

PRAGMATIC AND SKILLED LEADERSHIP: GENERAL GEORGE H. THOMAS AT STONES RIVER

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Due to requirements of the ongoing Global War on Terrorism, the United States military must continue to learn as much as possible about the nature of combat leadership. The Civil War battle at Stones River was intense and bloody, and the stakes could not have been higher for Union General George H. Thomas and the other commanders present. The student of military leadership can learn a great deal from this particularly desperate and fierce contest — countering an overwhelming assault, stabilizing a defense under constant enemy pressure, and turning the tide of a situation that otherwise looks lost. Perhaps more than any other single idea on this topic, the actions of General Thomas at the decisive point of Stones River demonstrate the importance of shaping the battle in a course necessary to achieve victory despite the odds and despite all appearances that suggest imminent failure.

The Union Army of the Cumberland staved off defeat at Stones River and brought the costly battle to a draw before General Braxton Bragg and the Confederate Army of Tennessee were forced to retreat from Murfreesboro. What part did Thomas play in this dramatic reversal of fortune? Did Thomas effectively command his subordinates during the desperate fight to hold the Union center on the first full day of the battle? In what way did he contribute to, or hinder, the Union effort to not be overrun completely, and to finally reestablish the Union center and continue the fight? This research will evaluate General George Thomas' leadership at the bloody but indecisive Battle of Stones River, where he commanded the key Union center wing, according to a profile drawn from elements of the United States Army's current doctrinal leadership framework. Because the framework is so expansive, and because the events under question are nearly a century and a half old, and considering the limited time available for this research, the



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Gen. George H. Thomas

focus will be on only a part of the overall model: the seven Army values, mental attributes (initiative and judgment in particular), tactical skills, and the leadership dimension of “influencing” (especially the ability to properly motivate soldiers in combat).

United States Army leadership doctrine is based on a leadership model, or framework, outlined in detail in Field Manual 22-100. The leadership framework is composed of numerous categories and dimensions based on the fundamental concepts of character, competence, and action. At its most basic level, the framework is composed of four core categories: values, attributes, skills, and actions. Each of the categories is further divided into a number of dimensions. Under values are loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage — all fundamental values that have been observed and demonstrated by successful warriors in the past. Attributes are divided into mental, physical, and emotional dimensions. Skills are divided into interpersonal, conceptual, technical,

and tactical. Actions are divided into influencing, operating, and improving. Influencing is further broken down into communicating, decision making, and motivating. The Army's leadership framework is meant to be universal, from private to general, across all occupational specialties and branches of service. Most importantly, it provides a common tool for all Army leaders and offers an institution-wide model for thinking about, discussing, and developing desired leadership attributes in all Army leaders. Due to its broad and universal qualities, the leadership framework can also be of use in evaluating the leadership exercised by individuals in the past.

Even an introductory examination of the records that exist for Thomas will show that he exhibited many of the dimensions of Army leadership. The record on Thomas is particularly well preserved because he was especially organized and an excellent administrator, who took pains in producing and maintaining quality written records of his decisions and orders to subordinates. From the evidence available it is clear that his loyalty to the Union was solid and unquestioned despite his Southern birth. Thomas was a career Army officer who aspired to high command and his sense of military duty guided many of his most important decisions. Honor and integrity were hallmarks of Thomas' dealings with peer commanders and superiors. In the Army's leadership framework, under actions, is the dimension of improving, which the Army defines as — in addition to merely accomplishing the stated mission — improving everything entrusted to the leader: subordinates, equipment, facilities, and resources. Apart from being one of the most successful battlefield commanders of the Civil War, Thomas also used his time and efforts to improve many different aspects of Army operations and organization. His accomplishments in the area of improving his institution—the Army — are many.

On more than one occasion Thomas displayed selfless service and an exceptional sense of duty to the Army and the nation by serving in a capacity that was below his rank and experience. After the disaster at Shiloh, Halleck felt compelled to demote Grant and replaced him with Thomas. This placed Thomas in the uncomfortable position of being over his former department commander, Sherman, and made him a target in an ongoing feud between Halleck and Grant. After only a short time, feeling he was being used as a pawn, Thomas asked to be reinstated to his division command. After Braxton Bragg launched his invasion of Kentucky, and after snatching Chattanooga from Major General Don Carlos Buell's advancing army, Halleck succumbed to Buell's critics and ordered Thomas to assume command of the army on Sept. 23, 1862. Again, Thomas felt like the undeserving target of political in-fighting. According to Peter Cozzens in his book *No Better Place to Die: The Battle of Stones River*, Thomas convinced Halleck to rescind the order because Buell was just about to resume operations against Bragg and such a late change in army command would prove unnecessarily disruptive. Only weeks later after the inconclusive fighting at Perryville (Oct. 8, 1862), Buell was finally relieved and Thomas found himself in an uncomfortable position again. Instead of being offered the command that he had only recently turned down, Thomas found that his replacement superior would be Major General William S. Rosecrans, who Thomas believed to be his junior in date of rank. Thomas had again found himself an unwitting player in a political game. This time the Ohio congressional delegation had gotten their "favorite son" advanced to army command while Thomas had the benefit of no Washington lobby. A backdated promotion resolved the issue of seniority and paved the way for Thomas and Rosecrans to meet and agree to put the good of the army ahead of their own individual careers. Thereafter, until Rosecrans was relieved in the wake of Chickamauga, Thomas served his superior ably and wholeheartedly.

