

***The Battle of Perryville, 1862:
Culmination of the Failed Kentucky Campaign***

By Robert P. Broadwater

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The Story

By late June 1862 the Confederate Army in the West was teetering on disintegration. The costly and heartrending defeat at Shiloh followed by the escape from Corinth, Mississippi, had significantly demoralized and reduced the once formidable fighting force. The original commander of the western army, General Albert Sidney Johnston, had been killed in action at Shiloh and was replaced by General Pierre Beauregard. After the Confederate evacuation of Corinth, General Beauregard, ill and despondent, gave himself an unauthorized sick leave from the army now stationed in Tupelo, Mississippi. When President Jefferson Davis learned that Beauregard had left the army, he angrily fired Beauregard and replaced him with General Braxton Bragg.

When Bragg took control of the army on June 20 he had under his command something slightly akin to a sick, frustrated, armed mob. Two months of waiting for the oncoming Federals at Corinth, while water and rations dwindled, had left the Confederates Army pessimistic about its chances. Discipline waned and desertion became a significant concern at Tupelo. Luckily, Bragg was a good choice to reconstitute an army and he attacked the job with energy. Bragg significantly reorganized his command in July and rumor spread that a new offensive was being planned for the Confederate Army of the Mississippi.

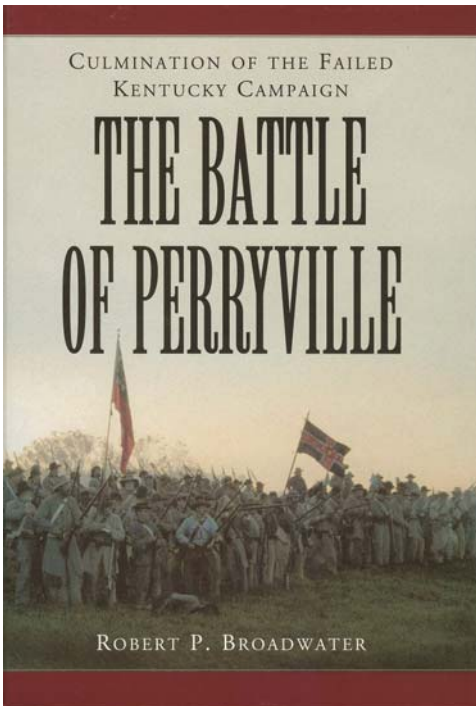
In late July Bragg moved his men almost 800 miles from Mississippi to Chattanooga, Tennessee, by rail. On July 31, Generals Bragg and Kirby Smith met at Chattanooga to discuss the prospects of a joint offensive into Tennessee and Kentucky. This meeting and the future working relationship between General E. Kirby Smith and Braxton Bragg has been the subject of much interpretation. Although both men agreed to the outlines of an offensive, ambiguity existed on almost every detail thereafter. The fundamental issues of command structure, coordination, and military objectives were poorly defined. Nevertheless, on August 14, General Kirby Smith, equipped with two of Bragg's best brigades, crossed from Tennessee into Kentucky and the campaign offensive was underway.

By August 29 Kirby Smith's command was nearing Richmond, Kentucky. The Union troops waiting at Richmond were under the command of General William "Bull" Nelson. Unfortunately, General Nelson (now with only four weeks to live before his assassination by another Union general) was at Lexington when the rebels arrived and the troops fell to the command of General Mahlon D. Manson. In short, General Manson made the mistake of underestimating the enemy. Manson's enemy that day was an Irishman by the name of Patrick Royne Cleburne. General Cleburne's introduction to Kentucky resulted in a complete route of Union forces in the Battle of Richmond.

Cleburne was shot in the jaw during the battle, but his plans were perfectly executed. The result of the running two-day battle was one of the most heralded Confederate victories (and one of the most disastrous Union defeats) in the American Civil War. By August 30, the Rebels had counted 5,000 Union dead, wounded, and captured while suffering approximately 500 casualties of their own.

Although things had gotten off to a favorable start, the promised coordination between Generals Kirby Smith, Van Dorn, and Bragg, essential to the success of the campaign, had already fallen apart.

While Kirby Smith was slashing Union troops at Richmond, it was General Bragg's turn to move on Kentucky. Once in Kentucky, however, earlier uncertainties began to reveal themselves. Was the campaign objective to cut off Buell's retreat to Louisville and give battle? Or was it to capture and hold Kentucky? Or was it to combine forces and attack Louisville or Cincinnati? Inexplicably, in the wake of his signal success at Richmond, General Kirby Smith suddenly took the defensive and remained idle at Lexington. Strategies were revised. After an unauthorized Confederate attack on a Union garrison at Munfordville was repulsed, Bragg felt it his obligation to reduce



Munfordville. Bragg surrounded the town with his vastly superior force, demanded surrender, and threatened to flatten Union positions with his artillery while completely isolating the occupants from reinforcements and supplies. After a somewhat quirky tour of the forces arrayed against him, Union General John T. Wilder surrendered the garrison and 4,000 more Union parolees were added to the growing ledgers.

