

Philip Henry Sheridan

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General P. H. Sheridan

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Part 3

P. H. Sheridan

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CHAPTER XVI.

AT CHATTANOOGA—THE ENEMY FORTIFIES LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN AND MISSIONARY RIDGE—REORGANIZING THE ARMY—REMOVAL OF GENERAL ROSECRANS—PUNISHMENT OF DESERTERS—GRANT AT CHATTANOOGA—THE FIGHT ON LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN—A BRAVE COLOR-BEARER—BATTLE OF MISSIONARY RIDGE.

By 9 o'clock on the morning of September 22 my command took up a position within the heavy line of intrenchments at Chattanooga, the greater part of which defenses had been thrown up since the army commenced arriving there the day before. The enemy, having now somewhat recovered from the shock of the recent battle, followed carefully, and soon invested us close into our lines with a parallel system of rifle-pits. He also began at once to erect permanent lines of earthworks on Missionary Ridge and to establish himself strongly on Lookout Mountain. He then sent Wheeler's cavalry north of the Tennessee, and, aided greatly by the configuration of the ground, held us in a state of partial siege, which serious rains might convert into a complete investment. The occupation of Lookout Mountain broke our direct communication with Bridgeport—our sub-depot—and forced us to bring supplies by way of the Sequatchie Valley and Waldron's Ridge of the Cumberland Mountains, over a road most difficult even in the summer season, but now liable to be rendered impassable by autumn rains. The distance to Bridgeport by this circuitous route was sixty miles, and the numerous passes, coves, and small valleys through which the road ran offered tempting opportunities, for the destruction of trains, and the enemy was not slow to take advantage of them. Indeed, the situation was not promising, and General Rosecrans himself, in communicating with the President the day succeeding the battle of Chickamauga, expressed doubts of his ability to hold the gateway of the Cumberland Mountains.

The position taken up by my troops inside the lines of Chattanooga was near the old iron-works, under the shadow of Lookout Mountain. Here we were exposed to a continual fire from the enemy's batteries for many days, but as the men were well covered by secure though simple intrenchments, but little damage was done. My own headquarters were established on the grounds of Mr. William Crutchfield, a resident of the place, whose devotion to the Union cause knew no bounds, and who rendered me—and, in fact, at one time or another, nearly every general officer in the Army of the Cumberland—invaluable service in the way of information about the Confederate army. My headquarters camp frequently received shots from the point of Lookout Mountain also, but fortunately no casualties resulted from this plunging fire, though, I am free to confess, at first our nerves were often upset by the whirring of twenty-pounder shells dropped inconsiderately into our camp at untimely hours of the night.

In a few days rain began to fall, and the mountain roads by which our supplies came were fast growing impracticable. Each succeeding train of wagons took longer to make the trip from Bridgeport, and the draft mules were dying by the hundreds. The artillery horses would soon go too, and there was every prospect that later the troops would starve unless something could be done. Luckily for my division, a company of the Second Kentucky Cavalry had attached itself to my headquarters, and, though there without authority, had been left undisturbed in view of a coming reorganization of the army incidental to the removal of McCook and Crittenden from the command of their respective corps, a measure that had been determined upon immediately after the battle of Chickamauga. Desiring to remain with me, Captain Lowell H. Thickstun, commanding this company, was ready for any duty I might find, for him, so I ordered him into the Sequatchie Valley for the purpose of collecting supplies for my troops, and sent my scout, Card along to guide him to the best locations. The company hid itself away in a deep cove in the upper end of the valley, and by keeping very quiet and paying for everything it took from the people, in a few days was enabled to send me large quantities of corn for my animals and food for the officers and men, which greatly supplemented the scanty supplies we were getting from the sub-depot at Bridgeport. In this way I carried men and animals through our beleaguerment in pretty fair condition, and of the turkeys, chickens, ducks, and eggs sent in for the messes of my officers we often had enough to divide liberally among those at different headquarters. Wheeler's cavalry never discovered my detached company, yet the chances of its capture were not small, sometimes giving much uneasiness; still, I concluded it was better to run all risks than to let the horses die of starvation in Chattanooga. Later, after the battle of Missionary Ridge, when I started to Knoxville, the company joined me in excellent shape, bringing with it an abundance of food, including a small herd of beef cattle.

