

“Was Thomas Really Slow at Nashville?”

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk to you about a truly remarkable person. George H. Thomas was one of our nation’s best Civil War Generals. Typically, Thomas is listed as 3rd or 4th in ranking with Grant, Sherman and sometimes Sheridan listed ahead of him. Ask any history student about him and you usually get a blank look. What was it that made him so unique yet obscure? Well he was a southerner from Virginia who stayed with the Union. But that wasn’t uncommon since there were hundreds of southerners that supported the Union and 13 of these were Virginians that had graduated from West Point and would become senior officers in the Union Army. Was it that he was a career officer in the Union Army? This certainly would have made him unique since most graduates of West Point gave up their commission as soon as possible to pursue civilian careers. Staying in peace-time army provided slow promotion and poor pay along with hard living on frontier outposts. Was it that he had political support in Washington? No, since he was a Virginian he was viewed with doubt and suspicion and would be asked several times to take the “Oath of Allegiance.”

Well, the reason for his uniqueness created his obscurity. You see he was the master of his trade. His pre-war service had groomed him in infantry tactics; he had fought in Mexico in the artillery corps and battled the Indians in the Southwest frontier as a cavalry officer. From 1851-1854, he taught artillery and cavalry at West Point. What he learned or experience he never forget. By 1861, George H. Thomas, the southern

gentleman had served for 21 years and had mastered his trade while many of the dashing, boisterous, political generals were just learning theirs by trial and error.

George H. Thomas was a humble man who suffered many injustices for the sake of our country. He was never driven from the field of battle and won every battle where he commanded. He was quoted as saying: "time and history will do me justice." My goal today is to do him justice!

For almost 150 years there's been an ongoing controversy around Major General George H. Thomas' leadership skills during the Battle of Nashville. Grant, Sherman and Halleck accused Thomas of being "slow" at Nashville. They meant that Thomas was slow at initiating an offensive attack and then slow at aggressively pursuing Hood to annihilate his army. Their opinion was that Thomas was best at defensive warfare, such as his leadership at Horseshoe Ridge on the left flank at the Battle of Chickamauga.

I propose to build a case to refute these accusations by explaining the circumstances that Major General George H. Thomas had to deal with from the time he took command on November 12th, till he attacked Hood on December 15th. Thomas had just 33 days to put together a force to combat Hood's army and guard an area the size of France.

Thomas was expected to accomplish with fewer resources what Sherman had been unable to do in four months and with over 100,000 men.

As long as there were Civil War veterans, Thomas's reputation remained high. Veterans of the Army of the Cumberland revered Thomas's memory and continued to speak and write about him. Veterans wrote many articles about Thomas and the battles in which he fought. Many of these appeared in the publications of veterans' societies and in popular journals.¹ The Society of the Army of the Cumberland honored Thomas; even after his death. They would place a draped vacant chair on the rostrum during each of its meetings and would toast Thomas's memory at their annual reunion. While scattered attacks on Thomas' reputation occurred during his lifetime, concerted efforts to discredit him began after his death especially with the publication of Sherman's memoirs in 1875, Grant's in 1886 and Schofield's in 1897.

Change to slide 2: It appears that Sherman was the first to use the word "Slow" with reference to George H. Thomas. As early as June 8, 1861, Bill Sherman writes his politician brother, John Sherman who was visiting General Patterson's camp. Bill Sherman tells his brother: Thomas is a Virginian from near Norfolk and say what we may he must feel unpleasant at leading an invading army – But if he says he will do it I think

¹ *George H. Thomas Virginian for the Union* by Christopher Einoff pg. 341

he will do it well. He was never brilliant but always cool, reliable and steady – maybe a little slow.”²

Change to slide 3: On June 18, 1864, during the Atlanta campaign Sherman influences Grant’s opinion of Thomas by blaming Thomas for many of his own short comings. In a personal correspondence Sherman wrote: “.... My chief source of trouble is with the Army of the Cumberland, which is dreadfully slow. A fresh furrow in a ploughed field will stop the whole column, and all will begin to entrench. I have again and again tried to impress on Thomas that we must assail and not defend; we are on the offense, and yet it seems the whole Army of the Cumberland is so habituated to be on the defensive that from its commander down to the lowest private, I cannot get it out of their heads..... This slowness has caused me the loss of two splendid opportunities which never recur in war.”³ (Sherman here was simply trying to excuse his own failings which, in the cases he was referring to (New Hope Church and the approach to Kennesaw), consisted of his own slowness of thought and/or shortsightedness. He was unable or unwilling to grasp Thomas's proven approach to battle and refused Thomas's suggestions. Often he did it "his way", with unfortunate results.)⁴

