Snubbed! George Thomas: Unknown General of the Civil War

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7/14/2017 • MHQ Magazine

George Thomas was one of the Civil War's greatest generals. But thanks to personal rivalries and an unfortunate nickname, you might never know.

The capital had never seen such a splendid celebration. In May 1865, after the killing was over and the slain president had been mourned, the victorious Union troops marched in a parade along Pennsylvania Avenue and past the White House. For two days, thousands along the curb cheered the soldiers who had fought from Bull Run to Vicksburg to Gettysburg to Appomattox, wave after wave of men in blue, heads high with hard-earned pride.

Thomas's troubles start with the fact that he was a Southerner who fought for the North. He grew up on a plantation in the Tidewater area of southern Virginia. In 1831, when he was 15, he and his family fled to escape the marauding slaves of Nat Turner's rebellion. At 20, Thomas went to West Point, where he roomed and competed with a spirited redhead from Ohio named William T. Sherman. Stocky and serious, the young Virginian won the respect of classmates for defending underclassmen against older bullies. Thomas finished 12th among 42 graduates in the class of 1840, Sherman sixth.

Although commissioned as an artillery officer, Thomas did infantry duty in the long war to drive the Seminoles out of Florida. His captain's description of his performance could just as well cover his 30-year army career: "I never knew him to be late or in a hurry. All his movements were deliberate, his self-possession was supreme, and he received and gave orders with equal serenity."

When war with Mexico opened in 1846, Thomas headed west and fought in the battles that served as the proving ground for the generation of soldiers that would lead in the Civil War. Heading up an artillery outfit under the plain, steady Zachary Taylor, he was cited for his "coolness and firmness" under fire and won brevet promotions for his actions in the battles of Resaca de la Palma, Monterrey, and Buena Vista. He was clearly a rising star. After another stint in Florida, he received in 1851 the choice billet of artillery instructor at West Point, where he taught Philip H. Sheridan, James B. McPherson, James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart, Fitzhugh Lee, and others who would go on to fame in the Civil War.

Three years at the academy planted seeds for the slights Thomas would suffer later in his career. The superintendent of the academy—a fellow Virginian named Robert E. Lee—was impressed by the conscientious and upright Thomas and assigned him the additional duties of cavalry instructor. When Thomas ordered cadets to restrain their shaky old mounts and proceed at a "slow trot"—a standard gait for cavalry—they jokingly called him "Old Slow Trot." Though good humored, the nickname stuck and hounded him the rest of his days.

After West Point, Thomas was dispatched to Fort Yuma in the New Mexico Territory, then promoted to major in the 2nd Cavalry, an elite regiment formed by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis. Duty on the desert frontier was lonely and dangerous; he narrowly escaped death when a Comanche arrow glanced off his chin and pierced his chest. The assignment also cemented his friendship with his West Point mentor Robert E. Lee, now the 2nd Cavalry's second in command.

Within months, Thomas, Lee, and hundreds of other Southern officers had to make a fateful decision. Abraham Lincoln's election sparked secession by states of the Deep South, but Virginia stuck with the Union until after Fort Sumter. When the Old Dominion withdrew, Lee agonized but soon cast his future with his home, family, and state.

Thomas made his decision quickly. His Virginia ties and holdings were much less extensive than Lee's, and his wife, Frances, a New Yorker he had married in 1852, was a strong-minded and loyal Yankee. After his death, Frances explained that "whichever way he turned the matter over in his mind, his oath of allegiance to the Government always came uppermost."

The choice caused Thomas great pain. When his sisters received the news, they turned his picture to the wall and insisted they no longer had a brother named George. Some of the many professional soldiers from Virginia who joined the Confederacy excoriated him as a traitor. "I would like to hang, hang him as a traitor to his native state," wrote Jeb Stuart, Thomas's former cadet.

Leaders in the North, meanwhile, were suspicious of this Southerner turned Unionist. Lincoln doubted his loyalty until Thomas's cavalry bested Stonewall Jackson in a brief clash before the battle of Bull Run. After that, the president promoted Thomas to brigadier general and sent him across the mountains, where he might fight outside Virginia.

On January 19, 1862, Thomas sent news from Mill Springs, Kentucky, of the first clear Union success of the war. After a long, cold, and muddy march, his outnumbered troops had turned back a Confederate advance across the Cumberland River. It was not a major victory, but it boosted sagging spirits in Washington and later helped Thomas earn promotion to major general.

