November 25 marks the 150th anniversary of the Civil War’s Battle of Missionary Ridge, the climactic event in the hard-fought Chattanooga Campaign. July’s “Historically Speaking” flagged up the course and significance of the Gettysburg and Vicksburg campaigns. As fate would have it, on July 4, 1863—the very day that Confederate GEN Robert E. Lee retreated from Gettysburg and Confederate LTG John C. Pemberton surrendered Vicksburg—Confederate GEN Braxton Bragg retired to Chattanooga, Tenn., after having been outmaneuvered by Union MG William S. Rosecrans in the Tullahoma Campaign. Chattanooga was a vital river port and railroad junction athwart lines of communication running east to west and north to south. In Union hands, it would turn the Allegheny Mountains into a barrier and open the gates into Georgia and beyond.

MG Rosecrans’ victory in the Tullahoma Campaign through central Tennessee was convincing but hardly flawless. It was marred by excessive periods of delay and procrastination between occasional bouts of movement and activity. After forcing GEN Bragg to withdraw from the Battle of Stones River, as discussed in January’s “Historically Speaking,” Rosecrans found one excuse after another not to advance until June 26, despite repeated admonitions to do so from Washington, D.C. Then, in nine days of artful maneuvering, Rosecrans turned Bragg’s positions three times and sped more than 80 miles to the Tennessee River. Rosecrans followed these exploits by lapsing into another six weeks of preparation, procrastination and fulmination.

When MG Rosecrans did move in early September, he skillfully brought his Army of the Cumberland across the Tennessee River downstream from Chattanooga and turned on a broad front to threaten GEN Bragg’s lines of communication to the south. Bragg withdrew from Chattanooga and concentrated 20 miles farther south for a counterblow. Opportunity presented itself to Bragg when Rosecrans sent one corps into Chattanooga and forced the other two through passes 20 miles apart crossing the formidable spine of Lookout Mountain. Confederate deception had convinced Rosecrans that Bragg was in full retreat, and he pressed his widely separated subordinates to speed ahead with minimal reconnaissance and gaping holes in their cavalry screen. Bragg fumbled two opportunities to pick off fragments of Rosecrans’ army, then concentrated to attack at Chickamauga, Ga., with a considerable advantage.

Fighting along West Chickamauga Creek on September 19 was confused and bloody as Bragg forced his way across, Rosecrans hustled in reinforcements, and units from both sides lost orientation in the heavily wooded terrain. Fighting on September 20 was dominated by the success of troops under the command of Confederate LTG James Longstreet, who had brought in a reinforcing corps by rail from Virginia in a brilliant strategic movement. Benefiting from Rosecrans’ desperate shuffling to meet attacks elsewhere, Longstreet struck the flanks of three divisions marching in column, sweeping them away. Rosecrans and two of his corps commanders, convinced that the battle was lost, left the field, leaving orders to follow. MG George H. Thomas, commander, XIV Corps, gathered as many remaining Union soldiers as he could, stemmed the rout and averted Union disaster. His gallant defense through the rest of the day earned him the nickname the “Rock of Chickamauga.” That night, Thomas brought out his embattled forces in good order.

Defeated and now defeatist, Rosecrans withdrew into Chattanooga. Flush with success, Bragg invested him there, effectively securing the surrounding high ground of Lookout Mountain.
Mountain and Missionary Ridge. Siege conditions prevailed. The supply situation became problematic, then desperate. Artillery horses starved. Union troops, on minimal rations, became listless and discouraged. President Abraham Lincoln intervened. In search of energy and unified effort, he appointed MG Ulysses S. Grant as overall commander between the Mississippi River and the Alleghenies. Lincoln gave Grant his choice of local commander for Chattanooga, and he chose MG Thomas, who assumed command on October 19. Grant arrived in Chattanooga on October 23, and reinforcements—two corps from the Army of the Potomac commanded by MG Joseph Hooker—had arrived as well.

Thomas resumed the offensive on October 26 and restored a sensible supply line to Chattanooga by October 28. The Confederates still held the high ground, however. Grant brought in MG William T. Sherman with two more corps to help Thomas and Hooker knock them off of it. On November 23, Thomas seized two prominent hills in the shadow of Missionary Ridge. On November 24, in an attack complicated by blinding fog, Hooker seized the defile between Lookout Mountain and the Tennessee River. This induced Bragg to withdraw his main line of resistance to heavily entrenched Missionary Ridge. An outcrop named Tunnel Hill anchored his line on the north, and positions along Chattanooga Creek secured approaches from the south.

Grant envisioned a double envelopment on November 25. Sherman was to seize Tunnel Hill in the north; Hooker was to force Chattanooga Creek from the south. They would then roll up Missionary Ridge from both flanks while Thomas fixed the defenders in the center. Sherman’s attack faltered in the face of Confederate reinforcements and determined resistance from well-considered positions. Hooker was delayed by destroyed bridges and a difficult stream crossing. Hoping to take pressure off of his embattled commanders on the flanks, Grant ordered Thomas to attack the nearest of three successive lines of trenches ascending the slopes of Missionary Ridge.

Thomas’ sudden and improvised attack swept into the first line of trenches readily enough. The Confederates defending the first line had difficulty getting away up the steep slopes without being shot and arrived at the second line in considerable disarray. Meanwhile, the successful Union attackers chafed at taking punishment in their new positions, exposed to fire from the trench lines farther up the slope. Confederate artillery that had been ineffective targeting the first rush of the attackers was beginning to acquire their range. Many of the troops did not know they were supposed to stop at the first line. One officer responded to inquiry concerning where the advance was to halt with “I don’t know, at hell, I expect.” Skirmishers moved forward to deal with the incoming fire. Battalions followed. Color bearers led their own wedges of troops, the nearest man taking up the colors from a bearer who had fallen. Contingents cued on the movements and success of those alongside them. With little in the way of organization, the ragged Union line swept into the second line of entrenchments and then into the third. Astonished, Grant and Thomas observed an attack no one had ordered sweep over the crest of Missionary Ridge.

Missionary Ridge, like Omaha Beach, has become a metaphor for small-unit initiative and courage under fire. Once on the crest, senior leaders regained control and cleared the ridge to the left and right. Now downslope and in the open, Bragg’s men fled. Bragg gathered his remnants and retired into Georgia. The Siege of Chattanooga was definitively broken and the Chattanooga Campaign concluded. Yet another gateway into the heart of the South lay open, and perhaps more importantly, Lincoln had found his man. In a few months’ time, Grant would take over as general-in-chief of all Union armies. Sherman took over from Grant in the West and Thomas remained in command of the Army of the Cumberland. In ever-increasing concert, the full power of Union arms would be brought to bear on a disintegrating Confederacy.

**Recommended Reading**

