

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Letters Not Written in Blood: The Tullahoma Campaign

By Daniel F. O'Connell

The Civil War featured several highly visible campaigns— Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Chancellorsville to name just a few— that have been studied by generations of military leaders. While these certainly deserve the attention that has been afforded to them there are lesser known campaigns that also deserve to rise from anonymity. Failure doomed some of these to obscurity, but for one spectacular success failed to gain it the requisite amount of attention. The Tullahoma Campaign is rarely mentioned in any discussion of the campaigns of the Civil War, yet it was successful beyond the wildest hopes of the designer, Major General William Starke Rosecrans.

The precursor of the Tullahoma Campaign was the fight for Murfreesboro, Tennessee at the beginning of 1863. This bloody, confused fight ended with the Army of the Cumberland in possession of the town but both sides were left staggering. Despite constant pressure from Washington to drive the Confederates from the area the Federal commander, Rosecrans, held his ground, rebuilt his battered army and established two preconditions before any offensive action would be taken. First it was necessary “to establish and secure a depot of supplies” to support his army. Rosecrans also insisted that he “organize an adequate cavalry force to combat that of the enemy” (which he considered “vastly superior”). With these priorities in mind Rosecrans continued the slow process of preparing for the summer campaign season.¹

The Confederate commander, General Braxton Bragg, was also attempting to rebuild and refurbish his forces. To accomplish this goal the Army of Tennessee had retreated behind a series of high rocky hills about three miles in depth, and taken a position centered on Tullahoma, Tennessee. Bragg had chosen to defend a lengthy line that extended from Shelbyville in the west to a protective screen of McMinnville in the east.

¹ United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 22, part 1, p. 403 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 22, pt. 1, 403).

Under this scenario the opposing forces in middle Tennessee spent the next five and a half months licking their wounds in their respective corners. Reconnaissance activities and a few cavalry raids were all that highlighted the military action during the long wet spring of 1863.

With the summer months approaching Rosecrans faced increasing pressure from Washington to engage Bragg. His task was to drive the Army of Tennessee from the middle of the state, prevent reinforcements from leaving the area, and facilitate operations in the area of East Tennessee by moving support for the Confederate troops there further from the area.

The Tullahoma Campaign commenced not with an aggressive move toward the enemy but a move westward by Major General Gordon Granger's Reserve Corps. The infantrymen of Granger's command were marched from Murfreesboro to Triune. They intentionally made no efforts to disguise the movement, which included a conspicuous train that was paraded in full view of the Confederate cavalry in the area. This demonstration was an attempt by Rosecrans to fix the attention of Bragg on the Shelbyville front. On the morning of June 23 Major General David Sloane Stanley, with the bulk of his cavalry corps, started moving southeast on the Lewisburg Pike from Triune toward Shelbyville. Their goal was to push back Confederate outposts at Eagleville, Middleton, Rover and Unionville. To complete the deception, Granger's Reserve Corps of infantry simultaneously began a move southeast from Triune to Salem, as if to follow the cavalry advance. It looked every bit like a major attack was brewing in front of Shelbyville.

This demonstration on the far left of the Confederate defense worked even better than Rosecrans had hoped. The reports of Federal forces concentrating near Shelbyville convinced Major General Joseph Wheeler, in command of Bragg's cavalry, that an attack there was imminent. Contrary to his orders to defend the eastern end of the line, he moved almost his entire cavalry force across the Confederate front. By the end of the day on June 23 only a single brigade of Wharton's command was left to screen the Confederate line east of Liberty Gap. The cavalry screen that Bragg was depending on for early warning on the right of his line was virtually gone before the first Union troops appeared there.

The Union Cavalry moved down the Lewisburg Pike toward Shelbyville until they encountered their first real resistance about a mile south of Eagleville. Here the 7th and 51st Alabama Cavalry and the 2nd and 4th Georgia Cavalry supported by a battery fought a delaying action. The fight lasted about two hours before the Confederate troopers were pushed back by the 9th Pennsylvania Cavalry. The Pennsylvanians were then relieved by the 2nd Michigan who over ran the small Confederate camp at Rover and continued on toward Unionville. Just outside of Unionville the Union cavalymen ran into Confederate infantry who utilized a road that did not appear on any of the Union maps to gain the Federal flank. The Southern infantrymen appeared on the right flank" and opened a brisk fire as a prelude to their assault. A quick reaction by the Federal units

present (4th Kentucky (US), 1st Tennessee (US), 1st Wisconsin, and Battery D of the 1st Ohio Artillery) managed to fight off the attack.

The next morning the march was taken up toward Versailles until orders were received to proceed to Middleton. After contact with Confederate pickets a battle line was drawn up with the 1st Wisconsin Cavalry and the 2nd Indiana Cavalry straddling the road. They drove the Confederate skirmishers back into town and waited for the infantry column to catch up. An effective fire from inside several buildings was received and the Federal commanders became impatient. A battery was brought up to engage the pesky snipers and force them from the buildings. A charge then cleared the enemy from the town. Again ignoring their success, the cavalry withdrew to the area of Christiana where they were to link up with the infantry.

