

Nashville and Mobile

While Sherman besieged Savannah, General Thomas at Nashville fought what some have called the "decisive battle of the war." Unable to stop Sherman, Hood had turned his army against Thomas at Nashville. A Confederate victory there would have freed Hood's army to proceed east to help Lee.

Thomas, after the fall of Atlanta, had been sent into Tennessee to stop Hood. When Hood moved toward Nashville, Thomas began to gather an army there to stop him. The division under A. J. Smith, following the victory at Tupelo, had been sent to Missouri to hunt for Price, as so many other armies had done. On October 29, while Smith was in western Missouri, Grant ordered him to hurry to Nashville to help Thomas. A forced march of fifteen days brought Smith to St. Louis, where he rested his men until November 23, when they boarded steamboats for the trip to Nashville. With Smith were the 12th, 27th, 32nd, and 35th Iowa Infantry regiments and the 2nd Iowa Artillery. At Nashville, with Major General James H. Wilson's cavalry, were the 2nd, 5th, and 8th Iowa Cavalry.

Meanwhile, Sherman had sent Scofield's 23rd

Army Corps to Thomas, and on November 30, 1864, Scofield had met Hood at Franklin, south of Nashville, and defeated him. Scofield then retired to Nashville, and on December 1 Smith arrived. Thomas now had 55,000 men to meet the expected attack from Hood, who had only about 25,000.

"Smith's Guerrillas" were a cocky lot with supreme confidence in their commander. One bearded veteran is quoted as saying: "We're A. J. Smith's guerrillas. We've been to Vicksburg, Red River, Missouri and about everywhere else . . . and now we're going to Hades if old A. J. orders us."

At Nashville, Thomas had the cavalry under Wilson; the detachment of the Army of the Tennessee under Smith; the 4th Army Corps under General Thomas J. Wood; the 23rd Army Corps under Scofield; and a number of miscellaneous regiments. Hood had three corps commanded by Generals Benjamin F. Cheatham, Alexander P. Stewart, and Stephen D. Lee. Most of Forrest's cavalry had been sent to Murfreesboro to destroy the railroad there. In addition, Hood's army had



