

Logistics of the Battle of

by Major William Kyle

In September of 1863, just a few months after the Union victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, another battle was fought just south of Chattanooga along a small creek known by its Indian name, the Chickamauga. Although not as widely remembered as the other two, the battle is perhaps equally important. The support provided to the troops on both sides during the days preceding the battle typifies Civil War logistics.

The Union force, around 79,000 strong and under the command of General William Rosecrans, had been pursuing the Confederate Army of Tennessee, led by General Braxton Bragg, south through central Tennessee for several months. Shortly after moving across the Tennessee River, Bragg decided to stop and fight. He was aided in this decision by the Southern government, which felt it needed a victory to boost sagging morale and to stop the Union tide. To ensure this, troops had been dispatched from both west and east to bring Bragg's force to more than 70,000. If the Union troops continued south unopposed, they would control Chattanooga and sever a major east-west rail line. They would also threaten control of eastern Tennessee, the last major source of pork for the South. In 1862 this area had provided some 12 million pounds of meat to the Confederacy, a quantity barely sufficient to meet its needs, but now the area was in danger of being lost.

Control of the lead and saltpeter mines of southwestern Virginia, key elements to Southern ordnance production, would also be threatened. The Confederate war effort could not afford to lose any of these resources. Rosecrans had to be defeated here to regain the initiative for the South and force the Union to send reinforcements from other theaters.

After crossing the Tennessee River, Rosecrans began to probe south and east of Chattanooga to find the enemy he thought was still in retreat. On 18 September the two forces met near MacLamore's Cove and immediately began preparing for battle. The actual fight took place a little farther north in the Valley of the Chickamauga on 19 and 20 September. At the end of 2 days of some of the bloodiest fighting of the war, the Union forces retreated from

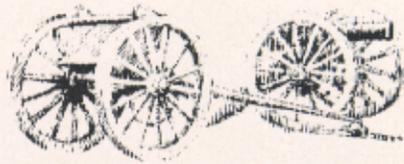
the battlefield defeated. Although Bragg had won the battle, he was not able to capitalize on it. Bragg had achieved one of his goals, forcing the North to send reinforcements to deal with him. The other gains that the South had hoped for, however, never developed.

There are numerous detailed accounts of this battle that give a good picture of how the forces met and how the battle was fought. From these accounts we can develop a good picture of the movement of forces, the strengths of the two armies, the command decisions that were made (or not made), and the bravery of the men involved. What is not so clearly developed, for this or any other Civil War battle, is the great amount of work that had to be done to move and support these forces during the long, hard weeks leading up to Chickamauga. The problems that faced Rosecrans and Bragg in preparing for and supporting the campaign provide some interesting parallels for today's logistician.

All Union forces were provisioned from fixed depots located in Philadelphia, New York, Cincinnati, and Saint Louis. While supplies were generally provided from these locations, it was impossible to supply an army on the march from these cities alone. To solve this problem, forward depots were created as near to the front as possible. Supplies were brought forward to these depots by train and taken forward from there by wagon. To support this campaign, a forward base was established in early August at Stevenson, Alabama, on the northern side of the Tennessee River. More than 60 railcars arrived daily at Stevenson in order to support Rosecrans during the campaign. From Stevenson forward, the movement of supplies became a real challenge.

The South also supported its forces from a number of fixed depots. Bragg received most of his support by rail from Atlanta, with Chattanooga serving initially as a forward depot. When he withdrew from Chattanooga, Bragg had no need to establish another forward depot since he was falling back on his own supply lines. Atlanta would continue to serve as his primary source of supplies, but quartermaster officers would supplement these with goods they req-

Chickamauga



itioned locally as best they could.

On 31 August, Rosecrans's troops began crossing the Tennessee River at several points west of Chattanooga. The crossing was difficult, for there were no bridges intact; men and material had to be ferried across. Most units took only ammunition trains and ambulances across with the troops. Baggage trains carrying personal equipment, mess gear, and rations moved separately and crossed at Bridgeport after a bridge, damaged by Bragg as he retreated, was repaired. Crossing the Tennessee without most of their supply wagons did not pose a serious problem, as each soldier had been ordered to carry 3 days' marching rations.

