“Control and Inspire”
General George H. Thomas, the Fourteenth Army Corps, and Devolved Command at the Battle of Chickamauga

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At the Battle of Chickamauga on 20 September 1863, the fate of the Army of the Cumberland hinged on the inspired leadership of Major General George H. Thomas and the battlefield initiative from subordinates at division, brigade and regimental level. Thomas’s XIV Corps, supported by elements from the XX, XXI, and Reserve Corps, sustained the army on the field and preserved its withdraw to Chattanooga after the disintegration of the army’s center and right flank on the second day of battle through necessary application of devolved command. Thomas skillfully exercised tactical control as senior officer, but the ultimate success of the Army of the Cumberland hinged significantly upon divisional and brigade commanders who effectively executed the orders disseminated from their superiors through careful inspection of the terrain, coordination with supporting units, and assessment of enemy intentions. The battle against the Army of the Cumberland’s left flank was defined by fluidity of action: corps and divisional organizational control quickly dissolved, pitting brigade against brigade in short, bloody engagements on ground governed by thick, forested, and sloped terrain. Thomas’s command—due to low visibility and the absence of real-time communication to rapidly coordinate large troop movements—devolved to division and brigade level control where officers attempted to concentrate and control massed fired against enemy advances. With battle swaying to and fro, the outcome was determined by the officers that properly assessed the battlefield conditions, mutual trust and coordination between division and brigade chiefs, the timely arrival of reinforcements, and the inability of the spent force to respond to the new threat on the ground and up the chain of command. This study will examine devolved command—the breakdown of military command protocol due to the fluidity of battle—from the commanding general of the army, Major General William S. Rosecrans, down to his senior corps commander, General Thomas, the XIV Corps, and the amalgamated forces that coalesced around Thomas’s
position on the army’s left flank after the Confederate breakthrough on the afternoon of the 20
September. General Rosecrans, upon reaching Chattanooga after his inglorious retreat from the
front, reported the army’s abrupt reversal to his superior in Washington, General-in-Chief Henry
W. Halleck: “We have met with a serious disaster extent not yet ascertained. Enemy
overwhelmed us, drove our right, pierced our center, and scattered our troops.” But, command of
the army had devolved to Thomas, “who had seven divisions, remained intact at last news,” and
was reinforced by Major General Gordon Granger’s Reserve Corps.1 George Thomas and the
forces under his command were “determined the hold the position until nightfall . . .”.2

At 10:45 A.M. on September 19, an hour after escalating a light skirmish into a major
pitched-battle, Major General George Thomas sent a message to Major General Thomas L.
Crittenden, commanding the XXI Corps: “If another division can be spared, it would be well to
send it up without any delay.”3 The Army of the Cumberland’s command system had devolved.
In describing the character of fighting at Chickamauga, historian Glenn Tucker compared the
battle to Gettysburg. In contrast to the clearly defined and static battles lines in Pennsylvania,
Chickamauga was defined by fluid action. Tucker details the battle’s fluctuation: “the two armies
surged continuously back and forth at each other through the woods and across the clearings.”4 If
a unit’s assault failed or petered-out, it gathered “new strength from a reinforcing [unit] and
plunged forward to the full limit of [its] strength.”5 Further, the opposing forces at Gettysburg
“were relatively stable in the positions they assumed at the beginning of the combat.”6 General

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1 The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (70 vols. in
4 Glenn Tucker. Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West (Indianapolis & New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company,
5 Tucker. Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West, 124.
6 Tucker. Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West, 124.
George G. Meade shifted elements of the Army of the Potomac during the three-day battle, effectively taking advantage of his interior lines, but “most of the corps, division, and brigades held or returned to their original positions.” At Chickamauga, General William Rosecrans deferred operational control of the army during the battle to his senior corps commander, George Thomas. Rosecrans’s responded to Thomas’s incessant calls for reinforcements by breaking off the divisions of Crittenden’s XXI and Major General Alexander McDowell McCook’s XX Corps and detaching them to support the XIV Corps. The commanding general, writes Tucker, “did not hesitate to issue orders to divisions and brigades directly.” Consequently, Rosecrans deprived his corps commanders of their function, “and at times without their knowledge personally assigned units to new positions in the line.” Rosecrans’ position as commanding general and the circumstances of battle necessitated his direct intervention, especially the placement of divisions and brigades, but his failure to properly and clearly communicate with commanders doomed the army on September 20.

