

A BGES Civil War Field University Program: America's Greatest Warrior? George Henry Thomas and the War in the West With Brian Steel Wills

There are some people who just keep appearing in the center of things, in the American Revolution British peer Lord Charles Henry Cornwallis seemed to be in every major military engagement of the war. So too is it with George Henry Thomas in the American Civil War. If the war is won in the West, then Thomas, by definition, plays a key role. Some historians of note such as Thomas Buell (**Warrior Generals**) and Albert Castel (**Articles of War**) have suggested that Thomas may have been the best officer in the Civil War. What does his contemporary biographer, Brian Wills, think?

George Henry Thomas will always represent a conundrum as the Virginian who sided with the North in the American Civil War; but, emerged as one of the Union's best and most successful general officers. Born in Southampton County, Virginia, on July 31, 1816. and raised to adulthood in the paternalistic world of Southern slavery, Thomas survived Nat Turner's slave uprising. He proceeded in his education to the United States Military Academy at West Point from which he graduated in 1840, ranked twelfth in his class. He went on to have a broad and distinguished career in the "Old Army" before confronting the crisis of secession and civil war.

In this glimpse into Thomas's extraordinary career, we will follow him through his most important campaigns and consider the contribution he made to the Union war effort. From Kentucky to Georgia to Tennessee, Thomas's presence was considerable and essential, we will learn how and why this was the case. In addition to providing a critical path tour of many of the greatest battles of the war you will come away with a greater appreciation for the Virginian who chose to wear blue in a conflict that set him at odds with fellow Southerners until final victory could be achieved and the Union saved.

On January 12, 2022, Brian and Len had an animated and informative discussion about General Thomas and this program. Click here to watch that 70 minute show

<https://youtu.be/fYApjz07a5s>

Friday, November 4, 2022

Have an early dinner and meet at the Springhill Suites Hotel in Ooltewah, TN (about 9 miles from the Chattanooga Airport) at 7:30 PM, Ezra Warner, the compiler of two volumes of biographical sketches of Union and Confederate commanders, described Thomas as the "third of the triumvirate who won the war for the Union."

George Thomas enjoyed many nicknames that reflected his character. Whether "Old Pap" to his men or "Slow Trot" to some of his critics, Thomas found early success at Mill Springs in 1862 and demonstrated his reliability and dependability on many other fields

such as Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge and Nashville. You will be at the Master's feet with Brian as he addresses these battles and other items of interest related to Thomas and the Union war effort. He will overview the next 6 days and provide a basis for your lines of inquiry. Hotel is included, dinner is on your own.

Saturday, November 5, 2022

8 AM—have your bags out by 7:45. We are headed for Kentucky where we will focus on the first big fight in Kentucky at Mill Springs. Despite his West Point credentials and a long period of military service that included recognition for his performance in the War with Mexico, there were significant doubts about Thomas from the very start of the war. There need not have been. The outcome of an engagement in the misty rain near the Cumberland River at Logan's Cross Roads (Mill Springs), on January 19, 1862, resulted in the destruction of the opposing Confederate force. We will examine this small but significant battle and see how Thomas set a high standard for his various tenures as a field commander for the rest of the war. This is a special treat as we get to see this new National Military Park.

We will then push back down into Tennessee and overnight in Smyrna, Tennessee. Breakfast, lunch and the hotel are included. Dinner on your own.

Sunday, November 6, 2022

8 AM: Leave your bags in place, we have another night here. Today our focus will be on the Union's "politically essential" success at Stones River. The year had been an important one as the front between the opposing sides had pushed the engagement zones to northern Alabama and central Tennessee whereas at the start of the year the fight was in Kentucky.

At Stones River, General Thomas exhibited his stoutness and determination in the face of a powerful Confederate attack by General Braxton Bragg that drove the Federal right flank and threatened the center of the Union line. The Virginian's resolve: "There is no better place to die than here," and his firmness: "This army can't retreat" stiffened the will of his commander Major General William S. Rosecrans and set the stage for a successful outcome to the fighting at the start of a new year. For Lincoln, with a major shift in war aims coming into effect on January 1, 1863 and a proclamation emancipating slaves, Stones River was a timely success for Lincoln in a crippling storm of battlefield failures in Virginia and Mississippi.