The Early Years

George Henry Thomas was born on July 31, 1816, on a family farm near Newsom's Depot, Southampton County, Virginia, in the heart of slave country. Despite his boyhood surroundings, Thomas exhibited progressive ideas concerning human bondage starting from a young age. As a boy he gave the slaves on his family farm Bible and reading lessons against the wishes of his parents, showing both his independent and rebellious side. As a youth he had natural mechanical aptitude and learned quickly by observation alone. This aptitude and his obvious sharp powers of observation probably contributed to his later demonstration of exceptional terrain sense. Although he would later pay dearly in the loss of family relations as a result of his decision to honor his fidelity to the Constitution and fight for the Union, Thomas remained true to Virginia throughout his life.

At the United States Military Academy at West Point, Thomas showed no special brilliance but did perform well enough to graduate 12th out of a class of 42. Although not recognized as a particularly sharp military mind while still at the academy, Thomas did gain recognition for being both a natural horseman and a dedicated cadet who could always be counted on to maintain a dignified military appearance and to faithfully maintain all of his equipment.

While stationed in Florida during his first assignment, Thomas conducted botanical studies and later while stationed at Fort Yuma he conducted zoological studies which received praise from experts — both showing and continuing to develop his extensive powers of concentration and detailed study. Also while in Florida, Thomas won the first of several brevets during his early career, to first lieutenant for his service against Seminole Indians. While serving in the Mexican War (1846-48), after being attached to Captain Braxton Bragg's light artillery battery in Texas, Thomas earned two more brevets primarily for gallant and meritorious service. He was made brevet captain in connection with his participation in the battles of Monterey. Thomas was promoted to brevet major for his bravery at Buena Vista (Feb. 22-23, 1847), where he solidified his reputation as an unusually knowledgeable and skilled soldier. In particular, he was remembered most as the artilleryist holding "the angle" at Buena Vista. In 1851 he was appointed artillery and cavalry instructor at West Point, after which he received permanent promotion to major. Having been wounded by an arrow through the flesh of his chin and into his chest during a skirmish with Comanche Indians in 1860 in Texas (he apparently pulled it out himself and went back to work) served to bolster his credibility among soldiers later during the Civil War.

During a seaborne voyage from Charleston to New York, Thomas had an experience which is symbolic of many significant events in his life. The ship was caught in a violent storm off Cape Hatteras at the same time the captain was utterly drunk and incapable of commanding the ship. The first officer explained the situation to Thomas and added that it would be mutiny for him to disobey the orders of his appointed superior. Thomas investigated the situation and after finding the captain unfit for service, confined him to his state room, telling the captain that he would assume all responsibility for the ship. With the help of the first officer, the ship survived the storm. Thomas never declined overall responsibility nor declined command of any sort due to a lack of trust in his own abilities.

Despite his Southern birth he remained loyal to the Union when Civil War was declared. Characteristically, Thomas gave very little evidence of his motivations except to make it clear that his loyalty was to only one country and one flag, and that his oath to defend it against all enemies was inviolable. This very difficult decision, which had to be made by many career Army officers at the time, was made easier due to Thomas' belief in the sanctity of his original oath of service.

The common portrayal of Thomas is as a "non-politician," an astute student of war who always did his "homework," capable, thoroughly dependable, and a winner of every engagement he entered during the Civil War. He is remembered almost universally as "an able and faithful officer." From early in his life as a Military Academy cadet and junior officer, Thomas was known as dependable, stolid, and fully competent by superiors as well as subordinates. History records that Thomas did not cause others to question his abilities.

Was Thomas ultimately too "apolitical" for the Army high command? Whatever the actual causes, it is clear that at least through the early course of the war, Thomas suffered from widespread suspicions (at least among powerful figures in Washington) concerning his Southern birth. Unusually, following Union victory at Mill Springs, which produced a surge in Northern

morale after the unexpected defeat at Bull Run, the commanding general was not even mentioned in the official order of thanks. To be fair, Thomas could be taciturn and was never especially communicative. He was a modest man even though very popular with his soldiers, and engendered fierce loyalty in those who served under him. Even after the war, when his battles turned to fights with the Grant-Sherman clique in Washington over recognition and position in the postwar Army, his most ardent supporters remained the officers and soldiers who had fought under him.

Thomas was known for taking a genuine interest in the morale and welfare of his soldiers despite the fact that his temperament was generally reserved — with soldiers in particular. (He earned one of his many nicknames — ‘Old Pap’ — from the near constant consideration he showed his soldiers.) He was constantly preparing his men for the harsh realities of battle by small unit sorties rather than parade ground drills. The soldiers understood and responded positively to Thomas’ practice of riding his horse alongside the road and leaving the road itself to the marching troops. The fact that he took great pains to ensure effective medical care — he developed the most efficient military hospital of the war where the use of chloroform was standard — also had to have an influence on the soldiers’ respect for their commanding general.

Thomas was a serious student of war without being overly intellectual or pedantic. He helped introduce the use of map coordinates in battle

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Gen. George Thomas and a group of officers meet near Ringgold, Ga., May 5, 1864.

planning and helped develop the first folding, portable pontoon bridges. He had the most highly developed telegraphy service of any army during the war and had the most highly developed mess service which later included full time cooks. In these and numerous other technical developments, Thomas was displaying the fruits of an active military mind and the drive of a pragmatic leader.

Thomas was known for being able to travel over very densely wooded terrain and always find his destination. From very early on in his career he demonstrated a superb sense of terrain analysis. It was surprisingly common for commanders during the Civil War (considering the large numbers of academy graduates and professional soldiers in the highest ranks) to devise battle plans that made good use of offensive maneuver but were completely divorced from the reality of the terrain over which they would have to be carried out (the Confederates at Shiloh and Bragg at Stones River are just two examples). Thomas was different. He understood the significance of terrain on operations and was constantly analyzing and reevaluating his plans in light of this.