The Chickamauga Campaign of 1863 was the Union’s attempt to build upon the momentum of summer victories in southcentral Pennsylvania at Gettysburg and along the Mississippi River at Vicksburg by delivering a major blow to the principal Confederate army in the Western theater. Through deception and audacious maneuver, the Army of the Cumberland cleared Confederate forces from Middle Tennessee, seized the logistical center at Chattanooga, and opened the road to Atlanta without provoking a major engagement by the first week of September. Major General William S. Rosecrans believed that Confederate losses earlier that summer had severely demoralized General Braxton Bragg’s Army of the Tennessee. The Union

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army’s relatively bloodless victories in securing Middle Tennessee and Chattanooga convinced much of the Union high command that the Confederate army was nearing complete collapse. Looking to profit off of the Confederates’ low morale, and emboldened by the successes of his brilliantly executed Tullahoma Campaign, Rosecrans continued his strategy of relentless, wide-flanking movements to cut off Bragg’s retreat to force battle or carry the campaign to Atlanta. However, unbeknownst to Rosecrans and senior commanders, the Federal army’s four corps, dangerously dispersed along a forty-mile front without mutual support, was not actually pursuing the remnants of Bragg’s depleted, broken command. Rather, Rosecrans unwittingly led his men into a Confederate concentration: thousands of reinforcements recently organized and directed to the defense of Georgia. This sizable contingent of Confederates threatened to cut off the Federal army from its supply base at Chattanooga, isolate its scattered corps, and terminate the army’s advance in piecemeal fashion. However, the fortuitous blundering of the Bragg’s high command, combined with the hasty organization and execution of Confederate battle plans allowed Rosecrans to escape the trap, concentrate his corps, and preserve intact his army for the forthcoming battle.

In his after action report written in October 1863, General William S. Rosecrans’s specified the Army of the Cumberland’s mission after the expulsion of General Braxton Bragg’s forces from Middle Tennessee: Chattanooga. As Rosecrans’s repeatedly stressed in his official report and letters to the *Army and Navy Journal*, control of Chattanooga was essential for its “southern entrance into East Tennessee, the most valuable if not the chief sources of supplies of coal for the manufactories and machine-shop of the Southern states, and [it] is the great gateways through the mountains to the champaign counties of Georgia and Alabama.”\(^\text{10}\) By September 8,

\(^{10}\) *Official Records*, Ser. I, Vol. XXX, Pt. 1, 47.
Rosecrans’s had achieved this objective; the Tullahoma Campaign launched on June 24th from Murfreesboro—a feint to Bragg’s left with a simultaneous flanking maneuver to the right—forced the Confederate army’s withdrawal from strong defensives positions at Manchester back toward Chattanooga by the Fourth of July.\footnote{Larry J. Daniel, \textit{Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland, 1861-1865} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 266-277.} However, the Army of the Cumberland’s stunning campaign of maneuver and deception, covering 80 miles over eleven days at the cost of less than 600 men, was hampered by torrential rain which bogged down the Federal marching columns, and allowed Bragg to escape the Federals’ pincher movement aimed to cut off Confederate withdrawal from Manchester to Tullahoma. The Confederates’ escape frustrated the Union War Department, who quickly made their displeasure known to Rosecrans. Henry Halleck expressed this sentiment with a deliberate jab at Rosecrans’s pace, writing, “There is great disappointment felt here at the slowness of your advance. Unless you move more rapidly, your whole campaign will prove a failure, and you will have both Bragg and [Joseph] Johnston against you.”\footnote{Daniel. \textit{Days of Glory}, 276.}

Although wounded by Washington’s inability to grasp the logistical difficulties of this maneuvering and appreciate his relatively bloodless campaign in which has army turned Bragg away from Middle Tennessee, Rosecrans nevertheless, directed his force past “the first great barrier (Cumberland Mountains) between it and the objective point on the banks of the Tennessee.”\footnote{Official Records, Ser. I, Vol. XXX, Pt. 1, 47.}

However, the War Department’s critiques were, perhaps, not entirely off base. The campaign that brought the Union army to the gates of Chattanooga, and ultimately into Georgia, revealed major command, control and communication issues that would only be magnified to the
great detriment of the army on the dense fields of Chickamauga. First, as described by historian Larry J. Daniel, was Rosecrans’s unwillingness to reveal his master plans to his corps commanders; rather, the commanding general “gave only one day’s instructions at a time, apparently so that his lieutenants could not divulge the big picture.”\textsuperscript{14} Bragg’s inability to discern Rosecrans’s feints during the Tullahoma Campaign momentarily diminished the lack of transparency amongst the Federal high command. Second, Rosecrans’s successful maneuver from Murfreesboro to Tennessee—three major marching columns from the four corps that comprised the army (the XIV, XX, XXI and Reserve Corps)—dispersed the army on routes funneled through narrow gaps on elevated terrain (Bellbuckle, Liberty, and Hoover) beyond mutual support.\textsuperscript{15} Rosecrans capture of the city on September 9\textsuperscript{th} achieved his major objective and removed Bragg’s threat to Middle Tennessee. Historian Glenn Tucker describes the opportunities that this situation presented to the Union commander: “Rosecrans might at this stage have reversed the march of Thomas and McCook (XX Corps) and concentrated these two corps with that of Crittenden (XXI Corps) at Chattanooga,” and then, with the city as a base, faced south and conduct “a more orderly campaign against Bragg’s army and Atlanta.”\textsuperscript{16} At 10:00 A.M. on September 9\textsuperscript{th}, Rosecrans “ordered a general pursuit of the enemy, with McCook advancing to Alpine, Thomas passing through McLemore’s Cove and over Pigeon Mountain at La Fayette and Crittenden to Ringgold.”\textsuperscript{17} Captain Horace Porter, attached to army command from the Ordnance Department, expressed the sentiment from headquarters as the army initiated

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\textsuperscript{14} Daniel, \textit{Days of Glory}, 267.  \\
\textsuperscript{15} Daniel, \textit{Days of Glory}, 267.  \\
\textsuperscript{16} Glenn Tucker. \textit{Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West}, 29.  \\
\textsuperscript{17} Daniel, \textit{Days of Glory}, 300.
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its pursuit from Chattanooga: “The Rebel army is retreating through Georgia, and we are following as fast as we can drag our artillery.”

