

The Chattanooga Campaign and the Art of Military History: A Review Essay

By Edgar F. Raines, Jr.

The battles for Chattanooga, Tennessee, began on the evening of 20 September 1863, when elements of two corps of the Union Army of the Cumberland fell back upon that strategic railway junction in disorganization and defeat. Nestled in a great loop of the Tennessee River and surrounded on all sides by mountains, Chattanooga was a necessary base for future Federal operations against the industrial and communications center of Atlanta, Georgia. It also represented a potential death trap for any army besieged there. The Lincoln administration made every effort to relieve its endangered forces. In *The Shipwreck of Their Hopes: The Battles for Chattanooga* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Peter Cozzens, the author of previous studies of the battles of Stones River and Chickamauga, examines how the Northern effort, lasting over two months, succeeded and the opposing Confederate attempt, feeble by contrast, failed.¹

Cozzens is a fine writer. His account is well organized and vividly described. He excels at penned portraits of situations and possesses considerable understanding of the psychological dimension of human relationships. He provides the best available and most detailed account, for example, of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton's secret meeting with Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in mid-October 1863. Stanton gave Grant two orders, with the option of choosing one. Both assigned the general to command the new Military Division of the Mississippi. One retained Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans in command of the Army of the Cumberland. The other relieved him and elevated Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas in his stead. Grant opted for the latter—the choice for which Stanton had devoutly hoped. While Cozzens' analysis of the rationale for Grant's decision is authoritative, Cozzens slights context. He is much less successful in explaining the military actions—or in this case inaction—which justified Rosecrans' relief and the machinations in Chattanooga and Washington that preceded Stanton's visit to Grant.

Cozzens' descriptions of combat actions at the brigade and regimental levels constitute one of the great strengths of his book. His work adopts the "men against

fire" approach of André du Picq, Stephen Crane, S. L. A. Marshall, and John Keegan. Cozzens is also very careful to identify exactly where each unit was located and when, very much in the Grand Army of the Republic–United Confederate Veterans–National Park Service tradition of battlefield memorialization. He has mined an impressive amount of material to do so, including published official records, regimental histories, diaries, and soldiers' letters, as well as both the published and unpublished correspondence of the commanders. The result is a brilliant account of a succession of small unit actions.

Cozzens' vivid portrayal of the efforts of the 93d Illinois Infantry at the battle of Tunnel Hill on 25 November 1863 illustrates his technique. The regiment, commanded by Col. Holden Putnam, charged up the incline to reinforce the 27th Pennsylvania Infantry, already heavily engaged. Expecting to find a coherent line, Putnam and his men discovered only knots of disorganized survivors from an earlier attack. The Pennsylvanians were huddled behind whatever cover the ground provided and engaged in a long-range firefight with the Confederate defenders. No sooner had the regiment passed through the Pennsylvanians than it was ambushed by two Arkansas regiments that had hidden in woods in front of the Confederate main line. As the Illinoisans wavered and began to fall back in response to the sudden burst of fire, Putnam, mounted on a large black horse, grabbed the regimental flag and shouted to his men never to forsake the colors. The next instant he was shot dead, and the regiment fell back in some confusion on the Pennsylvanians. The survivors dug in and fought as well as their relative lack of cover and dwindling supply of ammunition allowed. Their ammunition almost exhausted, they were overrun by a massed Confederate bayonet assault late in the afternoon. Only a pitiful remnant of the regiment made it to the safety of the Federal reserve position at the bottom of the hill.

Such a focus on small unit actions provides a clear memorial function. (A painting of Colonel Putnam attempting to rally his regiment graces the dust jacket.) It also makes an important contribution to the emerg-

ing historiography of the evolution of tactics exemplified by the works of John A. English, Paddy Griffith, and Perry Jamieson.³ Cozzens' weakness in this regard is that, while he can often explain exactly what happened and why, he is not always as clear as to what was intended or what should have been done. He would have to consult standard tactical manuals of the day to understand intent and post-Civil War manuals and texts for the lessons that the survivors drew from the conflict. Nevertheless, Cozzens makes a genuine contribution to understanding the experience of the men who "saw the elephant" in the Civil War. Grasping that reality, and the physical and psychological wounds it inflicted, will make it easier for students of post-Civil War American history to assess fairly the impact of veterans on politics and social policy.