Stones River

On Dec. 26, 1862, General Rosecrans set out from Nashville at the head of the Army of the Cumberland to attack and defeat Bragg’s Army of Tennessee, which was then concentrated about Murfreesboro to the east of Stones River. He was motivated by two facts. First, through the skillful efforts of Thomas, the Louisville-Nashville Railroad had been repaired and thus Union supply



lines were open again after they had been disrupted by marauding rebel cavalry. Second, Rosecrans had learned that Bragg had just lost an entire division to the Vicksburg area of operations under the direction of Jefferson Davis.

Between Dec. 29 and 30, after discovering that Bragg had not retreated as Rosecrans believed he would, the three Union corps proceeded to occupy their battle positions. Major General McCook's three divisions of the Union "Right Wing" traveled to Stones River by way of Nolensville, then to Triune, skirmishing with Confederate pickets along the way. Brigadier General R. W. Johnson, commanding McCook's Second Division, wrote in his official report: "On the following morning, December 30, General Sheridan's division was ordered to advance in line of battle, covering the Wilkinson pike, while General Davis' division marched in the same order on the right of General Sheridan. My division, being held in reserve, was marched in column on the pike. There being no troops on General Davis' right, and General Sheridan's left being guarded by General Crittenden's left wing, I was ordered to oblique to the right, covering the right of General Davis' division" (taken from *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*). Thus the key Union far right was not anchored on any defensive terrain but essentially hung in the open. Johnson attempted to strengthen his line by refusing his right flank and deploying a robust line of skirmishers toward the enemy. Thomas advanced by way of Brentwood, Nolensville, Stewartsburg, across Stewart's Creek, then to the battlefield along Nashville (also called Murfreesboro) Turnpike. Negley's division, traveling with Major General Thomas L. Crittenden's so-called "Left Wing," arrived at the battlefield and deployed to the right in anticipation of the arrival of the remainder of the "Center Wing." It wasn't until the evening of Dec. 29 that Thomas and Rousseau's division finally arrived behind Crittenden on the Union left (or northern) flank.

Rosecrans was a competent army commander, having graduated fifth in his class at the Military Academy, who was also popular with soldiers and subordinate commanders. Rosecrans planned to assault on his left with Crittenden's corps, dislodge Breckinridge's forces (the Confederate right) and continue the attack south through Murfreesboro and then around to take the force facing McCook (the Union right) in the rear (a plan which was probably overly ambitious given the low state of the troops' experience and quality of junior leadership). In his official report of the battle Rosecrans recorded: "The plan of the battle was to open on the right and engage enemy sufficiently to hold him firmly, and to cross the river with our left, consisting of three divisions, to oppose which they had but two divisions, the country being favorable to an attack from that part of the town."

At 2100 on Dec. 30 the Union wing commanders met with Rosecrans to receive the plan of battle and final guidance before the upcoming battle. According to Henry M. Cist, author of the valuable *The Army of the Cumberland*, originally published in

1882: "Thomas was instructed to open with skirmishing and engage the enemy's centre with Negley's division of his command and Palmer's of Crittenden's corps, Negley's right resting on Sheridan's left, and Palmer's right on the left of Negley, Rousseau being in reserve. Crittenden was ordered to move Van Cleve's division across the river at the lower ford, covered and supported by the pioneer brigade and at once advance on Breckinridge. Wood's division was to follow — crossing at the upper ford and joining Van Cleve's right — when they were to press everything before them into Murfreesboro. This gave a strong attack from two divisions of Federal troops on the one of Breckinridge's, which was known to be the only one of the enemy's on the east of the river. As soon as Breckinridge had been dislodged from his position, the artillery of Wood's division was to take position on the heights east of the river and open fire on the enemy's lines on the other side, which could here be seen in reverse, and dislodge them, when Palmer was to drive them southward across the river or through the wood. Sustained by the advance of the Centre under Thomas crushing their right, Crittenden was to keep advancing, take Murfreesboro, move rapidly westward on the Franklin pike, get on their flank and rear and drive them into the country toward Salem, with the prospect of cutting off their retreat and probably destroying their army." Rosecrans' orders were that the troops would attack at 0700 on the 31st.

On the eve of the Battle of Stones River, Thomas' center wing was the strongest formation under the Army of the Cumberland, but it had less soldiers available because the troops drawn to guard the army's line of communications came primarily from this command and not from Crittenden's or McCook's. According to

his own report, forces available to Thomas at the battle included Rousseau's and Negley's divisions, and Walker's brigade of Fry's division (arrived later after the start of the battle), for a total of about 13,395 effectives. By evening, Dec. 30, only Negley's division occupied battle positions, two lines were drawn up between Palmer's southernmost brigade (Cruft) and Sheridan's northernmost (Roberts) — this being the critical link between the left and right wings. Since only one-half mile separated the brigades of Cruft and Roberts, there was no more room for the center wing to deploy along the front. Rousseau's division of three brigades arrived and took positions as reserve behind Palmer's division, near Rosecrans' army headquarters, around 1030 on Dec. 30 after marching from Stewartsburg. Rousseau's entire division was designated a reserve

because of Rosecrans' anticipated offensive against the Confederate right on the east side of Stones River. So, as of late Dec. 30, of Thomas' center wing (nominally at a strength of five divisions) only Negley's division was forming the Union center battle line. Rousseau's division was the reserve located behind the Union left



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Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans

wing, behind what Rosecrans planned to be his main effort for the next day's attack.