The whole time my line remained near the iron-mills the shelling from Lookout was kept up, the screeching shots inquisitively asking in their well-known way, "Where are you? Where are you?" but it is strange to see how readily, soldiers can become accustomed to the sound of dangerous missiles under circumstances of familiarity, and this case was no exception to the rule. Few casualties occurred, and soon contempt took the place of nervousness, and as we could not reply in kind on account of the elevation required for our guns, the men responded by jeers and imprecations whenever a shell fell into their camp.

Meantime, orders having been issued for the organization of the army, additional troops were attached to my command, and it became the Second Division of the Fourth Army Corps, to which Major-General Gordon Granger was assigned as commander. This necessitated a change of position of the division, and I moved to ground behind our works, with my right resting on Fort Negley and my left extending well over toward Fort Wood, my front being parallel to Missionary Ridge. My division was now composed of twenty-five regiments, classified into brigades and demi-brigades, the former commanded by Brigadier-General G. D. Wagner, Colonel C. G. Harker, and Colonel F. T. Sherman; the latter, by Colonels Laiboldt, Miller, Wood, Walworth, and Opdyke. The demi-brigade was an awkward invention of Granger's; but at this time it was necessitated—perhaps by the depleted condition of our regiments, which compelled the massing of a great number of regimental organizations into a division to give it weight and force.

On October 16, 1863, General Grant had been assigned to the command of the "Military Division of the Mississippi," a geographical area which embraced the Departments of the Ohio, the Cumberland, and the Tennessee, thus effecting a consolidation of divided commands which might have been introduced most profitably at an earlier date. The same order that assigned General Grant relieved General Rosecrans, and placed General Thomas in command of the Army of the Cumberland. At the time of the reception of the order, Rosecrans was busy with preparations for a movement to open the direct road to Bridgeport—having received in the interval, since we came back to Chattanooga, considerable reinforcement by the arrival in his department of the Eleventh and Twelfth corps, under General Hooker, from the Army of the Potomac. With this force Rosecrans had already strengthened certain important points on the railroad between Nashville and Stevenson, and given orders to Hooker to concentrate at Bridgeport such portions of his command as were available, and to hold them in readiness to advance toward Chattanooga.

On the 19th of October, after turning the command over to Thomas, General Rosecrans quietly slipped away from the army. He submitted uncomplainingly to his removal, and modestly left us without fuss or demonstration; ever maintaining, though, that the battle of Chickamauga was in effect a victory, as it had ensured us, he said, the retention of Chattanooga. When his departure became known deep and almost universal regret was expressed, for he was enthusiastically esteemed and loved by the Army of the Cumberland, from the day he assumed command of it until he left it, notwithstanding the censure poured upon him after the battle of Chickamauga.

The new position to which my division had been moved, in consequence of the reorganization, required little additional labor to strengthen it, and the routine of fatigue duty and drills was continued as before, its monotony occasionally broken by the excitement of an expected attack, or by amusements of various kinds that were calculated to keep the men in good spirits. Toward this result much was contributed by Mr. James E. Murdock, the actor, who came down from the North to recover the body of his son, killed at Chickamauga, and was quartered with me for the greater part of the time he was obliged to await the successful conclusion of his sad mission. He spent days, and even weeks, going about through the division giving recitations before the camp-fires, and in improvised chapels, which the men had constructed from refuse lumber and canvas. Suiting his selections to the occasion, he never failed to excite intense interest in the breasts of all present, and when circumstances finally separated him from us, all felt that a debt of gratitude was due him that could never be paid. The pleasure he gave, and the confident feeling that was now arising from expected reinforcements, was darkened, however, by one sad incident. Three men of my division had deserted their colors at the beginning of the siege and made their way north. They were soon arrested, and were brought back to stand trial for the worst offense that can be committed by a soldier, convicted of the crime, and ordered to be shot. To make the example effective I paraded the whole division for the execution, and on the 13th of November, in the presence of their former comrades, the culprits were sent, in accordance with the terms of their sentence, to render their account to the Almighty. It was the saddest spectacle I ever witnessed, but there could be no evasion, no mitigation of the full letter of the law; its timely enforcement was but justice to the brave spirits who had yet to fight the rebellion to the end.

