

THE BATTLE OF PERRYVILLE **AND THE STRUGGLE FOR KENTUCKY**

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Over 7,600 casualties in one day. One hundred fifty years ago last month (October 8, 1862), the largest Civil War battle in Kentucky took place in the seemingly unlikely place of Perryville. Ultimately, the outcome of the battle would result in horrific losses on both sides and decide the fate of the Confederate efforts in Kentucky.

When General Braxton Bragg sent his telegram to the Confederate authorities in Richmond on June 17, 1862 announcing his "temporary" assignment as Commander of the Army of Mississippi, little did he expect how President Jefferson Davis would respond. In a return message were orders removing General Beauregard from command and designating Bragg as his successor. At the time, Bragg and his new command were located in Tupelo, Mississippi as a result of the evacuation of Corinth, Mississippi.

Originally after taking command, Bragg simply wanted to find a way to reverse declining Confederate fortunes in the west (the "west" as a theater of war included Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky). Bragg seized on

the notion of moving his Army of the Mississippi from Tupelo to Chattanooga, Tennessee. He saw such a move as a chance to bring Kentucky into the Confederacy, an idea that was developed by Major General Edmond Kirby Smith, the Confederate Commander of the Department of East Tennessee. With the Union Army of Ohio under the command of Major General Don Carlos Buell, moving towards Tennessee, Smith had a need for reinforcements, and the most obvious source was Bragg's Army of the Mississippi.

Bragg ordered the transfer of his army of approximately 30,000 infantry from Tupelo, Mississippi to Chattanooga, Tennessee where he could confront Buell's Army of the Ohio while protecting Edmond Kirby Smith's smaller force of 12,000 men. Ultimately, Bragg hoped to drive the Union army out of Tennessee and possibly even Kentucky.

The logistical problems associated with such a movement of men were enormous. Bragg transferred his army of 30,000 infantry over 800 miles using half a dozen different railroads going from Tupelo through Meridian, Mississippi, Mobile and Montgomery, Alabama and Atlanta, Georgia before reaching his destination in Chattanooga. However, upon reaching Chattanooga, the seeds of failure for the infant campaign had been sown. The campaign would begin without a unified command structure. Once in

Chattanooga, Bragg initially wanted to fight the Union forces there in Tennessee. However, political pressure to bring Kentucky into the Confederacy was rampant in Richmond, and Bragg heard promise after promise that Kentuckians would enlist in the Confederate Army en masse if "liberated". President Davis established Smith as an independent commander and expected the two to cooperate and provide mutual support for the operation. His expectations would not be met.

Bragg's plan was for Smith to advance against the Union forces at Cumberland Gap. After disposing of this force, Smith was to reunite with Bragg for the advance into Middle Tennessee which would cut the Union forces off from Nashville. Unfortunately, Smith had an obsession with bringing Kentucky into the Confederacy which would effectively end his agreement to mutually support and cooperate with Bragg. Bragg's inability to control Kirby Smith, a situation created both by Richmond's departmental system and Jefferson Davis's fondness for Kirby Smith, seriously undermined the Confederate effort in Kentucky. Without the combined forces he counted on, Bragg did not believe that he was strong enough to oppose Buell directly in Tennessee. Therefore, instead of trying to recapture Nashville, he decided to proceed into Kentucky and unite with Smith in the heart of the Bluegrass.

Meanwhile, Buell, with his Army of the Ohio, had departed Mississippi and moved toward Chattanooga. In order to maintain his supply lines, Buell had to repair several railroad lines, and was constantly required to fight off Confederate cavalry to maintain the operation of the railroad lines. Buell, as a result of the delays, changed his plans and ordered his Army to Nashville to defend the city. Eventually, Buell realized that both Bragg and Kirby Smith were moving their forces into Kentucky, and on September 7, 1862, Buell's forces left Nashville to try and catch Bragg's Army. The race to Louisville was on.