It is no accident that Thomas was named to lead the largest wing of The Army of the Cumberland — the left and right wings each contained three divisions under Major General Crittenden and Major General McCook respectively. Rosecrans openly admired Thomas and depended on his experience in the west. Rosecrans' description of his wing commander from his battle report includes an especially apt summation: "...Major General George H. Thomas, true and prudent, distinguished in council and on many a battlefield for his courage." Thomas was already a proven battle leader in the Western theater as a result of his decisive victory over Crittenden's brother at the battle of Mill Springs, Jan. 19, 1862. While in command of an independent force in eastern Kentucky, Thomas had gained the first important Union victory of the war. After marching his troops for 18 days along muddy roads in foul weather, from Lebanon to Logan's Cross Roads, Kentucky, Thomas beat back and finally defeated Crittenden with well-coordinated and timely counterattacks. The battle permanently broke the South's hold on Kentucky. Rosecrans demonstrated his faith in the capabilities of Thomas from the start of their professional relationship. In his book *The Life of General George H. Thomas*, author Thomas B. Van Horne said, "Soon after assuming command of the army, General Rosecrans offered to continue General Thomas in his position as second in command, but he preferred a distinct, defined office, and consequently was assigned to the command of the 'Centre,' composed of four divisions, with Generals Rosseau, Negley, Dumont and Fry as commanders." Rosecrans apparently accepted freely his reliance on Thomas' experience, competence, and reputation for completing any mission.

The terrain to the west of Murfreesboro did not support a Confederate defense. The road network converged on the town from the northwest, west, and southwest which only encouraged an attacker from the west to maneuver against the flanks of a defender in front of Murfreesboro. In his book, Cist described the battlefield this way: "Murfreesboro is situated on the railroad to Chattanooga, 30 miles southeast of Nashville, in the midst of the great plain

The armies involved were roughly matched in size and both had roughly the same proportion of raw to experienced troops. From the reports collected in the official records, it is also clear that both sides were fairly well apprised of the other's positions.

stretching from the base of the Cumberland Mountains toward the Cumberland River, and is surrounded by a gently undulating country, exceedingly fertile and highly cultivated. Leading in every direction from the town are numerous excellent turnpikes. Stone's River — named after an early settler — is formed here by the middle and south branches of the stream uniting, and flows in a northerly direction between low banks of limestone, generally steep and difficult to cross, emptying into the Cumberland. At the time of the battle the stream was so low that it could be crossed by infantry everywhere. The Nashville Railroad crosses the river about 200 yards above the turnpike bridge. At some 500 yards beyond, it intersects the Nashville turnpike at a sharp angle, then runs some 800 yards between the pike and the river, when the stream turns abruptly to the east and passes to the north. Open fields surrounded the town, fringed with dense cedar-brakes. These afforded excellent cover for approaching infantry, but were almost impervious to artillery." Obstacles in many different forms filled the battlefield, most significantly Stones River itself running north-south. The rolling hills created many areas of high ground (namely, Wayne's Hill on the east bank of Stones River, the high ground north of Murfreesboro between Nashville and Lebanon Pikes, the high ground west of the area where Salem Pike crossed the railroad, and the high ground near the Gresham farm) which became key terrain to both sides due to the sweeping fields of fire they afforded artillery batteries.

The armies involved were roughly matched in size and both had roughly the same proportion of raw to experienced troops. From the reports collected in the official records, it is also clear that both sides were fairly well apprised of the other's positions. Cist wrote that as Dec. 30 came to a close, troops along both battle lines knew that the next day would witness a

terrible and fierce struggle. While the troops readied themselves in whatever way they could, Rosecrans was envisioning his version of the epic and composed stirring words to be distributed throughout the Army of the Cumberland. In his General Orders issued before the battle, Rosecrans said, "Soldiers, the eyes of the whole nation are upon you; the very fate of the nation may be said to hang on the issue of this day's battle. Be true, then, to yourselves, true to your own manly character and soldierly reputation, true to the love of your dear ones at home, whole prayers ascend to God this day for your success. Be cool! I need not ask you to be brave. Keep ranks. Do not throw away your fire. Fire slowly, deliberately; above, all, fire low, and be always sure of your aim. Close steadily in upon the enemy, and, when you get within charging distance, rush on him with the bayonet. Do this, and the victory will certainly be yours."