² *Sherman’s Civil War Correspondence* by Brooks D Simpson page 101

³ *Sherman’s Civil War Correspondence* by Brooks D Simpson pg. 655

⁴ <http://home.earthlink.net/~oneplez/majorgeneralgeorgehthomasblogsite/id33.html>

Change to slide 4: In a correspondence dated September 4, 1864, Sherman writes to Halleck about the status of Hood's action in north Georgia and says: "George Thomas, you know, is slow but true as steel; Schofield is also slow and leaves too much to others."⁵ Brian S Wills used this as the title of his new biography on Thomas.

Sherman writes to Grant on December 16, 1864 while near Savannah: I know full well that General Thomas is slow in mind and in action, but he is judicious and brave, and the troops feel great confidence in him. I still hope he will out-maneuver and destroy Hood....⁶

Change to slide 5: Sherman in his memoirs writes about Thomas's personal character, five years after Thomas' death: steadiness, good order and deliberation nothing hasty or rash but always safe, "Slow and sure."⁷

Next we move on to Grant. Grant's negative opinion of Thomas may have begun right after Shiloh when Halleck punished Grant for suspicion of being drunk at Shiloh by giving Thomas, Grant's Army of Tennessee. Grant was made second in command under Halleck, which was a figurehead position. As further embarrassment, Grant's duties

⁵ *Sherman's Civil War Correspondence* by Brooks D Simpson page 700

⁶ O.R.--SERIES I--VOL. XLIV

⁷ *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman* pg. 574

were to pass Halleck's orders through to Thomas.⁸ Grant was on the very verge of resigning but Sherman convinced him not to. When Thomas became aware of this intrigue he resigned the command to return to his previous command under Don Carlos Buell.

Grant's only direct battle experience with Thomas was at Missionary Ridge. Grant must have been embarrassed by the lack of progress of his battle plan with Sherman's corps on the left flank. Grant's ego may have been bruised when Thomas's Army of the Cumberland saved the day by their charge up the center. After this, Thomas senior in rank was directly under Sherman who influenced Grant's opinion of Thomas.

Change to slide 6: Grant writes to Halleck on December 8, 1864, prior to the Battle of Nashville: If Thomas has not struck yet, he ought to be ordered to hand over his command to Schofield. There is no better man to repel an attack than Thomas; but I fear he is too cautious to take the initiative.

On March 16th 1865, Grant complaining to Sherman about Thomas' lack of response to several of his orders. He writes: "Ever since you started on your last campaign, (North Carolina) and before, I have been attempting to get something done in the West, both to cooperate with you and to take advantage of the enemy's weaknesses there --- to

⁸ *Memoirs of Henry Villiard* pgs. 266, 270

accomplish results favorable to us. Knowing Thomas to be slow beyond excuse, I depleted his army to reinforce Canby

Later, Grant would coin the phrase that “Thomas was too slow to fight and too brave to run away.”

Change to slide 7: Grant writes in his memoirs his opinion of Thomas. “Thomas’s dispositions were deliberately made and always good. He could not be driven from a point he was given to hold. He was not as good, however in pursuit as he was in action. I do not believe that he could ever have conducted Sherman’s army from Chattanooga to Atlanta against the defenses and the commander guarding that line in 1864. On the other hand, if it had been given him to hold the line which Johnston tried to hold, neither that general, nor Sherman, nor any other officer could have done it better.”⁹

Change to slide 8: “Ole Brains,” Henry Halleck also got into the act. During the Atlanta campaign Halleck writes to Sherman on July 1, 1864 that: Thomas is also a noble old war horse. It is true that he is slow, but he is always sure.¹⁰

⁹ *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S Grant* pg. 601

¹⁰ O.R.-- SERIES I--VOL. XXXVIII/5 [S# 76]

On January 1, 1865, after the Battle of Nashville, Halleck writes to Sherman that;

Thomas has done well against Hood, but he is too slow for an effective pursuit.

Moreover, he will not live on the enemy. He himself is entirely opposed to a winter campaign, and is already speaking of recruiting his army for spring operations.

