

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Knoxville Campaign: August 16-December 14, 1863

By **Daniel F. O'Connell**

The importance of Tennessee, particularly eastern Tennessee, to President Lincoln and the Federal war planners was evident from the very beginning of the secession crisis. When the state overturned its earlier refusal and joined the Confederacy in June of 1861 it established the state as a major battleground. This volatile region experienced violence even before the opposing armies battled here. A Unionist rally was fired into by a Confederate regiment at Strawberry Plains and bridges along the important Roanoke to Atlanta rail line were torched by loyalists funded by the Lincoln Administration. The Confederate government reacted harshly to quell the Unionist sentiment. Martial law was declared in Knoxville, habeas corpus was suspended, and death sentences were carried out on five found guilty of burning the bridges. Additionally, between 1,500 and 2,000 residents suspected of involvement were shipped off to Alabama and Georgia to serve prison sentences. Lincoln was aware of the plight of the loyalist and the military significance of made this area a priority.

Operations here, however, would have to wait as the Federal forces suffered a series of defeats and then fought off General Robert E. Lee's first incursion into the north. Following the bloody debacle at Fredericksburg the Union commander, Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside, was relieved and sent to Kentucky to head the Department of the Ohio where he was joined by IX Corps on March 19, 1863. By organizing the available forces in the area Burnside formed a second corps, designated XXIII Corps in April. It contained two divisions under the command of Major General George Lucas Hartsuff. In June IX Corps was sent to Vicksburg to reinforce Grant in Mississippi. The Federal victory there allowed Major General Ulysses S. Grant to send this Corps back to Kentucky in August. By this time the Corps had been depleted to just 6,000 men by the malarial conditions around Vicksburg and Burnside spent some time attempting to rebuild its strength. After weeks of badgering from Washington, Burnside finally left Nicholasville, Kentucky for Knoxville on August 16. Simultaneously Major General William Starke Rosecrans made an attempt on Chattanooga from his base at Murfreesboro. Lincoln constantly badgered Grant about aiding Burnside and sent reminders to his top commander in the west not to forget the push to Knoxville. The actions around Knoxville in late 1863 consisted of three individual campaigns, the Union seizure of eastern Tennessee, Lieutenant General James Longstreet's effort to dislodge them, and finally the pursuit of Longstreet from the city.

While Burnside struggled through 220 miles of mountainous terrain the Confederate defenders at Knoxville, under Major General Simon Bolivar Buckner, were pulled back to Sweetwater. General Braxton Bragg, commander of the Confederate Western Department, attempting to consolidate his forces before Chickamauga, stripped the region of all but a minimum defense, essentially forfeiting Knoxville. On September 3 Burnside's 15,000 Federal troops entered the city nearly unopposed to a hero's welcome. The next day Chattanooga fell to Rosecrans and the two keystone cities in Eastern Tennessee were in Union hands. Burnside moved quickly to solidify his gains, protect his flank and affect a link up with Rosecrans near Chattanooga. Moving south a Union column was frustrated when a small Confederate rear guard burned the bridge at Loudon and retreated. The Confederate victory at Chickamauga ended the chance for merging the two Union armies. Burnside was on his own.

Like the fall of Knoxville, the next important military triumph of the campaign in East Tennessee was bloodless. It was not, however, without significant loss to the Confederate forces still in the area. While Burnside's main body moved to secure the city a secondary force was sent to invest the critically important Cumberland Gap. On August 21 Buckner sent Brigadier General John Wesley Frazer, commanding forces in the Gap, an order "to hold your position to the last".¹

On September 8 a brigade of Union cavalry, under Brigadier General James Murrell Shackelford had sealed the southern end of the Gap and called for Frazer to surrender. This request was flatly refused by Frazer who made no effort to maneuver out of the inevitable encirclement, despite orders authorizing him to do so. The Northern end of the valley was sealed by Colonel John Fitzroy DeCourcy and a small division of Federal infantry. Another request for surrender was sent by DeCourcy. Again Frazer refused. Simultaneously, Burnside was personally leading Gilbert's Brigade of Hascall's division, XXIII Corps to reinforce the Union forces. The column covered the 60 mile route in 52 hours and moved into position, raising complaints from Frazer that the flag of truce to deliver DeCourcy's surrender demand was being abused.

Frazer's position was an unenviable one. Seemingly trapped and lacking confidence in his troops and their leaders Frazer had a difficult decision to make. His request for reinforcements and ammunition went unheeded while the enemy strength had grown. Responding to DeCourcy's surrender demand Frazer attempted to ascertain the numbers opposing him by naively asking the Union commander to disclose them. Naturally his question went unanswered and again he refused to give up his position. Finally an impatient Burnside sent his own demand for surrender. When Frazer learned that Burnside was present with reinforcements, Buckner had burned the bridge at Loudon, and that help from Major General Samuel Jones in Virginia would not be forthcoming he called a council of his commanders. He now believed that he was greatly

¹ Sheliha to Frazer, August 21, 1863, United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 30, part 4, p. 528 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 4, 528).

outnumbered and surrender was the only option. Writing in 1864 as “an act of self-defense and protection of my fair fame” Frazer attempted to justify his decision by stating that he had only “1700 effective men”, minimum artillery ammunition, and no access to water.² He also suggested that his decision would have been unanimously agreed upon had he conducted a vote of his officers. . He accepted Burnside’s offer to surrender unconditionally.

