



## *Grant opens the gateway to the Deep South Tennessee, September - November 1863*

*By Jean - Claude Janssens*

*Adapted into English by Gerald Hawkins*

The Chattanooga affair was rather peculiar. Indeed, it began with an unconventional siege war and quickly turned into a conflict of movement ending in a pitched battle of grand style. Contrary to what one might imagine, the besieged maneuvered more than the besiegers who confined themselves to fatal immobility. The Chattanooga campaign was certainly the last act of a long tragedy that began on January 1, 1863.

### **IMPORTANCE OF TENNESSEE**

The events that follow are closely related to the importance of the State of Tennessee in the Confederacy. Tennessee was the last southern State to secede. The decision was not made until June 8, 1861, nearly three months after the bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 11, 1861, and nearly six months after South Carolina took the big step as early as December 20, 1860. According to the census of 1860, the population of the State amounted to about 1,110,000 inhabitants of whom 827,000 were whites. Tennessee ranked second after Virginia in providing the largest military effort of the Confederacy. It recruited 135,000 soldiers, thus outclassing Virginia that mustered 120,000 men. In

1861, the State militia formed the nucleus of the Army of Tennessee, which was formally established on November 20, 1862. This large unit lined up at times more forces than those of the Northern Army of Virginia commanded by General Robert Lee.

Due to its geographical position, Tennessee constituted a barrier against a Union invasion of those States located farther south such as Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and to a lesser extent Florida. Its agricultural production was considerable and its heavy industry far from negligible, at least on a southern scale. Its railway network ideally ran from north to south. One line of particular interest is the Nashville & Chattanooga RR. Military statistics later emphasized the importance of the State of Tennessee by the eagerness of the belligerents to possess it during the Civil War. In this respect, Tennessee once more ranks second. In fact, of the 10,455 engagements recorded during the conflict, 1,462 took place on its territory. Virginia occupies the first place with 2,154 known actions.

### **THE 1863 CAMPAIGN**

As of March 1862, the Federals occupied northern Tennessee and Nashville, the State capital. Southern Tennessee was still in the hands of the Confederacy. In the fall of 1862, the invasion of Kentucky by the Confederates had been postponed. The Army of the Cumberland was thus able to pursue its offensive on December 26. For the people of the South, 1863 began under the darkest auspices. On January 4, at Murfreesboro, south of Nashville, after a bloody and uncertain battle at Stones River, the Army of the Cumberland commanded by General William Rosecrans compelled the Army of Tennessee of General Braxton Bragg to abandon its position.

After six months of inactivity, Rosecrans resumed his advance. From June 23 to 30, 1863, by a series of intricate but clever maneuvers between Murfreesboro and Tullahoma, and meeting little resistance, he forced the Confederates to retreat beyond the Tennessee River. On September 7, under severe pressure, Bragg abandoned the important place of Chattanooga without a fight and retreated to northern Georgia.

On September 19 and 20, the Army of Tennessee now reinforced by two divisions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia under James Longstreet, inflicted a resounding defeat on the Army of the Cumberland along the Chickamauga River in Georgia. At the conclusion of this hard fought battle, the Northerners narrowly escaped annihilation and retreated to Chattanooga thanks to the resilience of General George Thomas, the *Roc of Chickamauga*.

### **BRAXTON BRAGG AND HIS GENERALS**

The battle of Chickamauga was probably the only significant encounter that the Army of Tennessee won throughout the war. While delight and high morale should normally have prevailed in its ranks, it was quite the opposite. Large dissensions quickly arose between Braxton Bragg and his principal generals. He claimed that his subordinates had disobeyed his orders or not executed them properly. For their part, his officers asserted that Bragg was both physically and mentally unfit for command. He had not given the proper instructions, especially with regards to the pursuit of the defeated Army of the Cumberland.

However, since Bragg had the support of President Jefferson Davis, transfers and dismissals swiftly followed. On September 28, 1863, Generals Polk and Hindman were relieved of their command and sent to Atlanta. William Hardee replaced Polk. On the

same day, General Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry corps was merged with the forces of *Fighting Joe* Wheeler, one of Bragg's few supporters. Forrest was furious. Arriving at Bragg's headquarters he declared that he would never again obey his orders and even threatened his life if he interfered with him in the future. Such a virulent case of insubordination had never been recorded before! Fortunately for Bragg, Forrest was sent to Mississippi.

On October 4, twelve generals including James Longstreet, Simon Buckner, D. H. Hill and Patrick Cleburne signed a petition requesting the removal of Bragg at the head of the army. Breckinridge, although a notorious opponent of Bragg, did not sign it and thus managed to keep his position. Benjamin Cheatham, another antagonist, did not sign it either and discretely went on leave. The petition was handed over to President Davis during his visit to the army between October 9 and 14. But to no avail. General Bragg could do no wrong in the eyes of the President and he remained commander-in-chief of the Army of Tennessee. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, General D.H. Hill was removed, being wrongly accused of having drafted the petition of October 4, as investigations indicated that Buckner was the officer behind it. General Simon B. Buckner was the last to suffer the wrath of Bragg. Being a Kentuckian and the petition affair proved fatal. On October 29, at the instigation of Bragg, his Department of Eastern Tennessee was dissolved as was his corps. Buckner was demoted to division commander. Ultimate vexation, on November 22, his division was sent on the Knoxville front in Eastern Tennessee.