Change to slide 9: John M. Schofield a better politician than a soldier played on the rumors of Thomas being slow because he contributes to the sabotage of Thomas's reputation by telegraphing from Nashville directly to Grant at City Point his self serving opinions; **"Many officers here are of the opinion that General Thomas is certainly too slow in his movements."**¹¹

To understand what transpired at the Battle of Nashville we first must understand the Political Atmosphere. Because of the confidence in Grant the Washington authorities saw everything through Grant's eyes. Sherman introduced his "March to the Sea" plan to Grant on September 27th. Initially, Grant would not approve Sherman's plan unless Hood's Army was destroyed first. When Grant explained the plan to Lincoln and Stanton they were both "dubious and apprehensive." Lincoln would eventually let Grant make the decision but also take the responsibility.

It was an election year and the incumbents were trying to position themselves for the upcoming election. The state governors were encouraging the federal politicians to

¹¹ *Rock of Chickamauga* by Freeman Cleaves pg. 259

furlough the soldiers so they could return home to vote. A Union defeat of either Sherman or Thomas would go against the incumbent party.

Sherman pushes Grant further explaining that Hood's purpose is to draw him out of Georgia and reverse all the progress made during the Atlanta campaign. Sherman tells Grant that "If I could hope to overhaul Hood, I would move against him with my whole force; then he would retreat to the southwest, drawing me as a decoy from Georgia... no single army can catch him, and I am convinced the best results will follow from our defeating Jeff Davis' cherished plan of making me leave Georgia."

Finally, Grant approves Sherman's plan on November, 2nd after Sherman explained that Thomas would have "adequate forces" to deal with Hood. On paper the forces Sherman left Thomas seemed adequate. Sherman transferred his authority to Thomas and broke his communication with the outside world on November 12th. No news would be heard from Sherman until he made it to the outskirts of Savannah on December 17, 1864. The only news about Sherman's march that Washington City and Grant would hear was from Southern newspapers which, recorded that Sherman was defeated and starving. Which must have caused Grant much apprehension.

We likewise need to understand how the military atmosphere affected all parties. Grant was being criticized for his conduct of the Wilderness Campaign especially because of

the 50,000 casualties. He was also stalled in front of Lee at Petersburg, Va. He was faced with many of the same conditions as Thomas except Grant controlled the distribution of manpower, but Grant wasn't taking the advice that he was giving. Grant treated Thomas like he was a novice and not the seasoned warrior with the winning record that he had. There is a significant difference in the tone of how Grant corresponds with Sherman versus Thomas. Grant's tone with Sherman was more collaborative and friendly while his tone to Thomas was more instructive and insulting to Thomas's military knowledge. There is no other known example where Grant communicated with such condescending attitude. Grant should have let Thomas handle the responsibility that he had been charged with. Grant's reaction could have been from frustration due to his stalled progress in Virginia and anxiety with the unknown about Sherman since no word had reached the north of his progress. Grant was well aware that he would take much of the blame if either Thomas or Sherman were defeated especially after he had sold the plan to the president. If there were an investigation the truth would come out that Sherman had taken the best of everything and left Thomas undermanned and with the "Trash" in equipment, wagons and horses. On the other hand if Thomas won and defeated Hood then it may set up a military personality that could challenge Grant's future ambitions. This latter concern was most assuredly the reason Grant disbanded Thomas's army and scattered it to junior officers after Hood's defeat.¹²

¹² Education in Violence by Francis McKinney pg 433

Change to slide10-12: To understand the sequence of events leading up to the Battle of Nashville let's review a timeline. **(TIMELINE ON POWER POINT PRESENTATION)**

Once Sherman had Grant's approval on his plan to make "Georgia howl" he started working on his logistics. This work involved many elements. The first was to review all regiment's personnel. Any soldiers that weren't in top physical condition or who were close to discharge dates were sent back to General Steedman at Chattanooga. Sherman asked newly transferred General James H. Wilson, one of Grant's young Turk cavalrymen to inspect his cavalry and select 5,000 of the best. The horseflesh was handled in the same manner. Sherman had 1,500 troopers returned to Chattanooga along with 500 used-up horses. Next all wagons, artillery and tack were inspected and inventoried. Everything was put in top condition and all rejected equipment was destroyed or sent back to Chattanooga. George H. Thomas was given all the "trash" as Sherman phrased it in his memoirs.¹³ **Sherman's shortchanging Thomas was common knowledge throughout the army since it is well documented in many of the regimental histories. Albion W. Tourgee LLD, of the 105th Ohio Infantry writes in his Regimental History, "To him (Thomas) were sent the halt (lame) and maimed, the weak and worn, unattached regiments, commands whose terms of service were soon to expire; in short,**

¹³ *George H Thomas a Critical Biography* by Don Piatt pg. 560

all the more undesirable elements of a great army.” This must have been a statement of fact and experience since this regiment served with Sherman on his “March to the Sea.”

