

Miracle of Missionary Ridge

My Unlikely Passion for Civil War Battlefields



By Tamar Jacoby

I first went to a Civil War battlefield in search of my mother's great-great-cousin, David Stelle Smith, who fought in a New Jersey regiment at Fredericksburg and died a few months later, in 1863, of a septic wound at a hospital in Washington.

Thanks to the National Park Service, which maintains excellent records open to the public at Fredericksburg and other Civil War sites, I learned exactly when and where Smith's company entered the battle – early, it turned out, in one of the bravest and most tragic maneuvers of the day, charging the impregnable Sunken Road. Incredibly – and of course affectingly for me – the Park Service could also point me to the spot where Smith probably fell, give or take a few yards, just in front of the road. I spent several hours wandering the grounds – it was a glorious, clear May day – trying to imagine his experience and make sense of the battle. I had hardly thought about the Civil War since high school and remember feeling overwhelmed by all there was to learn. But one thing I knew – I was hooked. And I've been returning to Civil War battlefields ever since, as often as I can.

Nothing in my upbringing prepared me for this. I come from a liberal, cosmopolitan family, half Jewish, half agnostic Protestant. We went to galleries, not battlefields – I had discovered David Stelle Smith only by accident. And like everyone else I knew well into

adulthood, we were deeply suspicious of soldiering and war. Even now, when I try to explain what draws me to battlegrounds, most of my friends look at me quizzically and change the subject. Reading about the Civil War would be one thing, or occasionally taking a nephew to a reenactment. But spending several weekends each year by myself wandering around empty fields and forests, carrying a stack of books and maps, puzzling over the war's less known stories. For most people in my world, it doesn't compute.

So what is the fascination exactly? I was reminded anew this Memorial Day on a trip to Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The series of battles fought in and around Chattanooga in the fall of 1863 came at a critical point in the war. The Union had recently prevailed at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, stunning victories both, now regarded as a turning point – the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. But this was far from clear at the time. And what happened that fall at Chattanooga would turn out to be pivotal for the rest of the war. A vital rail and river hub, the small eastern Tennessee town (population then 2,500) was an all-important gateway to the Deep South.

I didn't know what to expect in Tennessee. I generally don't do much reading before I go on these trips – that would spoil the spontaneity of what I learn on the spot. But once I arrived in Chattanooga, now a pleasant, medium-sized Southern city at the foot of the Cumberland Mountains, I began to put the pieces of the puzzle together. It was then that I realized one of the reasons I like visiting battlefields is the sheer intellectual pleasure of figuring out what happened and how it fits into the context of the wider war.

In Chattanooga, it's complicated. There was not one battle, but five: Chickamauga in late September 1863, the biggest and bloodiest confrontation in the western theater of the war, followed by four smaller engagements at Orchard Knob, Lookout Mountain, Missionary Ridge and Rossville Gap, in late November. Chickamauga was a decisive victory for the Confederacy; the later four engagements a combined Union triumph. In between the two rounds of fighting, Northern troops held the town. But they were besieged by Rebel forces and, on the verge of starvation, almost gave up, which would have effectively undone the gains at Gettysburg and Vicksburg.

All in all, some 150,000 men took part in the five battles. There were more than 47,000 casualties – dead, wounded and missing. It was Ulysses S. Grant who turned the tide, making Chattanooga a major stepping stone in his larger-than-life career. And the Union victory paved the way for the campaign that ultimately determined the outcome of the war, General William T. Sherman's march through Georgia in 1864. No wonder, I realized as I read on my hotel patio that first morning, Lincoln said "taking Chattanooga is as important as taking Richmond." I'd stumbled on an important story!

Once the big picture falls into place for me on these trips, I generally stop worrying about the details for a while and let the landscape take over. Civil War battlefields vary widely. Some are great green preserves of meadow and wood, restored now to something close to what they looked and felt like at the time. Others are no more than small, often scruffy parks on an urban or suburban street, with just a monument or a few cannons commemorating those who fought and died. Chattanooga has both types of sites, scattered across the metro area. I decided to visit them in the order in which the battles took place, starting at Chickamauga, five miles south of the city.

Chickamauga is one of the most beautiful of the Civil War battlegrounds I've visited: 5,000 acres of sweeping, lush-green fields and dignified old-growth forest. In the hush of an early summer day, there's no mistaking it for anything but hallowed ground, and wandering at will reading the inscriptions on the veterans' monuments is a deeply moving experience. Piecing together the story of this company and that regiment as depicted on their commemorative plaques, you can't help but start to imagine the flesh-and-blood men: dirty,

tired, frightened or brave, commanding or following orders, all of them ready to face death for their cause.

It was also at Chickamauga that I started to get a grip on what happened at Chattanooga: not just the big picture and its military significance, but the human drama.

As at every battleground, the cast of characters is enormous: not just the commanders (in this case, Grant and William Rosecrans for the Union and Braxton Bragg for the Confederacy), but also their star generals (Sherman, Joseph Hooker, George H. Thomas for the North; James Longstreet, John C. Breckinridge and Patrick Cleburne for the South) and a host of mid-level officers and other figures.