As much as we want to treat this chronologically, we are here and it doesn't make sense to come back to Nashville later in the week so we will head there to visit a battlefield lost to development. Interpreting from Fort Negley and perhaps Shy's Hill, Wills will discuss Thomas's virtual destruction of the Confederate army in December of 1864.

Within this segment, we will pick up and discuss Thomas, after Sherman splits up his army, following the fall of Atlanta. It is important to understand Thomas's role in protecting Nashville and Middle Tennessee while Sherman executed his "March to the Sea".

Nashville created much controversy for Thomas. In command, he exasperates Ulysses Grant for what the General-in-Chief deemed a lack of aggressive leadership, indeed Grant nearly relieved the Virginian from command and was on his way to Nashville to do that very thing when Thomas struck decisively on December 15, 1864. No doubt flushed with the success he now enjoyed, Thomas called out to his subordinate James Harrison Wilson in an unusual outburst, "Dang it to hell Wilson, didn't I tell you we could lick 'em?" The crushing defeat of John Bell Hood's Army of Tennessee, earned Thomas another nickname as "the Sledge of Nashville."

We will return to Smyrna by 6 PM and have a group dinner

Breakfast, lunch, dinner and the hotel are included.

Monday, November 7, 2022

7:45 AM: Bags on board, depart at 8:00, Every leader has a signature battle that becomes the foundation of their legacy. Today we reach discover Thomas's bedrock at Chickamauga.

Our route will follow the Federal army from Murfreesboro to Chickamauga. That operation known as the Tullahoma Campaign is interesting for real students of the war and Brian will have his take on Rosecrans vision and Thomas' role in it. But we will not delay long as our major objective today is Chickamauga.

The South only won one major battle in the West and it was on the fields behind the Missionary Ridge at Chickamauga Creek. It should have and could have been a big thing instead it ranks as one of the most empty of all such triumphs in large measure to the strength of George Thomas on the slopes of Snodgrass Hill. Here Thomas exhibited his best traits as a military commander.

In fighting that stretched across three days, September 18-20, 1863, Confederates under Braxton Bragg, with the spear of James Longstreet's Corps from the Army of Northern Virginia, ultimately broke through the Union lines and drove most of Rosecrans's army from the field. Only the stubborn defense of the Union left flank at Snodgrass Hill and Horseshoe Ridge by George Thomas prevented the entire collapse of the Union command. From that point, the Virginian in blue became known as "the Rock of Chickamauga." Today, we study the performance that more than any other established his public persona as a leader under the most strenuous of circumstances.

We will Spend the next two nights in Chattanooga near the airport. Hotel, breakfast, lunch and dinner are included.

Tuesday, November 8, 2022

Depart at 8 AM: As the federal army fled into Chattanooga, Bragg slowly followed and perched on the high ground of Missionary Ridge and Lookout Mountain. Rosecrans would soon be toast and the victorious Grant came to assume command and open lines of supply for the besieged Federals. Thomas had reason to believe he might receive Rosecrans command; instead, Grant was selected and he brought the rest of his team with him. Given Grant's successes along the Mississippi, it was not a bad choice. Brian will discuss Thomas's relations with his new commander. This will lead us to Orchard Knob, Grant's efforts to sweep the Confederates from his front, and the role of Thomas's command in upstaging Sherman and breaking the siege. You will marvel, as did Grant, looking at the spontaneous surge of Thomas's troops to the top of the Confederates' dominating position atop Missionary Ridge—an honor that was supposed to go to Grant's protégé Billy Sherman.

