



# BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

## The Sharpshooters of Raccoon Mountain: An Incident of the 1863 Chattanooga Campaign

Anthony Hodges, October 5, 2020

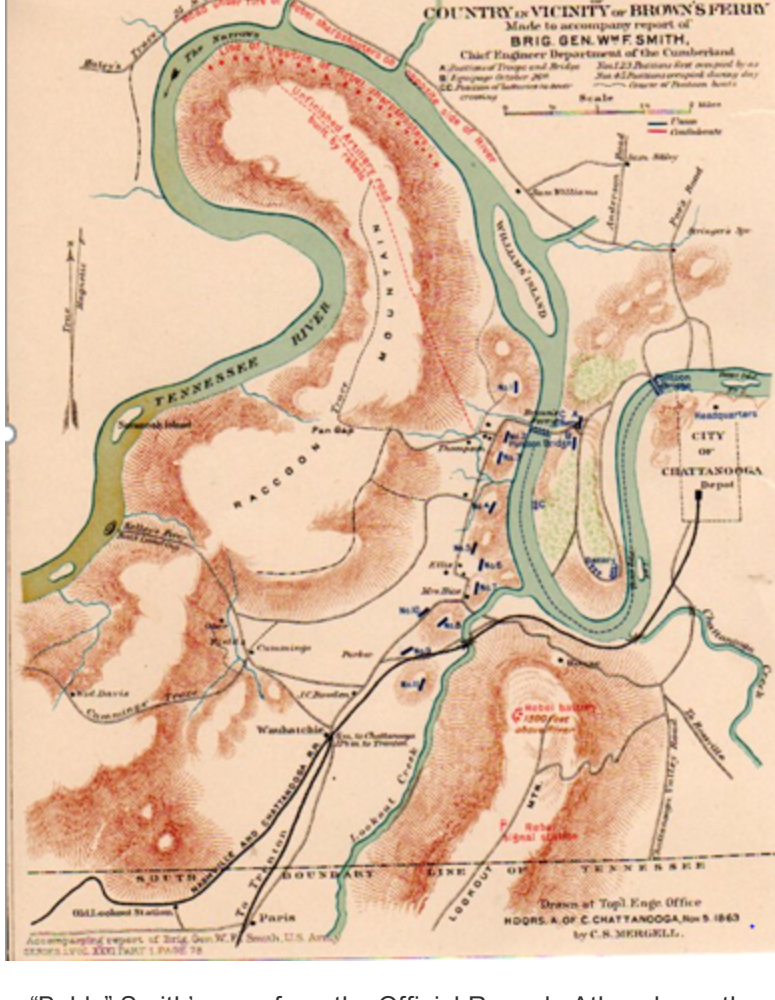
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English artist Frank Vizetelly visited the 4th Alabama's position on Raccoon Mountain and produced this drawing for the *London Illustrated News*. It was later used in *Harper's Weekly*. Note the Union wagons at the base of Walden's Ridge and the overturned Union wagon in the river.

Two mules at once! What a shot! The hexagonal-shaped bullet passed through both necks of a pair of Union army mules standing side by side in harness as they attempted to overcome the narrow mountain road and get supplies to the starving Union army inside Chattanooga. An Alabamian remembered the shot in his memoir: "I saw one of the Whitworth rifles ...with a globe sight, carrying a large ball, a few of which had run the blockade in the hands of one of our sharpshooters kill two mules in one shot, the heavy missile passing through both their necks." The Alabamians ensconced on Raccoon Mountain in early October 1863 never forgot that shot and never forgot their duty in the gorge of the Tennessee River. One of them remembered scenery: "Grand and wild. The bluffs on both sides of the river, which almost approach the water's edge, loom up hundreds of feet perpendicularly, while the river winds its torturous and turbulent way through them."

After their tactical defeat at Chickamauga, the besieged Union troops in Chattanooga were dependent on a supply base at Bridgeport, Alabama, with the most direct path for supplies running from Bridgeport through Lookout Valley into Chattanooga. When the Confederate army occupied Lookout Mountain and Lookout Valley, the direct route from Bridgeport was closed. The next alternative was for the Federals to bring the supplies north from Bridgeport into Sequatchie Valley, then east using a road known as Haley's Trace (mostly today's Suck Creek Road) through the narrow gorge between Raccoon Mountain (today's Elder Mountain) and Walden's Ridge (today's Signal Mountain), then cross the river to the south shore on a pontoon bridge (near today's Olgiate bridge), and enter Chattanooga.



