

Battle of Stones River

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The **Battle of Stones River** or **Second Battle of Murfreesboro** (in the South, simply the **Battle of Murfreesboro**), was fought from December 31, 1862, to January 2, 1863, in Middle Tennessee, as the culmination of the **Stones River Campaign** in the Western Theater of the American Civil War. Of the major battles of the Civil War, Stones River had the highest percentage of casualties on both sides. Although the battle itself was inconclusive, the Union Army's repulse of two Confederate attacks and the subsequent Confederate withdrawal were a much-needed boost to Union morale after the defeat at the Battle of Fredericksburg, and it dashed Confederate aspirations for control of Middle Tennessee.

Contents

- 1 Stones River Campaign
- 2 Murfreesboro and plans for battle
- 3 December 31
- 4 January 1 to January 3
- 5 Aftermath
- 6 See also
- 7 Notes
- 8 References
- 9 Further reading
- 10 External links

Stones River Campaign

After Confederate Gen. Braxton Bragg's Army of Mississippi was defeated at the Battle of Perryville on October 8, 1862, he retreated to Harrodsburg, Kentucky, where he was joined by Maj. Gen. Kirby Smith's army of 10,000 on October 10. Although Bragg's force was up to 38,000 veteran troops, he made no effort to regain the initiative. Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell, the Union victor at Perryville, was equally passive and refused to attack Bragg.^[2]

Frustrated, Bragg withdrew through the Cumberland Gap, passed through Knoxville and Chattanooga, turned northwest, and eventually stopped in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. His army, joined with Smith's Army of Kentucky and together renamed the Army of Tennessee as of November 20, took up a defensive position northwest of the city along the West Fork of the Stones River. During a visit by Confederate President Jefferson Davis on December 16, Bragg was ordered to send the infantry division of Maj. Gen. Carter L. Stevenson to Mississippi to assist in the defense of Vicksburg. The loss of Stevenson's 7,500 men would be sorely felt in the coming

Battle of Stones River

Part of the American Civil War



General Rosecrans (left) rallies his troops at Stones River. Illustration by Kurz and Allison (1891).

Date December 31, 1862 – January 2, 1863

Location Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Result Union victory^[1]

Belligerents

 United States (Union)

 CSA (Confederacy)

Commanders

William S. Rosecrans

Braxton Bragg

Strength

43,400

37,712

Casualties and losses

13,249

(1,730 killed

7,802 wounded

3,717 captured/missing)

10,266

(1,294 killed

7,945 wounded

1,027 captured/missing)

battle. Bragg reorganized his army, and Kirby Smith left for East Tennessee. Bragg commanded two corps, under Maj. Gens. William J. Hardee and Leonidas Polk, and a cavalry command under Brig. Gen. Joseph Wheeler. Considerable cavalry manpower and expertise were diluted from the young Wheeler's command when both Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Hunt Morgan were detached for strategic raids outside Middle Tennessee. Bragg had another disadvantage to deal with—a virtual revolt of his senior generals, who petitioned Jefferson Davis to relieve him (in favor of Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, the commander of all armies in the Western Theater). Davis refused to relieve either Bragg or the rebellious generals.

On the Union side, President Abraham Lincoln had become frustrated with Buell's passivity and replaced him with Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans, victor of the recent battles of Iuka and Corinth. Rosecrans moved his XIV Corps (which was soon after designated the Army of the Cumberland) to Nashville, Tennessee, and was warned by Washington that he too would be replaced if he did not move aggressively against Bragg and occupy eastern Tennessee. However, Rosecrans took ample time to reorganize and train his forces (particularly his cavalry) and resupply his army.^[3] He did not begin his march in pursuit of Bragg until December 26.