On the morning of June 24 Major General Alexander McDowell McCook's XX Corps began their march from Murfreesboro. At 6 a.m. Colonel Luther Prentiss Bradley's 3rd Brigade of the 3rd Division marched south on the Shelbyville Pike to secure an important crossroads to Christiana. Known as the all Illinois Brigade (22nd, 27th, 42nd, and 51st), it was led forward by five companies of the 39th Indiana Mounted infantry, under Lieutenant Colonel Fielder Alson Jones. The mounted men began skirmishing with the enemy cavalry picket just three miles south of Murfreesboro at a place called "The Knob." The Confederate pickets were pushed back but the Confederate artillery took them under fire. A counter-battery effort was ordered to hold their fire by Union Brigadier General Philip Henry Sheridan. The brigade held the crossroads until relieved at 2:00 p.m. by the follow on units of the division. The entire operation cost Bradley's brigade one wounded man.

Around 8:00 a.m. another column of XX corps troops departed their camps. They were led by Brigadier General August Willich's 1st Brigade troops of Brigadier General Richard Woodhouse Johnson's division. In the vanguard of the advance were the other five companies of the attached 39th Indiana Mounted Infantry, under Colonel Thomas J. Harrison. The Spencer wielding mounted Hoosiers dashed to the northern entrance to the gap and overwhelmed the videttes of the 1st/3rd Kentucky Cavalry (CSA). So rapid was the advance that three Confederate troopers were taken prisoner as they cut wheat. From these prisoners McCook learned that only two regiments were stationed in the gap and he decided to make a determined push against them. Willich was ordered to move his infantry column up as soon as possible to take advantage of the opportunity.

On his arrival Willich deployed two regiments (15th Ohio and 49th Ohio) across the road. After probing the defense he discovered that the hills on which the defense was set were steep, rocky, open for most of the distance but topped with trees. He determined that "the enemy had a very strong, and in front, easily defended position" and that a frontal assault "was out of the question." He extended his lines in an effort to gain the flanks of the position by placing the 32nd Indiana on the left and Harrison's men on the right. Battery A of the 1st Ohio Artillery (Captain Wilbur Fiske Goodspeed) was brought

up for fire support.²

Waiting for them were the 5th Arkansas Regiment, 13th/15th Arkansas, a section of artillery, and a detail of cavalry from Major General William Joseph Hardee's Corps. They had no intention of giving up their responsibility without a fight. Both sides began a series of flanking efforts. On the Federal left Harrison's mounted men galloped up just in time to repel the Confederate infantry as they tried to turn their flank. Willich continued to extend his flanks and, upon assuming command of the 29th Indiana and 77th Pennsylvania from the newly arrived 2nd Brigade, gained a clear advantage. A push by the Federal center forced the outnumbered Confederates of the 13th/15th Arkansas back after a brief counter attack. Left behind was their camp where the victors found a table set for dinner. The defenders took up a secondary position on the next set of hills where the artillery could be used more effectively.

The 29th Indiana and the 77th Pennsylvania were ordered to find a weak spot in the new position and to take possession of the hills. Swinging around the left of the enemy the 77th Pennsylvania charged, or more accurately struggled, up the hill toward the Confederate line. Colonel Thomas Ellwood Rose, commanding the 77th, reported that the men could only advance up the slippery steep incline by pulling themselves forward using the saplings and bushes for hand holds. Fortunately the expected resistance did not materialize. Brigadier General St. John Richardson Liddell had seen the untenable position for what it was and ordered a withdrawal to the main camp near the village of Bell Buckle. The gap had been taken and as night came on the opposing artillery continued to trade shots, but each side issued orders for their troops to hold their position.

At 4:00 a.m. on June 24 the Federals began their move toward Hoover's Gap. The 4th Division of Major General Joseph Jones Reynolds led the way with Colonel John Thomas Wilder's mounted Hatchet Brigade in the advance. They were followed by two divisions of infantry. Major General George Henry Thomas described their mission as an attempt to seize and hold Hoover's Gap. Wilder's advance consisted of five companies, led by Lieutenant Colonel Samuel C. Kirkpatrick of the 72nd Indiana, preceded by a forward deployed unit of 25 scouts from the 17th and 72nd Indiana. These men met the pickets of the 3rd Kentucky Cavalry just two miles after leaving the Murfreesboro defenses. This small force was easily pushed back to the reserve located on a heavily forested hill in the gap. Kirkpatrick deployed a company on each side of the road and drove the Confederate troopers from their position, taking two prisoners. The advance was ordered to continue forward to prevent the enemy from occupying defensive works known to be in the gap. Lieutenant Colonel Kirkpatrick "dashed forward along the pike" driving the defenders back so rapidly that they had no time to establish a defense. The retreat of the Confederate cavalymen was so disorganized that as they scattered the regimental colors were left behind and a small train of seven wagons was left undefended and captured. With nothing left to stop them the column continued on to the southern end

² *O.R.*, I, 23, pt. 1, 486.

of the gap.³

The contact between the two forces was not reported to the Confederate commanders responsible for defending the gap until 1:00 p.m. Brigadier General Bushrod Rust Johnson reported that the first he heard of the attack came from two disheveled local boys who appeared at headquarters to report the advance. Moments later this report was verified by a wounded cavalryman and an officer from the 1st (3rd) Kentucky Cavalry Regiment. The warning was sent to Major General Alexander Peter Stewart, who relayed it to Brigadier General William Brimage Bate, commanding a brigade near the gap. Bate immediately put the 20th Tennessee, 37th Georgia, and the Eufala Light Artillery on the road to the village of Beech Grove at the exit to the gap. Major Theodore Dwight Caswell's Georgia Sharpshooters were ordered to follow and the rest of the brigade ordered to prepare to move at a moment's notice. They had barely left camp before meeting remnants of the retreating Kentucky Cavalry. About a mile from camp they came upon a section of the cavalry that included their colonel and a few of his men. This group joined the column to act as guides and scout forward. Learning from the cavalrymen the extent of the Union advance Bate sent word back for the deployment of his remaining regiments. The main body continued on to Beech Grove where they were determined to arrest the Union advance.