Smith's Confederate forces, in eastern Kentucky, moved toward Richmond, Kentucky and there scored a major defeat of largely inexperienced Union troops. He then moved on to an undefended Lexington on September 2, and thereafter, occupied Frankfort on September 3.

News of the Confederate incursion into Kentucky spread quickly, and Cincinnati went into what can best be described as panic mode. In its lead editorial, the Cincinnati Gazette declared, "TO ARMS! TO ARMS! The time for playing war has passed. The enemy is fast approaching our city. Kentucky has already been invaded and our cities for the first time since the rebellion are seriously threatened..." However, because Smith unwisely chose to split

his forces, he was unable to seriously threaten Cincinnati. For the Union forces, there were two important outcomes of the panic. First, a significant and strong defensive position was put in place in Kentucky that all but eliminated any future consideration of an attack on Cincinnati and, second, significant numbers of newly raised troops were available to support General Buell if and when he reached a more northern assembly point.

Meanwhile, Bragg with his Confederate troops finally crossed into Kentucky, arriving at Glasgow on September 13, 1862. He was well positioned between Buell and Smith in a position to cut Buell off from Louisville. However, delays in moving his forces required Bragg to reassess his campaign plans. His choices were to confront Buell along the Green River advance to Louisville, and most likely capture Louisville, wait for Buell to pass and then proceed back to Tennessee and capture Nashville, or move towards Bardstown and unite with Kirby Smith's forces. Bragg finally chose to unite his forces with Smith, opening the way for Buell to outrace him to Louisville.

On September 28, Bragg left Major General Leonidas Polk in command of the forces at Bardstown and joined Kirby Smith in Frankfort, Kentucky for the inauguration of Confederate Governor Richard Hawes on October 4th. However, the inauguration ceremonies were cut short, and the participants

were forced to make an unscheduled departure due to Union artillery fire. Bragg became convinced that Frankfort was where the main Union forces were to be concentrated. With the advance of the Union Army of the Ohio, Bragg's Confederate forces fell back to Perryville on October 6, planning to continue on to Harrodsburg towards Smith's position the next day.

Passing through Perryville the first time, few soldiers took note of it, but Bragg's engineers had already marked it for two reasons. First, the town served as the hub of the regional road network that connected Bardstown with Danville, Harrodsburg and ultimately Lexington. Although Bragg didn't realize it at the time, those roads were also funneling Buell's army straight into Perryville.

Just as importantly, there was water there. In the autumn of 1862, the upper southwest of the Appalachians and Midwest were locked in the worst drought in memory. So severe was the drought, that when they arrived in Louisville, some of Buell's Hoosiers just kept walking across the Ohio River toward home. Indeed, both armies had marched north into Kentucky absolutely desperate for water, and as a result, the men were both dehydrated and sick due to the contaminated water they had ingested by drinking anything wet. Good water was a prize. On October 7 when Bragg

directed General Polk to stop in Perryville and eliminate what he thought was a small pursuing federal threat, he was also to guard a series of springs and the Chaplain River.

In reality, there was no grand battle plan devised for the Battle of Perryville on either side. The phrase "seat of the pants" comes to mind. Bragg was convinced that most of Buell's army was miles to the north, near Frankfort, about to overwhelm Kirby Smith's army. His original plan was to consolidate the two Confederate armies before fighting. But on October 7, he ordered Leonidas Polk to halt his march, turn and attack the federal force that had approached from Louisville before resuming the march north to engage Buell's "main force".

It is evident that none of the commanders was quite clear about what they thought was happening. Confederate dispatches on October 7 are a model of ineffective communication. But it appears that Polk believed he was facing only a division or two. Facing a far more sizeable and aggressive force than expected, Polk fell back on the morning of October 8 into a poorly designed defensive line west of Perryville and fought off an entire Union corps through the morning.

When Bragg arrived back in Perryville at approximately 10:30 a.m., he

furiously demanded why Polk had not attacked, still unaware that Buell's entire army was arriving in Perryville. More and more federal troops arrived, and Polk continued to delay his attack. Though skirmishes were already occurring, the main Confederate attack finally began at 2:00 p.m. on October 8, 1862.