Sherman anxious to start on his “March to the Sea” informs Grant that “Thomas will have ample time and sufficient troops to hold Hood until the reinforcements from Missouri reach him.”¹⁴ On November 12th just before he breaks communication he tells Halleck: “I have balanced all the figures well and am satisfied that General Thomas has in Tennessee a force sufficient for all probabilities.”¹⁵ Thomas looking at the troop reports was unaware of the real condition of his forces because he telegraphed Sherman that: “I have no fears that Beauregard can do us any harm now, and if he attempts to follow you, I will follow him as far as possible. If he does not follow you, I have enough to ruin him unless he gets out of the way very rapidly.”¹⁶ What Thomas quickly found out was Sherman had culled the forces leaving him with the short-timers, misfits, malingerers, sickly and convalescents. The day that Sherman started his march, Thomas found out that 15,000 of the troops Sherman had sent back to Chattanooga were either discharged or furloughed. Thomas then received orders from Washington to furlough all the Illinois men so they could go home to vote. Thomas refused to obey this order, but did send men that were unfit for duty.¹⁷

¹⁴ *The Dependable General* by Frank A. Palumbo pg. 273

¹⁵ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg. 376

¹⁶ *Memoirs of General W.T. Sherman* by W.T. Sherman pg. 644

¹⁷ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg. 381

Once General Grant realized that Sherman had short-changed Thomas he ordered Halleck to send Thomas all troops recruited from the West. Grant sent his Chief of Staff General J. A. Rawlins to St. Louis to find out what was delaying A. J. Smith's 16th Corps. Eventually Thomas would receive one regiment a day, over 12,000 men. However these were green recruits that were not schooled or supplied with the tools of war. The new Tennessee regiments were routinely fighting with the Negro garrison troops stationed in Chattanooga. The "green" Ohio regiments were so undisciplined that General Rousseau refused to take them into his command. Under the North's newest recruiting system, cripples, lunatics, criminals, diseased and the depraved were pouring into the army.¹⁸ As a further measure Grant recommended that Thomas arm his quartermaster troops and employees along with citizens and convalescences as combat troops.¹⁹ Thomas would eventually use his quartermaster's personnel to man the inner defenses at Nashville and their commander General Donaldson would later brag how his non-combatants freed up Thomas's combat troops to engage and whip Hood's forces.

Before Thomas could consolidate his forces he first needed to know what Hood's objective was. Tactically, Hood had three options: he could feint towards Nashville and pass through eastern Tennessee and go to the relief of Lee in Virginia or he could head

¹⁸ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg. 378

¹⁹ *Was Thomas Slow at Nashville* by Henry Boynton pg. 23

West and link up with E. Kirby Smith's forces or he could march on Nashville and then on to the Ohio River. Until Thomas was sure of Hood's intent he had to leave the garrison troops in place to defend the vital railroad supply lines. Thomas had General Robert S. Granger with 2,000 men stationed at Decatur, Alabama. James B. Steedman was at Chattanooga with 5,200 men and General Milroy at Tullahoma with 6,000 men, General Rousseau at Murfreesboro (Fort Rosecrans) with 5,000 men.

Manpower was not Thomas's only problem. He was also short of cavalry and artillery horses. Shortage of horseflesh was not a new problem. All during the Atlanta campaign Sherman had been hampered with a lack of horses and this situation had gotten worse. In preparation to his march, Sherman sent back five hundred used-up horses. This meant that Thomas had to find 8,000 mounts between November 12th and December fifteenth. There was also a big need for artillery horses which were a larger breed of horse. If these larger breeds couldn't be found then it would required six or eight cavalry horses to pull the guns which threw more demand on cavalry breeds. To add to the dilemma, Schofield's retreat from Pulaski to Nashville took a heavy toll on horses and mules. For more than a month prior to the battle of Nashville, Thomas's remount situation deteriorated steadily.²⁰ The Headquarters Cavalry Corps was unable to meet the demands. They were providing 500 horses per week when 1,500 per week would