The first effort at attacking the Federal advance was made by the 20th Tennessee and the 37th Georgia. It appeared that they were successful but this may have been the recall of Wilder's advance in an effort to consolidate a defense of the gains already made. Wilder was determined not to surrender the ground already gained. He refused an order to fall back and set a defense to fend off the expected Confederate counter-attacks.

The movement of Rosecrans' main effort got off to a slow start on the morning of June 24. The desire for secrecy prevented the orders from being sent to Major General Thomas Leonidas Crittenden's XXI Corps until 2:15 a.m. Major General John McAuley. Palmer, commanding the lead division did not receive them until 4:00 a.m. The orders called for "12 days rations of hard bread, coffee, sugar, and salt and half ration of pork and six days forage for the animals." The supplies were stored at Murfreesboro and Palmer decided the time required to make the preparations necessitated rescheduling the start time of 7:00 a.m. In an effort to save time he also disobeyed orders to move without baggage. The march finally began at 9:00 a.m. in a heavy rain and with baggage-laden wagons. Palmer quickly regretted having the excess weight along. The roads were quickly turned to mud and the travelling became very difficult. The column had a battalion of the Pioneer Brigade along and they worked feverishly to improve the roads but it was a losing battle against the rain. Progress was agonizingly slow.⁴

In the lead the 110th Illinois ran into a brief resistance just beyond the village of Bradyville and pushed them back about a mile. Unhappy with the rate of advance and being stalled by such a small force Palmer ordered a portion of Company C of the 7th

³ Ibid., 458.

⁴ Ibid., 528

Illinois Cavalry, his personal escort, to make a charge against the defenders. The impetuous charge satisfied Crittenden who reported that the enemy was “driven so easily as to cause no delay”. Here XXI Corps would suffer two of the three casualties that they would experience during the entire campaign.⁵

Palmer then thought it wise to halt the march for the night because the “excessive rains had softened the roads and raised the streams.” That evening Brigadier General John Basil Turchin reported to him with a brigade of cavalry. The other brigade of his division had been stripped away at the last minute to reinforce the Shelbyville front. The march began again the next morning and made reasonable progress until they reached Gillies Hill. The slope and condition of the roads brought progress to a halt. Palmer stopped the main column at Hollow Springs and awaited his supply train. Details were sent back to assist moving the wagons along but it was slow, exhausting work. As many as 50 men pushed and pulled each wagon along with the mules. The column would wait at Hollow Springs until June 27 before the movement could resume. In the interim two regiments of cavalry, under Colonel Eli Long, were pushed ahead to Lumley’s Stand. The effort to get behind Bragg was stalled by the weather and poor decision making. Crittenden’s men could not overcome the growing quagmire that was the road network from Bradyville to Manchester. The main effort of the Union campaign was stuck in the mud.⁶

Back at Hoover Gap Wilder prepared to defend his prize. He set his forces for the expected Confederate response by placing two companies of the 98th Illinois to the left of the road. To the right the Union line started with the 72nd Indiana on a hillock on which there was a graveyard. They were supported by two mountain howitzers on the front of the hill. Captain Eli Lilly’s six ten-pound Rodman’s anchored the center from a hill set back slightly from the main line. They were supported by the 123rd Illinois. The right was held the 17th Indiana. The mounted men had pushed about six miles ahead of the main infantry column and would have to hold out long enough for their support to close the distance.

Opposing them was Bate’s fully assembled Brigade with two batteries in support. They were equally determined to regain the gap. A barrage from the Confederate guns killed two gunners and all the mules of one of the mountain howitzers. Lilly’s guns responded and dismounted one Confederate piece and forced the others to move. The 20th Tennessee and Caswell’s (Georgia) Battalion pushed across the field to flank the 17th Indiana. Wilder responded by dispatching the reserve companies of the 98th Illinois to extend the line there. They arrived just as the Confederate line had succeeded in turning the position. The reinforcements greeted the attackers with a “tornado of death” at about one hundred yards. The volume of fire emanating from the Federal line drove the Confederates to the ground and they were forced to crawl back to safety. At this point in the fight a messenger from division headquarters arrived with instructions for Wilder to fall back. Wilder refused and sent the messenger away to make his report. Bate made

⁵ Ibid., 521.

