

Confederate Disaster at Chattanooga

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During the last week of November 1863, Confederate fortunes in the war's western theater received a devastating blow, as Union troops broke the siege of Chattanooga, Tennessee, driving the rebels into north Georgia and paving the way for a campaign against Atlanta the following spring. During this active week the Confederates also failed in their effort to capture Knoxville, Tennessee, and Union forces commenced the Mine Run Campaign in Virginia.

Following the September 1863 battle of Chickamauga, Confederate forces under General Braxton Bragg had maintained a partial siege of Union-occupied Chattanooga. In the aftermath of his Chickamauga defeat, Union General William Rosecrans had been removed from command, and Ulysses Grant, recently placed in command of all Federal forces in the west, took command at Chattanooga and developed plans to break the southern siege. By mid-November, William T. Sherman had reinforced the Federals and Grant finalized his plans. Bragg's command, meanwhile, had been reduced in size with the sending of a force under James Longstreet to capture Knoxville, and many of his other generals had grown frustrated with their acerbic commander for his failure to capture Chattanooga immediately following the victory at Chickamauga. The Confederate positions were centered on Lookout Mountain, which controlled the Tennessee River, as well as Orchard Knob and Missionary Ridge.

On November 23, Sherman's initial attacks were stopped north of the Tennessee River, but George Thomas' Federals captured the outlying Confederate positions at Orchard Knob, located about a mile in front of Missionary Ridge. The following day Joseph Hooker drove off a small southern force from Lookout Mountain in what became known as the "Battle Above the

Clouds.” On November 25, Sherman launched an attack against Tunnel Hill and the northern portion of Missionary Ridge, but his men were stopped with little gain. Grant then ordered Thomas’ men to move against Confederate earthworks at the foot of Missionary Ridge. The Federals captured the earthworks, and then surprisingly continued up the steep hill towards the main Confederate lines. Though the southern position was strong, the defenders were hindered in their firing for fear of hitting their own retreating men from the advanced earthworks. Thomas’ men climbed up the steep ridge and overwhelmed the defenders, capturing the positions along with much artillery and driving the Confederates into north Georgia. In the aftermath of the fighting, Braxton Bragg resigned as commander of the Army of Tennessee and Ulysses Grant would soon be promoted to general-in-chief of the Union armies.

To the northeast James Longstreet continued his siege of Knoxville. Unable to completely encircle the town, Longstreet waited for reinforcements. Upon their arrival he ordered an assault against the main position of the Union defensive line, Fort Sanders. On November 29 the Confederates attacked, reaching the ditch surrounding the fort with a few men climbing the parapet before being stopped. Confederate losses totaled approximately 800. Longstreet maintained the siege until early December, when he withdrew towards Virginia. William Sherman arrived two days later with reinforcements for the Union garrison. The Federals attempted to pursue Longstreet, but major fighting in the campaign had ended, leaving the Federals in command of east Tennessee.

In Virginia General George Meade, at the urging of the Lincoln administration, began an offensive against Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. Meade began by crossing the Rapidan River in an effort to turn Lee’s left flank. The Confederate commander, however,

established a strong position along Mine Run and Meade determined to withdraw rather than risk a direct assault, thus ending the campaign without a major engagement.