While Rosecrans was preparing in Nashville, Bragg ordered Col. John Hunt Morgan to move north with his cavalry and operate along Rosecrans's lines of communications, to prevent him from foraging for supplies north of Nashville. The Battle of Hartsville, at a crossing point on the Cumberland River about 40 miles (64 km) upstream from Nashville (north of Murfreesboro) was an incident in Morgan's raid to the north, before Rosecrans had the bulk of his infantry forces on the move. The relatively small battle that followed Morgan's surprise attack was an embarrassing Union defeat, resulting in many captured Union supplies and soldiers. The Union also engaged in a strategic cavalry raid. On December 26, the day Rosecrans marched from Nashville, a small force under Brig. Gen. Samuel P. Carter raided the upper Tennessee Valley from Manchester, Kentucky. Until January 5, Carter's men destroyed railroad bridges and fought a few skirmishes, including a serious one on December 28 at Perkins's Mill (also known as Elk Fort). But none of the cavalry raids, Confederate or Union, had any significant effect on the Stones River Campaign.

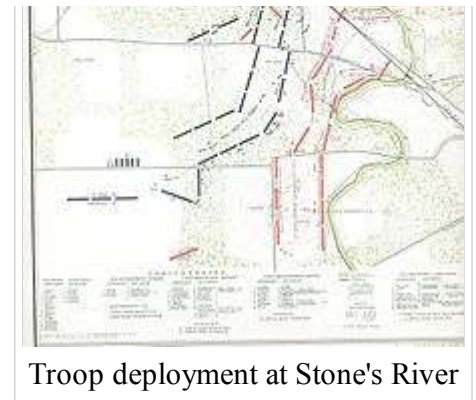
The Army of the Cumberland marched southeast the day after Christmas in three columns, or "wings", towards Murfreesboro, and they were effectively harassed by Wheeler's Confederate cavalry along the way, which delayed their movements. Although Rosecrans had reported his army to have 81,729 effectives in Nashville, his force on the march was barely more than half of that since he needed to protect his base and supply lines from the harassment of the Confederate cavalry. The left wing under Maj. Gen. Thomas L. Crittenden (14,500 men) took a route that was parallel to the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad, passing through La Vergne and south of Smyrna. The center wing of 16,000 men under Maj. Gen. Alexander McCook marched south along the Nolensville Turnpike to Nolensville, south to Triune, and then eastward to Murfreesboro. The right wing of 13,500 men under Maj. Gen. George Henry Thomas moved south along the Wilson Turnpike and the Franklin Turnpike, parallel to the Nashville and Decatur Railroad, then eastward through Nolensville and along the same route used by Crittenden south of the Nashville and Chattanooga. The separation of the wings was designed to launch a turning movement against Hardee at Triune, but when the Federal march began, Bragg moved Hardee back to Murfreesboro to avoid a confrontation.

Murfreesboro and plans for battle

Murfreesboro was a small town in the Stones River Valley, a former state capital named for a colonel in the American Revolutionary War, Hardy Murfree. All through the war it was a center for strong Confederate sentiment, and Bragg and his men were warmly welcomed and entertained during the month of December. It was located in a rich agricultural region from which Bragg planned to provision his army and a position that he intended to use to block a potential Federal advance on



Chattanooga. Hardee noted afterwards that "The field of battle offered no particular advantages for defense." Despite this, Bragg was reluctant to move farther south, say to the arguably more defensible Duck River Valley, or farther north, to Stewart's Creek, where Rosecrans thought Bragg would defend. Sensitive to the political requirements that almost no Tennessee ground be yielded to Federal control, he chose the relatively flat area northwest of the politically influential city, straddling the Stones River. Portions of the area, particularly near the intersection of the Nashville Pike and the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad, were characterized by small but dense cedar forests, in places more impenetrable to infantry than the Wilderness of Virginia. Short limestone outcroppings, separated by narrow cracks as if rows of teeth, impeded the movement of wagons and artillery. Hardee's Corps was initially placed in Triune, about 20 miles (32 km) to the west, Polk's on the west bank of the river, and a detached division from Hardee's Corps under Maj. Gen. John C. Breckinridge on the low hills east of the river. None of the troops were ordered to construct field fortifications.