The glow of this triumph still lingered when U.S. Grant was surprised at the April battle of Shiloh, stumbling badly before pulling out a victory. When the Union army then pushed south toward Corinth, Mississippi, Major General Henry Halleck, who headed the Department of the Mississippi, ordered Thomas to lead a wing that included men from Grant's and Sher – man's command. Halleck made Grant his second in command, but bypassed him to give orders directly to Thomas. Angry, Grant threatened to quit until Sherman talked him out of it.

Grant soon regained his command and with Sherman launched the Mississippi campaign that would target Vicksburg. Thomas remained in Kentucky and Tennessee, serving under Major General Don Carlos Buell at Perryville, then Major General William Rosecrans at Stones River and Tullahoma. In the heavy fighting over the next year, Thomas showed his troops how attention to detail and preparation before battle could make the difference between victory and defeat. His headquarters hummed with professional efficiency. Anticipating modern warfare, he

emphasized logistics and supply lines. And his mapping and scouting were so thorough that he was never taken by surprise, as Grant had been at Shiloh.

Nearly six feet tall, Thomas held himself erect and always projected a dignified calm, inspiring comparisons to George Washington. Although a firm disciplinarian, he showed a fatherly concern for his men. They called him "Pap Thomas" and followed him faithfully even in the worst of conditions.

In late summer 1863, Thomas's corps was part of a Federal force dug in on the western side of Chickamauga Creek, protecting the rail center of Chattanooga, Tennessee, against furious Rebel assault. When the attackers bent the Federal lines into a horseshoe around midday on September 20, Rosecrans and other commanders led a disorganized retreat into the city, believing the battle lost. Thomas, however, rallied scattered troops and held firm all afternoon, withdrawing into Chattanooga only after nightfall.

This delay saved the army from disaster. Thomas's bravery won him the nickname "The Rock of Chickamauga." When Rosecrans was later relieved from the Army of the Cumberland, Thomas assumed command, setting him up for more friction with Grant.

As cold weather descended that year, Thomas and his army were stuck defending Chattanooga and battling a Rebel siege that left them desperately short of food and fodder. Grant, who had pleased Lincoln by taking Vicksburg and control of the Mississippi River, now commanded all Union armies in the West. He promised to rush help to Thomas and ordered him to hold Chattanooga "at all hazards." Some of Thomas's troops were so hungry that they were eating dry corn from mule feed, but he replied: "I will hold the town till we starve."

Weeks passed before Grant assembled his forces for the march east, and then he struggled across Tennessee in a cold rain. His welcome in Chattanooga appears to have been as chilly as the weather. Grant's staff engineer, James H. Wilson, wrote of Thomas sitting mute on one side of the fireplace in headquarters while Grant, dripping and hungry, sat on the other. No one spoke, Wilson said, until he reminded Thomas that his commander was cold and wet, at which the general stirred himself and ordered that Grant be made comfortable.

Even if Wilson's version is only half true, it underscores the tension between the two. Grant, who graduated from West Point three years after Thomas, had fought with distinction in Mexico. Later, though, he was disciplined for drinking and dropped out of the army for seven years. He won a regimental command two months after the war began, and then only by tapping his political connections. By contrast, Thomas had an unbroken record of service. As a Virginian, he had no home-state member of Congress to lobby for his career advancement; indeed, in late 1862, he had turned down what he deemed an unwarranted promotion.

According to Wilson, Thomas's "coolness and neglect" helped explain the bad blood between the two. Wilson said that Grant described the Virginian as "slow, not only in action, but in his mental operations." Wilson believed Thomas "regarded himself as a better soldier than Grant" (perhaps because he graduated higher in his West Point class and had served with more distinction) and "resented Grant's assignment to duty over him," even if only unconsciously.

Sherman had a broken record of service akin to Grant's. He had served in an army administrative role in California during the Mexican-American War, and then left for various civilian ventures. In 1861, his brother John, a powerful senator from Ohio, helped him secure a regimental command. He fought well in early battles, but was temporarily relieved when he showed signs of a nervous breakdown.

Sherman bonded with Grant at Shiloh and in the Vicksburg campaign. He was quoted as saying: "He stood by me when I was crazy, and I stood by him when he was drunk; and now, sir, we stand by each other always."