Unfortunately, Rosecrans’s telegrams to the War Department in which he detailed Bragg’s ignominious retreat fueled pressure from Washington to immediately push forward. In response, the Army of the Cumberland continued “advancing on a wide front through the mountains,” to interpose it “between the enemy and Atlanta, or possibly strike Bragg a flank blow as he marched south, and bag or annihilate his entire army.” In his haste to follow up his earlier successes with a major battle victory, Rosecrans’s misread Bragg as the Confederate army retired south and east from Chattanooga toward La Fayette, concentrated, and awaited reinforcements. The commanding general, writes staff officer Lieutenant Henry Cist, was keenly aware that brilliant campaigns “without battles, do not accomplish the destruction of the army.” Rosecrans, writing with hindsight, grasped “that the enemy was concentrating all his forces, both infantry and cavalry, behind Pigeon Mountain, in the vicinity of La Fayette,” and “that the main body of [Joseph] Johnston’s army had joined Bragg,” with additional rebel reinforcements from Virginia. Rosecrans’s ends the passage with a sense of urgency that has been refuted by historians: “It was therefore a matter of life and death to effect the CONCENTRATION OF THE ARMY.”

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18 Daniel, Days of Glory, 300.
19 Daniel, Days of Glory, 299-300.
On the evening of September 12, General Thomas reported to headquarters that “a large force is concentrated at La Fayette.” The report confirmed that the enemy attack on the eleventh against the XIV Corps (Major General James S. Negley’s Second Division and Brigadier General Absalom Baird’s First Division) at Davis’s Crossroads portended a major Confederate movement against the dispersed Union army. Thomas’s report, combined with intelligence from civilian contraband that observed large number of Confederate troops advancing toward La Fayette was delivered to Chief of Staff, Brigadier General James Garfield, on the tenth. William Rosecrans did not to alter the army’s wide pursuit of Braxton Bragg. Rather, Rosecrans, in response to Thomas report that the Second Division “was attacked by an overwhelming force, replied with his belief that “General Negley withdrew more through prudence than compulsion.” But, by the late afternoon of the twelfth, Rosecrans, writes historian Larry Daniel, “had at long last begun to heed Thomas’s warnings of a sizeable concentration on the east side of Pigeon Mountain and began recalling the XXI Corps (Rosecrans ordered Major Thomas J. Crittenden in pursuit of Bragg on the eleventh) toward the La Fayette Road in a measured, though yet not frantic, attempt to connect his left and center wings (XIV Corps).”

Rosecrans’s restrained tones amplified as additional reports confirmed a large concentration of rebel forces. Chief of Staff Garfield’s message from headquarters to Major General Gordon Grander, commanding the Reserve Corps, noted Rosecrans’s response: “The enemy has concentrated in vicinity of La Fayette and attacked one of General Thomas’ columns

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yesterday, between Dug and Steven’s Gaps, with superior force. We are concentrating the army
to support General Thomas and fight a general battle.”

The Army of the Cumberland’s concentration, as ordered by Rosecrans, directed “McCook, spread out in the region of Alpine, to close on Thomas; Thomas’ and then McCook’s corps would pour out of Stevens Gap to contact with Crittenden at Crawfish Springs and at Lee and Gordon’s Mill.”

The army’s concentration consumed four days, but by the night of September 17, “Rosecrans’ three corps were in supporting distance of one another.”

On the battle’s eve, September 18, the recently arrived Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana, reported the army’s disposition to Washington: “Our troops are now being drawn toward our left (Thomas XIV Corps) as much as possible. Rosecrans has not yet determined whether to make a night march and fall on them at daylight or await their onset.”

It was George Thomas, not the commanding general, that “forced the fighting on the Confederate right, other divisions, both Union and Confederate, moved into the battle, each marching to the rescue of belabored force as both sides clamored for help. Only gradually, writes historian Freeman Cleaves, “did the battle become general.”

John Fitch, the Army of the Cumberland’s Provost Judge, succinctly described the fluid nature and effect of terrain on the battle’s first day. The battle, writes Fitch, “raged along hillsides and amid forests and ravines,” with the “army’s lines extended over nearly three miles of ground; only by the smoke that rose above the heights, and dust that ascended above the forest-trees in the valley, or as the cannon’s roar and the rattling discharges of musketry were

30 Tucker. Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West, 105.
31 Tucker. Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West, 105-6.
heard upon surrounding hills, could the observed note the ebb and flow of the tide of battle.”