Cozzens' research design and narrative suggest that he views battle as a collection of firefights. Understand each firefight and their interrelation, and you will comprehend the entire engagement. Such an approach is certainly intelligible for anyone influenced by the war in Vietnam or the computer models describing that conflict's ground combat. While this conceptualization has merit, it leaves out some important components—most notably the commander's intent.

Consider Cozzens' discussion of Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker's assault on Lookout Mountain on 24 November 1863, the famous "battle above the clouds."

Cozzens cursorily reviews Hooker's plans and then reverts to his focus on small units. He follows the deployment of Brig. Gen. John W. Geary's division across Lookout Creek, its advance along the palisade, and its successive attacks on the Confederate brigades of Brig. Gens. Edward C. Walthall, John C. Moore, and Edmund Pettus. In the process Cozzens does some very good work. His account of Lt. Col. Eugene Powell's seizure of the initial bridgehead over the creek is a classic. The author's descriptions of the faintheartedness of General Geary and the drunkenness of one of the Federal brigade commanders, Brig. Gen. Walter Whitaker, raise the question of how many of the tactical inanities of the Civil War—and the appalling casualties that often resulted—were a result of commanders who either lacked the physical courage to face the terrors of the battlefield or resorted to the bottle to pass the test. These are interesting lines for future research. The only difficulty with the account is that Cozzens does not give a clear statement of Hooker's plan: to use Geary's reinforced division to take the Confederates in flank while deploying three other brigades to keep the Southerners' attention focused to their front. It was the ability of the troops to execute this plan, despite some weak intermediate commanders, that achieved the tactical (and ultimately operational-level) victory at Lookout Mountain.

The battles around Chattanooga closely conform to Clausewitz's definition of a campaign as a series of

Renewed Call for Papers: June 2000 Conference of Army Historians

The Center of Military History is continuing to solicit papers for the June 2000 biennial Conference of Army Historians. The theme of the conference will be "The Korean War." Papers may address the background, conduct, or impact of the war. The conference organizers are seeking papers relating to all aspects of military operations in Korea, including the impact of military and civilian leaders, the contributions of various branches and organizations in the Army, the roles of other U.S. military services, and the operations of the military forces of other nations. Discussions of the diplomatic and political context of the war are also welcome. A secondary focus of the conference will be the Cold War, and the Center is particularly interested in papers addressing the impact of the Korean War on other facets of the Cold War.

The conference will be held on 6–8 June 2000 at the Sheraton National Hotel in Arlington, Virginia. Prospective participants should send their proposed paper topics either by mail to Dr. William Stivers, U.S. Army Center of Military History, ATTN: DAMH-FPF, 103 Third Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, D.C. 20319-5058, or by electronic mail to william.stivers@hqda.army.mil. Further information may be obtained by calling Dr. Stivers at (202) 685-2729.

linked engagements. In contrast to the Stones River and Chickamauga campaigns, in each of which one major battle overshadowed all else, the Chattanooga campaign consisted of a number of important actions which varied considerably in size—Maj. Gen. Joseph Wheeler's cavalry raid, the landing at Brown's Ferry, the night battle of near Wauhatchie, the capture of Orchard Knob, Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman's crossing of the Tennessee River, the attack on Lookout Mountain, the fight at Tunnel Hill, the assault on Missionary Ridge, Hooker's crossing of Chickamauga Creek, and Maj. Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne's rearguard action at Ringgold Gap. While the Missionary Ridge assault on 25 November 1863 was a large engagement—and one of the most dramatic of the war—it was in a sense superfluous. Hooker's forcing of Chickamauga Creek, often ignored by historians, had already rendered the Confederate position untenable. General Braxton Bragg would have had to withdraw on the evening of 25–26 November simply to protect his rear areas, since his ability to retire across West Chickamauga Creek would soon have been threatened even had the assault on Missionary Ridge never been made.

Cozzens is thus weak at a level of analysis where the nature of the campaign demands that he be strongest—at the operational level of war, to use the modern idiom. Grant in Cozzens' treatment is curiously detached, almost a spectator for much of the campaign rather than the directing brain who shaped the Northern effort. This is not to argue that everything went according to plan, as Bruce Catton once suggested in *Grant Takes Command* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969). Over a decade ago James Lee McDonough's book *Chattanooga—A Death Grip on the Confederacy* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984) exploded Catton's argument that the assault on Missionary Ridge was part of some master plan. Rather, Grant had constructed such a flexible operational plan that he could easily shift the focus of the Union effort from one flank to another or to the center, depending on the circumstances of the moment.