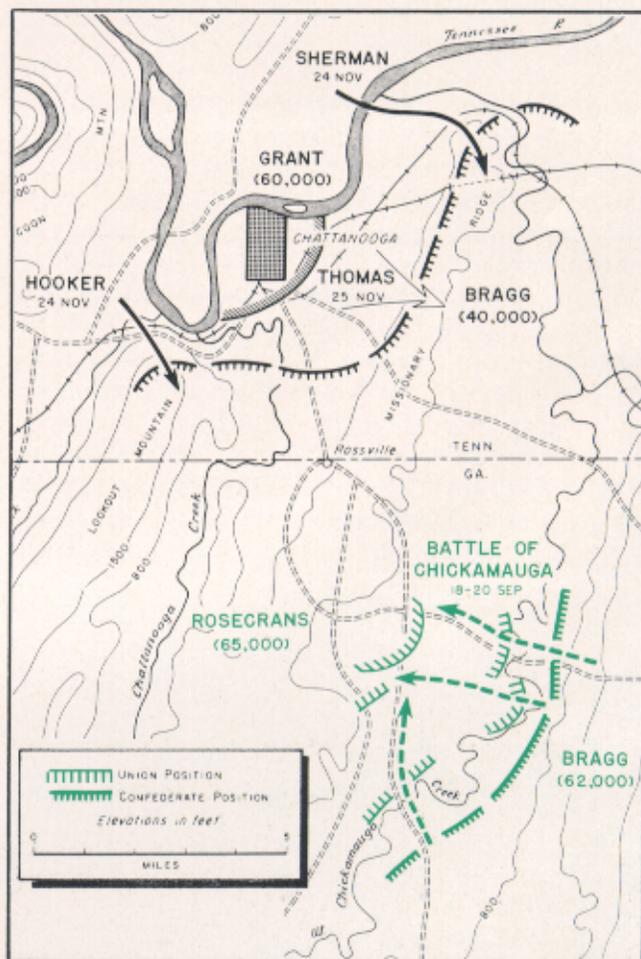
This may sound like an orderly way to organize the combat force, but it nonetheless proved to be a very difficult undertaking. Each of Rosecrans's 3 main corps had to ferry an average of 159 ammunition wagons and 116 ambulances across the Tennessee River. In most cases, rafts had to be constructed to accomplish this. When all the trains had finally crossed the river and reunited, the Union logisticians had a combined train of over 4,700 wagons of all types. The movement of the entire force and its support across the river in just a few days under these conditions was a noteworthy feat. Fortunately, the crossing was virtually unopposed.

While his opponents prepared to cross the Tennessee River, Bragg's supplies were delivered directly to him in Chattanooga. When he received word that Rosecrans's corps were crossing the river, Bragg began an orderly withdrawal back along his supply lines, greatly reducing the strain on his wagon trains. By the middle of September, Bragg had not received all his reinforcements; his force had only about 2,200 wagons, less than half the number of the Union force.

Once across the river, the Union force began searching for Bragg's army. Not knowing exactly where it was located, Rosecrans separated his corps and had them move along different routes, one leading far south of Chattanooga. The trains of each division accompanied their regiments, as usual, until 18 September, when the nearness of battle made it wiser to consolidate all but the most essential wagons

in the rear. The divisional wagons generally moved under the control of the division quartermaster.

The Union wagon trains set the pace of the march at only 2 miles an hour over the poor roads south of Chattanooga. The condition of the roads also reduced the amount of supplies that each wagon could carry to well below the 2,500 pounds they were designed for. The job of moving each wagon was given to civilian teamsters hired and paid by the unit quartermasters. Over 4,000 teamsters, many of them Negro, were hired to operate Rosecrans's trains.



■ The battle occurred at Chickamauga Creek, an Indian name meaning "river of death."