To Bragg, this one-two punch should have catalyzed the anticipated outpouring of Confederate recruits. The Confederate Army was a proven winner and possessed plenty of freshly captured weapons (and Union uniforms) with which to outfit new soldiers. In fact, Kentucky recruits barely replaced the losses of the entire campaign.

The Confederate successes at Richmond and Munfordville were counterbalanced by other factors. The time necessary to address Munfordville and the cautious behavior of General Kirby Smith allowed time for Union General Don Carlos Buell's army to reach Louisville without a fight and to become reinforced by fresh troops from Indiana

and Ohio. The Confederate Army had been in residence six successful weeks when Buell's rested and well-supplied men left Louisville in three great columns in order to find and expel the Rebels from Kentucky. Buell's objectives were crystal clear- find the rebel army and defeat it. As it turned out, Buell was perfectly framed to accomplish this very objective when things started to go wrong for him.

On the morning of October 8, two thirsty armies skirmished for fresh water outside Perryville. By nightfall 40,000 men had tangled for hours in fighting that was every bit as desperate as that of Shiloh, if not quite on the same scale. That evening the hilly battlefields were strewn with the dead and dying and a great Confederate victory was presumed at hand when General Bragg gave the order to quit the field. He had no

other choice. Amazingly, the Confederates under Bragg had been fighting all afternoon with only one-third of the Union Army arrayed against them. Bewildered Union commanders watched the vicious combat press their beleaguered left flank while they waited for the orders to turn and encircle the rebels. The orders never came. General Buell was unaware that a portion of his army was being savaged just a few miles from his headquarters. Buell was encased in an acoustic bubble that prevented him from hearing telltale cannon fire from the surrounding hillsides. He brushed aside all battlefield reports as mere skirmishes and continued his plans for an all-out attack the next day. When daybreak came on October 9, Buell's men could only throw a few shells at the last rebel wagons leaving Perryville.

Technically relieved of command just before the battle for slothful progress against his foe, Buell's apparent inattentiveness during the battle was immediately questioned by his superiors, his subordinates, Midwestern governors, Congress, the president- everyone. After an ineffectual chase of Bragg's soldiers from Kentucky, Buell was dealt the cruelest blow. A Congressional Committee on the conduct of the War was established where Buell was forced to defend his actions in an effort to save his career. It was too late. The dead at Perryville spoke louder than any defense General Buell was able to muster. Although not removed from service, Buell would never hold a field command again. He resigned in 1864.

The long, slow Confederate retreat from Kentucky was agonizing for the bedraggled soldiers who felt they had achieved so much at Richmond, Munfordville, and Perryville. Uninformed of the true battlefield circumstances at Perryville, rumors among the common ranks assumed the worst. To many in the Confederate Army, their questionable leader had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. The only soldiers saying anything complimentary about Bragg's skills were his battlefield enemies. Bragg himself came to several depressing conclusions- one, the enthusiastic assessment of his Kentucky generals regarding the desires of their home state had been nothing more than hopeful bravado. Second, just about everyone who agreed to support his Kentucky thrust had failed him in one way, or another, and, third, Kentucky's fate would reside with the Union for some time to come.

The Book

The Battle of Perryville is receiving some welcome recent attention. After more than a century without a full treatment of the subject there are at least three good Perryville works now available: Kenneth Hafendorfer's *Perryville: The Battle for Kentucky* (1981), Kenneth Noe's *Perryville: This Grand Havoc of Battle* (2001), and now Robert P. Broadwater's *Perryville, 1862: The Culmination of the failed Kentucky Campaign* (2005). Lee McDonough's *War in Kentucky* (1994) and Thomas Connelly's *Army of the Heartland: The Army of Tennessee, 1861-1862* (1967) also do a very nice job of describing the campaign. I have read all these books and each excels in a different way. Therefore, I think the choice of which to read depends upon the level of understanding that the reader brings to the decision. If you have never read a book on the Battle of Perryville and wish to be quickly informed of the high points and context of the battle, I believe Broadwater's book is probably your best choice. Hafendorfer's book is filled with battlefield minutiae and is primarily dedicated to the events of October 8. Noe's book is where you'll want to go if you already know the general outline of the battle and are looking for a more detailed description of the events and people involved. Connelly's

book is wonderful for its (sometimes alternative) interpretation of events from the Confederate viewpoint.

The primary feature that separates Broadwater's book from most other Perryville entries is his attempt to succinctly place the battle in the context of the 1862 Kentucky campaign. This is helpful. Surrounded by the Battles of Richmond and Munfordville on the run-up, and the rebel retreat afterwards, the Battle of Perryville can be seen in context as a long brewing showdown between two great, groping armies trying to make the case to Kentuckians about their future and the outcome of the war. The fact that the fight outside Perryville occurred the way it did, on the day it did, was happenstance, but that the two armies were brought together in a decisive showdown was foreordained.

