

# BATTLE DIGEST™



Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 3 • Issue 7

American Civil War:

## Chickamauga

DATE:

September 18–20, 1863

LOCATION:

Northwest Georgia near Chattanooga, Tennessee

### OPPOSING FORCES

**Union Army:** Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans commanded 57,000 troops of the Army of the Cumberland. His corps commanders were Maj. Gens. Thomas Crittenden (XXI Corps), George H. Thomas (XIV Corps), Alexander McCook (XX Corps), and Gordon Granger (Reserve Corps).

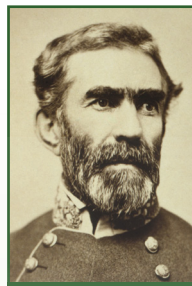
**Confederate Army:** Gen. Braxton Bragg commanded the Army of Tennessee with an effective strength of 66,000 troops. His two wings were commanded by Lt. Gens. James Longstreet and Leonidas Polk.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In 1863, while Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant maneuvered against Vicksburg in the West and Gen. Robert E. Lee prepared to invade Pennsylvania in the East, Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans began his campaign to capture Chattanooga, Tennessee. Control of this vital rail center and “gateway to the Deep South” would help determine the outcome of the war. But after Rosecrans’s brilliant start in a campaign of deception and maneuver, he made a critical error when he overextended his army in pursuit of Gen. Braxton Bragg. When Bragg tried to capitalize on the error, the result was the Battle of Chickamauga – one of the largest, costliest, and most desperately fought battles of the Civil War. This stunning Confederate victory might well have changed the South’s fortunes. But because Bragg chose not to pursue the Army of the Cumberland, they escaped. It was a costly mistake by the Confederates.

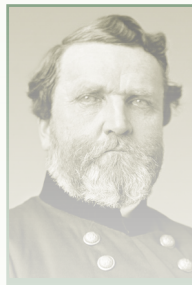


Maj. Gen. William Rosecrans



Gen. Braxton Bragg

At this point, Rosecrans had a choice: He could pursue Bragg or consolidate in Chattanooga. His subordinates advised him to pause. But Rosecrans, flush with victory, decided to push forward against what he thought was an army in headlong retreat. As he moved his three corps south, however, they were soon spread across 40 miles. And on 10 Sept., in an unexpected move, Bragg attacked Rosecrans’s flank – hitting Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas’s lead division near McLemore’s Cove. Fortunately, by the night of 12 Sept., Rosecrans realized he had been tricked and began consolidating his dangerously extended army toward Lee and Gordon’s Mill, 12 miles south of Chattanooga. He had no time to lose!



Maj. Gen. George Thomas

### STRATEGY & MANEUVER

**Actions by the Union** – The Army of the Cumberland had spent most of 1862 reacting to the Confederate invasion of Kentucky and Middle Tennessee under Bragg’s command. After Rosecrans finally stopped Bragg at the Battle of Stones River (December 1862), he set up camp near Murfreesboro, Tennessee. His next objective was Chattanooga, a rail center on the Tennessee River crucial to the Confederate war effort. President Abraham Lincoln told Rosecrans, “If we can hold Chattanooga and Eastern Tennessee, I think the rebellion must dwindle and die.”

Despite the urgings of Lincoln, Rosecrans took his time. While the opposing armies sat for six months less than 40 miles apart, Rosecrans

while he moved to his right. After Bragg fell for the ruse, he was quickly outflanked and retreated to the Elk River before further falling back to Chattanooga. (*Map 1*)

After Rosecrans moved forward to a new position north of the Tennessee River, on 4 July, he spent time resupplying and repairing the railroads to his rear. So far, he had driven Bragg out of Tennessee with minimal cost. He planned his next ruse to feint on Bragg’s right while he moved around Bragg’s left. (*Map 2*) His soldiers supported the deception by firing cannons from the northeast, lighting campfires near the river north of town, banging on empty barrels as if assembling pontoons and boats, and putting fresh wood shavings in the river.<sup>2</sup> In mid-August, when Rosecrans made his move, Bragg was tricked again. By the time Bragg learned that Union forces were across the river and around his left flank, it was too late. On 7 Sept., Bragg ordered the evacuation of Chattanooga.

**Actions by the Confederates** – After his defeat at Stones River, Bragg repositioned his demoralized army to Tullahoma and awaited Rosecrans’s moves. His army’s dysfunctions were many. His corps commanders had lost faith in him, and his two cavalry commanders, Brig. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest and Maj. Gen. Joseph Wheeler, despised each other. Despite his army’s dysfunctions, however, the president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, remained supportive. Although Davis did become concerned after Bragg was outflanked near Tullahoma, and he worked hard to reinforce him. With Vicksburg and