Charles Dana’s report to Secretary of War at 3:20 P.M. affirms Fitch’s detail: “The battle is fought altogether in a thick forest, and is invisible to outsiders. [The] line is 2 miles long.” The commanding general, writes Fitch, “who was at the right (Headquarters at the Widow Glenn’s farm) personally inspecting the lines, arranging batteries, &c., instructed Thomas to hold his position on the main road(s) (Reed’s Bridge and La Fayette) by all possible means, and that, if necessary, should be amply reinforced.” In fact, George Thomas’ requested and was sent support with the divisions of Major General John Palmer (XXI Corps) and Brigadier General Richard W. Johnson (XX Corps), devolving the commands of Thomas Crittenden and Alexander McCook.

“No signal advantage had enured to either sider when the day’s conflict closed,” writes Fitch, but the army maintained its position with the expectation “that the next day’s contest must be for the preservation of the army and holding of Chattanooga.”

Prior to summoning an evening council of war with the Army of the Cumberland’s senior officers, commanding General William Rosecrans reported the condition of his army to General-in-Chief Henry Halleck in Washington. The army, Rosecrans began, “just concluded a terrific day’s fighting and have another in prospect for to-morrow. The enemy attempted to turn our left, but his design was anticipated, and a sufficient force placed there to render his attempt abortive.” The sufficient force, as reported by George Thomas to Rosecrans at 7:10 P.M, had Generals “Brannan’s right occupying the slopes of Mission[ary] Ridge, Reynolds next, Palmer

next, and Baird on the left.”⁴⁰ Rosecrans’s message concluded with encouragement for the twentieth: “The army is in excellent condition and spirits, and, by the blessing of Providence, the defeat of the enemy will be total to-morrow.”⁴¹ At the conference of corps and division commanders, Alexander McCook, Thomas Crittenden, and Thomas “explained the disposition of their commands and the assembled generals debated possible improvements,”⁴² states historian Peter Cozzens. Thomas expected an attack “against his left flank, near the McDonald house, from the direction of Reed’s Bridge,”⁴³ and requested reinforcements. Thomas’s entreaty to the council as he dozed in and out on sleep was simple: “I would strengthen the left.”⁴⁴ Despite Rosecrans’s rhetorical reply, “Where are we going to take it from?”⁴⁵, the commanding general proceeded to support his senior commander. Rosecrans, details Daniels, “abandoned Lee and Gordon’s Mill and constricted his line to put most of his muscle on the left (six divisions under Thomas), with McCook on the right (two divisions), and Crittenden (two divisions) in reserve.”⁴⁶ The conference ended at 2 A.M. Thomas rode back to his headquarters along the Union army’s left flank. By noon, command of the Army of the Cumberland devolved to him.

At 6 A.M., Major General Thomas sent a third request for reinforcements to army headquarters. Thomas stated that his left (General Thomas Brannan’s Second Division) did not “extend to the road that branches off at McDonald’s house to Reed’s Bridge,”⁴⁷ and he requested Major General James Negley’s Fourth Division of his corps (detached south of Dyer Road under

⁴³ Cozzens. *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga*, 294.
⁴⁴ Daniel, *Days of Glory*, 323.
⁴⁵ Cozzens. *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga*, 294-95.
General McCook) to be placed on his “left immediately.” Historian Francis F. McKinney contends that by requesting the detached Fourth Division, Thomas was “evolving a defense for his threatened wing.” Thomas “would mass those batteries of his divisional artillery which could not be used along his barricades, on the shoulders of Missionary Ridge some six or seven hundred years west of McDonald’s house whence they could sweep the clearings over which the Rebel enveloping movement would have to pass.” In his after-action report, Thomas stated that Negley’s division was directed to support General Absalom Baird’s First Division, specifically Brigadier General John H. King’s Regular Brigade that faltered and broke the previous day, and if “stressed too hard both would fall back on the batteries, where guns and footmen would give each other mutual support.”

At 8:30 A.M., Thomas’s left flank was overlapped by the Confederate division under General John C. Breckinridge. Fortuitously, the vanguard of Negley’s division, Brigadier General John Beatty’s First Division, arrived on the field and extended the “line west from the left of the Regulars, facing it north.” McKinney describes Thomas’s application of Beatty’s brigade, refusing and extending the thin left flank, as a choice of improvisations. Unfortunately, Baird’s line was quickly overlapped which uncovered King’s and Beatty’s brigades. In his official battle report, submitted on September 30, Thomas detailed the command breakdown and fluid assault against his left flank:

The enemy at that time commenced a furious assault on Baird’s left, and partially succeeded in gaining his rear. Beatty, meeting with superior numbers, was compelled to fall back until relieved by the fire of several regiments of Palmer’s reserve, which I had

50 McKinney. Education in Violence, 239.
51 McKinney. Education in Violence, 239.
52 McKinney. Education in Violence, 239.
ordered to support of the left, being placed in position by General Baird, and which
regiments, with the cooperation of [Colonel Ferdinand] Van Derveer’s brigade of
Brannan’s division and a portion of [Colonel Timothy R.] Stanley’s brigade of Negley’s
division, drove the enemy entirely from Baird’s left and rear. General Baird being still
hardly pressed in front, I ordered General Wood (Second Division, XX Corps), who had
just reported to me in person, to send one of the brigades of his division to General Baird.
He replied that his division had been ordered by General Rosecrans to support Reynolds’
right, but that he would cheerfully obey them, and sent Barnes’ brigade, the head of
which had just reached my position.53