Others disagreed with his version of events. Major Bryon McDowell of the 62nd North Carolina, attending the council for his commander who was laid up with typhoid fever, recalled a willingness to fight; “When I was told by General Frazer that I had been surrendered, and that I and my regiment were prisoners of war my indignation and that of my regiment knew no bounds.”³ He announced his intention to evade rather than submit to capitulation. He was quickly joined by others who agreed with his position. Under the leadership of Colonel Campbell Slep about 600 men decided to attempt an escape after “sharp words were exchanged” with Frazer.⁴ As the flags were struck a local man, familiar with the area, led the evaders out of harm’s way without incident. Despite the exodus the victorious Federals netted 2,026 prisoners, 12 pieces of artillery, 200 horses and mules, 50 wagons, 160 cattle, 12,000 pounds of bacon, 2,000 bushels of wheat, and 15,000 pounds of flour. Jefferson Davis would call Frazer’s action “a shameful abandonment of duty”.⁵ Cumberland Gap would remain in Union hands for the remainder of the war.

In an effort to free his left flank Burnside deployed troops to push to the Virginia border. Travelling northeast along the *East Tennessee & Georgia Railroad* Colonel John Watson Foster’s brigade ran into Confederate defenders at the Watauga River. At 9:00 a.m. on September 22 skirmishing began at Hall’s Ford where Foster’s crossing was “disputed by a heavy picket force of cavalry.”⁶ After a short fight the outnumbered pickets were driven in on the main body at Blountsville.

Here Colonel James E. Carter posted his 1,200 men in a line supported by four artillery pieces. Inconclusive fighting lasted four hours until Foster decided to launch a flanking attack on the enemy position. The Confederates were dislodged by “a charge of the Sixty-fifth Indiana Mounted Infantry, Fifth Indiana Cavalry, and Eighth Tennessee Cavalry” just before darkness settled in.⁷ Union losses totaled 27, mostly in the 65th Indiana while the Confederates losses were much higher at 165. At least 50 prisoners and one artillery piece were taken by Foster’s men. Artillery fire started a fire that rampaged through the town unchecked while the fighting was going on and consumed “a great portion of it.”⁸

² *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 2, 609, 614.

³ <http://thomaslegion.net/62nd.html> , accessed December 17, 2014.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jefferson Davis, Indorsement, September 24, 1863, *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 2, 637.

⁶ *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 2, 593.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

This little fight is significant for the unusual correspondence that took place between the two army commanders prior to the event. On the 22nd Burnside sent a letter to Samuel Jones under a flag of truce asking that non-combatants be warned to leave towns and villages along the railroad. Having announced his intended route to the enemy Burnside suggested that “to avoid accidents” the civilian populations should be warned of his approach so that they may “remove themselves to a place of safety.” Burnside stated that military necessity might require him to fire into the towns but he would not do so until after 5:00 p.m. After the end of the safe period he would not be responsible for civilian casualties. Brigadier General John Stuart Williams answering the request “in absence of my superior officers” did not receive the letter until after 4:00 p.m. and replied angrily. In the fiery message Williams stated the “short space allowed” to make the warnings effectively negated the effectiveness of any attempt and therefore “does not seem consistent with the usages of civilized warfare”.⁹ Oddly Williams did not ask for an extension of the deadline. He asked only how such warnings might be made in such a limited time. Colonel Foster may or may not have known about Burnside’s diplomatic effort but the fight at Blountsville would certainly have violated the 5:00 p.m. deadline. Foster, writing his report after learning of the correspondence did, however, emphasize that it was enemy shells that started the blaze.

After the Confederate victory at Chickamauga the unification of Federal forces became unfeasible and Burnside began to retract some of his more exposed units. The Confederates did not hesitate to take up the abandoned territory and were soon exerting pressure on the crossing points of the Hiwassee River. Colonel Robert King Byrd’s Union brigade was in position to defend several fords but the northern bank of the river was dominated by elevations on the southern side. Placing artillery on the heights on September 25 Nathan Bedford Forrest’s cavalry took control of the geographic advantage and the Confederate troopers pushed them back from the river. This was the opening engagement of a three week period of back and forth actions to determine access to the crossing points of the Tennessee River.

At noon on September 26 Forrest attacked with 5,000 troopers and forced Byrd to retreat again. Byrd’s brigade retreated to Athens and joined forces with Colonel Frank Lane Wolford’s cavalry brigade to finally stop the Confederate advance. The Union position was poorly situated within a road network that allowed access from several directions so the two men agreed to seek a more defensible position and moved back to Philadelphia. On the September 27 an early morning patrol by Lieutenant Colonel Silas Adams and the 1st Kentucky Cavalry detected a move by Forrest to flank them and the Federal forces retreated again, finally deciding on a line near Loudon. Forrest’s success was not greeted with universal acclaim at Confederate headquarters. Bragg accused Forrest of insubordination and reckless freelancing. Forrest, unwilling to have his achievements undermined and his honor besmirched, angrily demanded transfer away

⁹ Burnside to Jones, September 22, 1863, *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 3, 786.

from Bragg's control after heated words were exchanged between them. The request was quickly granted and once again Bragg robbed himself of demonstrated leadership ability.

