

BOYNTON HENRY VAN

WAS GENERAL THOMAS
SLOW AT NASHVILLE?

Henry Boynton

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Henry V. Boynton
Was General Thomas Slow at Nashville?
With a Description of the Greatest Cavalry
Movement of the War and General
James H. Wilson's Cavalry Operations
in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia

PREFACE

A recent revival of the venerable charge that General George H. Thomas was slow at Nashville led to the publication, in the New York *Sun* of August 9, 1896, of the article which is here reproduced by the permission of that journal. A few brief additions have been made to the original text.

It seemed the more important to some of the veterans of the Army of the Cumberland that this charge in its renewed form should be met, because it was put forth with a show of official authority which would naturally give it weight with readers who were not familiar with the war records.

The discussion of the subject also afforded an opportunity to present, though in very concise form, the outlines of those magnificent cavalry operations under General James H. Wilson in the battle of Nashville, and in his subsequent independent campaign through Alabama and Georgia, all of which were without parallel in our war.

Though these movements constitute one of the most brilliant chapters in our war history, – in fact, in the history of cavalry in any war, – the country really knows little about them, because they were performed out of sight in Alabama and Georgia, while the attention of the country was fixed upon the fall of Richmond and the great events immediately following it. For this reason it is believed that the brief story here presented will not be without interest.

H. V. B.

Washington, D. C., *September*, 1896.

WAS GENERAL THOMAS SLOW AT NASHVILLE?

A new generation has come upon the stage since our civil war. It has its own writers on the events of that struggle. Some of these, careful students as they are, make proper and effective use of the stores of material which the Government has collected and published. Others, stumbling upon interesting dispatches of notable campaigns, read them in connection with the ill-considered and hasty criticisms of the hot times which brought them forth, and, finding questions settled twenty years ago, but entirely new to themselves, they proceed to reveal them as new things to the new generation. By this process it has recently been announced that General Thomas was slow at Nashville. To give this echo of thirty-two years ago sufficient voice, several columns of dispatches – which a quarter of a century since formed the basis of discussions that demolished the theory they are now brought forward to sustain – are gravely presented as something new.

Nothing better illustrates this situation than the very familiar story of the Irishman who assaulted the Jew for the part he took in the Crucifixion, and upon being remonstrated with upon the ground that the event occurred eighteen hundred years ago, replied that it was nevertheless new to him, as he had only heard of it the day before.

That General Thomas was not slow at Nashville is ancient history. General Grant, who was the first to charge it, was also the first to withdraw the imputation, by declaring in his official report that at the time he had been very impatient over what appeared as unnecessary delay on the part of Thomas, “but his final defeat of Hood was so complete that it will be accepted as a vindication of that distinguished officer’s judgment.”

The ostensible reason for heralding Thomas as slow – so slow, indeed, as to require his removal and lead to an order for it – was that he insisted upon concentrating his infantry force and remounting his cavalry. Secretary Stanton declared that the delay would be till doomsday if Thomas waited for the latter.

A consideration of this most important, underlying, and controlling factor in General Thomas’s preparations brings up one of the most brilliant chapters in our war history, and altogether the most brilliant in the annals of cavalry operations.

In touching upon General Thomas’s persistence in getting his cavalry ready, it would be very natural for a surface student to quote Secretary Stanton: “If he waits for Wilson to get ready, Gabriel will be blowing his last horn,” and treat it as conclusive proof of Thomas’s dilatoriness and Stanton’s final opinion. But just far enough under the surface to escape the eyes of historical amateurs, lies the splendid and unparalleled fact that in eight winter days after the date of that dispatch General James H. Wilson, Thomas’s chief of cavalry, had impressed horses enough, with those furnished on previous requisitions, to raise the effective mounted force at Nashville from 5500 to 13,500, and that on the eighth day General Wilson went into action with 12,000 mounted men, and had besides one brigade of 1500 men engaged in an independent movement.