General Grant arrived at Chattanooga on October 23, and began at once to carry out the plans that had been formed for opening the shorter or river road to Bridgeport. This object was successfully accomplished by the moving of Hooker's command to Rankin's and Brown's ferries in concert with a force from the Army of the Cumberland which was directed on the same points, so by the 27th of October direct communication with our depots was established. The four weeks which followed this cheering result were busy with the work of refitting and preparing for offensive operations as soon as General Sherman should reach us with his troops from West Tennessee. During this period of activity the enemy committed the serious fault of detaching Longstreet's corps—sending it to aid in the siege of Knoxville in East Tennessee—an error which has no justification whatever, unless it be based on the presumption that it was absolutely necessary that Longstreet should ultimately rejoin Lee's army in Virginia by way of Knoxville and Lynchburg, with a chance of picking up Burnside en route. Thus depleted, Bragg still held Missionary Ridge in strong force, but that part of his line which extended across the intervening valley to the northerly point of Lookout Mountain was much attenuated.

By the 18th of November General Grant had issued instructions covering his intended operations. They contemplated that Sherman's column, which was arriving by the north bank of the Tennessee, should cross the river on a pontoon bridge just below the mouth of Chickamauga Creek and carry the northern extremity of Missionary Ridge as far as the railroad tunnel; that the Army of the Cumberland—the centre—should co-operate with Sherman; and that Hooker with a mixed command should continue to hold Lookout Valley and operate on our extreme right as circumstances might warrant. Sherman crossed on the 24th to perform his allotted part of the programme, but in the meantime Grant becoming impressed with the idea that Bragg was endeavoring to get away, ordered Thomas to make a strong demonstration in his front, to determine the truth or falsity of the information that had been received. This task fell to the Fourth Corps, and at 12 o'clock on the 23d I was notified that Wood's division would make a reconnoissance to an elevated point in its front called Orchard Knob, and that I was to support it with my division and prevent Wood's right flank from being turned by an advance of the enemy on Moore's road or from the direction of Rossville. For this duty I marched my division out of the works about 2 p.m., and took up a position on Bushy Knob. Shortly after we reached this point Wood's division passed my left flank on its reconnoissance, and my command, moving in support of it, drove in the enemy's picket-line. Wood's took possession of Orchard Knob easily, and mine was halted on a low ridge to the right of the Knob, where I was directed by General Thomas to cover my front

by a strong line of rifle-pits, and to put in position two batteries of the Fourth regular artillery that had joined me from the Eleventh Corps. After dark Wood began to feel uneasy about his right flank, for a gap existed between it and my left, so I moved in closer to him, taking up a line where I remained inactive till the 25th, but suffering some inconvenience from the enemy's shells.

On the 24th General Sherman made an attack for the purpose of carrying the north end of Missionary Ridge. His success was not complete, although at the time it was reported throughout the army to be so. It had the effect of disconcerting Bragg, however, and caused him to strengthen his right by withdrawing troops from his left, which circumstance led Hooker to advance on the northerly face of Lookout Mountain. At first, with good glasses, we could plainly see Hooker's troops driving the Confederates up the face of the mountain. All were soon lost to view in the dense timber, but emerged again on the open ground, across which the Confederates retreated at a lively pace, followed by the pursuing line, which was led by a color-bearer, who, far in advance, was bravely waving on his comrades. The gallantry of this man elicited much enthusiasm among us all, but as he was a considerable distance ahead of his comrades I expected to see his rashness punished at any moment by death or capture. He finally got quite near the retreating Confederates, when suddenly they made a dash at him, but he was fully alive to such a move, and ran back, apparently uninjured, to his friends. About this time a small squad of men reached the top of Lookout and planted the Stars and Stripes on its very crest. Just then a cloud settled down on the mountain, and a heavy bank of fog obscured its whole face.