Troop deployment at Stone's River



Limestone outcroppings in a cedar forest at Stones River National Battlefield, 2005

By the time Rosecrans had arrived in Murfreesboro on the evening of December 29, the Army of Tennessee had been encamped in the area for a month. By nightfall, two thirds of Rosecrans's army was in position along the Nashville Turnpike, and by the next day Rosecrans's army numbered about 45,000 and Bragg's 38,000. The odds were closer than those figures would indicate. Bragg had the advantage of the detached, but cooperating, cavalry commands under Forrest and Morgan, who raided deeply behind Union lines while Wheeler's cavalry slowed the Union forces with hit-and-run skirmishes. (Part of Rosecrans's reluctance to move from Nashville was the inexperience of his cavalry forces in comparison to their Confederate counterparts.) On December 29, Wheeler and 2,500 of his men rode completely around the Union army, destroying supply wagons and capturing reserve ammunition in Rosecrans's trains. They captured four wagon trains and 1,000 Union

prisoners.

On December 30, the Union force moved into line two miles (3 km) northwest of Murfreesboro. The two armies were in parallel lines, about 4 miles (6 km) long, oriented from southwest to northeast. Bragg's left flank was weak at the start, and Rosecrans could have attacked there when he arrived and wheeled left, around the flank and directly into the town of Murfreesboro, but he did not know the full disposition of Bragg's forces because of the skillful screening of the Confederate cavalry during the Union march. In a manner similar to the previous year's First Battle of Bull Run, both commanders devised similar plans for the following day: envelop the enemy's right, get into his rear, and cut him off from his base. Since both plans were the same, the victory would probably go to the side that was able to attack first. Rosecrans ordered his men to be ready to attack after breakfast, but Bragg ordered an attack at dawn.

Bragg's forces were situated with Leonidas Polk's corps on the west side of the river, William J. Hardee's men on the east. He had expected Rosecrans to attack on December 30, but when that attack did not come, his plan was to drive Hardee's corps and the cavalry under Brig. Gen. John A. Wharton deep into the Union rear. He began moving the bulk of Hardee's corps across the river to his left flank in preparation for the next morning's attack. This left



Breckinridge's division in reserve on the east side of the river on the high ground.

Rosecrans planned to have Crittenden cross the river and attack the heights east of the river, which would be an excellent artillery platform from which to bombard the entire Confederate line. Crittenden—facing Breckinridge on the Union left—failed to notify McCook (on the Union right) of these troop movements. McCook, anticipating that the next day would start with a major attack by Crittenden, planted numerous campfires in his area, hoping to deceive the Confederates as to his strength on that flank, and to disguise the fact that his flank was not anchored on an obstacle (the nearby Overall Creek). Thomas, in the center, was ordered to make a limited attack and act as the pivot for Crittenden's wheel.

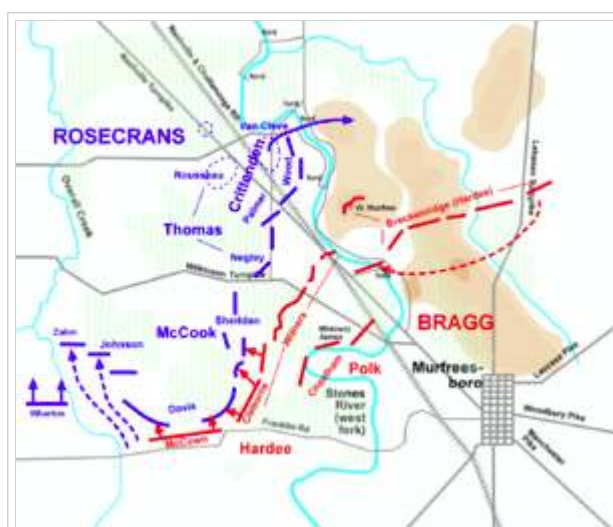


Movements and positions the night of December 30 to December 31.