Thomas’s line was enveloped on both flanks. “At the time the assault just described was
made on the Baird,” writes Thomas, “the enemy attacked Johnson, Palmer, and Reynolds, with
equal fierceness, which was continued at least two hours, making assault after assault with fresh
troops, which were met by my troops with a most determined coolness and deliberation.”54

Thomas’s report reveals the breakdown of corps and divisional operational control. The
general pattern of the second day’s battle decentralized to “fighting by brigades,” writes
Tucker.55 The timely arrival of Reynolds’s division, the mutual coordination between the
conglomerated divisions and brigades under Thomas, and the battlefield initiative of
commanders as exhibited by General Wood secured the Confederate breakthroughs and
stimulated counterattacks to retake lost ground. Thomas had thirteen brigades on the field, but
understood the “disastrous results should the La Fayette road be cut, continued his requests for
more reinforcements,”56 writes Daniel. Rosecrans again approved and dispatched the divisions of
Generals Phillip H. Sheridan (XX Corps) and Horatio P. Van Cleve (XXI Corps). The result,
Daniel’s argues, was the “organizational mess and the confused movement of many units,” the

55 Tucker, Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West, 164.
56 Daniel, Days of Glory, 326.
dissolution of Alexander McCook and Thomas Crittenden’s corps, and “the further weakening of the center and right.”

General Thomas Wood’s confused movement proved catastrophic to General William Rosecrans and the center and right of the Army of the Cumberland. George Thomas called for the support of his Third Division, General John Brannan’s (believing it was in reserve) placed on the XIV Corps’ line the evening of September 19. Thomas made a second call for the division and sent his nephew-aide, Captain Sanford Kellogg to Brannan, “unaware that one of its brigades was already on the way and that Brannan remained in line with the other two.” Thomas, after receiving Brannan’s “earlier message that he was in line, cancelled the order, a fact not immediately known to Kellogg,” explains Daniel. Kellogg passed in the rear from General Joseph Reynolds to Wood’s position, and “thought Reynolds’ flank was in the air, not being able to discern his communication with Brannan, not to see anything whatever of Brannan’s division through the numerous trees and heavy foliage between the Glenn Kelly and La Fayette roads.”

Calamitously, Kellogg reported to the commanding general “that as he had passed he noticed ‘Brannan was out of line and Reynolds’ flank exposed.’” General Rosecrans responded to Thomas’s initial request for support received at 10:30: “Yes; tell him to dispose of Brannan, who has only one brigade [Brannan had two] in line and to hold his position, and we will reinforce him, if need be, with all the right.” Rosecrans, writes Daniels, ignored the chain of command and directed Major Frank S. Bond with orders for Wood: “If Brannan goes out, Wood must fill his place. Write him that the commanding general directs him to close on the left on Reynolds.

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60 Tucker, *Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West*, 253-54.
and support him.” In his after-action report, Rosecrans states that Wood overlooked “the direction to ‘close up’ on General Reynolds, supposed he was to support him, by withdrawing from the line and passing to the rear of General Brannan, who, it appears, was not out of line, but was en échelon, and slightly in the rear of Reynolds right. By this unfortunate mistake a gap was opened in the line of battle, of which the enemy took instant advantage, and striking [General Jefferson C.] Davis in the flank and rear, as well as in front, threw his whole division in confusion.” Daniel asserts that Wood interpreted the order literally and began pulling three brigades out of line to fill a gap that did not exist, thus creating an actual gap.”

At 12:15 A.M., after Confederate General James Longstreet, recently arrived from Virginia, delivered a sledgehammer blow against Wood’s vacated position, General Rosecrans ordered Thomas to assume “command of all forces,” and “take a strong position and assume a threatening attitude at Rossville.” General Rosecrans and his staff, positioned directly behind the Union center, witnessed first-hand the Confederate breakthrough as General Van Cleve’s division of Crittenden’s corps “fell to pieces.” Rosecrans tried in vain to “rally, reform, and send fugitives back to the battle,” but the flight of the army’s right and center could not be stemmed. Rosecrans, after meeting McCook, attempted to join “Thomas by the way of the Dry Valley road,” but was caught in the army’s backwash which forced his retreat to Rossville and Chattanooga. Rosecrans, in Daniel’s estimation, “had lost control of his army.”

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63 Daniel, Days of Glory, 327.
65 Daniel, Days of Glory, 327.
68 Lamers. The Edge of Glory, 351.
69 Lamers. The Edge of Glory, 352.
70 Daniel, Days of Glory, 329.
commanding general’s inglorious flight from the field to Chattanooga removed him from the battle, both physically and emotionally. The commanding general was soon joined by McCook and Crittenden, leaving Thomas to command the field.