With Forrest gone the Federals began to reclaim some of the lost territory. They advanced as far as Athens on October 2. Reports of growing Confederate strength convinced them to move back again on the October 5. Arriving at Sweetwater the Federal commanders made a serious mistake. Despite the reports of a growing enemy threat they split their forces. Wolford's brigade remained at Sweetwater while Byrd, after detaching the 45th Ohio to Wolford, moved to Kingston. Facing a growing threat the Union troops again pulled back. By the 12th Wolford had been ordered back to Philadelphia.

Here the two sides settled down into skirmishing and scouting each other's position. The only significant activity was an October 15 attack on a Union foraging expedition that ended up netting 25 Confederate prisoners when the raiding party was attacked by a Federal relief column. On October 17 Major General Carter Littlepage Stevenson arrived to assume command of the Confederate forces. Stevenson immediately reinforced Colonel George Gibb Dibrell's brigade and set into motion a plan that would prove disastrous to Wolford's isolated command.

The Union campaigns for Chattanooga and Knoxville were intended to be mutually supportive. Burnside's efforts were planned to threaten Bragg's right and rear thereby creating a diffusion of Confederate strength. In an effort to affect the unification of Union forces Burnside had pushed cavalry forward as far as Cleveland. The Confederate victory at Chickamauga dashed any hopes of a quick unification and following the battle Burnside was forced to retract his dangerously exposed forward elements to the vicinity of Loudon.

Before Longstreet's expedition against Knoxville got underway Burnside was busy expanding his position in the far eastern portion of Tennessee. Not content to simply wait out developments he sent Brigadier General Samuel Perry. Carter's cavalry to secure the avenues of approach from Virginia and, if possible seize the important salt works at Abington. By coincidence the remaining Confederate division in the area, under Major General Robert Ransom, was moving to interdict the Union supply line at Cumberland Gap. Ransom sent Brigadier General John S. Williams ahead with his troopers "to cover a movement...upon Cumberland Gap".¹⁰ The opposing riders made initial contact in a meeting engagement on October 3 at Blue Springs, Tennessee. Both sides recoiled from the initial contact and spent the better part of the next week sparring with skirmishers and awaiting reinforcements.

Unfortunately for Williams his aggressiveness had moved his force too far ahead of and without adequate support. Ransom had not planned on advancing beyond Greenville and sent an order for Williams to assume command of all troops lest communication be severed between them. Williams mistakenly believed that the advance

¹⁰ *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 2, 640.

on Cumberland Gap would continue while he occupied the Federal troops at Blue Springs. Carter had no such trouble understanding his role. Burnside was personally leading a cavalry division and troops from Brigadier General Edward Ferrero's infantry division to his assistance. Attempting to match the extension of the ever growing Union line, Williams extended his force into a position that covered over two miles. The Confederate defense was stretched until it comprised "nothing but a line of skirmishers."¹¹ On October 10, after a reconnaissance by Chief Engineer, Captain Orlando Poe, the Union attack was launched at the Confederate center while cavalry, under Colonel Foster, attempted to gain their rear by sweeping around the right flank of Williams' position. The Union attack pushed to the very rear of the Confederate line before being repelled by a barrage from a judiciously placed battery. Foster's column did not make it into position in time to render assistance or cut off the line of retreat. The Union forces fled under the deluge of canister. Darkness and the absence of Foster's men allowed Williams to conduct a retreat. After the battle Williams discovered the expedition to Cumberland Gap had been cancelled and his fight had been unnecessary. All that remained to be done was to march out of Tennessee to safety. After uniting with a small force under BG Alfred Eugene Jackson at Greenville they began their escape. In the darkness the artillery took a wrong turn and while the main column waited for them to catch up the Federal troopers caught them at Rheatown and again on October 13 at Blountsville. These small actions delayed but did not stop the retreat into Virginia.

Losses for the unnecessary fight totaled 216 Confederates and 100 Federals. As a postscript to the affair Williams requested and was granted relief from command.

Securing the line of communication back to Kentucky required that Burnside man the route at regular intervals. One such outpost was located just east of Rogersville where a portion of the Third Brigade of the 4th Cavalry Division held the line. This isolated detachment (7th Ohio Cavalry, 2nd East Tennessee Mounted Infantry, and 4 guns of Battery M 2nd Illinois light Artillery) became a target for Confederate Cavalry commanded by Brigadier General William Edmondson "Grumble" Jones in the first week of November 1863.

Jones could not have selected a more opportune time to strike the outpost. The detachment commander, Colonel James Patton Taylor Carter and the regimental commander of the 2nd East Tennessee Mounted Infantry, Lieutenant Colonel James Melton had departed on leave of absence. Command fell to Colonel Israel Garrard of the 7th Ohio while command of his two maneuver units fell to Majors. The artillery was in no better condition as the regular commander had been ordered away leaving the guns under the command of Lieutenant W. Stevenson. This improvised command structure would do nothing to distinguish itself in the coming fight.

Jones' plan called for two columns to cross the Holston River and approach the Union encampment on two roads. Troops, under Colonel Henry Giltner, would hug the

¹¹ *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 2, 641.

river on Old Stage Road while Jones led the other to Carter Valley Road and an effort to gain the Federal rear.