It is apparent that General Buell also never really anticipated the Battle of Perryville. He was wrongfully convinced that Bragg was timid and almost certainly retreating as well. He summarily delayed his own attack and relaxed on his cot, recovering from a fall from his horse and drew up what he thought was a recipe for victory on October 9, 1862 (the next day!). He might have acted differently had he heard the afternoon fighting. But here, fate played a cruel trick on Buell. The atmospheric phenomenon known as "acoustic shadow" caused by the surrounding hillsides masked the sound of small arms fire at his headquarters. Since he could not hear the battle, he was unaware of the scope of the fighting. When aides and subordinates began arriving and describing a major Confederate onslaught, Buell did not fully believe them. In the end, he shifted barely enough units to stem the final Confederate assault, while continuing his planning for a battle the next day. Indeed, that night, he dismissed full accounts from two generals who had borne the brunt of the

fighting, and in so doing, earned himself the enmity of both men. Buell's hesitation, coupled with his disdain for many of his generals, marked his final undoing. Buell's inaction would cost him his command and would cause him to be brought up on charges of incompetence and dereliction.

Perryville was in many ways a classic soldier's battle. Both commanding officers misunderstood what was happening, their subordinates added to the confusion with orders and countermanding commands, cavalry was misused, and so the rank and file was left to slog it out in a series of desperate charges and defenses over broken and deceiving ground. Friendly fire was common. On Starkweather's Ridge and Mackville Road, men fought with bayonets and clubbed muskets and slipped and fell in the blood. The battle began at 2:00 in the afternoon, which meant that the Confederates were desperate to achieve a breakthrough before dark, even as Union soldiers hoped to just hang on until nightfall. That desperation added to the intensity. The end result was a battle that many Shiloh veterans described as the worst battle of the war.

Some examples from the words of some of the combatants may give you a sense of the intensity of the battle.

A brigade, consisting of 1,400 men of the 22nd Indiana Infantry, the 59th and 75th Illinois Infantry and the 5th Battery Wisconsin Light Artillery, marched

toward the sound of fighting. When Union Col. Gooding reached the remnants of Union troops near the intersection of the Mackville Road, Gooding reported, "I found the forces badly cut up and retreating (they, then having fallen back nearly one mile) and were being hotly pressed by the enemy." As the troops traded volleys, Union artillery dropped shells into the Confederate ranks, while rebel cannon blasted the federal line. The 22nd Indiana charged the Confederates with fixed bayonets, and as the battle continued, the Union troops fought on one side of the Mackville Road, and the Confederates firing from the other. William Cunningham of the 59th Illinois described the combat to his wife. He wrote, "Hundreds of balls came so close to my head and face that I could feel the wind of them...add to the musketry, the whirring of solid shot, the screaming and bursting of shells...it was as near pandemonium as I care to get."

As the sun dropped behind the hills, Confederate General John R. Liddell and his Arkansas troops advanced to the Mackville Road. Liddell wrote, "We confronted a dark line hardly more than 25 paces off." Immediately his men fired and sporadic shots echoed back from across the road. Cries of "you are firing upon friends; for God's sake, stop!" caused both lines to cease fire. John Berry of the 8th Arkansas noted that, "The smoke of the battle and the

approach of night made it difficult to tell foe from friend. We were soon ordered to cease firing, as it was feared our own men were in our front." Confederate General Polk, second in command at Perryville, rode up to Liddell when the firing stopped. When Liddell informed Polk that his men had fired on friendly troops, Polk responded, "What a pity. I hope not...let me go and see. Open your ranks." Polk, who could not find a staff member to undertake the reconnaissance, decided to personally scout the "dark line." Polk rode across the intersection and found the colonel of the mysterious regiment. Polk, "in angry tones," asked the colonel why he was firing upon "his friends." The colonel replied, "I don't think there can be any mistake about it. I am sure they are the enemy." "Enemy?" Polk huffed, "Why, I have only just left them myself. Cease firing, sir. What is your name, sir?" "My name is Colonel Keith of the 22nd Indiana, and pray, sir, who are you?" Polk now realized the startling fact that he was in the rear of the federal line. Polk decided that there was no hope but to brazen it out, and with his dark blouse and the darkening night concealing his true identity, rode up to Keith, shook his fist in the colonel's face and said, "I'll soon show you who I am. Cease firing at once." Polk then rode down the Union line shouting for the men to cease fire. As he trotted through the enemy regiment, he "experienced a disagreeable