The armies bivouacked only 700 yards (640 m) from each other, and their bands started a musical battle that became a non-lethal preview of the next day's events. Northern musicians played *Yankee Doodle* and *Hail, Columbia* and they were answered by *Dixie* and *The Bonnie Blue Flag*. Finally, one band started playing *Home Sweet Home* and the others joined in. Thousands of Northern and Southern soldiers sang the sentimental song together across the lines.^[4]

December 31

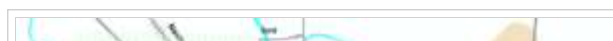
At dawn on December 31, about 6 a.m., Confederate William J. Hardee struck first, attacking the Union's right flank with the division of Maj. Gen. John P. McCown, before many in Union Brig. Gen. Richard W. Johnson's division had finished their breakfast. (This was the third major battle, after Fort Donelson and Shiloh, in which an early morning attack caught a Union army by surprise.) The 10,000 Confederates who massed on their left attacked in one massive wave. McCook's deceptive campfires and the relative inexperience of McCown caused his division to drift away to the left, which left a gap in the front, but the gap was filled seamlessly by the division coming up from his rear, under Maj. Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne. These two divisions swept all resistance aside. Several artillery batteries were captured without having time to fire a shot. Johnson's division, on the right, suffered over 50% casualties. His neighboring Union division to the left, under Brig. Gen. Jefferson C. Davis, was able to hold only briefly.



December 31, 8:00 a.m.

Although meeting stiff resistance, Hardee drove the Union troops back three miles (5 km) to the railroad and the Nashville Pike by 10 a.m., where Johnson was able to rally them. Rosecrans canceled Crittenden's attack on the Confederate right, which had begun with Brig. Gen. Horatio P. Van Cleve's division crossing the river at 7 a.m., and instead rushed reinforcements to his own right flank. He had been slow to recognize the threat, assuming incorrectly that McCook would be capable of turning back Hardee's assault. As Rosecrans raced across the battlefield directing units, seeming ubiquitous to his men, his uniform was covered with blood from his friend and chief of staff, Col. Julius Garesché, beheaded by a cannonball while riding alongside.

The second Confederate wave was by the Polk's corps,

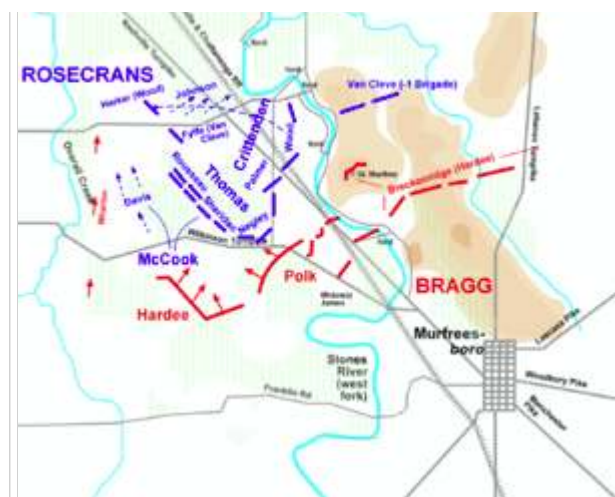


consisting the divisions of Maj. Gens. Jones M. Withers and Benjamin F. Cheatham. What saved the Union from total destruction that morning was the foresight of Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan (McCook's wing), who anticipated an early attack and had the troops of his division up and ready in the center of the right half of the line by 4 a.m. Withers hit Sheridan's right flank first (and Davis's left) but was repulsed in three separate charges. Then Cheatham, with his reserve division, hit Sheridan's front as Cleburne struck his flank. Cheatham's assault was sluggish and piecemeal; observers claimed he had been drinking heavily and was unable to command his units effectively. While Sheridan's men slowed the enemy advance, they did it at heavy cost to themselves; all three of Sheridan's brigade commanders were killed that day, and more than one third of his men were casualties in four hours of fighting in a cedar forest surrounded on three sides that became known as "The Slaughter Pen". By 10 a.m., many of the Confederate objectives had been achieved. They had captured 28 guns and over 3,000 Union soldiers.