GEN. A. J. SMITH

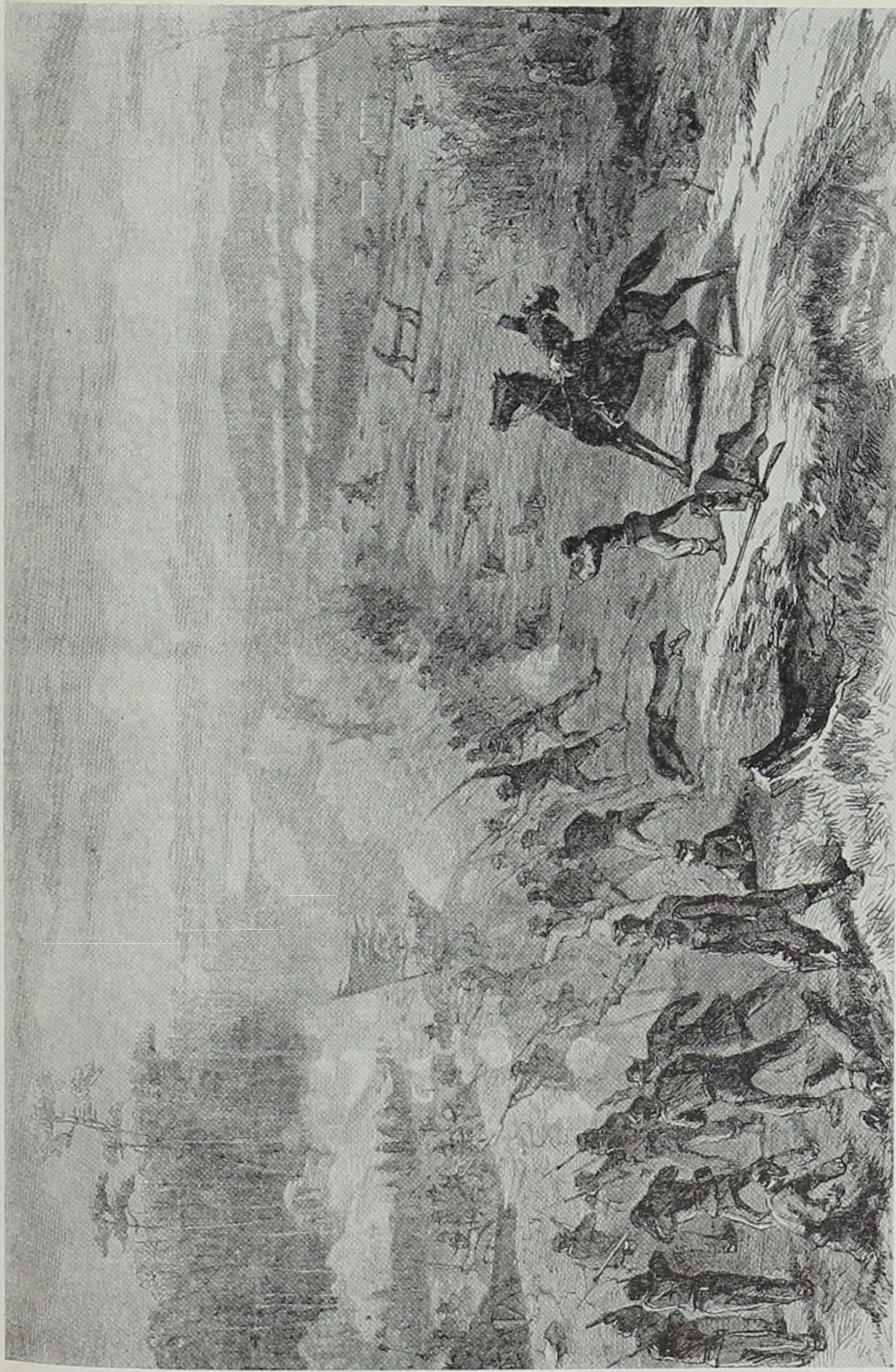
been considerably weakened by the loss of many of its officers at the battle of Franklin. His lines at Nashville were considerably shorter than Thomas' and less well fortified.

Nashville was surrounded by a chain of forts, connected by rifle pits and earthworks, and with heavy guns mounted in the forts. As the troops gathered at Nashville, they were assigned positions in this defensive network. While Grant waited anxiously for news of Thomas, that general, with his usual deliberateness, prepared for the attack. By December 9 he was ready, but an ice storm struck Nashville, making any movement impossible until December 13. Grant, impatient of the delay — he never had liked Thomas — was ready to relieve him from command when the word of victory came.

Thomas had placed his men in an arch before Nashville, reaching from the Cumberland River on each side of the city and pushing out in the center toward the Confederate position. Thus, he flanked Hood on both the right and left. Thomas' left was to feint at Hood's right, while his right, where he had the cavalry and Smith's detachment, was to left wheel against Hood's left. December 15 dawned dark and foggy; not until 10 A. M. could the troops advance as planned. Thomas, on a hilltop in front of Nashville, where he could see the whole battlefield, watched the Union blue move forward relentlessly against

Hood's flanks on the right, while the Union left kept the Confederate right occupied. Soon Hood's left began to crumble, and a steady stream of prisoners moved toward the Union lines — so many at one time that the troops lying in the reserve thought an enemy attack was imminent. By the end of the day some 1,200 prisoners and 16 guns had been taken, and Hood had retired several miles to a line of fortified hills.