⁶ Ibid., 529.

another thrust that was directed at the Captain Lilly's battery of Rodman's. Two Confederate regiments (20th Tennessee and 37th Georgia) surged across the field but were met by three well concealed companies of the 123rd Illinois who sprang up from a ravine and poured rapid fire into the Confederate ranks. This withering fire was joined by oblique fire from the 72nd Indiana from the cemetery. Wilder would state that "no human being could successfully face the avalanche of destruction" that was poured into the attacking ranks and he was correct. The badly battered Confederate's withdrew again.⁷

It was a brutal day for the men of Bate's Brigade. In his official report of the affair Bate estimated that a quarter of the men involved had become casualties in the unsuccessful attempt to regain control of the gap. Bushrod Johnson's Tennessee brigade arrived from Fairfield at 6:00 p.m. and began the process of relieving Bate's men. All but the 20th Tennessee and the Eufala Battery were moved back into a reserve position. At the exit to the gap Wilder's exhausted men were also being relieved by the 3rd Brigade troops of Brigadier General George Crook. Despite the refused order Wilder was congratulated by the division, corps, and army commanders for his stand. A general order was announced changing the name of the brigade from the "Hatchet" brigade to the "Lightning" Brigade the next day.⁸

On June 25 there was some sparring between the opposing artillery batteries and some skirmishing by Company A of the 44th Tennessee who possessed the only rifled weapons in the regiment but otherwise the day was quiet. At the Union and Confederate headquarters decisions were being made that would alter the shape of the campaign.

On the morning of June 25 the Confederate commander was preparing to renew the fight that would stall the Union troops in the gap. To accomplish his role in the plan as he understood it Major General Patrick Ronayne Cleburne reinforced Liddell with three regiments and an additional battery from the brigade of Brigadier General Sterling Alexander Martin Wood. Although the additional strength was desperately needed the restrictive terrain would not allow them to move up in direct support of Liddell's Razorbacks. Instead Liddell placed the 8th Arkansas in the Railroad Gap, the 2nd Arkansas just south of Wartrace Creek, and two regiments (5th and 13/15th Arkansas) nearby, directly in front of the gap on a small hill. The supporting artillery battery (Warren Light Artillery) was established about one mile back on a hill that offered a good view of the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 459; John T. Wilder, "The Battle of Hoover's Gap." Robert Hunter and William Henry Chamberlain, eds. *Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States-Ohio*. Cincinnati: Monfort and Company. 1908. Volume 6, 168-74.

⁸ Figures for Bate's Brigade show that the 37th Georgia suffered the most with forty-eight casualties (three killed and forty-five wounded), followed by Caswell's Battalion with forty-three (four killed and thirty-nine wounded), and the 20th Tennessee with thirty-three (nine killed and twenty-four wounded). The other two units of the brigade 9th Alabama (five wounded) and the 15th/37th Tennessee (one killed and five wounded) remained out of the main action and the two batteries collectively had eight casualties (two killed and six wounded). In comparison Wilder suffered sixty-one casualties in the Gap (fourteen killed and forty-seven wounded).

gap. The 6/7th Arkansas was held there as well to form a reserve.

Across a wide open field ranging in width between 500 and 2000 yards was Brigadier General Willich's Brigade of Union troops. Willich had placed the 32nd Indiana on the left of the road supported by the 15th Ohio and the 89th Illinois on the right backed up by the 49th Ohio. Other Federal troops were close by to reinforce any offensive or defensive operations. The field remained quiet until about 10:00 a.m. when about seventy-five skirmishers from the 5th Arkansas began an effort to push the Union skirmishers from the field. The back and forth action here lasted nearly five hours with the field exchanging hands several times. Colonel Hotchkiss of the 89th Illinois reported three separate attacks but the Confederate leader thought that the action here represented little more than heavy skirmishing. The net result was little change in the situation until 3:00 p.m.

Liddell was determined to test the resolve of the Union forces to remain in the gap. A more robust effort was made to move the Union line with the 5th Arkansas leading the way. The 2nd Arkansas joined the fray when it appeared that the Union line would collapse. The brief confusion in the Federal line, however, was caused not by the Confederate pressure but by the replacement of units along the line with fresh troops. The fire of the rejuvenated Federal defense drove the Confederate line back into the protective cover of a gully about half way across the field. The 49th Ohio advanced from its reserve position in four ranks and used "advanced firing"* to move the Confederates from their protected position. The 49th was joined by the 77th Pennsylvania and 79th Illinois to drive the Confederates back to their original line.⁹

At 4:00 p.m. Cleburne received a report that the Federal troops were moving back. He misinterpreted this to understand that the Union troops were abandoning the gap and decided to give them a push to help them on their way. Actually the reported movements were just idle troops being shifted to Hoover's Gap. Colonel Lucius Featherston (5th Arkansas) and Colonel John E. Josey (13/15th Arkansas) charged across the muddy field again only to find the Union line as strong as before. They were forced to fall back again. An immediate counter attack was raised by four Union regiments (77th Pennsylvania, 79th Illinois, 34th Illinois, and 38th Illinois). Using the natural strength of their excellent position the 2nd Arkansas repulsed three attacks. This stand, however, made Colonel Daniel Chevette Govan's men critically short of ammunition and he was forced to fall back under the fourth attack, led by the 38th Illinois. As they retreated up the hill the 2nd Arkansas color bearer was shot down and the battle flag captured much to the "great mortification to the regiment as well as the brigade." The retreat of Govan's men allowed the full weight of the attack to be shifted onto the 6/7th Arkansas who were also

⁹ Advanced firing is a technique that allows a regiment to move forward while at the same time provides maximum sustained firepower. The regiment is formed in four ranks and the front rank fires and then is passed by the other three. The process is repeated until the first rank again moves to the front after reloading.

compelled to retreat after a brief stand of their own. Darkness brought an end to the days fighting. Elements of S. A. M. Wood's brigade moved up to the forward positions, but there was little further action at Liberty Gap. The 45th Mississippi reported that they "were in a line of battle the 25th and 26th and on picket the night of the 26th" with nothing more than a smattering of skirmish fire and an occasional artillery shell to bother them. The Union forces made no further attempt to advance beyond the previous day's position.¹⁰

The first two days of the campaign left the opposing commanders with a different set of problems to solve. Each had to evaluate the situation that his army faced and adjust to the existing circumstances.