Suspecting that something was afoot Colonel Garrard dispatched a 50 man patrol eastward on the Carter Valley Road to link with a picket of home guards. Captain Marney, leading the patrol, met with Captain Rogers, commander of the picket force, and explained that they would join forces and push out on a scout of the road. While Rogers was making preparations to depart the lead elements of Jones column fell upon them with sabers drawn. Led by the 8th Virginia Cavalry, under Colonel James Corns, the Confederate mass easily swallowed up the small party. Company E, commanded by Captain H. C. Everett, “captured some 40 of them, and dispersed the remainder of them in the woods.” The prisoners were left with a small guard and “very near all of the men escaped and returned” carrying news of the Confederate approach.¹²

Colonel Giltner’s southern column, moving slowly to give Jones time to complete his circuitous route, ran into a party of defenders picketing the road. Valuable time was wasted and the enemy was allowed to retreat before Giltner was able to push forward to Big Creek in front of the Union encampment. Despite some advanced warning Garrard spent the available time trying to get the supply wagons ready for a getaway dash. Just after sunrise Garrard took the 7th Ohio out on the road to Rogersville to develop the Confederate intentions. They were blasted back by Jones’ troopers, who had completed their encircling move. Thinking Garrard killed in the repulse Major Daniel Carpenter tried to organize his forces. It was too late. Giltner’s column had arrived and was rapidly cutting off any chance for escape.

A disheveled Garrard reappeared and ordered Carpenter to have his men tie their horses and form a line. They were to defend their position “at all hazard.”¹³ As the Confederates closed in Garrard mounted his regiment and made a break out attempt leaving the Tennessee men to their fate. Of the 893 men under Carpenter’s command 5 were killed and 608 were captured (418 died in captivity). The 7th Ohio escaped the debacle losing roughly half its men and all the artillery. Despite the overwhelming success of the operation Jones criticized Giltner’s tardy arrival that allowed any of the Federal force to escape.

James Longstreet experienced a contentious journey to the Knoxville battlefields. Sent by Lee to reinforce Bragg just prior to Chickamauga he quickly found himself embroiled in the intrigues and cabals that surrounded Bragg’s command. The two men spared no time coming to loggerheads and Bragg took the first opportunity to rid himself of the “disrespectful and insubordinate” Longstreet.¹⁴ At the suggestion of Confederate President Jefferson Davis he dispatched his disgruntled deputy and his corps to Knoxville to deal with Burnside. Even though others were in better position to make the move

¹² *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 1, 552.

¹³ *O.R.*, I, 30, pt. 1, 553.

¹⁴ Thomas L. Connelly, *Autumn of Glory: The Army of Tennessee 1862-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967, 263.

Bragg insisted on detailing Longstreet to this task. It was a pleasant surprise for the Federal commanders to see these battle hardened veterans moving off. Grant noted in his memoirs that he was surprised, and thought it foolish, that Bragg would send away a corps in light of his growing strength. Bragg, however, thought differently and declared the departure of Longstreet to be a “great relief to me.”¹⁵

Longstreet was ordered to act quickly so that, although historians disagree that he ever intended to do so, he could return to assist Bragg at Chattanooga. There were few arrangements available to make the ordered rapidity of action a reality. The fragile rail system was incapable of moving the entire corps quickly. The *East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad* arrived with an insufficient number of cars and the 120 mile round trip took nearly thirty hours to complete. Frequent stops were required to dismount troops to gather wood and water to fuel the engine or to lighten the load so that the train could negotiate the inclines. Transportation of the corps to Sweetwater that was planned for three days took eight. The last of his troops did not arrive until late on November 10. Longstreet was also surprised to find the Confederate commissary depot he thought to be located there had been called back to Chattanooga. Another four days were lost while his troops foraged the already well scoured area for food.

The remaining distance to the enemy offered no fewer challenges. Longstreet had left all his organic transportation assets in Virginia and was critically short of animals. Some of his artillery was being hauled by oxen. The idea of a rapid deployment was gone, erased by logistical and transportation difficulties. Additionally, the original concept of operations was abandoned and a new plan developed because transportation for his pontoons was unavailable. The location for the crossing of the Tennessee River was moved to Loudon because that was as close as the railroad could move the critical boats to a suitable crossing site. The bridging material had to be manhandled to the river at Huff's Ferry. On the night of November 13 a select detachment of the Palmetto Sharpshooters, under Captain Foster, were paddled across the river to seize the enemy pickets. In Longstreet's words brought word that the Confederate Army was crossing the river. The next day the corps, consisting of two divisions of infantry and 5,000 cavalry, and 35 pieces of artillery crossed the river and built breastworks. A brief attempt at foiling the bridgehead was made by Brigadier General Edward Ferrero's Division before Union forces began a retreating process. Delaying actions by the Federal forces frustrated the Confederate advance. Burnside was trying to gain time so Captain Orlando Poe and his makeshift engineer battalion could finish the works at Knoxville. Longstreet knew that they must keep them from their works or suffer a siege.

On the night of November 13 as Longstreet crossed the Tennessee River with his infantry the cavalry was sent away on “a diversion upon the enemy's flank.”¹⁶ Major General Joseph Wheeler, with portions of four cavalry brigades, moved toward Maryville to capture the Union force there. The ultimate goal was to seize the heights overlooking

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sorrel to Wheeler, November 12, 1863, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 540.