²⁰ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg. 381

not meet the needs. General Thomas took desperate measures to fill the needs. When General Steedman with his District of Etowah Division marched into Nashville on December first, he was immediately ordered to turn over his horses to General Croxton commander of the 1st Brigade of Wilson's 1st Cavalry Division. Finally, Secretary of War Edwin M Stanton provided Thomas orders to, "seize and impress horses" in the private sector, which enabled Thomas to mount most of his troopers.²¹ These orders were communicated to the field on December third. One morning the citizens of Louisville awakened from their slumbers to find every street and pike leading out of the city picketed by mounted cavalymen, and the work of pressing in horses commenced and was kept up several days and until the battle of Nashville commenced.²² Troopers canvassing Kentucky, Tennessee and Northern Alabama commandeered 7,000 horses including horses from the street cars and hacks in Nashville and Louisville, a roving circus and all horses in Andrew Johnson's stable. As late as December 15th General Wilson still had 3,000 troopers in Louisville picking up horses.²³

The shortage of mules was perhaps even more critical since many of Thomas's Corps were brought into the campaign with little or no transportation. A.J. Smith's sixteenth corps was sent from Missouri by boat without any transportation. General James

²¹ OR Edwin M. Stanton telegram dated December 1, 1864-9.30 p. m.

²² *First Ohio Cavalry, Four Years in the Saddle* by W. L. Curry pg. 210

²³ *Rock of Chickamauga* by Freeman Cleaves pg. 255, *Reluctant Partners; Nashville and the Union* by Walter T. Durham pg. 231

Steedman, Division of Etowah provided manpower but no wagons or mules. Thomas needed mules and lots of them. It may have been Divine providence that provided this solution. In October, General James L. Donaldson, Thomas's Quartermaster at Nashville had told a buyer in whom he had confidence to: "Buy as many mules as you can." Not supposing he would be able to secure more than a few thousand at the most. Some weeks later, just before the attack upon Hood's army he inquired to his agent, how many mules have you been able to secure? To his amazement, he was informed twenty thousand or more had been obtained. The astonished General exclaimed, "I am a ruined man! I shall be court-martialed and driven from the army for not limiting you in the purchase. You have procured many times more than I had any idea or intention of purchasing; but the fault is mine, not yours. I ought to have been particular in my orders." In an extremely disheartened state he went home, believing that such a thoughtless act on his part could not be overlooked by General Thomas. He scarcely reached home before a messenger came from General Thomas with an order for General Donaldson to come immediately to headquarters. This seemed to be the sealing of his fate, and in a state of anxiety bordering on frenzy he appeared before General Thomas, whom he found in a depressed mood. General Thomas asked: "Donaldson, how many mules do you have?" With some embarrassment he replied, "Upwards of twenty-five thousand. " Twenty-five thousand did you say; repeated General Thomas. Is it possible that you have this number? General Donaldson please

accept my most heartfelt thanks! You have saved this army! I can now have transportation, and can fight Hood, and will do so at once.”²⁴

George H. Thomas understood how to use cavalry. He had learned cavalry’s strengths and weaknesses while fighting the Comanche, in the Southwest, as a major in the 2nd Cavalry. He had taught cavalry and artillery tactics at West Point and was the only trained cavalryman in the high command. General Thomas and General James H. Wilson worked closely to define their strategy. Their strategy was to use cavalry as mounted infantry. This fast moving, hard hitting force would ride on horseback to their destination then dismount and fight like infantry. Perhaps General Thomas took the example from that “devil Forrest”! General Thomas J. Wood, himself an old cavalryman, would declare: “I’ve never seen cavalry used like a whip around the enemy’s flank and rear as Wilson has used them for the last four days.”²⁵ Each one of Wilson’s troopers would carry added fire power by being armed with a seven shot Spencer carbine repeater. This seven shot carbine would give the troopers the fire power of double their number. The problem was that there was a shortage of these weapons. The Spencer Rifle Company had limited manufacturing capabilities. The total production was 3,000 units per month for all the Union Army. General Thomas pulled every string to procure these weapons but the best that could be had was 1,200 units per month. Even as late

²⁴ Century Magazine, August 1887, 617, *Civil War Treasury of Tales Legends & Folklore* by B A Botkin pg. 420

²⁵ *Under the Old Flag* by James Harrison Wilson Volume 2, page 136

as December 7th, General Richard W. Johnson, Commander of the 6th Division of Wilson's Cavalry Corps reported only having enough horses and repeating rifles to mount 65% of his troopers. His 2nd brigade of 759 troopers would go into battle dismounted without repeating rifles, only having pistols and sabers.²⁶

The fortifications around Nashville were another area of concern for Thomas. The work of fortifying Nashville was actually started in 1862 by Major General Morton. The work had started and stopped several times through the years. In October, Thomas again called on Quartermaster Donaldson to take charge of this work. The hold-up was manpower. An attempt was made to get civilian manpower by asking the population to offer their slaves as workers on the forts and trenches. On November 29th Thomas orders 7,000 quartermaster employees to work on trenches and fortifications.²⁷ As late as December 3rd, Thomas ordered the Provost Marshall to gather up all loafers and unemployed negroes and white men to use as workers on the fortifications. Over 1,000 were rounded up.²⁸ The fortifications and trenches were completed in time and defended by the same soldiers, employees and citizens from the Quartermasters Corps and garrison soldiers.