The order of march for unit wagon trains as prescribed by regulation was ammunition, subsistence, and then all other supplies. In addition to these wagons, each regiment was usually accompanied by an official sutler with one wagon. These businessmen provided the soldier with whatever the quartermaster could not. On the march, trains extended for miles, with an average of about 100 wagons per mile.

After Rosecrans's troops crossed the Tennessee River, they had to cross some treacherous terrain to reach the Chickamauga. They had to cross three mountain ranges—Sand Mountain, Lookout Mountain, and Missionary Ridge—to reach the actual site of the battle, which slowed the speed of the trains. The roads across the open terrain were poor, and those that ran over the mountains were often little more than trails. Because of the steepness of the roads, teams often had to be doubled to move the wagons.

Still further help was needed in some places on the mountains, where whole combat units were assigned transport duty. For example, the 73d Illinois Regiment assigned four men to each wagon to help the mules transport wagons across the mountains. The roads were so rough that wagons had to be lifted over obstacles as much as a foot high. This was also necessary when wagons reached many of the narrow switchbacks on the mountain road. Soldiers were posted at those narrow zigzag turns to lift the wagons through the turn. Occasionally an animal would step off the edge of a narrow road and fall, taking the rest of the team and wagon with it. At such treacherous locations men would be posted to keep the animals on the road. The 59th Illinois Regiment, along with three other regiments of its brigade—a total of more than 1,000 men—had to be posted along the road up Sand Mountain to help solve these problems. Bragg's troops avoided most of this difficult terrain by moving to the north of the ridges as they left Chattanooga and

heading in the general direction of La Fayette.

The work was not finished once the wagons had reached the top of the mountains. Help was usually required going down the slopes of both Sand Mountain and Lookout Mountain because of their steepness. It was not uncommon for the brakes of a wagon to fail on one of these descents, allowing the wagon to pick up speed and run over its team. To protect against these runaways, the 59th Illinois Regiment tied ropes to the back of the wagons to slow their descent. The movement up and down each of these mountain ranges usually took several days of very hard work. It is no wonder that Union trains did not begin entering the valley of the Chickamauga until 18 September.

Because of these time-consuming difficulties, the Union army had consumed its rations by the time it reached the battlefield. Resupply occurred as needed during the march, usually at night when the units halted. The rations were brought forward and issued by the regimental quartermaster.

The number of wagons available to any regiment at Chickamauga averaged around 18. Of these, only six were dedicated to food for the troops and feed for the animals drawing the wagons. As many as 380 wagons were required daily to feed the animals of the entire army. Very few (perhaps two per regiment) would actually carry rations for the men. The supply wagons ran out of rations within a week of crossing the Tennessee. About this time, the quartermasters instituted the process by which the army would subsist from that point on. As wagons were emptied, they were gathered and sent back to Stevenson for additional supplies—a slow process, at best.

Rosecrans's quartermasters used several methods to reduce the potential problem of such a slow turnaround time for the supply wagons. The army brought along a large herd of cattle to be butchered and distributed as needed. There were butchers assigned to each regiment. The Army of the Cum-



berland consumed about 100 head of cattle daily. This reduced, by almost one-half, the amount of daily rations that had to be carried by wagons. Another means of helping the situation was to forage for food. Wagons were to be sent out into the countryside to transport food purchased by the quartermaster there. This was not easily accomplished in northern Georgia in 1863; the area produced little food and the Southern army had already passed through the region. Foraging was not a major source of food supply during this campaign.

Bragg's men were authorized essentially the same rations as their Union counterparts, but shortages of some foods had changed their combat ration by late 1863. The Confederate Army also received herds of cattle to provide fresh meat as often as possible. Since cattle were difficult to procure in the South, pigs were sometimes substituted. With the closing of the Mississippi and the loss of Tennessee, the supplies of both cattle and pigs were dwindling. Still, there is no evidence that Bragg's men suffered from lack of food during this campaign.

Marching rations were designed to require little preparation. The Union soldier used every opportunity to improve his rations. Cooking was done at the squad level, each man taking a turn. In practice, however, the best cook usually was assigned the job permanently. Cooking equipment was carried in unit wagons and not usually available during the march.

