

Episode 155: The Siege of Chattanooga Begins

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Following the debacle at the Battle of Chickamauga, Union forces under Major General William S. Rosecrans retreated into Chattanooga. The northern soldiers built a defensive perimeter based on the fortifications built earlier by the Confederates who had recently retreated from the city themselves.

Rosecrans had suffered a bad defeat at Chickamauga and it might have been total but for the strong defense by Major General George Thomas and his men. Still, Rosecrans lost 16,000 men and much of his artillery. The Confederates under General Braxton Bragg took possession of Missionary Ridge, overlooking Chattanooga. They also took control of Lookout Mountain to the west of the city and thereby gained control of the Tennessee River.

At this point, Bragg needed to decide his next move. A direct assault of the Union troops seemed likely to be too costly to the attackers. Another possibility was to move up or down river, cross over and thereby be able to outflank Rosecrans. Unfortunately, Bragg did not have sufficient pontoons to make a river crossing. Bragg's choice then was to lay siege to the city. His intelligence indicated that the Union forces were short on rations and so Bragg decided he might be able to starve them into surrender. This strategy came close to success but the hungry Union forces would be led out of their perilous situation in October when Ulysses S. Grant arrived from the west to take command.

During this same week, there was some other aggressive Confederate activity in the western theatre. On September 22, about 800 Confederate cavalry troops under Colonel Jo Shelby set out from Arkadelphia, Arkansas on a 1,500 mile, two-month raid that would lead

them through Arkansas and into Missouri. By the time the raid had ended, the Confederates had captured 10 forts, had captured 600 rifles and 6,000 horses and mules and had destroyed over one million dollars worth of Union supplies. Gathering Union militia eventually forced Shelby to divide his forces and retreat to Arkansas, but the raid lifted Confederate spirits and made Shelby a Brigadier General.

Shelby was an interesting character and one of the most famous Confederates to resist surrender at the end of the war. In June 1865, rather than surrender, Shelby and 1,000 men headed south to Mexico. Shelby's original plan was to offer the services of his men to the Mexican Emperor Maximilian as a sort of Foreign Legion. Maximilian declined the offer but did allow Shelby to join an American colony being formed in Veracruz. The colony was being formed by Matthew Maury, formerly of the Confederate Secret Service. The so-called New Virginia Colony would eventually attract several other well known Confederate generals in Sterling Price and John Magruder.

Unfortunately for the ex-Confederates and Maximilian, in 1866 Napoleon III withdrew the French troops that had been propping up Maximilian's regime. Maximilian was executed the next year and the New Virginia colony dissolved as most of the ex-Confederates made their way back to the United States. The exploits of Jo Shelby in heading to Mexico were later glorified in the well known film *The Undefeated* starring John Wayne and Rock Hudson.