²⁶ OR Report Wilson's report dated 12/15/1864

²⁷ *Reluctant Partners, Nashville and the Union* by Walter T. Durham pg. 202

²⁸ *Reluctant Partners, Nashville and the Union* by Walter T. Durham pg 219

When William Tecumseh Sherman marched away from Atlanta with Thomas's 14th Corps Thomas lost more than veteran soldiers. He also lost "the entire equipment trains, pontoons, and similar essentials which Thomas, with great care, had perfected for the Army of the Cumberland."²⁹ Without the 14th Corps neither the 16th nor 23rd Corps would have any of these services unless developed after November twelfth. Thomas writes in his campaign report: "I would here remark that the splendid pontoon-train properly belonging to my command, with its trained corps of pontoniers, was absent with General Sherman."³⁰

Thomas thinking offensively, not defensively knew that he had five major waterways to cross if he was to totally defeat Hood. The only corps that had a pontoon bridge was the 4th corps. Thomas' plan was to have two pontoon bridges so he ordered his quartermaster corps to build another. Schofield would put a kink in Thomas's plans when he burned the 4th corps pontoon bridge after crossing the Duck River while falling back to Nashville. When Schofield called for another pontoon bridge to cross the Harpeth at Franklin it was under construction and not available. In building the second pontoon bridge, Thomas found his first obstacle was a severe shortage of canvas, an essential component in building lightweight pontoons. Thomas would use what canvas was available and supplemented that by making the heavier all wooden style boats.

²⁹ *Was Thomas Slow at Nashville* by Henry Boynton pg. 19

³⁰ *The Dependable General* by Frank A. Palumbo pg. 349

When completed the pontoon train would require 57 wagons and mule teams to transport. This would be somewhat of a “Catch 22” sense the heavier wooden pontoon boats would require more mules per teams to transport the train, especially on rain soaked non-mechanized roads. By the time the bridge was completed, wagons and mules procured there was little time left for training. This was a case of On-the-job training. In the beginning, black soldiers were used as pontoniers with infantry officers instructing them on assembly, at the bridge site. At one point during Hood’s retreat, the 51st Indiana and 15th Ohio Infantry of the 4th Corps fought the enemy to the edge of the Duck River then helped assemble the pontoon bridge³¹ so they could keep pushing Hood’s army south. If more pontoons had been available then the devastation of Hood’s army would have been even more complete.

With the mire of details Thomas was dealing with he also had the Confederate wolves on his perimeters. It started with Forest capturing a Union gun boat along with 17 other vessels. With these Forest manned and fought a naval battle and eventually destroyed several vessels and warehouses in Johnsonville with a loss of \$1,500,000 in supplies. Breckinridge, Duke and Vaughn with 3,000 men crossed over from Virginia and attacked Union General Alan Gillem and pushed him back in Eastern Tennessee. Thomas dispatched some of his cavalry to counter a guerrilla force attacking the railroad

³¹ *The Fifteenth Ohio Volunteers and Its Campaign* by Alexis Cope pg. 669

communication along the Louisville & Nashville railroad. On December 14th Thomas sent McCook's cavalry to Bowling Green, Kentucky to counter mischief that Confederate General Lyon with a force of 800 was attempting to disrupt his communication on the railroad. Guerrilla forces played havoc along the Nashville and Northwestern railroad where they destroyed 15 bridges, partially disabled four, burned two water tanks and damaged nine and severed the telegraph lines in nineteen places.³² All during this time the Cumberland River levels dropped so quickly that most deep draft ironclads were forced downstream to the Ohio River. Boat traffic up the Cumberland River was at a standstill,³³ with exception of Commander Fitch with 3 shallow draft tin-clad boats which patrolled between Carthage and Clarksville. Thomas used the small navy and his cavalry to patrol and scout up and down river for any attempts of the rebel forces trying to cross above or below Nashville. By December, guerillas and bush whacker activity increased their reign of terror, burning and killing increased enough so that the terrorized civilian population flocked aboard the trains moving towards Nashville. Even though Thomas dispatched cavalry to the field to combat this activity it was difficult to fight a foe that blended into the population at will.

