, *supra*, pg 29

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pg 3

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg xix.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pg 19; on the other hand Forrest had managed to inflict a mortal wound upon his assailant. See also Bowers, John. *Chickamauga and Chattanooga – The Battles that Doomed the Confederacy* (1994) New York: Post Road Press, pp 62-63.

¹⁷ Woodworth, *supra*, pg 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, *supra*, pg 30.