George Thomas heard the deafening commotion of the Confederate breakthrough on his right and rear at 2 P.M. He expected General Sheridan’s division detached from the XX Corps to be arriving on the field. Thomas, after hearing the heavy firing “turned in that direction and was riding to the slope of the hill in [his] rear to ascertain the cause.” Thomas met his nephew-aide, Captain Kellogg “reported to [Thomas] that in attempting to reach General Sheridan he had met a large force in an open corn-field to the rear of Reynolds’ position, advancing cautiously, with a strong line of skirmishers thrown out to their front.” Thomas met General Wood as he attempted to ascertain the unidentified force. Wood, writes Thomas, “confirmed the opinion that the troops advancing upon [him] were the enemy, although [they] were not then aware of the disaster the right and center of the army.”

The disaster fell upon General Jefferson C. Davis’s division of the McCook’s Corps. Major General McCook, in accordance to Rosecrans’s orders “to send two brigades of General Sheridan’s division at once and will all possible dispatch to support General Thomas,” observed, to his surprise, “Wood’s division left the position it held in line of battle on Davis’ left, marching by the left flank, leaving a wide gap in the line of battle.” As a result, writes McCook, Wood’s First Brigade commanded by Colonel George P. Buell “had scarcely marched more than its length when a most furious and impetuous assault was made by the enemy, in overwhelming

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numbers, on this portion of the line, the enemy’s lines of battle extending from beyond [General John] Brannan’s right (XIV Corps) to a point far to the right of the Widow Glenn’s house, and in front of the strong position just abandoned by General Sheridan’s two brigades.”

General Sheridan details the Confederate assault and the disintegration of the XX Corps as he attempted to march his division to support Thomas: “the enemy had assaulted Davis furiously in front and flank, and driven from his line.” In response, General McCook, “ordered [Colonel Bernard] Laiboldt’s brigade (Sheridan’s division) to charge by deploying to the front,” but the attack “failed to check the enemy’s heavy lines, and broke also and fell to the read.”

Brigadier General William H. Lytle’s First Brigade, at the head of Sheridan’s division, passed “along the rear of the ground where this disaster took place—in column on the road—en route to Thomas, as hundreds of fugitives rushed back, McCook directed [Sheridan] to throw in Lytle’s and [Colonel Luther P.] Bradley’s brigades. The XX Corps’ attempt to stem the Confederate breakthrough was futile. General Sheridan’s division, writes McCook, was “overwhelmed by numbers, [and] compelled to abandon its position in order to save itself from complete annihilation or capture.”

These five brigades of the XX Corps “were cut off and separated from the remainder of the Army of the Cumberland.”

As the Army of the Cumberland’s right and center folded, General George Thomas “rode to the crest of the hill [Snodgrass].” As Union soldiers retreat north toward Dyer Field, the Confederates attempted to carry their momentum through the field “where they could advance in the rear of Thomas’s salient.”

Colonel Morton C. Hunter’s 82nd Indiana (John M. Connell’s
brigade, Brannan’s division) was one of several regiments that “turned and began small, resolute attempts to check the oncoming gray tide.”**81 Hunter declared he would not retreat another inch. Historian Glenn Tucker contends that this sentiment “was the beginning of the Snodgrass Hill rally so fateful to the future of the Federal army.”**82 Positioned at the intersection of the Glenn-Kelly and Vittetoe Roads was General Wood’s Third Brigade, commanded by Colonel Charles G. Harker, that provided a rallying point “for units still disposed to carry on the battle.”**83 Daniel contends that the Union army “used the Wood-Harker stand to consolidate their position on Horseshoe Ridge,” where a “rag-tag line of four thousand men formed about 12:45 P.M., compose of some of Thomas’s reserve units from Kelly field sector and refugees from the center, all under Brannan’s command.”**84

The Army of the Cumberland’s stand on Snodgrass Hill became its defining moment. It was at this instant, prior to the renewed Confederate assaults commenced around 1 P.M., where General George Thomas “electrified the troops with his presence [and] established his headquarters not far from the Snodgrass house.” Thomas told Colonel Charles Harker, “This hill must be held and I trust you to do it.” Harker replied, “We will hold it or die here.”**85 In his after-action report, Harker stated that the men “appreciated the importance of their position, promised to hold to the last,” and nobly redeemed their promise.”**86 Harker’s brigade was “formed in two lines to the left of Brannan, fronting to the south and nearly perpendicular to Reynolds division, then on [his] left.” From 1 P.M. to nightfall, Harker noted, “this line was repeatedly attacked, but remained unbroken. The enemy failing to carry our line from the front, gradually worked around

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**81 Tucker. *Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West*, 286
**82 Tucker. *Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West*, 287
**83 Tucker. *Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West*, 287.
**84 Daniel, *Days of Glory*, 331.
our right and must finally have succeeded but for the timely appearance of” Union reinforcements. General John Brannan wrote in his action-after report that he “formed the remnants of the command (and such stragglers from other commanders [Wood and Van Cleve] as I could rally and bring into position) in line to resist, if possible, the pressure of the now advancing rebels.” In this manner, Brannan elaborated, his division “succeeded in holding the enemy in check for a considerable time, until, finding that the rebels were moving on my right, I swung back my right, and, moving about a half mile to the rear, took up a good position commanding the ridge, General Negley (who had a portion of his command intact) having pledged himself to hold my right and rear.” The Confederate movement against Brannan’s right flank forced the commander to make “every preparation to defend it to the last,” and was assisted with the “arrival of portions of Palmer’s and Negley’s division, and most opportunely re-enforced by Colonel Van Derveer’s brigade.” Brannan states that his command held their position until 3:30 P.M. until reinforcements arrived and extended the Union’s right flank. The reinforcements noted by Harker and Brannan was Major General Gordon Granger’s Reserve Corps.