Broadwater's writing style is easy and the book is put together well. It's not an extremely easy story to tell, but the author does a good job clearly piecing together the script. Other than a slip on page 25 about Louisville being Kentucky's capital city, (Frankfort is the capital city of Kentucky), and the lack of a few clear maps to more fully orient the reader, I think it is well done. I like the way the photographic portraits are done and the heavy board cover papered with the title graphics is an idea whose time has come (again). However, I do have a concern for which Broadwater bears little responsibility. *Perryville 1862* checks in at a rather compact 200 pages (including some 40 pages of back matter). This is part of what I like about it- its curt and to the point. My objection is a growing trend in hardcover Civil War books that seems to indicate that every new release is worth the \$40- \$45 it takes to buy it. I guess I'm just old fashioned. I will not judge for others as to whether this slim volume (and many others) is worth the money, but it is a question likely to come up while you're standing in the bookstore gazing at the price. I think a softcover version would do well.

The Interview

Following is a short e-interview with the author of *The Battle of Perryville, 1862: Culmination of the Failed Kentucky Campaign*, conducted April 25, 2006:

RM: You mentioned in the front of your book that when you started *The Battle of Perryville, 1862: Culmination of the Failed Kentucky Campaign* there were no books available on the subject, but now there are several. Kenneth Hafendorfer's book *Perryville: Battle for Kentucky* first appeared in 1981, which means your book has been a long time in the making. Why so long, and what were some of the difficulties you faced in writing *Perryville*?

Mr. Broadwater: The reasons why it took so long for me to complete this book are numerous. I started the research on it at the same time that I began researching Bentonville [Battle of Despair: Bentonville and the North Carolina Campaign] and Fort Fisher. The reason I did so was that there wasn't anything written on any of these battles at that time. At the time, however, I was a brand new writer, and let's just say there weren't many doors open to me. So.... I dabbled with projects that I could get someone interested in... anthology collections, and such. Fort Fisher was eventually published about ten years ago, as the first special edition ever run

by Confederate Veteran Magazine. Bentonville came out three years ago, published by Mercer University Press. By that time, there were two other histories of Bentonville published, and Mercer, as a condition of publication, insisted that I cite the existing works. As with anything else, accomplishment breeds opportunity, and this was the case with Perryville. Once I had gotten enough work published, it became easier to get a publisher to look at Perryville, and McFarland agreed to publish it, so I re-worked the original manuscript and sent it to them.

RM: In the weeks following the Battle of Perryville it seems that the actions of both Confederate General Bragg and Union General Buell were harshly criticized. Yet, Bragg claimed battlefield victory and Buell chased the main Rebel army from Kentucky—leaving both men with a qualified brand of success. Can you comment further?

Mr. Broadwater: Yes, both generals had limited reason to claim a victory in the Perryville Campaign. Bragg had mauled a large portion of the Union army on the battlefield, and Buell had forced the Confederate army to withdraw from Kentucky and abandon the campaign. However, both generals had lost far more than they had gained. Bragg lost an opportunity to transfer the war to the North, and to incorporate Kentucky into the Confederacy. He failed to win a decisive victory, or to gain the large numbers of Kentucky volunteers that the Confederacy so desperately needed. Buell, for his part, had failed to crush the Rebel forces when it was within his power to do so. The acoustic shadow that prevented him from even knowing that his army was engaged in a savage struggle can in no way be held against him, but his civil and military superiors did hold him accountable for the failure to destroy Bragg's army with the numerical superiority he had under his command. Personally, I think that Buell was judged too harshly and that he was a competent commander and strategist. Union efforts, East and West, had been a series of failures in 1862, and Buell's came at a time when the government had an extremely low tolerance for losses on the battlefield.

RM: According to the recollections of many soldiers, the Battle of Perryville was the most viciously contested battle in the western war theater. Despite this, more than a century went by until the first comprehensive treatment was published on the subject. What are your thoughts as to why there was such slow recognition of the battle's severity and importance?

Mr. Broadwater: I think that it took so long for a history of Perryville to be written because it was a Western battle. Most of the focus on the war, in the 1860's and after, was on the East. That is where the political and economic centers were located, and where the press wielded the greatest influence. We've all grown up hearing the stories of Gettysburg, Manassas, Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg, and such, and there have literally been thousands of books written about these battles. The West has always received short shrift. But it seems that in recent years,

historians are shifting their attention somewhat to embrace the western battles. Part of the reason for that is an awakening to the real importance of these campaigns, and part, I think, is because so much has already been written about the eastern campaigns. After all, what more can you say about Gettysburg than has already been written? With western campaigns, historians still have an opportunity to present information that is new to much of the Civil War community and to write about men and battles that people don't already know everything about. It's about time! The West is finally getting some of the appreciation that it has so long deserved. Can you tell that I'm a bit biased? Bentonville was my first campaign book.... Perryville is my second.... and I have one on Olustee [The Battle of Olustee 1864: The Final Union Attempt to Seize Florida] coming out in a couple months. The western campaigns have always peeked my interest, and that is why I write about them.

My thanks to Robert P. Broadwater, author of [*The Battle of Perryville, 1862: Culmination of the Failed Kentucky Campaign*](#). Go here to purchase his book. Mr. Broadwater is also author of at least nine other Civil War books and numerous articles.