The men improvised with the items at hand. Coffee was prepared at every opportunity, and bread was baked in primitive mud ovens made during evening halts. Hardtack and desiccated vegetables—dried, pressed vegetable cakes—were not appetizing. A favorite of the troops became a pudding made from a mixture of broken crackers, sugar, raisins, and water boiled in a tin cup. Despite all this effort, men often went hungry as the supply system repeatedly broke down. Being close to the railroads and

the resupply they brought, Bragg's men did not have to concern themselves with marching rations as much as Rosecrans's men.

Ammunition was not a problem during the advance from the Tennessee River. Rosecrans planned to start the campaign with enough ammunition to fight a 2-day battle. We cannot compute exactly how much this would have been, since there was no standard consumption figure. We do know that each soldier crossed the river with 60 rounds of ammunition, 40 in his cartridge box and 20 more in his knapsack. The roughly 335 ammunition wagons carried an additional 40 rounds for each man. An additional 150 wagons carried the reserve ammunition for the artillery units of the army. While there proved to be little use for this ammunition during the first 18 days of September, these wagons remained forward when all other wagons were pulled back.

In this fashion the Army of the Cumberland moved slowly to meet the Army of Tennessee. When a division from Rosecrans's 14th Corps ran into elements of Bragg's army on the road to La Fayette on the 18th, the Union commanders, sensing the impending battle, began to separate their supply trains from their ammunition trains. The supply trains were



■ Supplies of the Union force were moved from forward depots by a train of more than 4,700 wagons (left). Rosecrans's troops had to construct rafts to ferry the wagons across the Tennessee River. Supplying soldiers with sufficient rations (above) was more problematic for Rosecrans than for Bragg, since the Southern force remained close to its railway supply lines.

■ To hinder Rosecrans's advance, the Confederate army had destroyed the Howe Turn Bridge over the Tennessee River at Bridgeport in the Summer of 1863, forcing the Union army to build a temporary pontoon bridge and construct ferries to cross the river.



sent toward Chattanooga behind the cover of Missionary Ridge. The Union forces would not meet up with these trains again until they were beaten at the Chickamauga and were forced back into Chattanooga.

Rosecrans maneuvered for position well into the night of the 18th. The morning of the 19th found both Confederate and Union armies facing each other along La Fayette Road from Crawfish Springs in the south to Kelly Field in the north. Union ambulances, ammunition trains, and field hospitals were positioned between 100 and 200 yards behind the frontline as was customary. As the battle began, men were detailed to carry ammunition forward as needed and to bring wounded soldiers back, first to aid stations and then to field hospitals. At this point there was little concern for resupplying anything other than ammunition. While the army never used all the ammunition available in its wagons, a number of units did run short during the fighting as they moved away or were cut off from their ammunition trains. In the course of the battle, many Union ammunition and medical supply wagons were overrun and lost. Having separated the supply trains earlier, Union commanders avoided losing these.

Large Confederate reinforcements began to arrive from the Army of Northern Virginia on the 18th. General Longstreet, with more than two of his divisions, had been rushed west by rail to support Bragg. The Confederacy was able to gather only enough trains to move the troops. The wagons that normally supported them had to move west under their own power. The result was that more than 23 regiments and their supporting headquarters arrived without

any wagons. Bragg's quartermasters had to buy, borrow, or steal enough wagons to support this force, which would normally require nearly 300.

While the availability of supplies did not play a significant role in the Union defeat, both sides experienced shortages in virtually every category of supply. Good planning and hard work kept these shortages from having a crippling effect on either army.

The battle of Chickamauga offers some interesting parallels for today's logistician. Thorough planning and preparation were just as important to the success of an operation in 1863 as they are today. Once Rosecrans's operation began, the logistics plans and preparations would have been of little value without the successful movement of supplies, which required a team effort by combat units and logisticians. Cooperation by combat and combat service support units is perhaps even more important today than it was in 1863. An essential element to supplying units, then as today, was the ability of transportation to move supplies over all types of terrain. It is also obvious that a key element to the success of Civil War logisticians was their ability to improvise in the most demanding situations. ALCG

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