Captain William C. Russell, Assistant Adjutant-General of the Reserve Corps, delivered a message to Colonel George E. Flynt, Chief of Staff XIV Corps: General Granger (positioned 3 miles north of Horseshoe Ridge) is moving [Brigadier General James B.] Steedman with two brigades to General Thomas’ assistance.” In his after-action report, General Granger stated the second day’s battle escalating intensity could be heard as early as 10:45 A.M: heavy firing,

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which was momentarily increasing volume and intensity on our right in the direction of General Thomas’ position.”

Granger was convinced, “judging from the sound battle, that the enemy were pushing [Thomas] hard, and fearing that he would not be able to resist their combined attack, determined to go to his assistance at once [at 11 A.M.].” Granger left Colonel Daniel McCook’s brigade “at the McAfee Church in position to cover the Ringgold road,” and proceeded to Thomas’s position with the brigades of General Walter C. Whitaker and Colonel John G. Mitchell, “under the immediate command of Steedman.” Thomas was positioned between the La Fayette and Dry roads as “General Gordon Granger appeared on [his] flank at the head of Steedman’s division of his corps.” Thomas immediately ordered Granger “to push forward and take position on Brannan’s right, which order was complied with with the greatest promptness and alacrity.” Steedman, wrote Thomas, moved “his division into position,” and fought “his way to the crest of the hill on Brannan’s right, moved forward his artillery and drove the enemy down the southern slope, inflicting on him a most terrible loss in killed and wounded.” General Granger provided vivid detail of his First Division’s arrival on the field:

The enemy were pressing [Thomas] in front and endeavoring to turn both his flanks. To the right of this position was a ridge running east and west, and nearly at right angles therewith. Upon this enemy were just forming [and] were rapidly moving in large masses, with the design of falling upon the right flank and rear of the forces upon the Horseshoe Ridge. General Thomas had not the troops to oppose this movement of the enemy. As rapidly as possible I formed General Whitaker’s and Colonel Mitchell’s brigades to hurl them against this threatening force of the enemy. The gallant Steedman, seizing the colors of a regiment, led his men to the attack. The victory won, but to this army it was a priceless one.”

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General Steedman reported that “after a severe fight of about twenty-five minutes the enemy was driven from his position, and my troops occupied the ridge from which they were had forced the enemy.” Gordon Granger, without orders, marched to the sound of the guns, and in doing so, secured the army’s threatened left flank, repulsed further Confederate assaults against Thomas’s salient, and allowed General Rosecrans to organize a defense of Rossville and beyond it, Chattanooga.

Throughout the afternoon and evening of September 20, “the Confederates made repeated and savage assaults against Horseshoe Ridge, but the Federal stood firm,” writes Daniel. George Thomas proved to be the Union army’s anchor as his “controlled poised, determination to hold the high ground,” and stabilizing martial presence “kept a defeat from turning into a disaster.” At 4 P.M. Chief of Staff James Garfield arrived to Thomas’s headquarters at Snodgrass Hill to appraise the army’s status to General Rosecrans. Garfield detailed the situation to Rosecrans at 3:45 P. M.: “General Thomas has Brannan’s, Baird’s, Reynolds’, Wood’s, Palmer’s, and Johnson’s divisions still intact after terrible fighting. Granger is here, closed up with Thomas, and is fighting terribly on the right. General Thomas holds nearly his old ground of this morning. The hardest fighting [sic] I have seen to-day is now going on here. I hope General Thomas will be able to hold on here till night, and will not need to fall back farther than Rossville; perhaps not any.” The Chief of Staff believed the army had an opportunity to retrieve its disaster; the commanding general did not.

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99 Daniel, Days of Glory, 332.
100 Daniel, Days of Glory, 332.
Rosecrans’s 12:15 P.M. directive to General Thomas to assume “command of all the forces, and with Crittenden and McCook take a strong position and assume a threatening attitude at Rossville,” was received at 4 P.M. Thomas was “determined to hold the position until nightfall,” but proceeded to resupply his men with ammunition before directing the “division commanders to prepare to withdraw their commands as soon as they received orders.” The army’s withdrawal, Reynolds’s division at the vanguard, passed “through an open woods bordering the State road,” where Thomas was cautioned “that there was a large force of the rebels in these woods, drawn up in line and advancing toward [Thomas].” In response, Thomas directed Reynolds to “form [a] line perpendicular to the State road, changing the head of his column to the left, with his right resting on that road, and the charge the enemy, who were then in his immediate front. This movement, Thomas writes, “was made with the utmost promptitude, and facing to the right while on the march. [Brigadier General John B.] Turchin threw his brigade upon the rebel force, routing them and driving them in utter confusion entirely beyond Baird’s left.” General Reynolds provided detail on the division’s withdrawal engagement in his after-action report: “Arriving at the Rossville road, the command was met by the corps commander in person, and I was directed to form line perpendicular to the Rossville road. This was done General Thomas pointed in the direction and said, “There they are; clear them out.” General Turchin reported that after the command “Forward!” was given, “some few shots were exchanged; I gave the order to charge. The brigade yelled, rushed forward, and broke to pieces the confronting columns of the rebels.” With the road secured, Thomas proceeded to Rossville