When I first started visiting Civil War sites, just sorting out who was who was a huge chore. But by now, I've gotten to know many of these characters – I remember how this one distinguished himself in an earlier battle, or that one made a blunder later in the war. And a big part of the fun at Chattanooga was fitting the story of what they did there into that larger picture.

As it turns out, what happened at Chattanooga was not exactly what it seemed. Part of what had brought me to Tennessee was Grant and Sherman. Two of the Civil War's greatest generals, they were also close personal friends: Grant was down-to-earth, simple, steadfast, Sherman brilliant but mercurial, at one point having a nervous breakdown, but each was deeply loyal to the other. Their relationship – and their inspired soldiering, alone and together – is one of the grand stories of the war, and I was looking forward not just to learning about another chapter but also enjoying their triumph.

I'd brought both their memoirs with me to Tennessee and sat reading them on a shady bench at the breathtakingly beautiful Lookout Mountain battle site. What puzzled me first was the brevity of Sherman's account. "The whole thing succeeded admirably," he concluded his two cursory paragraphs on the Chattanooga campaign. But I knew from other accounts I'd read that he had in fact failed miserably in carrying out his orders. Vastly underestimating how difficult it would be to take the campaign's final objective – some steep foothills east of town called Missionary Ridge – he misread the geography and first took the wrong hill, then was unable to make up for it by capturing the real target the next day. And Grant's account was just as odd: the central point of his chapter, repeated again and again, was that the key to victory had been his clever master plan – but everything else I was reading told me this was not the case.

The true story became clear to me on my final day in town. The last foothold of the Confederates, the last remaining outpost of their almost successful siege, Missionary Ridge runs for some seven miles within plain sight of largely flat downtown Chattanooga. Grant's plan for taking the hill gave a starring role to his protégé Sherman, who was to storm the northern end of the ridge while Hooker's troops distracted the enemy with a smaller attack at the south end – and still other troops, under George Thomas, the Union hero of Chickamauga, waited in reserve.

Grant and Thomas spent the better part of the day on November 25 watching the ridge from an elevated spot close to town, and both grew more and more anxious as the reports filtered in. Hooker, delayed en route, was nowhere near the battle, and Sherman, try as he might, was unable to prevail. Finally, in mid-afternoon, a frustrated Grant ordered Thomas to send his Army of the Cumberland – some 23,000 men – out across the flat ground that separated downtown from the ridge. But Grant told Thomas to insist the men stop at the Confederate rifle pits that ran along the base of the hill. It was an order that made no sense – in the pits, even more than on the plain, the troops would make perfect targets for the Rebels on the crest of the ridge. Still, within minutes, the charge was under way.

The 23,000 men marched in regimented battle lines out across the denuded landscape – most vegetation had already been cut down or shot away. A torrent of artillery fire rained

down on the advancing troops; they quickened their pace until they were running. Most units took the rifle pits relatively easily – and then something totally unexpected happened. Baffled by an order that made no sense, chafing to strike back at the enemy who had humiliated them just months before at Chickamauga and simply unable to remain out in the open under fire in the pits, the troops of the Army of the Cumberland – not the commander, not the mid-level officers, but the soldiers themselves – took matters into their own hands and stormed up the side of the ridge. “Chickamauga! Chickamauga!” they screamed as they ran.

Grant, still hoping this would be Sherman’s day, was stunned, and he reprimanded Thomas, who disavowed the spontaneous charge. But by then, there was nothing the two generals could do but watch and wait as the troops clawed their way under heavy fire up several hundred yards of ridge. In many places, the hill was so steep that the men had to crawl on all fours. Their orderly lines broke into small, often leaderless units. The thunderous noise of the Rebels’ artillery and the smoke of the guns only intensified the chaos.

But then, astonishingly, in under an hour, Union troops could be seen breaking through the Confederate defenses on the crest of the ridge. They had some unforeseen advantages: Confederate defenses were poorly planned, the topography of the hill actually helped the invaders. Still, there was no denying what Union forces had accomplished: one historian called it the “miracle of Missionary Ridge” – a frontal assault against entrenched defenders holding high ground thought by all to be impregnable.

Today, the Union victory is commemorated by a tiny park at the top of the ridge – you can miss it if you drive by too fast on the narrow road. And I almost couldn’t believe it as I drove around town on my last afternoon: there is no memorial at all to what happened in the rifle pits – no veterans’ monuments, no Park Service signs, not even a marker identifying where the pits were once located and where Union soldiers took the battle into their own hands.

Their breakthrough was a critical turning point in the war – without it, Sherman’s march through Georgia could not have happened. A risky move, to be sure – failure would have been disastrous – and clearly insubordinate, it was still a stunning rebuke to careless leadership and a triumph of American democratic ideals.

The spot is lost today in a rundown urban neighborhood with none of the majesty of the nearby battlegrounds. But all the more reason, it seemed to me, why what happened there should not be lost to memory, and why I felt my trip to Chattanooga was more than worth my while. Reconstructing the charge up Missionary Ridge seemed the least I could do to repay the men who did it, my small act of re-imagining the least I owe them.

Tamar Jacoby is president of *ImmigrationWorks USA*, a national federation of small business owners advocating immigration reform.

**Image courtesy of [Collectors Frame](#).*