Knoxville from the southern bank of the Holston River. Confederate possession of this dominant position was thought to be enough to force evacuation of the city.

Pursuant to Longstreet's directive Wheeler crossed the Tennessee River at Motley's Ford "and made a night's march to strike between the enemy at Maryville and their line of retreat."¹⁷ To his surprise he found only the 11th Kentucky Cavalry (US) at Maryville, not the brigade he expected. Wheeler decided to forego any flanking attempt and attack the badly outnumbered Kentucky troopers straight away. While maneuvering into position his guides mistakenly led him directly into the surprised Federals. Wheeler initiated the attack with his escort and a squadron from Dibrell's brigade. In the confusion the Federal troopers scattered and became easy prey for the follow on units of Dibrell's brigade. They "ran down and captured 151 men."¹⁸

Hearing the commotion from his camp at Rockford, Brigadier General William Price Sanders mounted a rescue mission comprised of the 1st Kentucky Cavalry and 45th Ohio Mounted Infantry. In a rush to come to the aid of his beleaguered regiment Sanders failed to realize that his 1,500 men were galloping into 4,000 enemy troopers. Wheeler anticipated the attack and had a warm reception prepared. The attack wilted under fire from three directions and the Federal horsemen quickly retreated behind the Little River.

The next morning Wheeler found the crossings undefended. Sanders' troops had moved back toward Knoxville seeking better ground. Wheeler pushed forward against skirmishers until he reached Stock Creek. Here the Federal troopers put up "a strong and elevated" line fronted by the stream.¹⁹ Discovering that the stream could not be forded by horses and the bridge partially destroyed Wheeler dismounted a portion of his command and crossed the creek. This effort pushed the Union pickets back far enough to allow a detail to repair the bridge. Crossing the remainder of his force mounted, Wheeler attacked the retreating Federals. A spearhead of the 8th Texas, 11th Texas, and 3rd Arkansas broke the line and sent the Union defenders fleeing "in the wildest confusion."²⁰ Advancing to within a half mile of the Holston River, scooping up an additional 140 prisoners on the way, Wheeler stopped. The heights so strongly coveted were as heavily defended by "a strong force of the enemy's infantry and artillery."²¹ The Confederates retreated behind Stock Creek for the night. Burnside used the pause to rush reinforcements over the pontoon bridge he had wisely had thrown across the river. The next morning found the Federal position unassailable and the hopes of victory dashed. Wheeler, using a discretionary order from Longstreet to succeed or return to the main body, opted for retreat. There would be no devastating fire from across the river into Knoxville. The next best hope for Longstreet was to cut the retreating Union forces off before they reached the city.

¹⁷ Wheeler, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 540.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 541.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 542.

As Wheeler's cavalry were trying Knoxville's "back door" around Maryville, Longstreet moved to strike Burnside head-on. On the night of November 13 the Confederates executed a nearly flawless river crossing under the most difficult of circumstances. After dark the boats were manhandled to the water and the bridge thrown with a minimum of resistance. Fleeing Federal pickets spread the alarm. It was no matter for Burnside had no intention of contesting his bridgehead. His primary goal was to delay Longstreet long enough to evacuate his advanced forces into the city.

Brigadier General Edward Ferrero's division had been detailed to watch for the Confederate crossing in the vicinity of Loudon. Unbeknownst to Longstreet his maneuver was neither unexpected nor undetected. Ferrero's men rushed to Huff's Ferry, arriving about 10:00 p.m. While keeping an eye on Longstreet's movement and skirmishing with his pickets Ferrero was called back to Burnside's headquarters. He was instructed to fall back slowly "so as to draw the enemy over the river and keep him engaged while other important movements were being carried out by the army in Middle Tennessee."²²

In a driving rain Ferrero began the slow retreat. Both sides struggled on the muddy roads. Ferrero attached regiments of troops to each piece of artillery to help move them after the teams started giving out. Slowly they made their way back to Lenoir's Station. Here they fought off "several attacks on my picket line."²³

The following morning they began a movement back to Campbell's Station. Longstreet now saw the Union strategy and was determined to make quick work of the retreating forces before they could reach the city. He wanted no part of time consuming siege operations if they could be avoided. His plan involved forced marches northeast on the Kingston Road to cut Burnside's escape route. Both men realized the race to Campbell's Station was on. The winner would have a decided advantage. The hard marching Confederates gained a slight lead but Burnside countered with one of his best decisions of the war. He ordered all nonessential equipment abandoned. Wagons and extra caissons were left mired and three regiments were veered away to delay Brigadier General Micah Jenkins' (Hood's) division. At the same time a group of "500 or 600 mounted men" and a battery were rushed forward to take control of the critical junction of the Concord and Kingston Roads.²⁴ They arrived fifteen minutes ahead of the lead elements of Longstreet.

As the Union retreat continued the Federal rear guard continued to delay allowing the main body to establish a line on the Kingston Road. Longstreet quickly developed a plan for not only cutting them off from their Knoxville works but crushing them in place. Major General Lafayette McLaws formed in the front of the Union position and held their attention while Brigadier General Evander McIver Law's brigade was sent on a flanking march around the Federal left. This movement was detected by

²² Ferrero, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 350.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Potter, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 332.