The success of Grant in November 1863 set the stage for the penultimate campaigns to end the war. Grant was promoted yet again to Commanding General and Lieutenant General. He placed his trusted friend Sherman in Command in the West. But at the head of Sherman's largest army: The Army of the Cumberland, George Thomas became the anvil in Sherman's drive to Atlanta. We will look at operations in the winter of 1864 in and around Dalton finishing the day with the Confederate decision to abandon Dalton and Resaca. Breakfast, lunch and hotel in Chattanooga are included.

Wednesday, November 9, 2022

Today we advance to Atlanta. Have your bags out by 8 and before our 8:15 departure. Sherman's move of his behemoth force of which Thomas had the largest command dominates May and June 1864. Today we will drive to two engagements involving Thomas's Army of the Cumberland—in the first, at Pickett's Mill, elements of Thomas's army are unexpectedly pushed back and subsequent engagements at Dallas and New Hope Church force another turning movement within eyesight of Atlanta. This move set the stage for an important, but ill-advised, attack at Kennesaw Mountain. Thomas's Army of the Cumberland is the main strike force of Sherman's Army Group that included The Army of Tennessee and The Army of the Ohio. Both sites are exceptional and give a great flavor of this important and indeed decisive campaign. We will then overnight in Atlanta. Breakfast, lunch, dinner and hotel is included.

Thursday, November 10, 2022

At the Battle of Atlanta, Army of the Tennessee commander, James B. McPherson dies and is replaced—sadly Brian Wills cannot finish this war with us—he has an academic obligation at Kennesaw State University, where he is a professor, this morning so we have named a new commander, Robert Jenkins. Bob is a strong student of the campaign and General Thomas. Jenkins will bring completion to the Thomas study.

After Kennesaw Mountain, Sherman maneuvered yet again to cross the final riverine obstacle leading to direct operations against a fortified Atlanta. This period saw the replacement of General Johnston with General John Bell Hood when President Davis lost confidence in Johnston's resolve to hold Atlanta. Rivers are significant obstacles, ripe with opportunity for detailed defensive operations, the relative ease with which Sherman passed the several rivers to Atlanta cost Johnston his job and set the stage for a post war feud between Davis with Hood as a central pawn.

The attack at Peachtree Creek was General Hood's first effort to save Atlanta. It is an instructive and important change in Confederate strategy. Thomas and Sherman were up to the challenge. Jenkins has written the definitive works on both the crossing of the Chattahoochie River and the Battle of Peachtree Creek.

Thomas's strong performance gives Sherman the stability and firepower to successfully encircle Atlanta and force its capitulation. This significant breakthrough just two months before the Presidential election helped Lincoln coast to electoral victory and with it his ultimate success in the War of the Rebellion. Breakfast, lunch included.

This will conclude our Thomas program. Your exit options vary. Please read the following before making up your mind.

We finish the program the afternoon of November 10th. Recognizing that folks may have their cars parked at the originating hotel we are prepared to return you to that point this afternoon. You could depart and be away from Ooltewah by 6 PM.

*Bob Jenkins starts a separate but thematically cogent two day program for us starting Friday evening November 11th that ends on Sunday, November 13th. It is based at the Hampton Inn, the same hotel we will be at the evening of the November 9th. Bob will lead tours of the Battle of Atlanta and Ezra Church. Thus, you can get the central substance of Hood's main battles for Atlanta on one trip. To make it worth your while, **if you register for both this program and Jenkin's program we will include your hotel for November 10, 11 and 12.** We will then make arrangements to get you back to your car or Chattanooga airport for departure the evening of November 13th.*

One additional consideration, if doing both programs, perhaps you can fly into Chattanooga and out of Atlanta. We will work to help you make that happen.

About the Faculty:

Brian Steel Wills is a Professor of History at Kennesaw State University outside of Atlanta. He is also the Director for the Center for the Study of the Civil War Era. In addition to the biography on Forrest, he is the author of the most recent biography of **General George Henry Thomas, As True as Steel**. Another of his books is **The War Hits Home The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia**. Last but certainly not

least is his entertaining book “**Gone with the Glory, The Civil War in Cinema.**” Each of Brian’s works reveal an expansive view of history and its potential—his interpersonal interactions have proven him to be a popular and engaging speaker. You will enjoy your time with him.

