

## Introduction

The Battle of Nashville, fought December 15-16, 1864 just south of Tennessee's capital, is considered one of the most decisive battles of the Civil War. Decisive because it ended the last major Confederate offensive in the Western Theater, and decisive because it was an undisputed victory for the Federals, ending in a rout. The Confederate Army of Tennessee under Major General John Bell Hood was attacked by the Federals under Major General George Henry Thomas and soundly defeated. America's preeminent military historian, the late Russell F. Weigley, reaffirmed that "Nashville ranks as probably the most complete battlefield victory of the war." Nashvillian Stanley Horn's definitive 1956 book on the subject is titled *The Decisive Battle of Nashville*. But Hood's army was not destroyed, as some historians and authors contend. The rearguard of Hood's army fought valiantly for the next ten days, under continuous heavy pursuit and in miserable winter weather conditions. Federal forces spearheaded by the troopers of Major General James Harrison Wilson chased Hood's routed ragtag army more than one hundred miles south to the Tennessee River in northern Alabama. Given their overwhelming numbers and firepower, and the beaten-down condition of Hood's army, the Federals under Thomas and Wilson should have rather easily bagged the entire rebel army and either annihilated them or shipped them off to Northern prisoner-of-war camps. The fact that neither one of those possibilities occurred is testament to Yankee overconfidence and floundering, the appalling winter weather, the rugged terrain, and, last but not least, the tactics of the Confederate rearguard.

"There was no pursuit and no rearguard action during the entire war to compare with that during Hood's retreat," declared historian Paul H. Stockdale, a viewpoint echoed by renowned historian

Edwin Bearss. Cavalry expert Edward G. Longacre noted, “The pursuit was one of the most devastating in American history.” Ross Massey, historian for the Battle of Nashville Trust, said, “No army in the war endured a more miserable and depressing episode than did the Army of Tennessee on this retreat.”

There are few examples of successful pursuits following battlefield victories in any theater of the Civil War. Failure to act decisively was one reason, as at Shiloh, Antietam, and Gettysburg. But even when pursuit was employed, as at Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge, seldom does the victor destroy the defeated force. Christopher Einolf, a biographer of Thomas, noted one of the main reasons—a retreating army falls back on its own supply line, while a pursuing force tends to outrun its own supplies.

Horn elaborated on the aftermath of the two-day battle at Nashville: “The next 10 days were a nightmare of nerve-wracking hardship and struggle to both armies. Alternating marching and fighting, worn down by battle fatigue and sheer physical exhaustion, they somehow managed to carry on an almost continuous running battle from Nashville to the Tennessee River. The weather was abominable—rain, sleet, and snow, with below freezing temperatures. The wagons and guns churned the roads into seemingly bottomless quagmires, which froze into sharp edged ruts during the cold nights. The heavy rains not only drenched the suffering soldiers but soon flooded the streams and made the passage of each of them a serious problem.”

Popular historian Hampton Sides was writing about Korea 1950, but he could have been referring to Middle Tennessee in December 1864: “Whatever euphemism one wanted to use, all the martial textbooks agreed on this point: Even under more favorable circumstances, a disciplined, well-choreographed fighting withdrawal was one of the trickiest maneuvers in military science . . . It was hard enough for an army to defend itself when dug in; to do so while on the move, with a numerically superior army attacking every inch of a rearward march, was next to impossible. Yet some battlefield situations offered only one solution beyond surrender or destruction—and that solution was a swift exit.”

General Thomas would have known this maxim well; he was called the Rock of Chickamauga for holding fast at that bloody 1863 battle, the largest of the Western Theater, and then retreating

from the enemy at nightfall to the safety of Chattanooga. For his victory a year later, an offensive masterpiece, Thomas became known as the Sledge of Nashville.

The running pursuit began late on the afternoon of the second day of battle when anxious Federal infantry stormed the heights of Compton's Hill (now known as Shy's Hill) and the Confederate soldiers turned and fled, initiating a full-fledged rout. With the Federals and Wilson's troopers nearly surrounding the hill and cutting off the closest escape route, the Confederate soldiers skirted the Overton Hills and fled southeastward to the Franklin turnpike. Units of Hood's army organized to establish holding actions which allowed much of the infantry to escape through Brentwood and surge southward to the village of Franklin. Fighting was fierce on December 17th, with hand-to-hand combat north of Franklin and a major confrontation at a tributary of the West Harpeth River. The command of the Confederate rearguard changed hands several times in the first few days as Federal troopers, armed with repeating rifles, tried to outflank the rebels on the turnpike. Acres of knee-deep mud sapped the strength of man and beast. The use of the macadamized turnpike, which ran all the way from Nashville to Franklin to Columbia to Pulaski, was vital to both sides during the retreat.

Many rivers and streams had to be forded. Destroyed bridges had to be replaced. Rainy conditions turned small creeks into raging torrents; there was much skirmishing along Rutherford Creek, which was difficult to cross. The arrival of the Federal pontoon train was delayed due to critical errors. Then the weather turned bitterly cold, with snowfall. The Duck River at Columbia was a major obstacle to the Federals, as was the arrival of Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest. The wily general employed delaying tactics to hasten the retreat while battling his tormentors all the way through Pulaski to the state line. Major conflicts were fought at Lynnville and Richland Creek north of Pulaski, and at Anthony's Hill and Sugar Creek south of that town. By that time, the Confederate troops were slowly crossing the Tennessee River to safety on a rickety pontoon bridge as the last-chance fighting evolved into a purely cavalry match.

Back on December 16th, the Confederates atop Compton's Hill had several options—they could desert, surrender, fight to the

death, or flee. That their fate was not decided for the next ten days was testament to the willpower of both blue and gray.

As Winston Churchill, an avid scholar of American history and the Civil War, said, in emphasizing the fighting spirit of Americans, the Civil War was fought “to the last desperate inch.”