sensation calculating how many bullets would lie between my shoulders any moment." Polk spurred his horse back to Liddell's line. When Polk found Liddell, he cried, "General, every mother's sons of them are Yankees." Soon the cry of, "They are enemies. Fire upon them", echoed throughout the Confederate ranks. The rebel troops blasted the unsuspecting Indiana regiment. Polk later told an acquaintance that the hundreds of muskets "blazed as one gun...the slaughter of that Indiana regiment was the greatest I have ever seen in the war."

The volley decimated the ranks of the 22nd Indiana. Colonel Keith was shot in the chest and killed. General Gooding's horse was struck and he was captured. Polk noted that the fierce volley "closed the operations of the day in that part of the field." The musketry of Liddell's troops forced the Union brigade to retreat to the northwest. When the enemy line grew silent, Liddell ordered his men to cease fire and Polk and Liddell rode forward to investigate.

Liddell reported, " The ground before my line was literally covered with the dead and dying." The 22nd Indiana lost 59 killed, 119 wounded and 17 men missing. When troops marched into battle, they had a force of 300 men. When the smoke cleared, 195 were casualties. They had lost a staggering 65.3% of their force. The battered Union regiments searched for their

wounded the next day. When a lieutenant of the 59th Illinois reached the intersection, he found that "it seems as though there were not ten square feet of ground on which there were not one and sometimes two or three dead men lying."

The following is an excerpt from a letter printed in the October 18, 1862 Chicago Daily Tribune. It is a report of Dr. Wagoner, regimental surgeon of the 24th Illinois. The report notes as follows:

Camp near Perryville, Boyle County, Kentucky, October 10, 1862.

Dear Editors, I am still too much exhausted today to send you much more than the list of our heavy losses, and some disjointed notices of the bloody battle which was fought the day before yesterday. On the morning of the 8th, under a burning sun and under a terrible want of water, we advanced from Mackville, a village in the strongly Union county of Washington, towards Perryville. Towards the afternoon, we espied the first rebels, and our left wing was soon engaged. It was not our intention as I know from good authority, to give battle here, and it was soon apparent that we stood against an enemy vastly superior in numbers. Our two divisions were opposed by the united army corps of Hardy and Polk. Thus, we had to stand the full and terrible charge of four regiments. Soon the fire of the enemy thinned our ranks to

such an extent that a retreat into a better position, about 100 paces to the rear, was ordered. Of the few officers the regiment had, several were already disabled by a shot wound but our center, grouped around the regimental colors, refused to give way. "I received the flag to carry it on to victory," cried Joseph Broesch, the color bearer, ready to die at his post, "Never an enemy shall see my back." But immediately afterwards, he too sank down, holding the flagstaff--the flag had already been shot to tatters-- bravely aloft. Quick as thought, a rebel officer sprang forward from the column of the enemy, which was only a few paces from ours, in order to conquer our palladium, but a ball from Corporal Vogelburg's rifle laid him low at the same moment, however, the gallant corporal, too, was struck down by the deadly lead.

A terrible hand-to-hand conflict with butt and bayonet now ensued around the remnants of the flag. The enemy's flag was only twenty paces from ours, and twice the bearers of it were shot down by our riflemen; but from our heroic color guard, one by one sank to the dust. Here our Corporal Kirchner received his death wound, and now Hollen fell to the ground with shattered arms at the moment when he again leveled his rifle against an enemy officer who had laid hands upon our flagstaff. Corporal Kemmler, already bleeding from a wound in the arm, cried not to forsake the flag, but

he too was felled by a second shot in the leg. We have collected the remnants of our regimental colors as a sacred memory to our dead brothers and we shall send them to the citizens of Chicago who once presented the flag to us.