At the transfer of command, Thomas had two under strength army corps, the 4th and 23rd and 5,000 cavalry mostly dismounted. Sherman had reported to Grant that the 4th

³² Reluctant Partners, Nashville and the Union by Walter T. Durham pg. 265

³³ Reluctant Partners, Nashville and the Union by Walter T. Durham pg. 217

Corps had 15,000 men but in reality it only had a little less than 13,000. After the Battle of Franklin 4,000 replacements were added to replace losses and strengthen the corps.³⁴ These replacements had never fought together as one force and most had belonged to Sherman's army that had been left behind. The 23rd Corps was reported as having 12,000 when it only had 8,000 combat troops.³⁵ Steedman's Provisional Detachment based at Chattanooga was recipients of many of Sherman's cast offs. All of these were assigned to Thomas. This would eventually be a hybrid of six brigades from four different army corps made up of fragments of 200 ill provided regiments. Of these troops 25% were scarcely convalescent, 50% were new recruits and one brigade was United States Colored Troops who had never seen combat and were previously assigned to garrison duty. From all this Steedman would put 5,200 combat soldiers in the field that would have no wagons, ambulances or in most cases firearms.³⁶ Even Thomas' command structure had holes. Similar to Hood, after the Battle of Franklin, Thomas had to reorganize his command structure. General David S Stanley, 4th corps commander was wounded at Franklin and was out of action being replaced by Thomas J. Wood. General Ruger 2nd Division commander for the 23rd Corps was also out with General Darius N. Couch fresh from the Army of Potomac replacing him. General Wagner the 2nd Division commander of the 4th corps had resigned and replaced by General W.L. Elliott a

³⁴ March to the Sea, Franklin and Nashville by Jacob Cox pg.134

³⁵ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg. 377

³⁶ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg. 404

former chief of cavalry in the Atlanta campaign. General Kenner Garrard, another cavalryman throughout the Atlanta campaign was assigned to an infantry division in A. J. Smith's 16th corps. With exception of T.J. Wood these commanders were entire strangers to the troops they were to command.³⁷ Sherman transferred command to Thomas on November 12, 1864. Sherman possibly feeling guilty ordered A. J. Smith's detached 16th Corps of the Army of Tennessee from Missouri to report to Thomas. This force was about 14,200 veteran troops that would take eighteen days to make it to Nashville. Thomas' old chief, William S. Rosecrans had diverted A.J. Smith's 16th Corps to fight Price in Missouri. When Smith arrived at Nashville on December 1st they were without corps organization, medical support or transportation trains and supplies.³⁸ One regiment didn't even have officers.³⁹ By the fifteenth of December, Thomas had put together a force of 55,000 combat infantry and 12,000 Cavalry troopers to face Hood. Even the weather was working against Thomas. First the ice storm of December 10th through 14th which shut down all movement in and around Nashville for four days. In hind-sight this was a blessing since it gave Thomas and his army the needed time to complete some of the more critical needs. On the morning of December 15th the day dawned with a heavy fog covering the ground. The battle was delayed 2 hours till this fog burnt off. Once the "skedaddle" towards the Tennessee River started both Armies

³⁷ *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* by Johnson and Buel Vol.4 page 456

³⁸ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg. 377

³⁹ *Master of War* by Benson Bobrick pg. 266

were at the mercy of Mother Nature. Of the thirteen days from the start of the Battle of Nashville till Hood crossed the Tennessee River it rained or snowed ten.⁴⁰ The roads were muddy, the fields were knee-deep in mud the creeks and rivers were full to overflowing. The cavalry attempted to travel alongside the highway leaving the mechanized road to the infantry however the mud was too deep and the horses floundered back to road, many of them too exhausted for further use. More than 5,000 of Wilson's horses were ruined in 13 days. During the day their legs were covered with mud which froze into heavy casts at night. They died before dawn on the picket line in frozen mud pots scooped out by their hooves as they vainly tried to free their legs from the thick coats of mud (and ice). Hundreds lost their hooves and had to be destroyed.⁴¹ It was two days after the start of the battle before food and ammunition were able to get to Wilson's men and horses. The entire country from Nashville to the Tennessee River had been fought and foraged over by both armies and it had been swept clean of food for man and beast.⁴² Literally there were no provisions for men or horses of either side so they all went hungry. The road conditions were so bad that wagons took twelve hours to go six miles. Both Wilson and Wood doubled their horse teams on their artillery