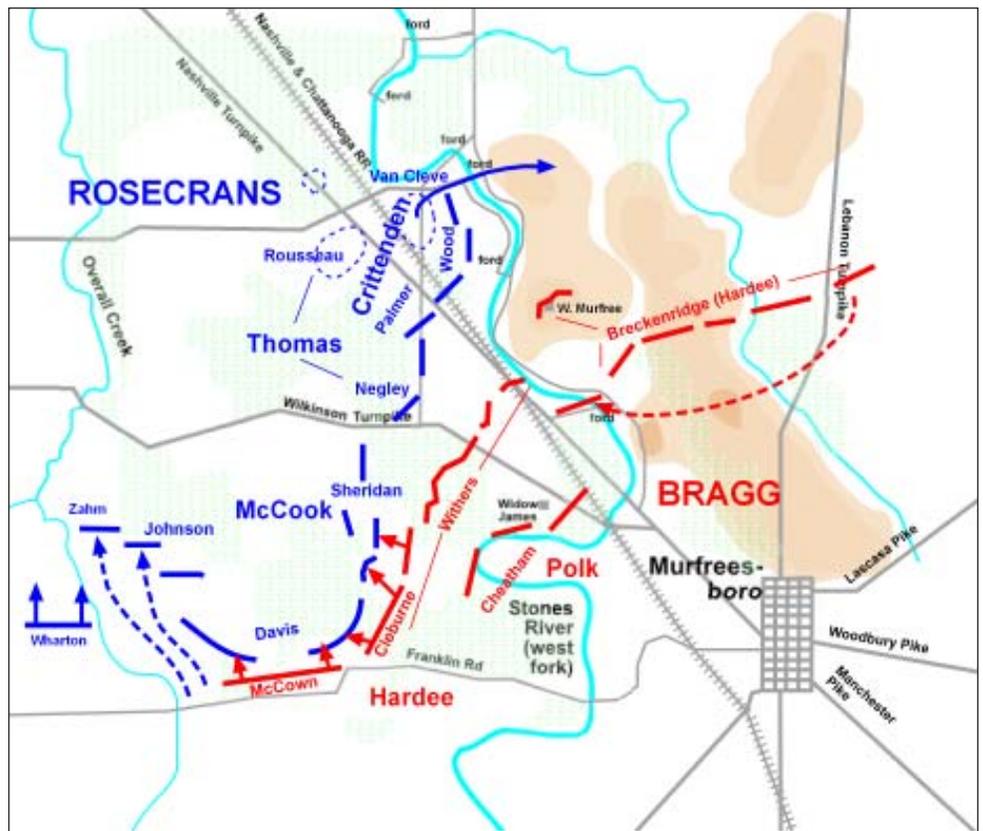
Bragg's initial deployment was poor. Most alarming of all was that both Stones River and the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad bisected the Confederate battle line. High ground to the front had not been secured before the arrival of Union forces. The broken and compartmentalized terrain severely hindered organization and communication — both of which were critical to the success of the rebel battle plan. Bragg also failed to have his units entrench — only in the center did Confederate commanders take it upon themselves to construct hasty field works stretching one half mile north and south of Wilkinson Pike. Bragg arrayed his three wings roughly from northeast to southwest, Breckenridge's division (nominally part of Hardee's corps though he was on the other end of the battle line) held the right on high ground from Stones River to Lebanon Pike. Pegram's cavalry screened the extreme right. Polk's corps (of Cheatham's and Withers' divisions) held the Confederate center. The arrogant but less than brilliant Polk seemed to only obey Bragg when it suited his own aims, and in this insubordination he enjoyed the protection of his good friend in Richmond, Jefferson Davis. The center held a piece of both wooded and open ground on a sharp salient on the west side of Stones River through which ran both Nashville and Wilkinson Turnpikes. So the Confederate center and right were separated by both natural and

manmade obstacles. Hardee's remaining two divisions of Cleburne and McGown held the left in that order from center left to far left, also with Stones River to their rear. Wharton's cavalry screened the extreme left in the direction of Triune.

Both commanders devised similar battle plans and both plans were equally ambitious and unrealistic. Bragg's plan of battle directed his entire left and center to assail the enemy's right flank by wheeling right, pivoting on Lieutenant General Polk's right — which sat on the point where the Nashville Pike crossed the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad — as an anchor. Hardee's corps, stretched south of Polk's, would lead the assault with the aim of pinning the bulk of the Union army against Stones River. Various arguments have been made concerning Bragg's overall battle plan, such as the accusation that the terrain was poorly suited to the offense and that the maneuver called for in the plan seemed better suited to a parade ground. Whatever merits his position and battle plan may have had, his battle plan failed and the terrain had a fundamental role in that failure.

Thomas suspected before the battle began that the enemy would attack McCook. In response, he ordered an engineer unit to clear routes through the thick woods in his sector which would prove decisive during the ensuing battle because it allowed Thomas to maneuver both infantry and artillery freely through the cedar breaks in the center where otherwise no organized movements of any kind would have been possible, according to Thomas B. Buell in his book *The Warrior Generals: Combat Leadership in the Civil War*. Thomas' earliest combat experiences, at least as far back as his observations at the siege of Fort Brown as a lieutenant, taught him the supreme importance of proper and detailed preparations. While still a division commander early on in the war, Thomas refused to carry out orders to invade east Tennessee on the grounds that his soldiers were not yet fully trained, according to Burt. His propensity to prepare in-depth for operations meant that the Confederates would not easily sweep away the Union center wing.

Around 0600 on Dec. 31, Hardee's corps launched an all-out assault against McCook's wing on the Union right. (See Map 1.) The divisions of Johnson and Davis bore the initial brunt of the attack. According to official records, the extreme Union right was overwhelmed by a large infantry force and a supporting cavalry force (elements of Wharton's brigade) on the extreme western part of the battle lines. Soldiers fled in panic as entire formations from McCook's wing broke up and retreated in disorder. An artillery battery commander who fell captive to the advancing Confederates reported: "The infantry, our support, gave way on the front and flank in disorder, almost with the first volley." McCook was for the most part absent from his sector that morning. He had already been made aware that his line might be the target



Maps by Hal Jespersen from www.wikipedia.org

Map 1 — Map of Stones River on Dec. 31, 1862, at 0800

of the main Confederate attack but, from a review of the official records, he did not make any special preparations. He probably made the foolish assumption that since General Crittenden's wing was tasked with opening the Union offense, whatever potential threat that faced his wing could be discounted. Although Johnson readied his lead two brigades for an enemy attack, he was not given any special guidance or support from McCook.

Bragg's grand attack — divisions attacking in echelon, wheeling right — began to break down soon after it was under way. The terrain broke up the formations and made coordination between regiments almost impossible. According to Thomas' report of the battle, at the same time that Bragg's left corps attacked and drove back McCook's unprepared regiments, so far that the enemy were able to wheel north and dislodge the southern flank of Thomas' center, Negley's and Palmer's divisions were attacked in strength to their front. While Hardee launched into the Union right, Van Cleve and his force crossed Stones River in the north to lead Rosecrans' anticipated attack.