At this point a moment’s consideration of the real reasons which caused the outbreak against General Thomas, on the ground that he was slow, will not be out of place. At City Point it was the perfectly natural but sickening anxiety lest it should turn out that a great mistake had been made in letting Sherman march away to the sea, thus possibly opening the way for Hood to the Ohio. At Savannah it was the same fear, intensified by the consciousness that Thomas had been left with unprepared forces to contend against a veteran army which had stubbornly resisted both Thomas and Sherman during the hundred days from Dalton to Atlanta.

And so, while Thomas, as all who were on the ground knew, was making superhuman exertions to prepare fully for the task in hand, he was advised to fight, pressed to fight, ordered to fight, threatened with removal if he did not fight, and his successor dispatched to relieve him. And the underlying cause of it all was the demoralizing fear that Hood might elude or overthrow Thomas and

strike for the Ohio, and the country rise in wrath to inquire why Sherman, with 62,000 thoroughly equipped veterans, including a larger force of mounted men than he left behind, had been allowed to march away from the central theater of war. So great was this fear at Savannah that even after receiving Thomas's dispatch giving an account of the first day's battle at Nashville, which resulted in driving Hood's left eight miles (which movement General Grant characterized as a "splendid success"), Sherman telegraphed that this attack on Hood "was successful but not complete": that he awaited further accounts "with anxiety," as Thomas's complete success was necessary to vindicate his own plan for this campaign.

Throughout all this inside panic in high official circles, only Thomas and the trusted officers who supported him at Nashville were cool and unmoved in the memorable crisis.

THOMAS ORGANIZING HIS ARMY

The concentration and organization of the fragments which finally made up the force with which he practically annihilated his enemy was one of the most remarkable accomplishments of the war. It was prosecuted and consummated in the immediate presence of the enemy, and a large portion of the work was performed during the continued movement, constant skirmishing, frequent affairs, and one great battle of an active campaign.

Arriving at Nashville, the first point of concentration, General Thomas, after careful study of the situation, decided upon his plan of battle. It included, as one of its essentials, the remounting of an effective force of cavalry. From the moment his plans were formed the utmost energy was put forth to prepare for their execution. Greater or more effective activity was never exerted in the Union army than was manifest at Nashville throughout this period. Every stroke of effort was directed toward the predetermined end, with the result which the country knows.

Naturally, the part played by the cavalry in our great battles was often concealed or minimized, while the infantry operations filled the public eye and for the time dimmed the credit due to the cavalry arm. The history of the war does not afford another case where the cavalry formed the determining factor, and, notwithstanding this, where it was so largely overlooked in the distribution of the honors.

It is necessary to a full understanding of the brilliancy, efficiency, and completeness of Thomas's final movements to have in mind the situation after General Sherman had marched away from Hood and left Thomas in Tennessee to stand between that veteran Confederate army and the Ohio.

Preparatory to the march to the sea the great army about Atlanta had been carefully inspected both as to men and equipments. Every weak man, all convalescents, those whose terms of service were expiring – in short, all the “trash,” as General Sherman expressed it – were sent to the rear, that is, to Thomas. All equipments of infantry, artillery, and cavalry were examined, and every weak or worn piece replaced by new, and all the “trash” either destroyed or “sent to Thomas.” The entire cavalry force was dismounted for close inspection and for the perfect remounting of Kilpatrick's column. Of the sound men whom Thomas received he lost 15,000 by expiration of terms of service and previous furloughs to vote, within a week after Hood's movement began.

After this sifting of the armies General Sherman started for the sea with 62,000 veterans, of whom he wrote that “all on this exhibit may be assumed to have been able-bodied, experienced soldiers, well armed, well equipped and provided, so far as human foresight could, with all the essentials of life, strength, and vigorous action.” With this force was included the entire equipment of trains, pontoons, and similar essentials which Thomas, with great care, had perfected for the army of the Cumberland. Thomas's request that he might have his old corps which he had organized, which had fought under him so long, was refused, and, instead, two small corps were sent him.