On the following day, Hood's shortened line was anchored on his left on Shy's Hill, protected by a stone wall. Smith's first and second brigades tried repeatedly to storm the hill, only to be thrown back time and again. Meanwhile, the third brigade watched. One of the members of the 12th Iowa later described the famous charge which followed: "We could stand it no longer and away we went as one man; it seemed as though every man in the Regiment and Brigade started instantaneously. I have never seen a man yet who heard an order to start on that charge." Rushing through muddy fields, the brigade reached the wall where it had been breached and a cannon placed, trained on the oncoming Yankees. A Confederate major stood alone at the cannon, ready to fire, but before he could pull the lanyard he was overwhelmed by the Iowa men in the advance. Turning the cannon around, they fired the prepared shot at the now retreating enemy.



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“Charge of Third Brigade, First Division, Sixteenth Corps, at the Battle of Nashville.”

This charge broke the back of the Confederate resistance, and Hood's army retired in confusion, with Thomas' men hard after them. A steady December rain soon reduced the roads, trampled by soldiers, horses, and wagons, to a deep mire, and although Thomas tried to pursue Hood as far as possible, he found the movement too slow to catch the flying enemy. On December 30 he abandoned the chase. The remnants of Hood's army retreated into Mississippi, completely destroyed as an army.

Thomas' losses at Nashville were only 3,061 — not heavy, considering the numbers engaged. The Iowa regiments also did not suffer as much as they had in previous battles: 9 killed, 94 wounded, for a total of 103.

Smith's "detachment," as it was now designated, returned to Memphis and in February, 1865, was transferred to the Military Division of West Mississippi at New Orleans, now under command of Major General Edward R. S. Canby. Mobile, long an objective of both Grant and Sherman, was Canby's destination. His orders were to move from the Gulf Coast toward Selma or Montgomery, Alabama, and to capture Mobile. Besides the Iowa regiments with Smith, there were seven with the 13th Army Corps under Major General Gordon Granger: the 19th, 20th, 21st, 23rd, 29th, 33rd, and 34th.

On March 5 the troops left New Orleans by

boat and converged on Mobile Bay. Mobile, situated on the west shore of the bay, was protected on the east side by several forts, including Spanish Fort and Fort Blakely, the two most important. On March 20 the troops landed and moved up toward Spanish Fort, their first objective. Here, a member of the 12th Iowa overheard a conversation between Generals Canby and Smith, in which "Old A. J." further endeared himself to his men:

Canby said to Smith, "General, I understand your men sometimes take things that do not belong to them." Smith replied, "Yes, by G— d—, we will take Mobile, and it don't belong to my men." Canby replied: "No, no, not that." Smith: "Well, then, what is it?" Canby: "Why my cook procured a half dozen turkeys last night, and put them in a coop beside my tent, and this morning I find four of them have been taken." Smith: "Couldn't have been my men, not my men; they would have taken them all, taken them all!"

While part of Canby's army besieged Spanish Fort, troops under General Frederick Steele arrived overland from Florida and invested Fort Blakely, six miles to the north. Smith's 16th Corps was on the right of the line besieging Spanish Fort, while Granger's 13th Corps was on the left.

The siege lasted thirteen days, during which there was much skirmishing and artillery firing. But the forts were strong, and the attacking

Union army suffered many losses. Finally, Canby prepared for a general assault on April 9. During the preceding afternoon, a heavy bombardment hammered Spanish Fort. Under cover of this attack, the 8th Iowa on the extreme right, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William B. Bell, was ordered forward to advance the Union line. Heavily attacked, the regiment, instead of intrenching on a ridge as they had been ordered, continued right on into the fort itself. One Iowa regiment thus took the fort which had held out for so long. Smith and Granger now went to the support of Steele at Fort Blakely, and on the evening of April 9 the combined forces took Fort Blakely. Two days later Mobile was evacuated.

The troops at Mobile did not know for several days that on the very day that Fort Blakely fell, Lee had surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. The last great battle of the war had been fought.

The Iowa losses at Mobile were not heavy. Of the 1,678 casualties in Canby's army, only 175 were Iowans. Of these, 51 were in the 8th Iowa: 8 killed and 43 wounded. The 8th, which had begun its army service at Shiloh, where almost the entire regiment had been captured after its strong stand in the "Hornet's Nest," had closed its career brilliantly in its charge on Spanish Fort.