Mounting sounds of battle easily reached Rosecrans on the Union left. Advancing Confederates were heard by Major General Rousseau and others along the entire Union lines, as the sounds indicated the enemy was advancing then swinging around into the rear. After Rosecrans, who was posted behind the left supervising Crittenden's forces, had finally been convinced by a staff officer that disaster was befalling his right wing, he suspended Crittenden's advance and raced to the center where he found Thomas and called Rousseau's division into the fight to halt the charging Confederates. It is no surprise that at that moment when Rosecrans realized the precarious position of his entire army he

turned to his most expert commander in the center. Cist wrote, "As the storm of battle passed down the line it reached Thomas, who cool, calm, and self-sustained, stood the test of one of the fiercest contests of the war. It was to him that Rosecrans first turned in the hour of disaster and in him he trusted most."

Sheridan commanded the Third Division of McCook's wing and formed the key link between the retreating right and Thomas' center. Sheridan's men had already fought their way forward the day before to a position two and a quarter miles from Murfreesboro against Confederate skirmishers until ordered by McCook to form battle line. In the very early hours of Dec. 31 after a report of noisy enemy activity to his front (probably the sounds of Cheatham's men preparing for battle), Sheridan deployed more of his reserves to bolster his lines, and by 0400 that morning his men were in battle positions. The hasty withdrawal of Davis' and Johnson's forces completely exposed Sheridan's right flank to enemy fire. After his brigades exhausted their ammunition and the capture of an ammunition train, Sheridan ordered bayonets fixed. Rosecrans wrote in his battle report: "Sheridan, after sustaining four successive attacks, gradually swung, his right from a southeasterly to a northwesterly direction, repulsing the enemy four times, losing the gallant General Sill, of his right, and Colonel Roberts, of his left brigade, when, having exhausted his ammunition, Negley's division being in the same predicament, and heavily pressed, after desperate fighting, they fell back from the position held at the commencement, through the cedar woods, in which Rousseau's division, with a portion of Negley's and Sheridan's, met the advancing enemy and checked his movements."

A lack of ammunition forced Sheridan's weary soldiers to finally withdraw from their key position in the sharp salient caused by the retreating right wing and to the left of Crittenden who still occupied his original position. The Confederates recognized the gap between Rousseau and Negley caused by the withdrawing Sheridan and began stepping up the pressure, trying to bring the full weight of their numbers on this potential seam and break it wide open. Confederate forces had paused shortly to resupply and reorganize as much as

possible after driving McCook back more than two miles. Instead, the Union regiments held by defending successive lines organized by Thomas and maximizing the use of terrain, specifically protective terrain such as depressions and natural obstacles. In concert with these successive defensive lines — in effect, an organized defense in depth — Thomas sited his artillery in prepared positions with sweeping fields of fire to bring fires raining down on the advancing rebels and in support of the hard pressed infantry. From Thomas' own extremely modest report of the battle, he said, "As it became necessary for General Sheridan to fall back, the enemy pressed on still farther to our rear, and soon took up a position which gave them a concentrated cross-fire of musketry and cannon on Negley's and Rousseau's troops at short range. This compelled me to fall back out of the cedar woods, and take up a line along a depression in the open ground, within good musket-range of the edge of the woods, while the artillery was retired to the high ground to the right of the turnpike. From this last position we were enabled to drive back the enemy, cover the formation of our troops, and secure the center on the high ground." Thomas began stabilizing the Union center by sending Rousseau's reserve division to Sheridan's right and ensuring that Negley held his ground just north of Wilkinson Pike against Polk's piecemeal attacks.

Thomas directed his subordinates skillfully and in person, using prompt and uncomplicated orders. Negley wholeheartedly commended Thomas' leadership in his official report of the battle where he noted that his commanding general was up front, exhibiting his usual courage and "cool determination." An examination of the reports from Thomas' other subordinates indicates that Thomas was present in his sector and always seemed to appear where key decisions needed to be made. Rousseau, for example, recorded that the two met and deliberated together over exact unit dispositions and actions under the heat of battle, including the seizure of key terrain to deny its use by the enemy.

Thomas' calm and controlled behavior — so important to the morale of soldiers in battle, when coupled with competency — allowed the Union center to reform and repulse one Confederate attack after another. Thomas was personally present

with or very nearby while Rousseau and his brigades repulsed numerous determined Confederate assaults in an attempt to break the Union center. Thomas did not get overly excited like Rosecrans and was not prone to giving ambiguous or unintelligible orders. He was not very talkative at all, in fact, even in the thick of battle. Although his brigade fought hard and diligently, at one point during the battle, Colonel Scribner ordered his men to disperse due to sharpshooters and effective enemy artillery, and to reform on the Wilkinson Pike. Realizing that Thomas was in view and might mistake the situation for a retreat, Scribner rode over to the general to explain that his men would be reforming and asked if the general had any further orders. According to Larry J. Daniel in his book *Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland, 1861-1865*, Thomas replied in his typical manner, without expression, "No, reform on the pike."

Thomas was a patient, steadfast commander. He had that rare ability to imbue his subordinate leaders and soldiers with a rock-steady confidence that he himself genuinely shared. "Under Thomas, the Centre of the army evinced, in a marked degree, the staying qualities of that commander, which afterward were shown so conspicuously at Chickamauga," according to Cist. Thomas' determined command influence created a climate that allowed his soldiers to steel themselves under enemy attack and fight back even following high profile setbacks. He had both appeal and credibility among the troops which was unusual for a successful high-level commander of the period.

Though pushed back, the Union center was not broken which ultimately led to an opportunity to break the Confederate assault once it had culminated. Polk made a serious tactical error by committing his forces to the fight in the center piecemeal instead of concentrating for a coordinated attack. As a result, by mid-afternoon, Polk's assault broke apart, lost momentum, and was finally repulsed by Union soldiers under Colonel W. B. Hazen holding the Round Forrest, which was also called "Hell's Half Acre" by the soldiers who fought there.