Major General Rosecrans had his primary drive stalled, not by the enemy, but the weather. If Crittenden could not challenge the enemy's communications then he would have to shift the emphasis of the move to someone that could. In fact Crittenden despaired at the failure of his column to make the necessary progress. He stated "if this army fails it will be mainly due to the fact that our wagons have been loaded down with unauthorized baggage." He was clearly looking to scapegoat Brigadier General Palmer for his decision not to return the excess baggage to Murfreesboro before departing as directed. Rosecrans had no interest in finding blame. He needed to find a way to pressure Bragg's rear and escape route or the campaign would devolve into the head on attack into the Confederate defenses that he was trying to avoid. Realizing that Crittenden could not accomplish this task Rosecrans sent a message to the Corps commander stating that he would no longer hold him to the pre-arranged schedule. The responsibility for applying pressure to the Confederate right would shift to Thomas. This decision was made possible by the unexpected ease of the drive into Hoover's Gap. Thomas would conduct a breakout from the Gap and push toward Manchester where he would be joined by Crittenden at the first possible opportunity.¹¹

Bragg had decisions to make as well. His decisions, however, would be severely complicated by a serious communication problem. Unbelievably Bragg was still unaware of the situation on his right. All the reports available indicated that the main Union thrust was being conducted at Liberty Gap just as he had anticipated. Using this as the basis of his decision making process he intended to proceed with the original plan of attacking the Federal forces stacked up behind the Gap. Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk, commanding First Corps was summoned to his Tullahoma headquarters on the June 26 and ordered to attack the Union flank by a march up Guy's Gap. Polk pleaded against the move stating that the topography and weather made such a move impossible. Bragg would not be swayed and insisted that the attack be conducted as ordered. Polk, convinced that the move was folly, returned to Shelbyville and prepared to execute the attack.

¹⁰ *O.R.*, I, 23, pt. 1, 590; David Williamson, *The Third Battalion Mississippi Infantry and the 45th Mississippi Regiment: A Civil War History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 117.

¹¹ Rosecrans to Thomas, June 28, 1863, *O.R.*, I, 23, pt. 2, 479.

On June 26 one thing was apparent in Middle Tennessee. The opposing sides were each preparing for a different battle. While Braxton Bragg was consolidating troops on his left to support the intended battle at Liberty Gap William Rosecrans was shifting forces from that area to support the drive to Manchester on the Confederate right. These moves paved the way for yet another objective gained by the Union forces with relative ease.

General Thomas issued orders to clear the road from the gap for Reynolds to make a dash for Manchester. To accomplish this task troops from Brigadier General John Milton Brannan's 3rd Division and a brigade of regulars from Major General Lovell Harrison Rousseau's 1st Division were assembled with the idea of turning the Confederate left. Opposing them Bushrod Johnson's Tennessee Brigade was tasked with conducting a delaying action while the remainder of Hardee's Corps moved off to the southwest toward the consolidation point at Fairfield.

At 10:00 a.m. a strong line of skirmishers preceded the Union attack that was formed by two closely packed lines of infantry. The brigade of regulars headed directly for the 17th Tennessee that was positioned on a set of small hills near Garrison Creek. Captain George Smith of the 18th United States Infantry ordered his men to advance at the double quick until they reached a wheat field. There the matted grain made for slippery going and necessitated a more deliberate approach. About half way across the field they were engaged by Captain George W. O'Neal and Company H of the 17th Tennessee who drove the Union skirmishers back to the main line from a position at a nearby farmhouse. The Regulars continued to advance until they reached the base of the hill occupied by Confederate defenders. On orders from the acting brigade commander Major Phillip Sidney Coolidge (Brigadier General John Haskell King being taken ill) the advance stopped there and traded shots with the enemy while the remainder of the Union line maneuvered around the Confederate flank. Finding his line overlapped Johnson skillfully adjusted his regiments to cover the movement of the units behind him. The Union attack made no further progress and the effort died out around 3:00 p.m. Johnson's regiments had accomplished an admirable delaying action but in doing so had granted the Federal troops their true objective – free access to the Manchester Pike.

With freedom of movement now in hand Reynolds again unleashed Wilder's mounted brigade for the race to Manchester. Meeting no resistance Wilder's men rode to within six miles of Manchester. An early morning move into the town caught the small garrison off guard and forty were captured. The main infantry column arrived later in the day to secure the prize. Again free to act Wilder dispatched four companies of the 17th Indiana and Captain Lawson Kilburn with a detachment of the Pioneer Brigade to destroy the bridge and break the rail line just four miles from Tullahoma.

Bragg finally learned the true nature of the situation on his right flank late in the day on June 26 from a dispatch from Major General A. P. Stewart. Understanding the magnitude of the threat that this new information revealed he had no choice but to rescind the orders for the attack by Polk's Corps. Instead a general retreat to the Tullahoma

defenses was ordered for all Confederate troops. It was critical that the Confederate forces get south of the Duck River and into a consolidated defense at Tullahoma before the trap could be closed.

