

Bloody Battle at Chickamauga

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The week of September 15-21, 1863 would see the second bloodiest battle of the American Civil War—the famous engagement at Chickamauga, Georgia which resulted in a Confederate victory, but one which was not as complete as it may have been because of the actions of a stubborn Union general. While the Chickamauga campaign dominated activities in the war's western theater, in the east there was minor skirmishing between the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia as the former moved southward towards the Rapidan River against Robert E. Lee's depleted force. President Abraham Lincoln's actions overshadowed those of the military as on September 15 he ordered suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus which allowed for the holding of individuals by military or civil authorities without charge.

The country's attention, however, was focused along the Tennessee-Georgia border, where the Union Army of the Cumberland under William Rosecrans and the Confederate Army of Tennessee under Braxton Bragg moved towards a collision. In the preceding weeks, Rosecrans had outmaneuvered Bragg and forced a Confederate evacuation of Chattanooga. The southern commander was then frustrated in two attempts to destroy isolated elements of the Federal army, and by September 18 the two forces faced each other near Chickamauga Creek in north Georgia. Bragg hoped to move to the north and cut Rosecrans off from Chattanooga.

The main fighting began on Saturday, September 19, when Union General George Thomas engaged Confederate cavalry under Nathan Bedford Forrest. By the end of the day the two sides were fighting along a three mile long line in heavily wooded terrain. Despite a series of rebel attacks the Federal line held as darkness ended the engagement. That night Confederate

troops under James Longstreet, sent westward from Lee's army, reinforced Bragg. The battle opened the next morning with a Confederate attack by Breckenridge's division against the Union left. Though the Federals were pushed back, their line held. Later in the morning, Rosecrans received reports that a gap had opened in the Union line, though in fact one did not exist. In response, the Union commander moved a division under Thomas J. Woods to fill the non-existent gap, which opened a real gap in the position that Woods' division had just vacated. At that moment, Longstreet's forces launched a massive attack, hitting the gap and throwing the Yankee army into chaos. A large portion of the Union army, including its commander, was swept northward towards Chattanooga, and it appeared that the Confederates had won a decisive victory that might change the course of the war in the west.

The Union XIV Corps under George Thomas, along with the fragments of a few other units, managed to hold a strong defensive position at Snodgrass Hill, from which he repulsed a series of desperate rebel attacks throughout the afternoon. Thomas eventually received reinforcements from General Gordon Granger that enabled him to maintain his position until nightfall, when he began a retreat towards the defenses at Chattanooga. Thomas' stand earned him the nickname "Rock of Chickamauga" and almost certainly enabled the Federals to hold Chattanooga. By the following day Thomas had moved his forces to Rossville, before finally retreating to Chattanooga. Bragg began a pursuit of the retreating Federals, but soon canceled it, allowing the Yankees to escape and thus failing to capitalize on his victory. The battle of Chickamauga resulted in combined casualties of nearly 35,000, a rate of approximately 28% for each army. It was the greatest tactical victory for the Confederate in the war's western theater, though because of Bragg's failure to pursue, it had failed to force the Federals out of Chattanooga. For the next two months the Confederates maintained a partial siege of the city,

which would ultimately be broken in November by the series of attacks by Federal troops now commanded by Ulysses Grant. By the end of the year the Confederates had retreated into north Georgia and the Federals would begin a campaign against Atlanta the following spring.