As things turned out, even though Bragg had advanced in overwhelming force and smashed his enemy's entire right flank, he had also reduced the Union forces into a

tight and compact salient. Even worse, Rosecrans, Thomas, and a majority of the Army of the Cumberland stood ready as ever to repel any further enemy assaults, said Cleaves. Although the Union right had been completely routed over two miles from their original positions, this accomplishment was won at a fearful cost in Confederate lives. According to Colonel David Urquhart, a member of Bragg's staff, of the first half-day's fighting: "Our attack had pivoted the Federals on their center, bending back their line, as one half-shuts a knife-blade." The Union right, then center had been pushed back over two miles like a great door, the hinge of which was Palmer's division under General Crittenden which sat just north of the Round Forrest. At the most disheartening point of the battle for the Union side, around 1600 on Dec. 31, Rosecrans had his right and center pushed back so far north of the Wilkinson Turnpike that the Union position was crammed into a space of about a mile and a half from side to side, within a mile of Stones River. (See Map 2.)

After realizing Polk had failed to break the enemy center, Bragg called on his only reserve — Breckenridge's division still deployed on the Confederate right. Although it is reasonable to assume Bragg believed he was very close to breaking the Union center and thus collapsing the Union lines and severing Rosecrans line of communication, Bragg took his only intact formation of any size and sent it directly into the strongest and most firmly held spot on the battlefield — the Round Forest and Thomas' well organized center wing. Bragg made the mistake of making no attempt to probe and find a weakness first in the enemy's line, according to Buell. As it turned out, Breckenridge's brigades were decisively beaten after failed frontal attacks against Hazen's brigade still defending the Round Forrest. Nightfall finally concluded the first full day of battle.

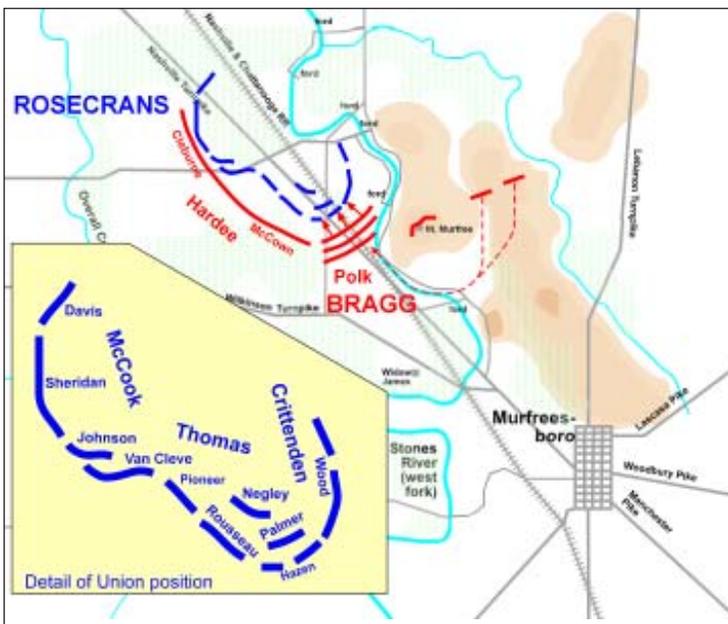
All day on Jan. 1 both armies adjusted their lines but declined to renew operations. Finally, in the afternoon of Jan. 2 Bragg gave the order to Breckenridge to attack Van Cleve's division (Crittenden's Third Division, now commanded by Colonel Beatty) which had crossed Stones River and occupied a knoll overlooking

the Confederate right wing. Van Cleve was forced from the high ground and, left unsupported, withdrew back across the river. As Breckenridge's victorious soldiers crested the knoll they were met by the concentrated fire of 58 cannons in position on the opposite side of the river. After seeing the enemy lines reel from the mass fire, some of Crittenden's soldiers spontaneously charged back across the river and routed what remained of Breckenridge's division. (See Map 3.) On Jan. 3, after initially refusing to cede the battleground, Bragg ordered a withdrawal under the cover of darkness in the direction of Tullahoma. Official records indicate that on Jan. 4, Rosecrans reported to higher headquarters that the enemy was in full retreat and that the Union center led the pursuit.