The problem is not that Cozzens ignores the operational level but that it is not the focus of his research and analysis. Cozzens knows what happened on the tactical level, and he can read a map. On this basis he delivers *ex cathedra* judgments about operational decisions. But questions of command and con-

trol require research and analysis as careful and systematic as those of minor tactics. A historian seeking to address command and control in a serious fashion must answer a whole series of related questions. What were the means of control available to a commander at any particular time—field telegraph, wigwag (torch or flag), or mounted courier? To what extent did meteorological conditions permit or inhibit long-range communications? (To his credit Cozzens does describe the effect of weather on operations, although not on communications.) Where did the commander locate his headquarters? How soon did he receive information from the front, and how quickly could he react to it? How did he use his staff to process information, reach decisions, and communicate them to his subordinates? How clear and precise were his orders? (Cozzens does address the content and clarity of Sherman's orders at Tunnel Hill.) To what extent did he use—or bypass—the chain of command and with what consequences? Cozzens answers some of these questions for General Geary, a division commander, at Lookout Mountain, but ignores most of them for General Sherman, an army commander, at Tunnel Hill.

Just a year after the University of Illinois Press published *The Shipwreck of Their Hopes*, St. Martin's Press released *Mountains Touched with Fire: Chattanooga Besieged, 1863*, by Wiley Sword. Sword's account is much more satisfactory on the operational level than Cozzens' book, although Cozzens is surely correct to blame General Bragg and Maj. Gen. John C. Breckinridge for the Confederate debacle at Missionary Ridge rather than Lt. Gen. William J. Hardee as Sword does. Sword provides some discussion of the practical issues of command and control but gives no systematic analysis.

Readers with neither the time nor the inclination to read more than one book on the Chattanooga campaign will probably do best to stick with McDonough's *Chattanooga*. Although his volume was the first book-length treatment of the campaign and remains the shortest, it addressed most of the major issues. McDonough pitched his analysis at a higher level than either Cozzens or Sword and confronted what might be called the grand strategic issue posed by the campaign—how did it contribute to the eventual outcome of the war? McDonough argued that by late 1863 an outright military victory was beyond the capacity of

the Confederacy. The possibility of foreign intervention had also evaporated. The one hope remaining for the South was to prolong the conflict until war weariness led the North to seek a negotiated settlement. A Confederate victory at Chattanooga would have required Federal forces in the West to start their 1864 campaign one hundred miles farther north than they eventually did, leaving Atlanta a distant rather than an immediate objective. This analysis is very satisfying—which perhaps explains why neither Cozzens nor Sword even addresses the issue. Furthermore, Cozzens' emphasis on the tactical battle makes for a confusing introduction to the campaign for first-time readers. While Sword's concentration on the operational level alleviates this particular problem, his discussion of the strategic background is disjointed. Thus, readers who want an in-depth understanding of the campaign need to read all three volumes.

Those who want only a brief overview can now also obtain that from the fine recent study by Steven E. Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee: The Chickamauga and Chattanooga Campaigns* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). Woodworth's subtitle is somewhat misleading as *Six Armies* encompasses the Tullahoma campaign as well as the two it advertises. Only 217 pages long, Woodworth's book devotes some 89 pages to the Chattanooga campaign alone. A distinguished student of Confederate military history, Woodworth writes clearly and directly.³ He displays a good grasp of both the operational issues and the logistical factors that shaped the commanders' major decisions. In particular, he provides the best available analysis and defense of the decisions made by General Bragg at the operational level during the campaign. Woodworth effectively synthesizes the existing literature, drawing not only on the volumes already mentioned in this essay but also on Roger Pickenpaugh's excellent *Rescue by Rail: Troop Transfer and the Civil War in the West, 1863* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), which he consulted in manuscript. But most important, Woodworth can express his impressions in memorable style. Having Nathan Bedford Forrest in an army, he observes, "was something like operating in concert with a band of formidable but unpredictable barbarian allies" (p. 29). The weaknesses of Woodworth's book are the weaknesses

of the literature—the early portions of the Knoxville campaign and mounted operations generally—as well as the brevity of his account.