The nucleus around which General Thomas was to organize an army to take care of Hood – who from May till November had taxed the offensive resources of Sherman's three armies – was, the Fourth Corps, General Stanley, with an effective force of 13,907, and the Twenty-third, General Schofield, with 10,358 effectives.

The means of holding Chattanooga are indicated by the instructions from Sherman to Steedman, whose troops had almost dwindled away by expiration of service: “You must organize and systematize the hospitals and men sent back to Chattanooga. You could use some of them for your forts,” and it was suggested to Thomas: “To make things sure, you might call upon the Governors of Kentucky and Indiana for some militia, cautioning them against a stampede.” Thomas was so short of men that when Steedman asked for enough for a small but important garrison, he was obliged to reply: “You might send a force from the organization of convalescents now being made up by General

Cruft at Chattanooga.” To which Steedman replied, “So far, all such detachments reported from the front [Sherman] are with furloughs, and are waiting transportation home.”

In place of the 15,000 veterans whose terms had expired, Thomas received 12,000 newly enlisted recruits. General A. J. Smith’s veteran corps had been ordered from Missouri, and a great parade has been made of this fact by those whose interest it was to show that Thomas had been left with a competent force. But the fact that it did not arrive at Nashville till after the battle of Franklin, and that Thomas was waiting for it as well as to remount the cavalry, was not so loudly proclaimed.

However, when Sherman was ready to start for the sea, with Hood’s veteran army concentrated behind him, and Thomas, with the above mentioned elements of an army scattered over a territory as large as France, had been assigned to take care of Hood, General Sherman telegraphed Halleck: “I therefore feel no uneasiness as to Tennessee, and have ordered Thomas to assume the offensive in the direction of Selma, Ala.” And General Grant, after receiving some inflated figures of a great force left with Thomas, telegraphed Sherman: “With the force you have left with Thomas, he must be able to take care of Hood and destroy him.” Later, when the anxiety at City Point referred to in the opening of this paper had become intense, the margin of force with which General Thomas was really operating was found to be so small that General Grant suggested that he should “arm and put in the trenches your quartermaster employees, citizens, etc.,” and again, a few hours later, he was suggesting what he could do “with your citizen employees armed.”

CONCENTRATING IN FRONT OF HOOD

It was under such circumstances and conditions which, after all, are but faintly shadowed forth by the facts here stated, that General Thomas began to concentrate his conglomerate forces in Hood's front, and begin under fire the work of organizing and refitting an army. With superhuman effort, and such loyal assistance and energy from officers and soldiers as were not elsewhere exhibited during the war, because not previously required, General Thomas set about the task of preparing the means of overthrowing Hood. Deliberate action and the extreme of prudence were essentials of the situation. The objective of Hood's campaign, under suggestions from President Davis, was the Ohio River. There was no reserve force in sight or within summoning distance, or immediately available anywhere in case of reverses. Thomas could not afford to take the slightest risks so long as his own position was not imperilled. It was not alone the immediate interests confided to his keeping and defense which hinged upon his success or failure, but both Grant and Sherman and possibly the Union itself were to stand or fall with such success or failure. Had Hood succeeded, as at the first he might have succeeded without fault of Thomas, or even fair ground for reflection upon him, what would have been said of Sherman for marching off to the sea, leaving the central West without sufficient protection, or of General Grant for having allowed him to go?

And because the deliberate, prudent, imperturbable, and always successful Thomas appreciated the situation, and determined to be ready to annihilate his enemy before he struck, he was hastily declared to be slow by those he was preparing to save.

All of General Thomas's troubles at Nashville arose from his adhering, in the face of threatened removal, to plans of action which made General Wilson's cavalry an essential factor in the attack on Hood for which he was energetically preparing. He was looking not only to attack, but to crushing pursuit. In view of the great preponderance of the enemy's cavalry, which was then double his own, and led by Forrest, one of the ablest cavalry generals on either side, effective pursuit without a strong mounted force would be impossible.

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