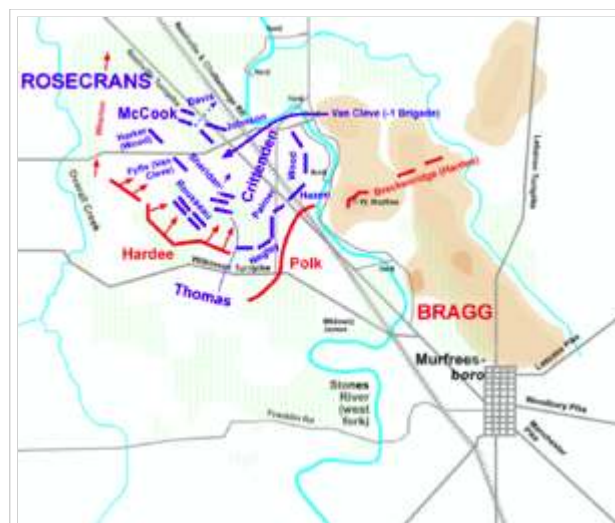
Two Confederate blunders aided Rosecrans. Breckinridge, on the east side of the river, did not realize that Crittenden's early morning attack had been withdrawn. He refused to send two brigades as reinforcements across the river to aid the main attack on the left. When Bragg ordered him to attack to his front—so that *some* use could be made of his corps—Breckinridge moved forward and was embarrassed to find out that there were no Union troops opposing him. At about that time, Bragg received a false report that a strong Union force was moving south along the Lebanon Turnpike in his direction. He canceled his orders that Breckinridge send reinforcements across the river, which diluted the effectiveness of the main attack.

By 11 a.m., Sheridan's ammunition ran low, and his division pulled back, which opened a gap that Hardee exploited. The Union troops regrouped and held the Nashville Pike, supported by reinforcements and massed artillery. Repeated attacks on the left flank of the Union line were repulsed by Colonel William B. Hazen's brigade in a rocky, 4-acre (16,000 m²) wooded area named "Round Forest" by the locals; it became known as "Hell's Half-Acre". Brig. Gen. Milo S. Hascall sent the 3rd Kentucky to the Round Forest as reinforcements. When he was informed that the 3rd's regimental commander was dead, he decided to take personal command of the defensive position. He declared that it had to be held, "even if it cost the last man we had."^[5] Hazen's brigade was the only part of the original Union line to hold. The Union line was stabilized by the strong leadership of Rosecrans and by the rallying of the divisions under Johnson and Davis. The new line was roughly perpendicular to the original line, in a small half oval with its back to the river.

Bragg planned to attack the Union left, a portion of the oval line facing southeast, manned by Hazen's brigade. The only troops available for such an assault were Breckinridge's, and Bragg ordered him to cross the river, but Breckinridge moved slowly. By 4 p.m., Breckinridge's first two brigades assaulted Hazen in piecemeal attacks and suffered heavy repulses. Two more brigades arrived, and they were sent in, reinforced by other elements of Polk's corps. The attack failed a second time. Thomas responded with a limited counterattack that cleared his front. By 4:30 p.m., the battle was finished.



December 31, 9:45 a.m.



December 31, 11:00 a.m.

11:00. By 4:30 p.m., the battle was finished.

Bragg's plan had had a fundamental flaw: although his objective was to cut Rosecrans's line of communication (the Nashville Pike), his attack drove the Union defenders to concentrate at that point. Bragg's biographer, Grady McWhiney, observed:

Unless the Union army collapsed at the first onslaught, it would be pushed back into a tighter and stronger defensive position as the battle continued, while the Confederate forces would gradually lose momentum, become disorganized, and grow weaker. Like a snowball, the Federals would pick up strength from the debris of battle if they retreated in good order. But the Confederates would inevitably unwind like a ball of string as they advanced.