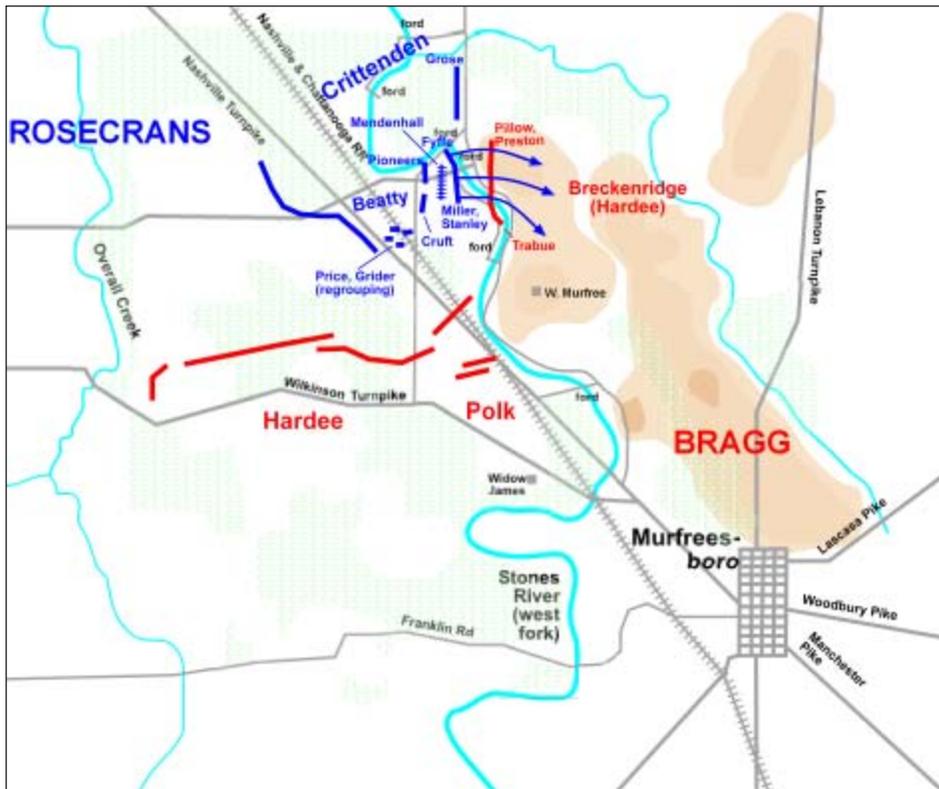
In all significant ways the Battle of Stones River was a costly draw. Of the approximately 43,000 Union soldiers and 37,000 Confederates engaged at Stones River, approximately 12,000 Federals and 10,000 rebels became casualties, or roughly 27 percent for each side. The fighting was so fierce along Sheridan's front that he lost all three of his brigade commanders. Yet still the Union could call it a triumph of sorts. Major General Crittenden recorded this impression: "As in most of our battles, very meager fruits resulted to either side from such partial victories as were for the most part won. Yet it was a triumph. It showed that in the long run the big purse and the big battalions — both on our side — must win; and it proved that there were no better soldiers than ours." As debilitating as Stones River was with respect to casualties — it ranks with Gettysburg, Chickamauga, and Antietam as one of the costliest battles of the war — it nonetheless served an important purpose of bolstering the morale and fighting spirit of the Union army in the west.

Although militarily not a victory at all, Stones River was nonetheless the "non-loss" that President Lincoln needed at the time — following the costly disasters at Fredericksburg and Chickasaw Bayou. On Jan. 5, Lincoln composed a letter to Rosecrans thanking him for his effort: "Please tender to all, and accept for yourself, the nation's gratitude for your and their skill, endurance, and dauntless courage." General-in-Chief Halleck's response, from Jan. 9, included: "The victory was well earned and one of the most brilliant of the war. You and your brave army have won the gratitude of your country and the admiration of the world. The field of Murfreesborough is made historical, and future generations will point out the places where so many heroes fell, gloriously, in defense of the Constitution and the Union."

General George H. Thomas' leadership of the Union center at the Battle of Stones River presents a compelling example of Army leadership that is especially instructive to soldiers today. The survival of the Union army hinged on the ability of the center to reform itself quickly under significant enemy pressure. Following the initial Confederate assault, Union forces, after a furious defense, took up a new line of defense running roughly along Wilkinson Turnpike perpendicular to the original battle line. To accomplish this required a commander who was adept at quick tactical decisions, a quick appraisal of the terrain and situation, and a strong will to ensure subordinate units moved and acted as necessary. Thomas' biographer Thomas B. Van Horne wrote: "Battles are won in a general way by the aggregate force of all operations to which every officer who gives or obeys an order, and every soldier who fires a cannon or a musket, makes a contribution. However, in an engagement of marked



Map 2 — Map of Stones River on Dec. 31, 1862, at 1600



Map 3 — Map of Stones River on Jan. 2, 1863, at 1645

emergencies the action of a brigade, division, or corps often stands out distinctly as saving an army. The crisis at the centre was so distinct, that its mastery brought General Thomas and his five brigades into boldest relief, as having saved the army. The prompt dispositions of the commander, and the steadiness and bravery of the subordinate officers and men under circumstances which have often brought confusion to generals and panics to soldiers, give the greater prominence to their action. General Thomas gained greater distinction in other battles, but never did he meet a crisis with more promptness and skill.”

Thomas was an officer who regularly displayed integrity and a solid sense of duty and at the Battle of Stones River in particular, his profound sense of duty and common sense approach to tactical problems served to bolster the Union center and break the Confederate offensive. Thomas used initiative and his exceptional judgment to reconnoiter his sector of the Union line early and made key decisions concerning the preparation of the field for battle. He identified key terrain that afforded effective fields of fire to his artillery which he correctly assessed would prove decisive in the coming battle. Thomas relied on all of his considerable tactical

skills and experience to successfully employ his units in a prepared defense in depth along successive lines operating over difficult terrain. Thomas successfully communicated the purpose of the defense his soldiers were being required to make and motivated them through his personal presence and example to remain organized and in communication.

Thomas was among the best combat

leaders of the war. Unfortunately he is too often characterized as merely a superb defensive fighter — and in fact, he was probably unsurpassed as a defensive commander by any other Civil War leader. Although he was well suited to the defense, where maximum use could be made of his abilities to orchestrate in-depth preparations, his later victory at Nashville proved Thomas understood the fundamentals of the offense as well. In many primary and secondary accounts, Rosecrans receives the lion’s share of credit for moving ceaselessly along his lines during the critical fighting of Dec. 31, encouraging his soldiers and given direct (sometimes too direct) guidance to his subordinates. After all, it was Rosecrans who received an official “Thanks from Congress” (on March 3, 1863) for his actions at Stones River. Still, and despite this, it is clear from a detailed study of the battle that General Thomas—before winning the sobriquet “The Rock of Chickamauga” — through his deliberate preparations, foresight, aggressive and successful leadership, held the Union center at Stones River against the odds and won the battle for the Union.

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A list of references for this article is on file with *Infantry Magazine*.



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A sketch shows the charge of the Col. M.B. Walker's 1st Brigade during the Battle of Stones River on Jan. 2, 1863.