"Baldy" Smith's map from the Official Records Atlas shows the position of the 4th Alabama at the map's top as well as Haley's Trace across the Tennessee River.

On October 8, men from the Law's Alabama Brigade were ordered into Lookout Valley to interdict the Union supply line. Col. William Oates of the 15th Alabama described their assignment: "Law sent the 4th Alabama to do this perilous and all-important work down to the point of Raccoon [Mountain] to act as sharpshooters and prevent the use of the river and the wagon road on the other side of the river [Haley's Trace]; the 15th to picket the river from the right of the 4th up to [Lookout Creek]."

A 4th Alabamian described their position: "The position of the 4th Alabama was different from that of the 15th Alabama. Being up on the bluffs on Raccoon Mountain, no direct attack could be made on us from the river. The only way to get us out was a flank movement of the enemy."

Assigned to duty with the 4th Alabama were Hood's Division Whitworth sharpshooters; six men armed with a highly accurate hexagonal-bored sharpshooter's rifle, commonly called the Whitworth, which claimed capability of hitting targets as far away as a mile. These guns, made in England and run through the blockade, were the most accurate firearm of the day. Shooting contests were held in the Confederate army to decide who would be assigned a Whitworth and a place in the sharpshooters.

Placing themselves among Raccoon's large rock outcroppings, the Alabamians watched as the first Union wagon train proceeded westerly along Haley's Trace on the river's opposite side, letting about 2 miles of wagons expose themselves before opening fire. One Alabamian remembered the teamsters "whistling and cracking their whips in a merry mood, entirely unsuspecting" of the danger that lay three hundred yards away across the river." On the western end of the train, the Whitworth sharpshooters shot "down the front teams, at which point the road became entirely blocked. We then proceeded in a leisurely manner to use our Enfield [Enfield] rifles. The road was too narrow between the bluff and the river for the teams to turn around or escape in any manner, and they were compelled to stand until all were shot down."



Battlefield excavated .45 caliber Whitworth bullets. Both the hexagonal and cylindrical pattern Whitworth bullets have been excavated from the 4th Alabama position on Raccoon Mountain.

For roughly the next three weeks the Alabamians "progressed very well in our isolated retreat, shooting mules to our heart's content, and enjoying the sport immensely." They had reduced the Union army to quarter rations and forced them to rely on a difficult 60-mile-plus supply route that came up Sequatchie Valley and crossed over Walden's Ridge well to the north, which sometimes took eight days to complete. Roughly 10,000 Union horses and mules died from the rigors of the journey and the lack of forage. The Alabamians on Raccoon were supplied by a single mule who brought supplies foraged from farms in Lookout Valley, but they realized "that we would not be permitted to remain there much longer without an effort on the part of the enemy to dispossess us."

On October 27, the fun was ended by the simultaneous arrival of Union troops via an amphibious assault at Brown's Ferry and another column of reinforcements marching into Lookout Valley from the west. Realizing they were about to be trapped, the Alabamians strapped all their cooking utensils onto their mule and "were soon ready to evacuate Raccoon Mountain. From some cause the mule, in the confusion, not placing our utensils on his back to exactly suit his fancy, got away from the man leading him and went braying and kicking down the mountain trail, the boys laughing and yelling and picking up scattered utensils." Running along the eastern side of Raccoon Mountain the 4th Alabama boys then crossed through Lookout Valley between the two columns of Union troops to safety on the side of Lookout Mountain. The mule arrived with only a skillet handle remaining of his cargo.

A participant summarized the 4th Alabama's efforts in Lookout Valley in a postwar memoir: "The 4th Alabama, in the Lookout Valley Expedition, accomplished more and inflicted greater damage to the enemy, with less loss to itself, than in any other campaign in which it participated during its four year service." For the boys of the 4th Alabama who had been through the maelstroms of First Manassas, Gettysburg, and Chickamauga, the affair on Raccoon Mountain would be one of war's lighter and more memorable moments.



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