Indeed, given the complexity of the Chattanooga campaign, even Cozzens and Sword face the problem that a sustained analysis of the strategic, operational, and tactical levels as well as the political background would require a book more than twice as long as either author has produced. This may explain why there is remarkably little overlap between their two books, which cover the same campaign. Thus, for example, Cozzens gives a far more detailed version of the Federal preparations to seize a bridgehead at Brown's Ferry, while Sword is much more informative on Sherman's crossing of the Tennessee. McDonough and Woodworth provide intelligent introductions to the campaign, but for an in-depth understanding readers will have to turn to both Cozzens and Sword.

A single-volume definitive history of the Chattanooga campaign cannot, however, simply be either Cozzens or Sword writ longer. Such a study will need to be based on a whole series of specialized articles and monographs on particular aspects of the campaign. Their volumes suggest these topics, even as they cannot provide wholly satisfactory treatments of them. More study is needed on cavalry operations; command and control; staff organization, procedures, and operations; communications; intelligence collection and analysis; engineer operations (topographic, construction, and combat); logistics; and the complementary campaign in East Tennessee, with particular reference to how political developments may or may not have affected operations in that theater. For a model of how to analyze the interplay of political considerations and military operations, the prospective author of the definitive study need go no further than *Mountains Touched with Fire*. One of Sword's major contributions is to demonstrate the effect of the Ohio elections on the timing of Rosecrans' relief. Lincoln waited until the soldier vote was safely in from the Army of the Cumberland before he allowed Secretary Stanton to proceed west to his fateful meeting with General Grant.

Several of the subjects outlined above are closely interrelated and can resolve themselves into a series of detailed questions. Take cavalry operations, for example. Neither McDonough, Cozzens, nor Sword gives a satisfactory account of mounted operations in

the campaign. Yet they were crucial in determining when the soldiers of the Army of the Cumberland would practically starve in Chattanooga, as they did after Wheeler's raid, and when they would not, as after the Federal riposte led by Brig. Gen. George Crook and others. The absence of cavalry around Chattanooga proper deprived the Union Army of the capabilities that branch traditionally provided—screening infantry advances, protecting flanks, executing close and distant reconnaissance, and engaging in pursuit missions. It is difficult to see how Col. John Bratton could have surprised Geary's division at Wauhatchie if cavalry had accompanied Hooker's relief column from Bridgeport, Alabama. Similarly, Sherman's advance toward Tunnel Hill on 24 November would have been aided immeasurably by the presence of cavalry to screen his flanks and front. Mounted patrols could have reconnoitered the Confederate position. In these circumstances, Sherman would have been less likely to be confused about his objective.

The traditional explanation is that the level of supply in Chattanooga precluded the use of cavalry. However, its absence might also have reflected Grant and Sherman's lack of familiarity with the capabilities of the mounted arm. To sustain or refute either explanation will require knowledge of both the commanders' perceptions of the logistical situation and the hard truth of that situation. What, for example, was the hauling capacity of the standard Army supply wagon? How much transport could Grant accumulate along the line of communications of the Army of the Cumberland? How many wagonloads could the Bridgeport–Brown's Ferry route sustain? How depleted were the depots in Chattanooga by the time Hooker reestablished the Bridgeport line of communications? What were the normal daily supply requirements of the troops and animals in and around Chattanooga? How much of the troops' supply was normally provided by local purchase? Given the debilitated state of the garrison, what additional nutriment and how much time were required to restore men and animals to a level of health sufficient for sustained exertion? How much additional supply, particularly forage, would a mounted regiment, brigade, or division have consumed?

The types of materials that will provide answers to these and related questions include Army quartermaster and commissary manuals, as well as the latest

research on the medical issues involved. The answers themselves will not necessarily be precise, but they should at least provide a standard by which to evaluate the logistical constraints on the armies' operational decisions. Donald Engels' minor masterpiece, *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), might serve as a guide for anyone interested in pursuing this line of analysis.