Only after dark on the evening of October 8th did Bragg realize that he had taken on Buell's entire army at Perryville. Bloodied and outnumbered, facing thousands of fresh federal troops, Bragg fell back during the night to a supply depot at Camp Dick Robinson, only to discover that there was a little food or forage collected there. Moreover, Bragg was now furious that Kentuckians had not come forward to fight for the Confederacy, as so many, including Kirby Smith, had promised him. That combination of factors convinced Bragg to fall back to Tennessee where he could rebuild and resupply his army. The fight for Kentucky was effectively over.

The losses on both sides were terrible. Of Buell's forces, the records report that 845 were killed, 2,851 wounded and 515 captured or missing, for a total of 4,211 casualties. Of Bragg's forces, it is reported that 510 were killed, 2,635 wounded and 251 captured or missing, for a total of 3,396 casualties.

The Perryville battlefield is described as one of the best preserved battlefields in the nation. Urban sprawl has never caught up with Perryville;

there are no Pizza Huts or souvenir shops standing on hallowed ground. During the last 20 years, and thanks to a combination of public and private initiatives that notably includes the Civil War Preservation Trust, much of the field of battle that had remained in private hands became park property.

ADDENDUM

No Athenaeum paper would be complete without a reference to how the subject is tied to Christian County. With regard to Christian Countians, it is reported that a company of Christian County troops, numbering about 100 men rank and file, was assigned to duty as Company H of the 1st Regiment of Kentucky Cavalry in the Confederate forces. It was officered as follows: Captain, H.C. Leavell; First Lieutenant, T.M. Barker; Second Lieutenant, W.T. Radford; Brevet Second Lieutenant, W.M. Bronaugh. Among the names of the privates are recalled: H.B. Garner, James Bronaugh, L.D. Watson, Mack and West Brame, John Brame, D.A. and W.T. Tandy, Warfield and Virgil Garnett, Sanford Brooks, William Jessup, R.M. Dill, Marcellus Turnley, John H. Massey, W.G. Wheeler, D.A. Bronaugh, L.A. Watson, W.T. Winfrey, Sy T. Williams, Marion Lane, Mack Carroll, M. Cavanaugh, Peyton Venable, Garland Quisenberry, R. Barnett, J. Vinson, J.C. Marquess, J. Wilcher, Del Rawlins, Del

Tandy, A. McRae, John Barker, B.D. Lackey and A.O. Lackey. These names are taken from the History of Christian County, edited by William Henry Perrin.

Perrin reports on the fortunes of Company H:

They remained under the command of Lieutenant Colonel H.C. Leavell, their old captain, till just before Bragg started on the march to Kentucky, when, Colonel Leavell, dying, they passed under the command of Major J.W. Caldwell. On the march in Kentucky, they were placed in the advance, and throughout the campaign, did efficient service as videttes (cavalry). They were in frequent collision with the enemy's infantry and cavalry, both in Kentucky and Tennessee, and at all times and on all occasions, preserved their well-earned prestige as good soldiers. At the Battle of Perryville, although their term of service expired on that very day, they remained and took part in the action, operating with the rest of the cavalry against the enemy's flanks. Afterward, when Bragg had reached Tennessee, they disbanded at Clifton, near Knoxville, the men scattered out, some into other commands and some returning home. It is regretted that the facts thus preserved are so meager and incomplete, but the lapse of time and the preoccupation of other matters, has served to obliterate much of the story from the minds of those who survived.

It should also be noted that Brigadier James S. Jackson, United States Army (Union), a native of Woodford County, who moved in Hopkinsville to 1855 and practiced law here and was eventually elected to Congress in 1861, was killed in the Battle of Perryville. Brigadier General James S. Jackson is buried in Riverside Cemetery.