

River of Death: The Chickamauga Campaign: Vol. I The Fall of Chattanooga

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Review

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Robertson, William Glenn. *River of Death: The Chickamauga Campaign: Vol. I The Fall of Chattanooga.* University of North Carolina Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9781469643120

Robertson sets the scene for the Union's only major defeat in the Western Theater mainly by giving the fog of war its due, especially that part emanating from flawed staff work, poor communication, and personal grudges. Although this first volume stops short of the culminating battle, he helps us see through some of that fog. First, by providing background information on every commander in the contending armies down to brigade and sometimes regimental level, he elucidates the human factor as few recent campaign histories have. Second, a painstakingly detailed day-by-day narrative enables the reader to understand what commanders knew and when they knew it: the author's stated intention. That a supervisor of numerous Command and General Staff College Chickamauga staff rides would seek to understand a battle by understanding the campaign that hatched it will surprise no one. Shedding light on the generalship of William S. Rosecrans and Braxton Bragg by eliminating hindsight also points to the author's qualifications as a teacher of combat arms leaders. But if the author's method comes as no surprise, the degree to which it succeeds might. After all, his conscious effort to upgrade the clueless Bragg of Thomas Connelly and Grady McWhiney suggests a preconception or two of its own.

Robertson's Bragg, like Steven E. Woodworth's, remains the "naturally disputatious" character noted in Grant's memoirs as well as the victim of disloyal and/or incompetent corps commanders called out in their earlier works, most notably Woodworth's *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West* (1990). Even readers who prefer the perpetually flummoxed Bragg to Robertson's competent if irascible professional must admit that Joseph Wheeler's aversion to aggressive and timely reconnaissance blinded Bragg at crucial moments. So, too, do Rosecrans's tendencies toward nervousness and micromanagement

remain as before. The self-righteousness afflicting both generals has also attracted previous comment, although readers of this most recent work may yet wonder how much of that self-righteousness stemmed from the "theateritis" prevailing in Richmond and Washington. *River of Death's* original and indispensable contribution is its flood of details – details wherein the devil truly lurked.

Having convinced us that ad hominem swipes at army commanders offer only an artificially easy way out, Robertson outlines systemic problems originating with their respective staffs and subordinate commanders. Bragg chose a similarly qualified professional, West Point classmate William Mackall, as his chief of staff. Mackall understood his commander's quirks better than most, but his ability to manage his staff suffered, as Bragg often maintained closer working relationships with his more junior aides de camp. Instead of consistently assigning personnel, intelligence, operations, and supply functions to the same staff officers, he used those officers interchangeably and often fatigued himself by performing their duties when the Army of Tennessee's operational pace was at its quickest. Not only were individual staff responsibilities poorly defined, but few of Bragg's staff officers had brought like experience with them. The lack of army level signal and railroad organizations and Bragg's micromanagement sometimes compounded that problem, while Assistant Adjutant General George Brent's intercessions and the overall loyalty of Bragg's staff occasionally mitigated it.

The author's detailed profiles of Bragg's major subordinate commanders reveal a far more troubling picture: Not only did Leonidas Polk wangle a corps command despite a total lack of military experience (other than his cadet years at West Point), but his disloyalty and ability to spread it among more competent peers figures more prominently in Robertson's analysis than any of Bragg's miscues. Cronyism and egotism, far less attributable to any one person with the possible exception of Jefferson Davis, was the culture in which such a virus thrived. As for the paralyzed Bragg of Connelly and McWhiney, Robertson's attention to Confederate shortages in rations and bridging capability yields at least a partial rehabilitation: Whatever his flaws, Bragg was in no position to do anything but let Rosecrans cross the Tennessee River before delivering a counterpunch of his own.