Burnside from a nearby hill and he ordered an adjustment to the Federal line. While this move was being accomplished McLaws' men struck at the Union right and again on the right center. Both attacks were repulsed with heavy loss. Law never managed to get his men into the proper position and ended up scrambling the Confederate lines and disrupting the timing of the attack. Furthermore his men did not get deep enough to cut the road behind the Union forces. They were beaten back as was McLaws' attempt at flanking the right of the Union line. Before any more efforts could be made darkness put an end to hostilities. During the night Burnside's infantry retreated to Knoxville and 700 cavalry troopers delayed the Confederate advance until the evening of November 17. Knoxville was gained and the shape of the campaign changed. Casualties totaled 570 for the Confederates and 320 for Burnside's defenders. Law's brigade suffered but 1 killed and 12 wounded in their weak effort.

The defenses at Knoxville had been prepared by Captain Orlando Poe and his engineer battalion comprised of detailed men from the infantry regiments. With orders to build works for 600 men he designed two forts to improve the incomplete Confederate works from an earlier occupation. Burnside quickly approved the designs but the two Forts were therefore incomplete when occupied by the forces retreating from Campbell's Station on November 17. Poe was directed by Burnside Thoroughly familiar with the ground, Poe prepared a written order containing the position to be assumed by each regiment as it entered the city. The exhausted arrivals wasted no time in improving the line. Confederate forces occupied an opposing line after driving back the Federal cavalry acting as a rear guard. Brigadier General William P. Sanders, leading the Union troopers, was killed in the final action before the standoff at Knoxville began. The improved work at the northwest corner of the Knoxville defense, formerly Fort Loudon, was named in his honor on the November 18. Each side made ready for the coming siege operations.

Longstreet understood he did not have time for a protracted siege and selected Fort Sanders as the site for his inevitable assault. He reasoned that his men could get to within 200 yards of the Unions works while still under cover and that would benefit the attacking force. To this end he placed thirty of his available artillery pieces into position to fire into the fort. The remaining four guns, howitzers, were rigged as improvised mortars by placing the axle on a skid until they reached an elevation of about sixty degrees. All the guns were protected by earth works. These preparations took until November 24 to complete.

Besides the usual skirmish activity the defenders also worked on improving their position, by "falling timber and spreading loose brush...along the front of the line" forming an abatis.²⁵ Most troublesome were a number of buildings outside the line of works that could provide a platform for observation and shelter for Confederate sharpshooters. On the nights of November 18 and 19 details were sent out to burn the buildings to deny their use to the enemy and clear fields of fire. On the 20th Brigadier General Ferrero ordered the 17th Michigan to push the Confederates out of a building

²⁵ Humphrey, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 363.

about 1,000 yards from the fort “doing material damage to my line of skirmishers.” Companies A and F moved forward followed by a five man “burning party”.²⁶ The troops cleared the building and succeeded in applying the torch. On their move back to the Union line they were opened on by Confederate artillery, suffering two killed and four wounded.

Longstreet became convinced that some advantage could be gained by seizing the heights south of the river that covered Fort Sanders. On the November 21 he sent two brigades (Law's and Brigadier General Jerome Bonaparte Robertson's) across the river in boats to attack the hills. In a short but bitter struggle they managed to gain control of one the hills only to discover that the range was too great for their artillery. Longstreet decided not to waste his limited supply of ammunition and the valiant efforts of Robertson's Texans and Law's Alabama Brigade went for naught.

Two days of relative peace, caused mostly by heavy rains, were followed by an unusual effort on the November 23. Ferrero reported that during the night two miles of telegraph wire were stretched “in front of my line forming entanglements.”²⁷ The next day the 2nd Michigan was detailed to drive enemy pickets from positions 200 yards from Fort Sanders. The rifle pits were cleared of Confederates but could not be held. After two hours they were forced to retreat after suffering nearly 50% casualties. The affair cost the Wolverine regiment 2 killed, 60 wounded and 24 missing or captured. Thereafter things remained quiet until the November 28 when a general advance by the Confederates that drove the Union pickets “nearly to the works” foretold of coming events.²⁸

The original plan for the assault on the Federal position at Fort Sanders called for the improvised mortars to open at sunrise on November 25 followed by the direct fire guns. Sharpshooters were to seize the advanced Union rifle pits and keep up a deadly fire on the embrasures to mask the approach of the main attack force. While all these preparations were in the works Longstreet learned that Bragg had succumbed to his appeal for reinforcements. Bragg had decided to reinforce him with two divisions from around Chattanooga. The bulk of the planned movement was recalled when the fight for Missionary Ridge exploded in the midst of the deployment. Longstreet decided to postpone the attack awaiting the promised reinforcements. Brigadier General Bushrod Rust Johnson's and Brigadier General Archibald Gracie's brigades began to arrive at Knoxville late on November 24.

Accompanying these troops was Brigadier General Danville Leadbetter, Bragg's Chief Engineer. On Friday November 26 Leadbetter, Longstreet, and Colonel Edward Porter Alexander conducted a reconnaissance of the area north of Knoxville in hopes of finding an area better suited for the assault. After Wheeler's cavalry drove in the Union pickets the three determined that a successful attack would be impossible. The Confederate

²⁶ Ferrero, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 352; Comstock, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 369.

²⁷ Ferrero, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 352.