After the view was lost the sharp rattle of musketry continued some time, but practically the fight had been already won by Hooker's men, the enemy only holding on with a rear-guard to assure his retreat across Chattanooga Valley to Missionary Ridge. Later we heard very heavy cannonading, and fearing that Hooker was in trouble I sent a staff-officer to find out whether he needed assistance, which I thought could be given by a demonstration toward Rossville. The officer soon returned with the report that Hooker was all right, that the cannonading was only a part of a little rear-guard fight, two sections of artillery making all the noise, the reverberations from point to point in the adjacent mountains echoing and reechoing till it seemed that at least fifty guns were engaged.

On the morning of the 25th of November Bragg's entire army was holding only the line of Missionary Ridge, and our troops, being now practically connected from Sherman to Hooker, confronted it with the Army of the Cumberland in the centre—bowed out along the front of Wood's division and mine. Early in the day Sherman, with great determination and persistence, made an attempt to carry the high ground near the tunnel, first gaining and then losing advantage, but his attack was not crowned with the success anticipated. Meanwhile Hooker and Palmer were swinging across Chattanooga Valley, using me as a pivot for the purpose of crossing Missionary Ridge in the neighborhood of Rossville. In the early part of the day I had driven in the Confederate pickets in my front, so as to prolong my line of battle on that of Wood, the necessity of continuing to refuse my right having been obviated by the capture of Lookout Mountain and the advance of Palmer.

About 2 o'clock orders came to carry the line at the foot of the ridge, attacking at a signal of six guns. I had few changes or new dispositions to make. Wagner's brigade, which was next to Wood's division, was formed in double lines, and Harker's brigade took the same formation on Wagner's right. Colonel F. T. Sherman's brigade came on Harker's right, formed in a column of attack, with a front of three regiments, he having nine. My whole front was covered with a heavy line of skirmishers. These dispositions made, my right rested a little distance south of Moore's road, my left joined Wood over toward Orchard Knob, while my centre was opposite Thurman's house—the headquarters of General Bragg—on Missionary Ridge. A small stream of water ran parallel to my front, as far as which the ground was covered by a thin patch of timber, and beyond the edge of the timber was an open plain to the foot of Missionary Ridge, varying in width from four to nine hundred yards. At the foot of the ridge was the enemy's first line of rifle-pits; at a point midway up its face, another line, incomplete; and on the crest was a third line, in which Bragg had massed his artillery.

The enemy saw we were making dispositions for an attack, and in plain view of my whole division he prepared himself for resistance, marching regiments from his left flank with flying colors; and filling up the spaces not already occupied in his intrenchments. Seeing the enemy thus strengthening himself, it was plain that we would have to act quickly if we expected to accomplish much, and I already began to doubt the feasibility of our remaining in the first line of rifle-pits when we should have carried them. I discussed the order with Wagner, Harker, and Sherman, and they were similarly impressed, so while anxiously awaiting the signal I sent Captain Ransom of my staff to Granger, who was at Fort Wood, to ascertain if we were to carry the first line or the ridge beyond. Shortly after Ransom started the signal guns were fired, and I told my brigade commanders to go for the ridge.

Placing myself in front of Harker's brigade, between the line of battle and the skirmishers, accompanied by only an orderly so as not to attract the enemy's fire, we moved out. Under a terrible storm of shot and shell the line pressed forward steadily through the timber, and as it emerged on the plain took the double-quick and with fixed bayonets rushed at the enemy's first line. Not a shot was fired from our line of battle, and as it gained on my skirmishers they melted into and became one with it, and all three of my brigades went over the rifle-pits simultaneously. They then lay down on the face of the ridge, for a breathing-spell and for protection from the terrible fire, of canister and musketry pouring over us from the guns on the crest. At the rifle-pits there had been little use for the bayonet, for most of the Confederate troops, disconcerted by the sudden rush, lay close in the ditch and surrendered, though some few fled up the slope to the next line. The prisoners were directed to move out to our rear, and as their intrenchments had now come under fire from the crest, they went with alacrity, and without guard or escort, toward Chattanooga.

