

Episode 158: Grant Takes Command in the West

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This week saw a major reorganization of Union forces in the western theatre of the war. Seeing what kind of fighter he had in Ulysses S. Grant, President Abraham Lincoln created a new overarching command in the west called the Military Division of the Mississippi and put Grant in charge. Grant's success at Vicksburg and elsewhere to this point in the war had overcome his somewhat dubious reputation coming into the war.

The new division would consist of the Departments of the Ohio, the Tennessee and Cumberland, essentially comprising all Union forces west of the Appalachian Mountains except for a few troops in Louisiana. Grant's first order of business was to deal with the situation in Chattanooga. Grant and Lincoln were both disappointed in the leadership of William Rosecrans at Chattanooga and Grant promptly replaced him with Major General George H. Thomas. Thomas's defense at Chickamauga had essentially saved the entire Union army there and had earned him the nickname "The Rock of Chickamauga". Grant wired Thomas informing him of his new command and telling him he must hold Chattanooga at all costs. Thomas wired back that "We will hold the town until we starve."

In Virginia, this week saw the first serious fighting in that state since Chancellorsville in the spring. Robert E. Lee had endeavored to get around the flank of George Meade's Union army south of Washington D. C. Meade began to retreat toward Washington, partially in response to anguished messages from President Lincoln who feared that Lee might yet invade the city.

At the vanguard of Lee's army was the Third Corps under Lieutenant General A.P. Hill. On October 14, Hill's men caught up with what they believed to be the rear of Meade's forces at Bristoe Station near Warrenton. Hill was unaware that the Union II Corps was actually to his left and not in front of him. While Hill's men prepared to launch an attack on the Union forces ahead, the II Corps deployed behind an railroad embankment and ambushed Hill's stunned Confederates. Hill's men recovered enough to put up a good fight, but by the time the Battle of Bristoe Station had ended Confederate casualties were at 1,380, considerably more than the 540 men lost by the Union. Lee was disgusted by Hill's inattention to the presence of the enemy and when Hill tried to explain what had happened, Lee commented "Well, well, general, bury these poor men and let us say no more about it."

Finally, there was an event of note in Charleston harbor on the day following the Battle of Bristoe. The Confederate submarine *H. L. Hunley* made another training run, this time with designer Horace L. Hunley in command instead of the usual pilot George Dixon. Under Dixon's command the submarine had shown promise of becoming a formidable weapon. Hunley however met with disaster. Emulating Dixon, Hunley took the submarine underneath a boat moored in Charleston's harbor. Unlike Dixon, Hunley and his crew did not re-emerge. Divers found the boat three days later buried bow-first in the mud. By November 7 the boat had been brought back to the surface and training under Dixon would begin again with the aim of attacking Union blockading vessels as soon as possible.