Bob Jenkins is a practicing attorney in Dalton, Georgia. An active preservationist, Bob has played a significant role in expanding the story of the start of the 1864 Atlanta Campaign. He has completed two outstanding books on the campaign: The first being **The Battle of Peachtree Creek, Hood’s First Sortie July 20, 1864** and **To the Gates of Atlanta: from Kennesaw Mountain to Peachtree Creek 1-19 July 1864.** Bob is an animated and exceptional historian and you will be regaled with new and thought provoking information.

Hotel Information:

The road trip program will be based at the Springhill Suites, Ooltewah, Tennessee with one night there. Two nights will be in Smyrna, two nights in Chattanooga and one night in Atlanta. Hotel information will be announced when it is available and will be sent to registrants prior to the event. Your hotel is included with the registration fee.

Transportation:

The servicing airport is Chattanooga (CHA) which is served by every major airline. Atlanta (ATL) might be a consideration. There are rental car companies at the airport. Uber and Lyft offer taxi type services.

Recommended Reading:

You will be provided with maps upon arrival. The following books are suggested to enhance your readiness for the program. These books are available on line. If you register with AmazonSmile a portion of any books you purchase for this or other purchases will be sent to BGES as a charitable contribution.

Buell, Thomas B. **The Warrior Generals: Combat Leadership in the Civil War.**

Castel, Albert. **Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864.**

Cozzens, Peter. **The Battle of Chickamauga: This Terrible Sound,**
_____. **The Battles of Chattanooga: The Shipwreck of Their Hopes.**
_____. **The Battle of Stones River: No Better Place to Die.**

Hafendorfer, Kenneth A. **Mill Springs: Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs, Kentucky.**

Robert Jenkins: **To the Gates of Atlanta: from Kennesaw Mountain to Peachtree Creek 1-19 July 1864**

Jenkins, Robert D., Jr. **The Battle of Peachtree Creek: Hood's First Sortie 20, July 1864.**

McKinney, Francis F. **Education in Violence: The Life of George H. Thomas and the History of the Army of the Cumberland.**

Sword, Wiley. **The Confederacy's Last Hurrah.**

Tucker, Glenn. **Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West.**

Wills, Brian Steel. **George Henry Thomas: As True as Steel.**

Registration Form
America's Greatest Warrior?
George Henry Thomas and the War in the West
A BGES Civil War Field University Program
Presented by Brian Wills and Bob Jenkins
November 4-10, 2022 from Chattanooga, Tennessee

Name (s): _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Registration includes six nights hotel, six breakfasts, six lunches and three dinners, maps, the academic program, support of a professional historian, tour director and transportation. We will also provide snacks and cold bottled water.

_____ Registration \$1750 single occupancy or \$1375 pp double occupancy

_____ Current BGES member \$1675 single or \$1300 pp double occupancy

_____ Registration for Wills' Thomas and Jenkin's Atlanta 6 program includes 9 nights lodging, \$2400 single occupancy \$1700 pp double occupancy

_____ Current BGES member for Wills and Jenkins includes 9 nights lodging, \$2250 single occupancy \$1650 pp double occupancy

_____ I am not a member but would like to join so that I can get the member's rate or I am a member who is past due to renew. Please accept my donation of

\$_____ (must be \$75 or more which is tax deductible)

_____ I am sending a deposit of \$500 per person plus full payment for any memberships. Total enclosed is \$

I will pay the balance due before the event.

_____ Check enclosed

Charge my (circle one) MC VISA AMEXP Discover \$_____

#_____

Exp: _____ CVV: _____

Signature: _____

Mail to BGES Seminars, PO Box 1176, Chatham, VA 24531, or fax credit cards to 434-432-0596 . You may also register on line at www.blueandgrayeducation.org.