Relations were also tensed between Bragg and James *Pete* Longstreet who had won many laurels in Virginia. However, to dismiss such a respected general was no easy task. Despite everything, Bragg managed to remove his cumbersome bully on November 5 and sent him to wage war at Knoxville. On November 12, finally rid of all the troublemakers, Bragg reorganized his army into two corps under Generals John Breckinridge and William Hardee. He took the opportunity to smash the Tennessee-Kentucky lobby by dispersing the units of these States in different divisions. At the beginning of the campaign, Benjamin Cheatham had twenty-two Tennessee regiments in his division. He was now left with only six. Breckinridge's division no longer possessed any of the brigades present at Chickamauga. These measures led to a gloomy consequence: the men who were exasperated by their officers were now fuming at their general-in-chief. This state of affairs could only hinder the efficiency of the entire army.

## CHANGE OF COMMAND IN THE UNION ARMY

In the Union camp, the battle of Chickamauga of September 20 had also led to significant changes at the senior command level. On the 28<sup>th</sup>, Generals McCook and Crittenden, respectively head of the XX<sup>th</sup> and XXI<sup>st</sup> Corps, were sent to Indianapolis to attend a court martial. Their corps was dissolved and the men transferred to the newly formed IV<sup>th</sup> Corps of General Gordon Granger. On October 16, the Mississippi Military Division was formed, uniting the Departments of Ohio, Cumberland and Tennessee. General Ulysses Grant, the victor of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, was put in charge of the new organization.

On October 17, Grant met Secretary of War Stanton in Cairo, Illinois. From that time on he became the most prominent Union commander. On the same day, General Rosecrans was dismissed. George Thomas, the *Rock of Chickamauga* replaced him and the XIV<sup>th</sup> Corps was transferred to his colleague John McAuley Palmer. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, General William T. Sherman, backed by Grant, was promoted commander of the Northern Army of Tennessee.

## **GENERAL SITUATION - IMPORTANCE OF CHATTANOOGA**

As of September 22, 1863, and during the following two months, Chattanooga was to become the center of North America for both Federals and Confederates. Chattanooga was a small town of 2,500 inhabitants located in southeastern Tennessee, almost on the border with Georgia. Grant said it was more "*an idea than a city!*" It was also an important railway node where the Nashville & Chattanooga RR joined the Western & Atlantic RR. It was by and large the gateway to the Deep South. General Bragg knew the site well. He had already established his headquarters there in 1862 and more recently, from July 7 to September 7, when he abandoned the place although he had heavily fortified it. General Rosecrans finally entered the town two days later and his troops immediately began to improve the existing defenses. From September to November, large numbers of federal troops - eight army corps - gathered around the town. The V<sup>th</sup> and XIV<sup>th</sup> Corps of the Army of the Cumberland already on the scene, the XI<sup>th</sup> and XII<sup>th</sup> Corps of the Army of the Potomac from Virginia and the XV<sup>th</sup> and XVII<sup>th</sup> Corps of the Army of Tennessee from Memphis, Tennessee, would take part in the forthcoming campaign. The IX<sup>th</sup> and XXIII<sup>rd</sup> Corps based at Knoxville since September 2 would be kept in reserve. The entire force comprised seventeen divisions plus cavalry. On the confederate side, ten divisions and Wheeler's cavalry were scattered between Chattanooga and Knoxville.

## **CHATTANOOGA BESIEGED**

Following their defeat at Chickamauga, the 35,000 men of the Army of the Cumberland and their thousands of horses as well as 2,500 unfortunate civilians, were besieged in Chattanooga as early as September 22. They were confined in a space of about two miles long by a mile wide, wedged between the Tennessee River and the 50,000 soldiers of the victorious Army of Tennessee. Houses and dwellings were stripped clean of their furniture, doors, window frames and wooden floors, which were used as fuel or construction materials. The Army of the Cumberland certainly destroyed the town like a swarm of locusts!

The Confederates judiciously settled on the neighboring heights: Missionary Ridge in the east and Lookout Mountain in the south. The Chattanooga Creek Valley was also occupied. No enemy movements could theoretically escape their attention. Unfortunately, no confederate troops occupied the north of the city. Indeed, the sinister Walden's Ridge was considered - wrongly - impracticable for any form of transportation. Braxton Bragg had decided to besiege and starve the enemy army while quietly awaiting their surrender. There was no question of an assault on the town since he knew the importance of its fortifications.

To be continued ...