

Patrick Cleburne
by
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I grew up in Chattanooga without ever hearing anything about Pat Cleburne. I suspect this still holds true for a lot of Chattanoogaans.

This isn't surprising since the site of his victory at the north end of Missionary Ridge is named after the man he defeated. It's named Sherman's Reservation. When I bemoaned this fact to Shelby Foote, Foote said, "No, it's alright, because that's where Sherman got whipped."

The battle of Chickamauga was fought in September 1863. It was an inconclusive Confederate win. After that, the Confederates, under Bragg, invested Chattanooga and tried to starve the Yankees out. It didn't work. Soon the Yankees, now commanded by Grant, were reinforced by two new army groups one of which was led by Sherman. Late in November, the Yankees advanced against the Confederates on Missionary Ridge.

Grant's plan was to attack the flanks of Missionary Ridge. Sherman was supposed to overrun the North end and Hooker the South end. Hooker didn't arrive until late so the main thrust would come under Sherman.

On the night of November 23rd, Sherman began crossing the Tennessee River. On the 24th he advanced and thought he had taken the north end. He was mistaken. He occupied Billy Goat Hill. On the 25th he looked across the chasm and saw Pat Cleburne's division occupying the true north end.

No matter, Sherman thought. He had about 25,000 men and Cleburne was commanding only 5,000. Starting at 10:00 AM Sherman began the attack and he continued it until about 4:00 PM. Cleburne hadn't budged.

After 4:00 PM Sherman sent word to Grant saying not to send him any more reinforcements. He mistakenly told Grant that the Confederates had sent Cleburne so many troops that the Confederate line had to be thin elsewhere. That wasn't the case. Cleburne had received no reinforcements. Be that as it may, Sherman conceded that he couldn't take the north end.

Anyway, as darkness was falling on the 25th, Cleburne's men were celebrating a victory. Their celebration, however, was short-lived as word came down to Cleburne that the Yankees had hit the Confederate center on Missionary Ridge and the center had broken.

It had broken disastrously. It was a debacle.

In the gathering darkness Cleburne's men had to roll off the north end and fight the rearguard action.

On the 26th the Yankees started in hot pursuit of the fleeing and disorganized Confederate army. Hooker's army group was the fastest and geographically the best positioned. They led the pursuit.

During the day of the 26th, Bragg was directing the Confederate army to Dalton. If they could reach Dalton, they could regroup safely. But there was a problem. The soldiers could make it, but the baggage train was going to move much slower. The baggage train contained all their supplies. If the Yankees could overtake the baggage train, Bragg's Confederate army would be finished.

During the night of the 26th, Bragg sent a verbal order to Cleburne to move his division into Ringgold Gap and to hold off the Yankees until the baggage train could reach safety. Cleburne felt his division was being dispatched on a suicide assignment. So, late in the night he sent a courier to Bragg to make Bragg give him a written order.

Before daybreak on the 27th, Cleburne positioned his division in Ringgold Gap. Hooker's Yankee army began piling thru Ringgold by 8:00 AM and commenced the attack. Despite having 16,000 men against Cleburne's 4000, they couldn't get thru.

By 1:00 PM Cleburne received word that the baggage train was safely away and he began his withdrawal and took his men into Dalton.

The Confederate army wintered in Dalton. Although Cleburne was militarily inactive, he engaged in 2 significant activities.

The first, which caused a commotion, was a petition authored by Cleburne urging the Confederate army to employ Blacks. As Cleburne said, "As between the loss of independence and the loss of slavery, we assume that every patriot will freely give up the latter – give up the Negro slave rather than be a slave himself."

When the petition caused a furor, Cleburne took off all the signer's names except his own and forwarded it to Jefferson Davis. Davis quashed it, and it wasn't until 25 years later that the petition was made public.

The 2nd event occurred when Cleburne went to a wedding near Mobile. There he met and fell in love with Sue Tarlton. Over the remaining months of the winter they became engaged.

They remained so until the battle of Franklin where Cleburne was killed leading a futile charge ordered by the laudanum-addled John Bell Hood.

Before the charge, Cleburne's last recorded words were: "Well, if we must die, let us die as men."

Cleburne was born in Ireland. He wanted to be a physician like his father but he flunked the entrance exam. Feeling disgraced, he joined the British Army. After 3 years he left the British Army and immigrated to America; ultimately he settled in Helena, Arkansas.

Before the war he was first a pharmacist and then a lawyer. On one occasion he was asked to accompany a friend who was fearful of being bushwhacked. His friend's concern proved correct when they were ambushed on the streets of Helena. A gunfight ensued. Although wounded he was the last man left standing.

As during the war, Cleburne was asked to stand and stand he did.

Here was a man of whom any nation should be proud.