²⁸ Humphrey, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 364.

leaders unanimously decided to shift the focus of their attack back to Fort Sanders. The scheduled attack, using the previous plan, was again postponed on November 27. On November 28 Longstreet announced that the plan was not only postponed again but drastically altered. Instead of a period of artillery preparation he insisted, probably at Leadbetter's urging that a surprise attack by infantry only at dawn on November 29 would be the course of action.

Referring to a reconnaissance they had conducted on November 27 Longstreet wrote to Micah Jenkins on November 28 that "The work of the enemy is not inclosed (sic). The ditch is probably at some points not more than 3 feet deep and 5 or 6 feet wide...we so judged... in looking at a man walk down the parapet and over the ditch."²⁹ On this bit of information rested the fate of the attack. Lafayette McLaws was ordered to prepare his brigades for an assault. McLaws issued orders for Brigadier General Benjamin Grubb Humphreys' Brigade of Mississippi troops to form the right of the advance with Brigadier General William Tatum Wofford's Georgia Brigade on the left. Brigadier General Goode Bryan's Brigade would form the reserve. Jenkins would support the main effort with an attack on McLaws' left.

During the early morning hours of November 29 the Confederate picket line surged forward and pushed the Union pickets almost back into the fort. Sharpshooters were positioned to provide covering fire into the fort. The retreating Union pickets raised the alarm and the garrison quietly prepared for the assault they knew was inevitable. The defenders poured water out of their embrasures so that the frigid night air would form an icy crust on the steep parapet walls. The garrison was reinforced and confidently awaited the attack.

As soon as it was light enough for them to see the sharpshooters began to pour fire into the fort and the advance began. The two brigades moved forward through a light abatis and the wire tangle foot, which momentarily disrupted the move but served as no great obstacle. When they reached the fort they discovered that the reconnaissance reports were horribly wrong. They were faced with a ditch between 10-13 feet deep with near vertical sides. To escape the fire coming from the fort and to make an effort at scaling the walls the Confederate attackers crowded into the ditch. Like the railroad cut at Gettysburg and the outside works at Franklin the sanctuary proved a death trap. Flanking fire devastated the trapped men. The troops manning the fort at the point of assault improvised ways to add to the destruction. One artilleryman, unable to depress his piece enough to fire into the pit, began lighting the fuses and hand tossed the rounds over the wall. Artillery capable of firing into the deadly mayhem did so with triple loads of canister. The few Confederates that managed to claw their way to the top of the parapet were equally devastated. One Union officer dispatched an intrepid attacker by placing "my pistol six inches from his face and pulling the trigger three times."³⁰ Nearby another defender was beating back an effort to enter the fort with an axe.

²⁹ Longstreet to Jenkins, November 28, 1863, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 3, 757.

³⁰ Benjamin, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 342.

The assault was mercifully called back. The bloody twenty minute effort cost the Confederates 813 casualties while the defenders suffered approximately 20. The siege of Knoxville was not over but no further efforts were made at the Union line.

Following the repulse at Fort Sanders Longstreet was informed that a Union relief column had been sent from the victorious Union army at Chattanooga. The Confederate troops were held in their lines around Knoxville as bait to draw Sherman away from Bragg's retreating army. A staged withdraw began on December 3. Units on the west of the city were shifted to the east and the entire force moved off to the northeast on the night of December 4. Burnside reported the departure and the bulk of the relief troops returned to Chattanooga. Only Granger's corps continued on to join the defenders at Knoxville.

On December 5 the Union mindset changed from defense to pursuit. Major General John Grubb Parke was given command of the chase but the first efforts were hampered the condition of his cavalry. "The few cavalry we could mount...were in such bad condition as to be unable to make any great impression on the enemy."³¹ Brigadier General J. M. Shackelford started after the Confederate Army with a mixed task force of cavalry and infantry on December 7 after a short period of consolidation and reorganization. From the December 7 to 13 the pursuers kept a respectful distance, having been ordered by Parke "not to attack with the force I came out with."³² A series of skirmishes marked the chase, the most important occurring on December 10 at Morristown. Colonel Israel Garrard, out on a scout of the Rogersville Road, avenged his earlier defeat there by attacking the Confederate cavalry. It "was a gallant affair" with "40 or 50 rebels reported killed or wounded."³³ After the fight the Union cavalry gathered at their headquarters at Bean's Station.

The Union cavalry had moved well in advance of their infantry support and Longstreet sensed an opportunity. The Confederate leader reversed his direction of march with an eye to destroying the Federals located at Bean's Station. On the morning of the December 14 Bushrod Johnson's division moved down the Rutledge Road fronted by 100 cavalry troopers from Giltner's Brigade. Initial contact was made with the Federal skirmishers about three miles east of Bean's Station at 2:00 p.m. seven companies of the 59th Alabama were advanced as skirmishers and began the slow process of pushing the Union troopers back. At one half mile from the station the 43rd Alabama extended the Confederate line and advanced on the main Union position. Well placed artillery drove them to the ground and the Confederate guns were brought up to begin dueling with the Union pieces. Captain William Watts Parker's Virginia Battery and Captain Osmond B. Taylor's Virginia Napoleons battled the Federal gunners for the rest of the day. Parker's guns reportedly fired 375 rounds during the engagement.

³¹ Burnside, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 278.

³² Shackelford, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 410.