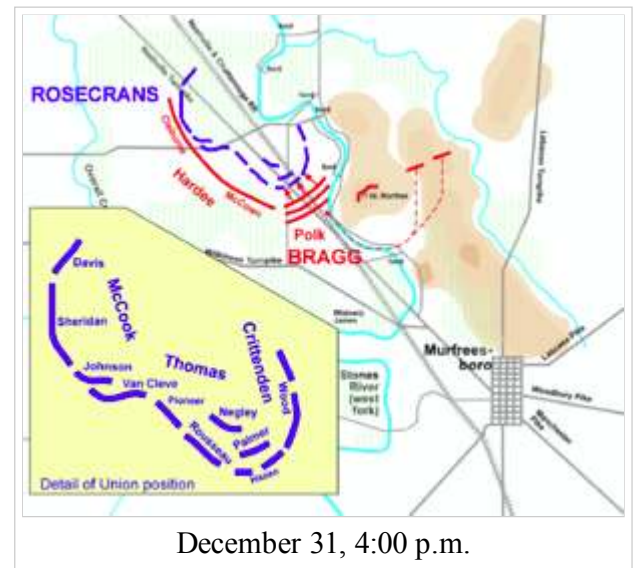
That night Rosecrans held a council of war to decide what to do. Some of his generals felt that the Union army had been defeated and recommended a retreat before they were entirely cut off. Rosecrans opposed this view and was strongly supported by Thomas and Crittenden. Thomas has been quoted by different sources in the council meeting as saying either "This army does not retreat" or "There's no better place to die." The decision was made to stand and fight, and as the Union line was reinforced, the morale of the soldiers rose. Rosecrans was quoted after the battle as saying, "Bragg's a good dog, but Hold Fast's a better."

On the Confederate side, Bragg was certain that he had won a victory. Although he had suffered 9,000 casualties, he was convinced that the large number of captured Union soldiers meant that Rosecrans had lost considerably more. The Confederate army began digging in, facing the Union line. Bragg sent a telegram to Richmond before he went to bed: "The enemy has yielded his strong position and is falling back. We occupy [the] whole field and shall follow him. ... God has granted us a happy New Year."

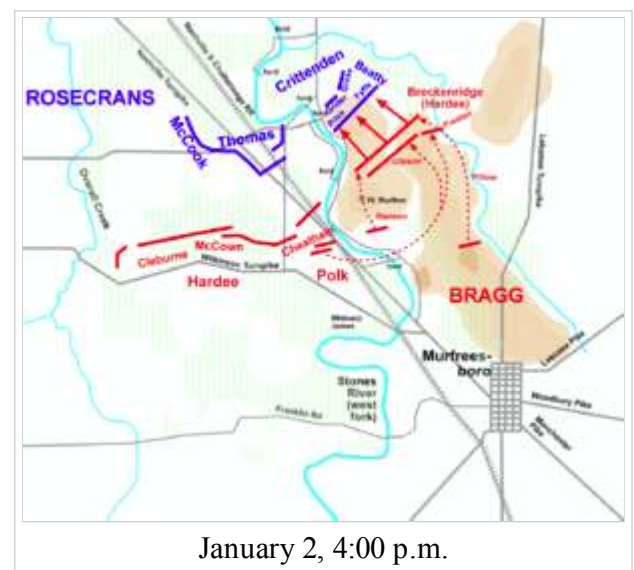
January 1 to January 3

At 3 a.m. on January 1, 1863, Rosecrans revived his original plan and ordered Van Cleve's division (commanded by Col. Samuel Beatty following Van Cleve's wounding the previous day) to cross the river and occupy the heights there, protecting two river crossing sites and providing a good platform for artillery. But the day was relatively quiet as both armies observed New Year's Day by resting and tending to their wounded. Polk launched two probes of the Union line, one against Thomas, the other against Sheridan, to little effect.

In the rear, Wheeler's cavalry continued to harass the Union line of communication on the turnpike back to Nashville. Convoys of wounded had to travel under heavy escort to be protected from the cavalry, and Wheeler interpreted these movements as preparations for a retreat, and he reported such to Bragg. Buoyed by his sense that he had won the