The order to retreat to Tullahoma spared Polk the movement that he had argued so vigorously against but caused a new problem for the Confederate command. Infantry units retreating from Shelbyville early on June 27 ran into the units of Patrick Cleburne's division moving back from Fairfield at a single bridge over the Duck River. The constant rain had made ford unusable and the roads nearly impassable. Fortunately the two Union divisions emerging from Hoover's Gap abandoned the chase to follow Reynolds to Manchester. Had the Federal troops continued the pursuit there would certainly have been a battle in which the Confederates would have found themselves with their backs against the swollen river. As it was however, the two armies were once again moving in opposite directions.

To cover Polk's retreat from Shelbyville Major General Joseph Wheeler assumed personal command of Brigadier General William Thompson Martin's division of cavalry and several regiments of Brigadier General John Austin Wharton's division. The Union cavalry chief, Major General David Sloane Stanley, was also eager for a fight and was delighted by an order early on June 27 to rid Guy's Gap of enemy forces. Sensing weakness in the Confederate position north of Shelbyville and afraid that waiting for Granger's infantry, who were plodding through the mud, would allow a golden opportunity to pass Stanley requested and got permission from Granger to continue on his own.

The 1st Tennessee (US) met the 51st Alabama at the head of the gap and pushed them back into the entrenchments where they joined the 4th Alabama. The 4th United States Cavalry held the Confederate troopers in their position while the 7th Pennsylvania, 4th Michigan, 3rd Indiana, and elements of the 1st Tennessee formed a flanking party. When they found a portion of the works that was unoccupied Colonel Robert Galbraith sent dismounted men from the 1st Tennessee to clear the obstruction (abatis) from their path and attacked the position on horseback. The badly outnumbered Confederate troopers retreated in a wild horse race to the next set of works on the outskirts of Shelbyville where they attempted another stand. The extensive works were nearly empty and the 4th Michigan moved along them until they reached a spot where they were undefended. They entered the defenses and moved down them until they struck the refused end of the hastily assembled Confederate line. As the Wolverine troopers engaged the left end of the line the 7th Pennsylvania and 4th Regulars assaulted the front. The Southern troopers were overpowered by numbers and equipment failure. One Confederate trooper stating that only one weapon in ten would fire in the wet conditions.

In Shelbyville Wheeler used a battery of artillery to hold off the Federal pursuit while he gathered what forces he could to delay the advance while the last of the supply trains cleared the town. The barrage had the desired effect as the Union troopers moved out of range to regroup. Couriers returned to Stanley with a status report and he

immediately ordered an attack on the battery. Colonel William B. Sipes and 150 men of the 7th Pennsylvania were placed in a column of fours behind the guns of the 18th Ohio Battery and awaited the signal to advance. Two guns were fired and the Pennsylvanians emerged out of the smoke at a full gallop with sabers drawn. Adjutant George Steahlin wrote of the attack that the Pennsylvania troopers entered the fight “cutting right cuts, left cuts, front cuts, and rear cuts making thrusts right, left and front – dealing death at every blow.” The surprise and shock value of the attack broke the Confederate defense almost immediately.¹²

The Confederate troopers retreated to the railroad depot where they made a brief stand. A volley there dropped twelve Union troopers but the 3rd Indiana appeared out of the side streets and engaged them with small arms and sabers. Again the Confederate troopers were forced to retreat losing three of four artillery pieces to the Federal onslaught. As the melee was being fought a messenger arrived for Wheeler from Forrest who was approaching the scene from the west. For some reason this gave Wheeler the idea to retake the bridge. He called for volunteers and the 1st Confederate Cavalry responded. The bold band dashed across the bridge but found they were outnumbered by the reunited forces of the Union cavalry. The second retreat from Shelbyville quickly became an everyman for himself affair as access to the bridge became blocked. The rout turned to disaster as the beleaguered Confederate troopers made a mad dash to escape the trap. General Wheeler and many jumped their horses into the river in an attempt to swim away. Some drowned, some were shot, but a few lucky ones managed to get to safety. Shelbyville was won but the lack of infantry support caused Stanley to discontinue the pursuit. On orders from Bragg the Confederates were falling back to Tullahoma all along the line.

The seizure of Shelbyville signaled another period in which the two armies would move away from each other. The Confederate forces were moving south to Tullahoma while the bulk of the Union forces were marching east and then southeast toward Manchester. The nearly constant rains made the movements extremely slow. Some Confederate units took as long as two days to make the twenty-five mile march. The situation was no different at Manchester where Crittenden's Corps was finally arriving after using three days to cover twenty miles.

