“A Hard-Earned Victory”

On December 31, 1862, and again on January 2, 1863, the Union Army of the Cumberland and the Confederate Army of Tennessee were locked in grim combat along the banks of Stones River, just west of the town of Murfreesboro in Middle Tennessee. The percentage of casualties they inflicted upon each other those two days, about 24,000 out of an estimated 81,000 engaged, was arguably the highest of any major battle of the Civil War.

But according to Jim Lewis, a park ranger at Stones River National Battlefield, “Numbers…are somewhat meaningless,” because the rates for both sides were astronomically high. Stones River cost Ohio dearly—more than 2,500 either killed or wounded and another 1,100 counted as captured or missing—and claimed the lives of many Valley men. The names of ten soldiers from Youngstown are recorded to history on the granite faces of the monument downtown.

Lewis says that by late 1862, President Abraham Lincoln needed to have some good news. “The Union people basically said through the ballot box that we’re tired of this long, drawn-out, bloody war,” he says, referring to the mid-term elections, which went badly for the Republicans.

The president compounded the pressure a couple of months earlier when he issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, the first step in his plan to end slavery. Although the Proclamation freed no slaves when it went into effect on January 1, 1863, it was Lincoln’s promise as Commander-in-Chief to do so. But that promise depended entirely on the military’s ability—and its will—to assert and maintain the authority of the Federal government. If the Federal armies failed, Lincoln’s Proclamation would not be worth the paper upon which it was written, according to Lewis.

Therefore, he says, by late 1862 “every major army of the Union is being pressed to go out and pick a fight.”

But they could hardly have gotten off to a worse start. The Army of the Potomac under Ambrose Burnside lost 12,000 men in the disaster that was the Battle of Fredericksburg in Virginia and William Tecumseh Sherman’s army was “hammered,” says Lewis, at Chickasaw Bayou a few miles north of the strategically important city of Vicksburg on the Mississippi River.

The last major Union army operating in the field was the Army of the Cumberland, commanded by the Ohioan William Starke Rosecrans (the Union usually named its armies after major rivers located in the departments in which they operated). It consisted primarily of regiments from the old Midwest—Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Close to 10,000 Ohioans participated in the battle of Stones River, among them Mahoning Valley soldiers in the 19th and 26th Regiments of infantry.
Tennessee—Nashville and Chattanooga

Only Virginia saw more fighting during the Civil War than did Tennessee. The rich farmland and abundant natural resources fed and outfitted not only the Confederate armies in the western theater, the vast stretch of land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, but also those operating in Virginia.

Lewis says that because of its large number of loyal Unionists, Lincoln wanted first to occupy East Tennessee. But his generals, knowing that the mountainous terrain and limited food supplies there made it difficult to move and sustain large armies, overruled him. “Lincoln may not understand it,” Lewis says, “but his generals do, that the key to actually seizing East Tennessee is getting down to Chattanooga, and that means using the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad,” which runs north and south through the center of the state.

“Control over the Middle Tennessee region,” Lewis says, would give the Union army “a great base of operation.”

In early February of 1862, the Confederate surrender of Fort Donelson on the Tennessee River opened the way for the capture of Nashville, the state capital and the third-largest industrial center in the south.

“The major railroads running out of Nashville are critical for connecting to the supply base (at Louisville) and down to points farther south like Chattanooga,” which Lewis says was “one of the most important towns because of all the railroads that came together there.” On February 25, 1862, the Union army marched into Nashville, thus beginning the nearly year-long drive to Chattanooga. The town of Murfreesboro, about thirty-five miles to the southeast, lay directly in its path.

The Battle of Stones River

Recent heavy rains had swelled the normally ankle-deep Stones River to waist-deep by the time the Union Army arrived on December 30. They formed their line roughly north and south, parallel to the west bank of the river, where they faced the Army of Tennessee commanded by Braxton Bragg (the Confederate custom was to name an army after the state in which it operated).

Rosecrans and Bragg each had decided on early-morning attacks with their left-flank units, but Bragg’s orders were simpler, Lewis says: “sun comes up, attack,” and his instructions aggressive: “If you can see ‘em, hit ‘em,” and that’s what happened. His men stepped-off just before dawn with no breakfast, which gave them the jump on the unsuspecting Federals.

The results were disastrous for the Union defenders. The extreme right flank was easily crushed, and if not for the determined stand of the Irish-born Ohioan Philip Sheridan, the entire right might have quickly and completely collapsed.
Sheridan’s division suffered mightily, but they bought just enough time for Rosecrans to construct a new line of defense along the Nashville Pike, the army’s lifeline to its supply base and its main line of retreat.

Early in the morning, the 19th Ohio was fording the river with the other left-wing units when, according to one soldier, “an ominous and appalling roar of musketry, with a burst of terrific artillery firing, announced that the battle was on our right.” These units were “halted and hurried back on the double-quick to assist the right of the line.”

Rosecrans was forced to switch from the offense to the defense, Lewis says.