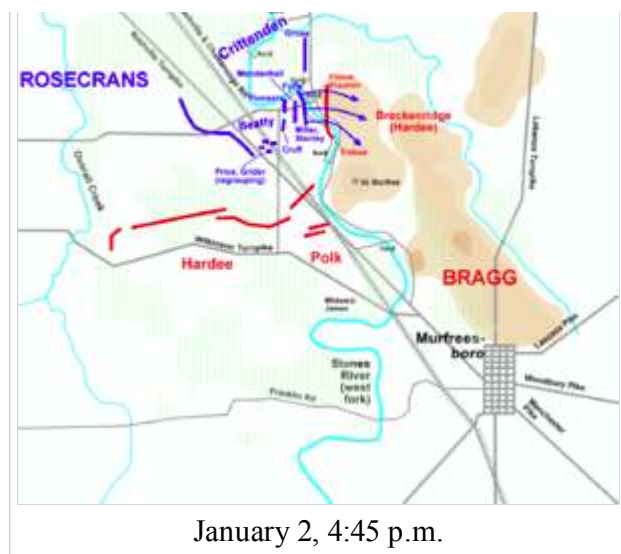
December 31, 4:00 p.m.



January 2, 4:00 p.m.

battle, Bragg was content to wait for Rosecrans to retreat.

At 4 p.m. on January 2, Bragg directed Breckinridge's troops to attack Beatty's division, which was occupying the hill on the east side of the river. Breckinridge initially protested that the assault would be suicidal but eventually agreed and attacked with determination. The Union troops were pushed back across McFadden Ford, but the Confederate charge ran into heavy fire from massed Union artillery across the river, commanded by Crittenden's artillery chief, Captain John Mendenhall. Mendenhall deployed his guns perfectly—45 arrayed hub-to-hub, completely commanding the opposite bank and heights beyond—and saved the day for Rosecrans. The Confederate attack stalled, having suffered over 1,800 casualties in less than an hour. A Union division under the command of James S. Negley (Thomas's wing) led a counterattack at 4:45 p.m., and the Confederate troops retreated. Breckinridge was devastated by the disaster. He lost nearly one third of his Kentucky troops (Hanson's Brigade, also known as the Orphan Brigade because it could not return to Union-occupied Kentucky). As he rode among the survivors, he cried out repeatedly, "My poor Orphans! My poor Orphans."



On the morning of January 3, a large supply train and reinforced infantry brigade reached Rosecrans. Wheeler's cavalry attempted to capture the ammunition train that followed it but was repulsed. Late that evening, Thomas attacked the center of the Confederate line with two regiments in reaction to constant enemy sharpshooting against troops in his division under Lovell H. Rousseau. Thomas drove the Confederates from their entrenchments, taking 70 to 80 prisoners. (Despite this action, the main battle is generally accepted to have ended on January 2.)

Bragg was convinced that Rosecrans would continue to receive reinforcements, and he knew that the miserable weather of freezing rain could raise the river enough to split his army. Beginning at 10 p.m. on January 3, he withdrew through Murfreesboro and began a retreat to Tullahoma, Tennessee, 36 miles (58 km) to the south. Rosecrans occupied Murfreesboro but made no attempt to pursue Bragg.

Aftermath

Total casualties in the battle were 23,515: 13,249 on the Union side and 10,266 for the Confederates. This was the highest percentage of casualties of any major battle in the Civil War, higher in absolute numbers than the famous bloodbaths at Shiloh and Antietam earlier that year. The battle was tactically inconclusive, although Bragg was traditionally considered to be defeated since he withdrew first from the battlefield. He received almost universal scorn from his Confederate military colleagues; only the support of Joseph E. Johnston and President Jefferson Davis's inability to find a suitable replacement saved his command. But a case can also be made that it was at least a strategic Union victory. The battle was very important to Union morale, as evidenced by Abraham Lincoln's letter to General Rosecrans: "You gave us a hard-earned victory, which had there been a defeat instead, the nation could scarcely have lived over." The Confederate threat to Middle Tennessee had been nullified.

Rosecrans spent five and a half months reinforcing Murfreesboro. The massive earthenworks "Fort Rosecrans" was built there and served as a supply depot for the remainder of the war. The next major clash, the Battle of Hoover's Gap, also known as the Tullahoma Campaign, did not come until June, when Rosecrans finally moved his army against Bragg.