At Manchester Rosecrans wasted no time in furthering his plan to thwart the expected Confederate retreat. With only a single widely scattered cavalry brigade (Turchin) on hand he again looked to Wilder to execute his design to force the enemy to move out from their works. Wilder was tasked with securing the bridge over the Elk River at Pelham and then continuing on to Decherd to disrupt the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad. Rosecrans felt that a threat to security of this vital line might spur Bragg into coming out of Tullahoma to its defense. Wilder's men advanced to Hillsborough where they left two companies of the 123rd Illinois as security. The

¹² George F. Steahlin, “Gallant Charge of the Seventh Pennsylvania Cavalry at Shelbyville Tennessee, on the 27th of June 1863 – Terrible Scenes at Duck River,” *National Tribune* (Washington, DC), May 27, 1882.

remainder of the column headed for the Elk River intending on fording it and proceeding to Decherd. They encountered several smaller waterways that “swam our smallest horses” and caused them to move “the howitzer ammunition on the men’s shoulders across the streams.” When they struck the Elk they found that rain had made the river impassable. The only viable alternative was to ride on to the bridge at Pelham six miles away.¹³

Wilder dispatched eight companies of the 123rd Illinois, under Colonel James Monroe, to burn the bridges at Estill Springs. The mission proved a failure, however, when on approaching the bridges Monroe found them guarded by a division of infantry as a large wagon train crossed. The column doubled back and rejoined Wilder the following day. Approaching the river near Pelham the Lightning Brigade found the bridge under guard from a small detail of Confederate troops determined to destroy it. Lieutenant Colonel Edward Kitchell with the 98th Illinois and thirty scouts made a dash at the bridge before it could be fired by the defenders. The attack not only saved the bridge but captured two of the defenders and seventy-eight mules. The next obstacle was the South Fork of the Elk which was crossed by swimming the horse and tearing down a nearby building for materials to construct a raft that was used as a rope ferry to cross the two mountain howitzers.

Immediately on arrival at Decherd they attacked the small garrison of about eighty men. The defenders attempted to defend from behind a stockade but were eventually driven into a nearby ravine. Wilder ordered up the two howitzers and two rounds of canister finally forced them to give way. The destructive work on the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad started as soon as the defenders scattered. A bridge on a branch line was blown up, the depot and three large storage facilities were burned and three hundred yards of track were ripped up using the devise designed by Wilder for that purpose. The destructive actions came to an end when the advance units of the Confederate response appeared. Skirmishing with these troops supplied four or five prisoners. From the interrogation of these men Wilder learned of an impending attack by six regiments of Confederate infantry. Wilder, believing the tale and realizing they could not stand up to such a force, decided to move off in the direction of the Cumberland Mountains.

Bragg finally had his entire army consolidated at Tullahoma which offered the opportunity to discuss matters with his corps commanders. At the council of war Bragg announced his intent to give battle at the defenses there. Polk’s dissatisfaction with the decision was evident from the very beginning as he argued vehemently that Tullahoma was untenable. Nevertheless, Bragg ordered his Corps commanders into the works for a showdown with Rosecrans’ forces. The proposed defense of the town got off to a poor start. Despite having occupied the Tullahoma for more than a year Hardee and Polk found the works incomplete, degraded, or non-existent. Major General Benjamin Franklin Cheatham’s and Major General Jones Mitchell Withers’ divisions of Polk’s Corps were ordered to improve the breastworks in their sector only to find that the Chief

¹³ *O.R.*, I, 23, pt. 1, 460.

Engineer of the Army of Tennessee, Captain Stephen Wilson Pressman, had ordered all available tools to General Hardee's portion of the line. Polk's troops were reduced to using what was on hand and piling dirt and brush to form what protective cover they could.

As word of Wilder's raid reached Bragg his resolve to defend Tullahoma began to falter. He called another conference and opened by asking Polk for his thoughts on the situation. Given the floor to voice his opinions Polk again launched into a call for immediate retreat stating that without secure communication with Chattanooga their efforts were doomed. He based his opposition on two factors; how would the Army be supplied at their present location and what would happen if the Union troops got behind them and forced a retreat into northern Alabama? (exactly the scenario that Rosecrans envisioned). Bragg countered that the railroad had been retaken and secured by the cavalry. Polk was unconvinced and continued to argue that there was not enough cavalry to hold the line against the growing federal strength. He suggested that they would be cut off within thirty-six hours. Beginning to lose his patience with his surly subordinate Bragg blurted out "You propose that we shall retreat?" To which an unfazed Polk responded, "I do." When Polk looked to his supposed ally for support Hardee proved less willing to retreat suggesting that infantry be sent to reinforce the cavalry securing the line. Bragg adjourned the council without changing his mind.¹⁴

On the night of June 30 Bragg called his corps commanders back to his headquarters to announce that he had reconsidered. Although the actual damage done by Wilder's foray to Decherd was insignificant it was enough to convince Bragg of the vulnerability of his communications. Hardee and Polk were asked to give their advice on the following question: Shall we fight on the Elk or take post at the foot of the mountain at Cowan?

Both men indicated that they preferred Cowan. The decision was made. On the night of June 30 /July 1 the Army of Tennessee crossed the Elk River destroying the bridges behind them. The swollen river was expected to provide them at least a temporary respite from the constant pressure being applied by the Union forces so that they could formulate a defensive position.

Wilder's men moved north from Decherd to Sewanee and followed the rail line to Tracy City where track on a branch line was torn up. Colonel John J. Funkhouser of the 98th Illinois was dispatched with 450 men to wreck the road at Tantalou while Wilder, acting on reports from scouts that a troop train might be intercepted there, took the rest of the brigade toward Anderson, on the Alabama and Tennessee border. On June 30 Wilder, learning that Brigadier General Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry was in close pursuit, decided to return to rejoin the main body of the Union army. The brigade was reunited in Manchester on July 1 without having lost a single man.

¹⁴ Stanley F. Horn, *Tennessee's War: 1861-1865* (Nashville: Tennessee Civil War Centennial Commission, 1973), 188.