⁴⁰ *History of the 79th Indiana Volunteer Regiment in the Civil War* pg. 195-200

⁴¹ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg 422

⁴² *Under the Old Flag* by James H Wilson page 132-133

pieces to get their guns to the front and even then the advance was slow. Ammunition loads were reduced to ten boxes per wagon even when their teams were doubled.⁴³

With all these hurdles to overcome, the fruits of Thomas's efforts paid off when he unleashed his forces against Hood on December fifteenth. General Thomas J. Wood commander of the 4th Corps reported that while riding the battle line on the morning of December 15th his troops were chanting "this is Old Pap's fight and we are going to win it for him."⁴⁴ George H. Thomas using a maneuver that seventy years later would be called a pincer movement used his cavalry as mounted infantry to move fast, attack the enemy from the rear while the infantry held their front.

According to Grant, Thomas was not an offensive warrior yet on December 18th Thomas pulled General Steedman and his provisional army out of the line of battle at Franklin. He sent him and his force by rail to Chattanooga and on to Decatur, Alabama where he met up with General R.S. Granger for a combined force of 10,000 men. His orders were to cut Hood off on the south side of the Tennessee River. In preparation of this movement he had already staged at Bridgeport, Alabama his best cavalry regiment, the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry.⁴⁵ To this he added detachments of the Second Tennessee and

⁴³ *The Eighty-Sixth Regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry* pg. 512

⁴⁴ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg. 402

⁴⁵ *History of the Fifteenth Pennsylvania Volunteer Cavalry* by Charles Kirk page 440

the 10th, 12th and 13th Indiana Cavalry for a total cavalry force of 600 men. This force without infantry support moved across northern Alabama from Stevenson, Huntsville, arriving at Decatur on December 28th where they engaged Hood's, 12th Alabama Cavalry. There they captured 2 artillery pieces and several prisoners. Colonel Palmer of the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry caught up with Hood's wagon trains at Navoo, Alabama and destroyed both wagons and pontoon boats. Continuing on in a southwesterly direction they caught up and destroyed another wagon train in Itawamba County, MS just east of Tupelo. On January 6th, they returned to Decatur, AL having traveled 235 miles. They had captured 2 Colonels, 3 Captains, 8 Lieutenants, 187 enlisted men and 2 six-pounder field artillery pieces. They destroyed 78 pontoon boats, 310 wagons and 1 ambulance; over 800 mules and 25 yoke of oxen, besides a large number of muskets and many revolvers which were kept by the men.⁴⁶

Again on December 18th, General Thomas started another offensive effort coming from the west. He asked Admiral S. P. (Samual Phillips) Lee with his armada of gun boats to move up the Tennessee River towards Florence, AL. Thomas asked that the Admiral be prepared to tow a "fleet of troop transports." The mission was to destroy Hood's pontoon bridges before his army could cross. On December 24th Admiral Lee saw action at Chickasaw, AL and destroyed a new fort and magazine as well as visible means of

⁴⁶ *History of the Fifteenth Pennsylvania Volunteer Cavalry* by Charles Kirk page 456

crossing the river below Florence. He also destroyed a number of flats and pontoons at Garner's Ferry where he reported that none of the prisoners were Tennessee troops. Unfortunately, the river was too shallow to move further above Florence so Hood's forces were able to cross the river six miles above Florence at Mussel Shoals.⁴⁷

For the first time in the Civil War an army corps was totally annihilated and when the remnants made it back to Tupelo, Mississippi there were 15,000 tattered men left of the 41,000⁴⁸ men that started that fateful journey. Thomas's army had pushed Hood more than 200 miles in 13 days and was the longest pursuit in the war in time and distance. The most famous pursuit – Grant pushing Lee to Appomattox – only covered eighty miles and lasted seven days.⁴⁹ By 1892, European military schools were teaching that in the history of the world there had only been two perfect battles fought – Napoleon at Austerlitz and Thomas at Nashville.⁵⁰

So you be the judge was George H. Thomas "slow" at Nashville?

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Portraying George H. Thomas

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ *Hood's Tennessee Campaign* by Thomas Robson Hay, pg.78, 180, *The Life of Maj-Gen George H. Thomas* by Thomas B. Van Horne page 479

⁴⁹ *Education in Violence* by Francis McKinney pg. 423

⁵⁰ *Lincoln and the Men of War Times* by Alexander K McClure pg. 363