³³ Shackelford to Parke, December 11, 1863, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 413.

While the batteries fought amongst themselves Johnson's Brigade pressed forward in a line of battle while McLaws' men attempted to turn the enemy's left. Gracie's Alabama Brigade led the way with the 60th Alabama out front. The move was met by heavy fire coming from the large hotel building at the station and the men were forced to lie down. Artillery was diverted from the counter battery fire onto the hotel. Unfortunately the hotel stables, occupied by men of the 60th Alabama, were struck and 2 men killed and 3 others wounded. Eventually the Union troops were compelled to evacuate the hotel leaving several wounded soldiers in the basement to be captured. Johnson then called on Jenkins (Hood's) Division for assistance. An effort was made to flank the right of the Federal line, but the move was detected and Shackelford had his men retreat into the night.

The next morning Longstreet hoped to push the Union troops into a trap. Brigadier General William T. Martin was supposed to circle the Union position at Bean's Station and take up blocking positions with his cavalry to thwart any Federal retreat. Martin met unexpectedly tough resistance from "a brigade of cavalry" at May's Ford.³⁴ The stubborn Federal troopers were finally driven away from the river by rapid fire from Captain B. F. White's Tennessee and Captain Janneden H. Wiggin's Arkansas batteries. The next morning the enemy pickets were driven off the ford and the crossing made. The lost time, however, could not be made up and Martin did not gain the correct position. As a result the Union cavalry was allowed to fall back on their infantry support and assume an entrenched position. Longstreet declined to attack the entrenched enemy and the Battle of Bean's Station was over. The Confederate losses totaled 900 while the Union defenders suffered slightly less with 700 casualties. Retreat and skirmishing lasted for two additional weeks before Longstreet and his men were allowed to make winter camp. The spring would see them return to Virginia's battlefields.

The Knoxville campaign is impossible to assess alone. Close proximity to the larger Chattanooga campaign gave the two an interdependent relationship. The movements in each necessitated changes in the other.

Burnside's original mandate was to clear eastern Tennessee of Confederate influence, yet his presence there had exactly the opposite effect. The Union army at Knoxville became a magnet for a large Confederate reinforcement there. Bragg had to weaken himself by sending Longstreet's Corps to the area to protect his right and rear. The departure of these troops delighted Grant as it weakened Bragg in the face of Grant's impending offensive.

Much to the surprise of his detractors in Washington, Burnside handled the rapidly changing demands of the campaign skillfully. Despite the lack of an impressive battlefield triumph Burnside regained much of the credibility lost at Fredericksburg. By drawing Longstreet away from Bragg and holding him at Knoxville and then pushing him

³⁴ Martin, *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 546.

away toward Virginia he contributed significantly to the success of both campaigns. Longstreet's veterans remained isolated and suffered through the winter in extreme eastern Tennessee. Longstreet and his troops became a non-factor until the spring of 1864.

From a Confederate standpoint the action around Knoxville in the fall and early winter of 1863 was a miserable failure. Longstreet was sent on a fool's errand by the erratic Bragg. Arriving too late and with too little to really have an opportunity to have an impact. His efforts were further doomed by two factors, the superior plan of his enemy and internal strife in his own command structure.

Longstreet spent the entire campaign acting exactly as Burnside wanted. He was drawn away from support of Bragg and into a siege that he could not hope to successfully conclude. In the end his time at Knoxville made him vulnerable to the relief column from Chattanooga. If any positive can be taken from this campaign it would be that his retreat to the northeast did not allow Burnside's forces (Burnside was replaced by Major General John Gray Foster on December 10.) to join in the pursuit of the defeated Bragg.

Poor communications between his divisions and brigade commanders coupled with jealousy over Jenkins assumption of command of Hood's Division spelled disaster for his tactical moves. The one great opportunity at Campbell's Station was wasted when Law seriously mishandled his portion of the battle Longstreet did not suffer his failure well. His brief tenure in independent command had embarrassed him and he lashed out at his subordinates for it. McLaws was relieved of command for not supporting Longstreet's plans.

Jenkins' Division was not spared his wrath. Longstreet preferred charges against both Law and Robertson for offenses ranging from "conduct highly prejudicial to good order and military discipline" (Robertson) to "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman" (Law).³⁵ Jenkins, atypically, did not mention either of his brigade commanders when dealing out post campaign accolades in his report. He also stated that the campaign suffered from "the absence of high and cordial sustaining support to loyal authority on the part of some high officers."³⁶

Longstreet's charges against McLaws and Law received a cold shoulder from court authorities and government officials. McLaws was found not guilty on two of the three specifications and the guilty verdict in the third was overturned. The guilty finding on the charge that McLaws failed to provide his troops with a means to cross the ditch at Fort Loudon was reversed for faulty intelligence. Charges were not brought against Law despite a letter from Robert E. Lee asking that they be examined. Longstreet was chastised for having seriously offended against good order when he ordered Law arrested again after the charges were thrown out. Robertson was found not guilty of conduct

³⁵ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 470.

³⁶ *O.R.*, I, 31, pt. 1, 472.

unbecoming, but guilty of making disparaging remarks about the campaign to his regimental commanders. The guilty verdict on the second specification ended his service with First Corps. For his part in the failed campaign Longstreet submitted his resignation on December 30. Not surprisingly the request was denied.