After a short pause to get breath the ascent of the ridge began, and I rode, into the ditch of the intrenchments to drive out a few skulkers who were hiding there. Just at this time I was joined by Captain Ransom, who, having returned from Granger, told me that we were to carry only the line at the base, and that in coming back, when he struck the left of the division, knowing this interpretation of the order, he in his capacity as an aide-de-camp had directed Wagner, who was up on the face of the ridge, to return, and that in consequence Wagner was recalling his men to the base. I could not bear to order the recall of troops now so gallantly climbing the hill step by step, and believing we could take it, I immediately rode to Wagner's brigade and directed it to resume the attack. In the

meantime Harker's and F. T. Sherman's troops were approaching the partial line of works midway of the ridge, and as I returned to the centre of their rear, they were being led by many stands of regimental colors. There seemed to be a rivalry as to which color should be farthest to the front; first one would go forward a few feet, then another would come up to it, the color-bearers vying with one another as to who should be foremost, until finally every standard was planted on the intermediate works. The enemy's fire from the crest during the ascent was terrific in the noise made, but as it was plunging, it over-shot and had little effect on those above the second line of pits, but was very uncomfortable for those below, so I deemed it advisable to seek another place, and Wagner's brigade having reassembled and again pressed up the ridge, I rode up the face to join my troops.

As soon as the men saw me, they surged forward and went over the works on the crest. The parapet of the intrenchment was too high for my horse to jump, so, riding a short distance to the left, I entered through a low place in the line. A few Confederates were found inside, but they turned the butts of their muskets toward me in token of surrender, for our men were now passing beyond them on both their flanks.

The right and right centre of my division gained the summit first, they being partially sheltered by a depression in the face of the ridge, the Confederates in their immediate front fleeing down the southern face. When I crossed the rifle-pits on the top the Confederates were still holding fast at Bragg's headquarters, and a battery located there opened fire along the crest; making things most uncomfortably hot. Seeing the danger to which I was exposed, for I was mounted, Colonel Joseph Conrad, of the Fifteenth Missouri, ran up and begged me to dismount. I accepted his excellent advice, and it probably saved my life; but poor Conrad was punished for his solicitude by being seriously wounded in the thigh at the moment he was thus contributing to my safety.

Wildly cheering, the men advanced along the ridge toward Bragg's headquarters, and soon drove the Confederates from this last position, capturing a number of prisoners, among them Breckenridge's and Bates's adjutant-generals, and the battery that had made such stout resistance on the crest—two guns which were named "Lady Breckenridge" and "Lady Buckner" General Bragg himself having barely time to escape before his headquarters were taken.

My whole division had now reached the summit, and Wagner and Harker—the latter slightly wounded—joined me as I was standing in the battery just secured. The enemy was rapidly retiring, and though many of his troops, with disorganized wagon-trains and several pieces of artillery, could be distinctly seen in much confusion about half a mile distant in the valley below, yet he was covering them with a pretty well organized line that continued to give us a desultory fire. Seeing this, I at once directed Wagner and Harker to take up the pursuit along Moore's road, which led to Chickamauga Station—Bragg's depot of supply—and as they progressed, I pushed Sherman's brigade along the road behind them. Wagner and Harker soon overtook the rearguard, and a slight skirmish caused it to break, permitting nine guns and a large number of wagons which were endeavoring to get away in the stampede to fall into our hands.

About a mile and a half beyond Missionary Ridge, Moore's road passed over a second ridge or high range of hills, and here the enemy had determined to make a stand for that purpose, posting eight pieces of artillery with such supporting force as he could rally. He was immediately attacked by Harker and Wagner, but the position was strong, the ridge being rugged and difficult of ascent, and after the first onset our men recoiled. A staff-officer from Colonel Wood's demi-brigade informing me at this juncture that that command was too weak to carry the position in its front, I ordered the Fifteenth Indiana and the Twenty-Sixth Ohio to advance to Wood's aid, and then hastening to the front I found his men clinging to the face of the ridge, contending stubbornly with the rear-guard of the enemy. Directing Harker to put Opdyke's demi-brigade in on the right, I informed Wagner that it was necessary to flank the enemy by carrying the high bluff on our left where the ridge terminated, that I had designated the Twenty-Sixth Ohio and Fifteenth Indiana for the work, and that I wished him to join them.