“accompanied by Generals Garfield and Gordon Granger, and immediately prepared the place the troops in position at that point.”\textsuperscript{107}

After Thomas’s commanders received their orders to retire, the Confederates made their final concerted effort to break the Union position. “Johnson’s and Baird’s (and Palmer’s) divisions were attacked at the moment of retiring, but they being prepared, retired without confusion or any serious,” Thomas reported.\textsuperscript{108} General Baird’s order to retire to Rossville reached him as “the heavy firing on the right ceased, and it seemed to be the signal for another attack, the most violent of all, upon [his] portion of the line.” Baird reported that “the enemy used artillery, and concentrated the fire of three batteries upon us, while his infantry pressed on with the utmost vigor.”\textsuperscript{109} The withdrawal of Reynold and Palmer’s divisions exposed General Richard Johnson’s right. In his report, Johnson stated “he barely had time to send word to my command to save them from complete destruction.” Fortunately, Johnson’s reserve brigade under the command of Brigadier General August Willich “engage[d] the enemy in four different directions and by his prompt movement he saved the troops from annihilation and capture.”\textsuperscript{110} Willich skillfully executed a contested withdraw and “covered the retreat of the army.”\textsuperscript{111}

George Thomas detailed the position of his command at Rossville to headquarters at 6:45 A.M. on September 21. Thomas commanded divisions from all four of the army corps in a strong defensive position, but was “convinced the position was untenable in face of the odds” opposing him, “as the enemy could easily concentrate upon [his] right flank, which, if driven, would expose [his] center and left to be entirely cut off from communication” with Rosecrans at

Chattanooga. Thomas “therefore advised the commanding general to concentrate the troops” and retire to Chattanooga. Major General Rosecrans provided the battle’s details to the Commander-in-Chief, President Abraham Lincoln at 9 A.M on the twenty-first: After two days of the severest fighting I ever witnessed our right and center were beaten. The left held its position until sunset. Our loss is heavy our troops word down. We have no certainty of holding our position here.” Rosecrans also sent a message to Thomas as he was preparing to withdraw from Rossville: The general commanding directs me to inform you that Sherman and McPherson are ordered to this department. Three cheers! He says, ‘Tell the boys.’

General Rosecrans term as army commander came to premature end as Union reinforcements arrived to Chattanooga. On October 19, Rosecrans was relieved as commanding general of the Army of the Cumberland. The arrival of Generals Sherman and McPherson’s superior, Major General Ulysses S. Grant, marked the beginning of Rosecrans’s participation in the Civil War. His senior corps commander, George H. Thomas earned the sobriquet as the Rock of Chickamauga, and with the appellation came the promotion to head the army. Rosecrans was not the only commander that fled the field at Chickamauga who was purged from the army. Prior to his relief, Rosecrans issued Special Field Orders No. 269. Generals Alexander McCook and Thomas Crittenden were relieved of duty; the XX and XXI Corps was merged to into new IV Corps under General Gordon Granger. Historians, including Glenn Tucker, contend that Rosecrans’s “flight to Chattanooga while the battle was in progress calamitous.”

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Phillip Sheridan echoed this sentiment in his memories, but included McCook and Crittenden, writing: their absence was discouraging to all aware of it.”\textsuperscript{119} The flight of the three senior commanders from the field further devolved the army’s diluted command structure.

George Thomas concluded his after-action report by commending all the troops under his command on September 19-20. Thomas mentioned one corps commander, Granger, and eight divisions from the four army corps that fought under his command during the battle. The XVI Corps’ chief became the nominal commanding general of the army as Rosecrans, McCook, and Crittenden, both willingly and in accordance to orders, relinquished and devolved their commands to Thomas. The Confederate assaults against Thomas’s sector on the twentieth illustrated the chaos as corps and divisional organizational control dissolved, pitting brigade against brigade in short, bloody engagements on ground governed by thick, forested, and sloped terrain. Thomas and his subordinates at the division level responded to the battle’s fluidity of action by properly assessing the circumstances and directing reinforcements to threatened positions. Brigade chiefs, notably on Snodgrass Hill and during the army’s withdrawal to Rossville on the twentieth, demonstrated indispensable initiative by shifting their lines, directing supporting units, and leading counterattacks to secure Thomas’s salient and line of retreat. The War Department’s emissary, Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana, recognized the Army of the Cumberland’s stand under Thomas in his dramatic report to Washington on the afternoon of September 21:

Thomas, finding himself cut off from Rosecrans and the right, at once brought his seven divisions into position for independent fighting. Refusing both his right and left, his line assumed the form of a horse-shoe posted along the slope and crest of a partly wooded ridge. Thomas seemed to have filled every soldier with his own unconquerable firmness. . Our troops were immovable as the rocks they stood on.\textsuperscript{120}

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