These kinds of detailed questions about one aspect of logistical operations naturally lead to a broader consideration of the organization, procedures, and operation of the Federal and Confederate supply services. How were the armies' logistical operations administered at the level of the geographic department or division? To what extent were the bureaus autonomous, or to what extent were they guided by the commanders' intent? Did commissary and quartermaster officers even have accurate information about the supplies they had available—either in transit or in depot? Sword is at pains to detail how remarkably slow Rosecrans was in responding to the supply crisis in Chattanooga. Did this reflect Rosecrans' post-Chickamauga stupor or a deeper and more systemic problem in logistical administration? How pervasive was corruption? Cozzens is particularly instructive about lower-level corruption within Chattanooga. Did some supply officers get a head start on Gilded Age fortunes during the campaign? What was the impact of corruption on supply operations?

Until such work is completed and synthesized, McDonough, Cozzens, and Sword will remain indispensable for understanding the Chattanooga campaign in detail. Woodworth's book may endure even longer as a brief introduction to those operations. *The Shipwreck of Their Hopes* is the concluding volume of Cozzens' trilogy on the Army of the Cumberland. At the time of its publication, I was concerned that the volume might also mark the end of the author's work as a historian. It is, after all, an avocation for this Foreign Service officer. Cozzens, however, has continued to write about the Civil War. In 1997 the University of North Carolina Press published another fine Cozzens study, *The Darkest Days of the War: The Battles of Iuka and Corinth*. In 1998 the same press issued *The Military Memoirs of General John Pope*, edited by Cozzens and Robert I. Girardi. The high

quality of these studies is not surprising, for Cozzens' *Shipwreck* is one of the finest examples of the application of the "new military history" to the battlefield. It deserves the attention not only of students of the American Civil War but of all those interested in the evolution of warfare.

Dr. Edgar F. Raines, Jr., is a historian in the Center's Histories Branch. The Center plans to publish his book, tentatively titled Eyes of Artillery: The Origins of Modern U.S. Army Aviation in World War II, in 2000.

NOTES

1. This paper substantially expands ideas first developed in my review of *The Shipwreck of Their Hopes* that appeared in the *Illinois Historical Journal* 88 (Winter 1995): 294–95. I thank the editor of that journal for permission to revise and extend my

remarks in this forum. Cozzens' earlier works were *No Better Place To Die: The Battle of Stones River* (Urbana, Ill., 1990) and *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga* (Urbana, Ill., 1992).

2. John A. English, *A Perspective on Infantry* (New York, 1981); Paddy Griffith, *Forward into Battle: Fighting Tactics from Waterloo to the Near Future* (1981, reprint ed., Novato, Calif., 1990), and *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn., 1987); Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (University, Ala., 1982); Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865–1899* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1994).

3. For other examples of his work, see Steven E. Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Campaign Command in the West*, *Modern War Studies* (Lawrence, Kans., 1990), and *Davis and Lee at War*, *Modern War Studies* (Lawrence, Kans., 1995).

Upcoming Military History Conferences

The Society of Military History will hold its annual conference at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia, on 28–30 April 2000. The themes of the conference will be "Korea 1950 and 400 Years of Limited War." Further information about the conference is available from Professor Gordon Rudd, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Quantico, Virginia 22134–5068.

The Council on America's Military Past will hold its 34th annual military history conference at the Radisson Hotel in Burlington, Vermont, on 10–14 May 2000. The conference will devote particular attention to military activities around Lake Champlain, North American wars from the French and Indian War to the War of 1812, the Civil War, and Canadian military history. Further information may be obtained from the council by writing to P.O. Box 1151, Fort Myer, Virginia 22211–1151, or by phoning (703) 912-6124.

Siena College will hold a multidisciplinary 60th anniversary conference on World War II at its Loudonville, New York, campus on 1–2 June 2000. The conference will focus on worldwide political, military, diplomatic, cultural, and artistic developments in the year 1940. Further information may be obtained by writing to Professor Thomas O. Kelly II, Department of History, Siena College, 515 Loudon Road, Loudonville, New York 12211–1462; by calling 518-783-2512; or by sending an electronic mail inquiry to legendziewic@siena.edu.

The U.S. Army Center of Military History will hold its biennial Conference of Army Historians on 6–8 June 2000 at the Sheraton National Hotel in Arlington, Virginia. The theme of the conference will be the Korean War and its impact. Further information may be obtained by contacting William Stivers by phone at (202) 685-2729 or by electronic mail at william.stivers@hqda.army.mil.