Not that the bluecoats were free of bickering, self-serving connivers. Indeed, readers will find ample overlap of careerism and professionalism in the Army of the Cumberland as well, especially because its commanding general had a disputatious streak of his own. Rosecrans's

outmaneuvering of Bragg during the Tullahoma Campaign had only reinforced twin tendencies: to dismiss Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and General in Chief Henry W. Halleck as uninformed meddlers, and to believe in his own infallibility. Such was likely to drain any reservoir of toleration in Washington, and it also set an unfortunate example in Rosecrans's own command. Robertson's most compelling display of dueling egos is the 7-8 September "blind obedience" controversy involving Thomas L. Crittenden (XXI Corps) and one of his division commanders, Thomas J. Wood – the same Thomas J. Wood whose literal interpretation of an obviously incorrect order would bring about the Union collapse at Chickamauga not two weeks later. In this earlier episode, however, Crittenden favored the more literal interpretation of Rosecrans's orders for a reconnaissance in force toward Lookout Mountain and Wood, convinced that his division was already overextended, one that afforded more tactical flexibility and therefore a smaller commitment of troops. An outpouring of mutual recrimination ensued even though the Army of the Cumberland was dispersed over a 30 mile front in a valley with a mountain to its rear and no reliable intelligence on the enemy to its front.

Flaws in staff work also offset Federal advantages in logistical support and initiative. Although no career military professional, Army of the Cumberland Chief of Staff James A. Garfield was equally convinced of his own infallibility and, at times, given to siding with Washington behind Rosecrans's back whenever higher headquarters believed progress too slow. Many of Garfield's staff officers were twenty-somethings who had served with Rosecrans in Mississippi without prior staff experience. Worst of all, their staff only functioned from noon to midnight, largely because the commander rarely arose before 10 a.m.; an arrangement that could not possibly have worked well in the field, even without the two hours of socializing that followed in the wee hours of the morning. Accordingly, Robertson argues with considerable traction that the consequent sleep deficit not only hindered staff work, but a micromanaging commander incapable of self-criticism.

That a lack of sleep may have caused Rosecrans to lose confidence in his own judgment when he was actually right is the most stinging of ironies. Early in the morning of 9 September, he heard of Chattanooga's evacuation and ordered an all-out pursuit of the Army of Tennessee, but at that point the picture blurs. We do know that Rosecrans met with George H. Thomas, whose XIV Corps was to play a key role in the upcoming push, but neither man left a record of the meeting. Robertson tentatively fills in the blank with a reference to the postwar account of

XIV Corps Chaplain Thomas Van Horne. Van Horne was not present at that crucial meeting but later wrote a history of the Army of the Cumberland at Thomas's behest. According to Van Horne, Thomas recommended that Rosecrans consolidate his scattered army before attempting any pursuit and exploitation. Rosecrans agreed that the advice was sound but insisted on pursuit nevertheless because his superiors expected it. Robertson handles the Van Horne account carefully enough, noting that the more conservative course was in character for Thomas and that the War Department's tendency to needle Rosecrans is also an established fact. It is indeed likely that the Federals then forged ahead into un-reconnoitered territory because Rosecrans had at long last – and at the worst possible moment – caved in to pressure from Washington. While Lincoln famously held that Rosecrans seemed "confused and stunned like a duck hit on the head" in the wake of Chickamauga, the orders of 9 September mark the beginning of that downfall.

His victory of 19-20 September still eleven days away, Bragg's loss of Chattanooga has usually drawn more fire than Rosecrans's consequent leap into the dark. Robertson's dismissal of McWhiney and Connelly is especially on point here. They and numerous others have taken Bragg to task for stupidly expecting the main enemy crossing of the Tennessee to take place upriver from Chattanooga even after several Union divisions had crossed downriver. Instead, Robertson emphasizes the shortage of intelligence coming to Bragg's headquarters from both sectors. Informed mostly by unknowns, Bragg's decision not to contest the downriver crossings was therefore the only prudent choice that could have been made. Sufficient knowledge of Union dispositions was clearly unavailable when Bragg needed it, and a wrong guess could have been fatal.

By attending to concrete details – areas not reconnoitered, copying and transmittal time for field orders, spot reports eagerly awaited but never sent, overstretched supply lines, collapsed bridges, railroad construction setbacks, and inexcusable bickering while in harm's way – Robertson reminds us of what zero defects historiography and Monday morning quarterbacks will not: that generalship is all too often a game of blind man's bluff. In the end, we who celebrate history's successful gambles must also give credit to leaders who could tell a good bet from a bad one.

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