At Chattanooga, Sherman and his Army of the Tennessee rejoined Grant for a bid to drive the Confederates off the heights that dominate the city. Missionary Ridge was the key terrain; on November 25, 1863, Grant sent Sherman to drive up from the left and Joseph Hooker to approach on the right. Thomas was held back to strike the Rebel center. Sherman's effort fell short, however. Once ordered to move, Thomas took his time, studying the heights carefully before sending his troops ahead. Though expected to halt after taking the first line of Confederate works, they pushed through heavy fire and struggled up the slope. "Who ordered those men up the hill?" Grant demanded angrily, but Thomas was surprised as well. His troops plunged ahead until they reached the top and jubilantly planted the Stars and Stripes.

Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana, attached to Grant, called the assault "one of the greatest miracles in military history." But the feat did little to improve the relationship between Thomas and Grant. That winter, when Grant was tapped to command all Union armies, he chose Sherman to lead the great 1864 offensive from Chattanooga to Atlanta, even though Thomas outranked him.

Striking out for Georgia in early May, Sherman was soon complaining to Grant about the man they both saw as a plodder. "A fresh furrow in a plowed field will stop [his] entire column," he wrote. At Kennesaw Mountain outside Atlanta, Sherman ignored Thomas when he warned against charging strong Confederate defenses. The result was a costly setback, with Thomas's men suffering heavy casualties.

During the four-month campaign, Thomas commanded about two-thirds of Sherman's infantry. His army smashed into General John B. Hood's Confederate forces defending Atlanta, then led the way into the city. Yet neither Sherman nor Grant mentioned Thomas in their victory communiqués. Credit for entering Atlanta first went to Major General Henry Slocum, Thomas's subordinate.

After Atlanta, Sherman briefly tried to run down Hood, who headed for Tennessee. But eager to march on to the sea, he stripped Thomas of much of his Army of the Cumberland and sent the reduced command north to deal with Hood. By December, Hood had taken the high ground around Nashville, a Union stronghold for much of the war. Thomas dug in behind the city's fortifications and went about gathering badly needed horses and supplies.

Grant, who was hundreds of miles away directing operations in the fighting around Richmond, repeatedly urged Thomas to take the offensive. Thomas replied that he would move as soon as he

rebuilt his cavalry. Grant's pleas turned to angry demands. Finally, he decided to relieve Thomas and made plans to head west and execute the order in person. Just then, a spell of icy weather in Nashville broke, and Thomas—unaware of Grant's plans to fire him but now confident his men were ready to fight—attacked at last. On December 15 and 16, 1864, he demolished Hood's Confederate Army of Tennessee in what historian Thomas Buell has called the war's "unsurpassed masterpiece of theater command and control." It was the only battle in which one army virtually destroyed another, and it ended major combat west of the Appalachians.

The battle also demonstrated very clearly that Thomas was not slow so much as thorough. And thoroughness, he proved, won battles. Despite Grant's impatience, he had delayed the attack in part to buy time to arm his cavalry with new breech loading Spencer carbines—weapons that helped his horsemen curl around and behind the Rebel left in a maneuver critical to the victory.

Following Nashville, while Thomas mopped up Hood's scattered remnants, Grant and Sherman completed the war in the East and were celebrated as heroes. After the war, Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan sometimes praised Thomas, but they almost reflexively added that he was, of course, always slow.

Thomas never publicly defended his record. Nor did he write his memoirs, as his rivals did. When President Andrew Johnson offered a promotion to full general, Thomas turned it down, saying it came too late. While Grant and Sherman moved on to great glory in political and military affairs, he continued his army career in relative obscurity. He first oversaw Reconstruction in parts of the South, then was transferred to San Francisco. There in 1870, he died of a stroke, still a soldier at age 53.

Bruce Catton, one historian who gave Thomas his full due, was an admirer of Grant. Nonetheless, he argued that the lesser-known general delivered some of the war's most devastating blows. "There was nothing slow about Thomas," Catton wrote. "He liked to make sure that everything was ready before he moved, but when he did move, somebody had to get out of the way."

"Thomas never had a bad day," Catton added. "One gets the haunting feeling: Perhaps this man actually was the best of them all."

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Originally published in the Autumn 2013 issue of *Military History Quarterly*. To subscribe, click here.