At Tullahoma rumors of a Confederate retreat emboldened Thomas to inch toward the town. Near Bobo's Crossroads Major General James Scott Negley's 2nd Division of XIV Corps occupied a position while cavalry skirmished in front of the advance. The 2nd Kentucky Cavalry (US) battled the 4th Tennessee of Forrest's command while the 15th Pennsylvania rode toward Tullahoma with a local man as a guide. About two miles from town they encountered a Confederate guard post and captured fifteen enemy troopers. The snail like advance of the infantry, however allowed the successful completion of the Confederate retreat. When four companies of the 39th Indiana Mounted Infantry and four companies of the 2nd Kentucky Cavalry thundered into town on July 1 they captured a few members of the rear guard but otherwise found the defenses vacant.

Two days later Philip Sheridan led his men to the Elk River. The bridge at Winchester Springs was gone, destroyed by the retreating Confederate cavalry. Selecting an alternative route, Sheridan's men forded Rock Creek and moved to a more manageable crossing point of the Elk. A Confederate cavalry regiment was forced away from the far bank by superior firepower and a line was strung across the river. The men moved across, holding the line to avoid being swept downstream by the rain fueled current.

At Pelham Crittenden's men finally saw some action. When they found the bridge there still intact they advanced to seize the span. A small Confederate rearguard dashed in to set fire to the bridge before the Yankee infantry arrived. The sodden timbers resisted their efforts and the bridge was taken. Some minor repairs were made and the crossing opened. The effort cost Crittenden one man.

At Morris Ferry Turchin's Union cavalry attempted to seize the ford site. Across the river the 51st Alabama Cavalry, 25th and 26th Tennessee and battery of artillery prepared to defend the crossing. Turchin sent two companies of the 4th Ohio Cavalry out to test the Confederate defense. After pushing in the enemy skirmishers the Buckeyes were stopped cold by heavy fire from the stout Rebel line. The remainder of the regiment joined the advance and the two sides exchanged fire as Turchin learned of another fording site nearby (Shallow Ford). Lieutenant Shoemaker took a small party went to investigate the crossing to see what they could learn of the size and disposition of the enemy position there. As they approached the ford site they came under fire from the far shore. A company was sent to secure their side of the crossing. Back at Morris Ford Turchin was unable to determine the exact nature of the rebel defense. A gun was ordered forward to engage the pesky skirmishers. Three rounds of canister cleared the far bank. A dozen dismounted men were sent across the river to see if they could determine the extent and position of the main Confederate defense with the design of sending four companies across. This effort failed to obtain the necessary information but Turchin reported that the strength of the Confederate line was revealed when their guns took them under fire. The single Federal artillery piece was moved back to join the rest of the battery at a higher elevation and returned fire dismounting one of the Confederate pieces. An attack on this location was repulsed and the Federals backed away to await support. Once his troopers were reinforced by Stanley's main column they moved forward again but found only a

rear guard detail of the 51st Alabama. A brief skirmish with the 3rd Ohio Cavalry claimed the life of the Lieutenant Colonel James Daniel Webb, commander of the 51st before the crossing was won.

Learning that the river obstacle had been breached Bragg started his army over the mountain toward Chattanooga. On the July 4 the 5th and 6th Kentucky Cavalry (US) moved toward University Place in a search for the enemy rear. An advance of three companies of the 5th Kentucky, led by Major Michael Owsley, moved down University Road for about a mile when they encountered enemy pickets, who were driven back on the main body. The well concealed enemy (3rd and 4th Georgia Cavalry dismounted) engaged Owsley there and wounded five men. Owsley wisely fell back to the main column. The 5th Kentucky was formed as a reserve while the 6th advanced to the attack. A brisk thirty minute fight finally drove the Confederates from their position. Retreating slowly the rebel troopers continued a stubborn fight all the way back to about a half mile beyond the University. The Federal troopers were ordered into camp and the rear guard melted away. The last fight of the campaign claimed seventeen casualties from the Kentucky regiments (three killed and fourteen wounded). Confederate losses were undetermined. Brigade Commander, Colonel Louis Watkins, reported taking twenty-two prisoners and a set of brass band instruments. With his territorial objectives won Rosecrans discontinued active pursuit of the fleeing Army of Tennessee. The Tullahoma campaign was over on the same day that Vicksburg fell and Gettysburg won.

The soggy campaign came to an end without a great confrontation. The two sides paused to collect themselves and prepare for future campaigns. Rosecrans put the 1st Michigan Engineers to work repairing the lines of communication so he would be ready for a move on Chattanooga. Bragg called for reinforcements and was answered when Longstreet's Corps was sent from Virginia. There would be a short respite followed by battles enough to make up for what this campaign lacked in bloodshed. The price of failing to significantly harm Bragg's forces would be paid at Chickamauga. In light of the Union successes at Gettysburg and Vicksburg the Tullahoma Campaign was seemingly ignored in Washington. Rosecrans rebelled against the lack of recognition:

“You do not appear to observe the fact that this noble army has driven the rebels from Middle Tennessee of which my dispatch informed you. I beg you...do not overlook so great an event because it is not written in letters of blood.”¹⁵

Unfortunately, his pleas fell on deaf ears and the Tullahoma Campaign became a footnote to larger victories.

¹⁵ Major General William S. Rosecrans to Secretary of War Stanton, 7 July 1863