“Everything was in a state of confusion,” wrote Private Thomas L. Sexton in a lengthy letter home to the Mahoning Register after the battle. “Supply, artillery and ammunition wagons were being driven from the field with all possible speed, to avoid the shells which were flying in every direction.”

When they reached the Nashville Pike, Rosecrans himself positioned the 19th and several other regiments to strike the oncoming Confederates. “We charged upon the ‘gray-backs’ and literally drove them at the point of the bayonet,” Private Sexton remembered. “A second time we were ordered to charge bayonets, and during this charge, and while leading his men, our commanding officer, Lieut. (Daniel) Donovan, fell to rise no more.”

They pursued the enemy for one-quarter mile before being halted and then withdrawn to a position near the Pike. But suddenly a new force of the enemy emerged from the woods: Pat Cleburne’s 6,000-man division with a reputation as the hardest hitting and most dependable fighters in the army.
The Texas and Arkansas boys opened a devastating fire, forcing the survivors of the 19th to drop down in line where they stood. Then, while under fire, the 19th changed front to face Cleburne’s men, which gave them an opportunity to deliver one last volley before retreating to the support of the cannon positioned along the pike. Here the Confederate tide ebbed and the Union right flank held.

Private Isaac Davis of Youngstown was wounded in this action and died three months later at Nashville.

In the meantime, the 26th Ohio, having been caught up in the confusion of the retreating masses and not able to directly follow, positioned itself at the center of the Union line near what was known locally as the Round Forest.

“No sooner had the Twenty-sixth got into position than they became hotly engaged,” wrote General Milo Hascall in his official report, “and the numerous dead and wounded that were immediately brought to the rear told how desperate was the contest.”

A protracted firefight ensued and the 26th continued to take casualties. It was here that Lieutenant David McClelland of Youngstown fell while cheering his men, cautioning them to “fire coolly and with good aim.”

After at least three serious attacks, the Confederates, seeing “bodies everywhere, (and) guys streaming back with horrific wounds,” decided they had had enough, Lewis says. The Round Forest area was “the one spot on the whole Union line that doesn’t actually move.”

The veterans named this small but bloody part of the field, “Hell’s Half-Acre.”

The people of Youngstown Township would not learn until a few weeks later that in those late morning hours of New Year’s Eve six more of their brothers, sons, and fathers in the 26th would join Lieutenant McClelland on the Roll of Honor.

Both armies spent New Year’s Day shifting units while keeping an uneasy eye on each other. The 19th Ohio “took the same position we occupied on the morning of the previous day,” according to Private Sexton, and remained there until the afternoon of the 2nd when “a heavy force came against the line immediately in front of our regiment.” When that line gave way, the 19th charged with their bayonets, but were soon overwhelmed. In this counter-charge, Sexton’s comrade in Company B, Corporal Daniel Cooper, was killed.

The Confederates pushed forward until they were stopped by fifty-eight massed Union cannon firing from a ridge across the river. According to Lewis, artillery fire, which normally accounted
for ten per cent of casualties on a Civil War battlefield, killed and wounded nearly double that at Stones River.

**Aftermath**

The battle at this point was a tactical draw, but when the Confederates abandoned Murfreesboro in the late hours of January 3rd, Rosecrans claimed victory. But the consequences of the battle would not be felt until much later.

Lewis believes that the Battle of Stones River is a “thinking man’s battle” because “the important things take a long time to develop and, frankly, can’t even be seen until you look back on it long after the war is over with the dispassionate lens of history.”

Victory at Stones River meant more than the Federal army controlling the field—they secured Middle Tennessee and its valuable resources and established a new forward base of operations. On July 4th, 1863, the same day that U.S. Grant captured Vicksburg and Robert E. Lee began his retreat from Gettysburg, Rosecrans and his Cumberlanders watched as the Confederates retreated across the Tennessee River following a series of brilliant and nearly bloodless maneuvers that forced Bragg and his army out of its fallback position near the rail town of Tullahoma in south-central Tennessee. This effectively rid two-thirds of the state of Rebels and opened the road to Chattanooga.

It would take nearly a year of hard fighting to accomplish, but with Chattanooga securely in Union hands, William Tecumseh Sherman was able to strike southward into Northern Georgia, which culminated in the capture of Atlanta in September of 1864, and the subsequent “March to the Sea” and beyond.

The defeat at Fredericksburg on December 15 cast a gloomy pall over the Union. Upon learning of the great slaughter, Lincoln wrote, “If there is a worse place than hell, I am in it.” But the good news delivered by Rosecrans and his westerners helped to bolster the northern people’s morale while softening the sting of Fredericksburg, giving them hope as the ink from the president’s pen was still drying on the Emancipation Proclamation.

Lincoln put it best later that year when he wrote to General Rosecrans, “I can never forget, whilst I remember anything, that about the end of last year and the beginning of this, you gave us a hard-earned victory, which, had there been a defeat instead, the nation could scarcely have ever lived over.”

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