

**15th Infantry Regiment
October to December 1863 and Chattanooga
By Mark W. Johnson**

In the aftermath of the Battle of Chickamauga, the Army of the Cumberland found itself bottled up in the town of Chattanooga. With the enemy controlling Chattanooga's river and rail approaches, the Army of the Cumberland's lifeline consisted of a narrow, twisting road up and over Walden's Ridge north of town. Desperately needed supplies and reinforcements had to travel more than fifty miles on this difficult route from the Federal depots at Bridgeport and Stevenson in Alabama. Only a trickle got through, but part of that trickle was a battalion of Regulars. On October 2, 1863, Maj. [John R. Edie](#) reported to the Regular Brigade's camp at the head of a begrimed and exhausted column of troops: the 2nd Battalion, 15th U.S. Infantry. Their journey had been a long one, covering more than 400 miles by river steamer, railroad, and foot in just less than two weeks.

When Col. Oliver Shepherd took command of the 15th U.S. in May 1863, he knew that the Regular Brigade would put 2/15th's services to good use; it would certainly be a better use of Regular manpower than having the battalion continue with its garrison duty in Grant's Department of the Tennessee. Shepherd started working through the red tape and requested an assignment to the Army of the Cumberland for Edie's Memphis-based troops. General Grant was understandably reluctant to part with a battalion of Regulars (he had only three in the Army of the Tennessee, the others being 1/13th U.S. and a small contingent of the 1st Infantry) but finally relented. On September 20, the day [King's](#) Regulars were fighting for their lives at Chickamauga, 2/15th U.S. boarded a northbound steamer at the Memphis docks. The craft docked at Louisville five days later and Edie's troops started toward the front via the Louisville & Nashville Railroad. The Battalion arrived at Bridgeport on September 28, the starting point for its difficult overland march to Chattanooga. For most of the trip Edie's command accompanied a huge mule train of more than 800 wagons, Rosecrans' most ambitious attempt to force supplies into Chattanooga. The Regular Battalion separated from the train on the morning of October 2, taking a more treacherous but shorter footpath over Walden's Ridge for the final leg of the journey. Moving along that separate route spared 2/15th U.S. from the rest of the column's fate. Confederate Maj. Gen. Joseph Wheeler crossed the Tennessee River north of Chattanooga at the head of the Army of Tennessee's Cavalry Corps on September 30, setting out on a raid of Federal communications. His first prize was the wagon train strung out along Walden's Ridge. The raiders captured the entire train and destroyed what they could not carry. Edie's battalion avoided the confrontation but the unit's equipment was put to the torch with the rest of the convoy. The Battalion Quartermasters escorting the baggage, Lt. Charles Lord and nineteen soldiers, were captured.

Edie's tired troops limped into Chattanooga with little more than what they could carry. "Everything belonging to my Officers was destroyed by the Rebels," Edie complained to the Department Adjutant a few weeks later. "Since our arrival here we have been compelled to trespass upon the kindness of friends for all the necessities of life, and as the things we need can not be bought or otherwise procured here, I know of no other way of supplying our wants." At least the Battalion was well supplied with ammunition. A few days after venting his equipment complaint, [Major Edie](#) reported that his unit "has been supplied with a sufficient amount of ammunition, each enlisted man having forty round in his Cartridge Box and there is a surplus of 5,000 rounds

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remaining.” Carrying live cartridges was a new experience for the Battalion. Edie informed Department Headquarters that it would be a good idea to put some of that surplus to use: “I have the honor to request that permission be given me to practice the men of this Command, for a few days, at Target firing. They have had some practice in firing with blank cartridges, but have always been stationed at points where Target firing was strictly prohibited. I respectfully suggest that if the permission be given, it would render this Battalion much more efficient in action than it would be without such practice.”

While Edie’s troops may not have been skilled marksmen, the Regular Brigade still desperately needed the 198 officers and men of 2/15th U.S. who survived the trek from Bridgeport. Even after the return to duty of lightly wounded troops and a few others who had been listed as missing in action after Chickamauga, King’s battalions still counted less than 800 men in ranks at the end of September.

Five months of campaigning in 1863 had reduced many of the Army of the Cumberland’s regiments to mere shadows of full-strength units, and another major reorganization took place in the weeks following Chickamauga. Three regiments from Col. Timothy R. Stanley’s brigade of Negley’s old division were grafted into the Regular Brigade and the consolidated unit was designated the 2nd Brigade, 1st Division, XIV Corps. Joining the Regulars were the 11th Michigan, 19th Illinois, and 69th Ohio, veteran organizations that had all fought well at Chickamauga. John King retained Brigade command and divided the unit into two “demi-brigades,” one volunteer, the other Regular. Major Edie took charge of the Regular battalions. Captain William S. McManus, a New Yorker commanding B/2/15th U.S., moved up to take Edie’s place in command of the 15th Infantry’s 2nd Battalion.

General Ulysses S. Grant assumed command of the growing Federal force at [Chattanooga](#) in November 1863. In addition to the Army of the Cumberland, now commanded by George H. Thomas, Grant also had at his disposal troops from the Army of the Potomac under Joseph Hooker, and a corps from Grant’s old Army of the Tennessee led by William T. Sherman. Grant unleashed this force in late November. Although the offensive did not unfolded exactly as planned, it generated spectacular results. On November 22 Federal observers noticed enemy activity that seemed to indicate Southern troops were leaving Chattanooga. This was Cleburne’s and Buckner’s Divisions beginning a movement to reinforce Longstreet, then operating miles to the northeast near Knoxville, but the Northerners could only discern that some sort of withdrawal was taking place. Rumors reached General Grant the next day to the effect that the Confederates at Chattanooga were calling off the siege and retreating southward. Worried that Bragg’s army might withdraw prior to Sherman’s attack, which would finally get under way the next day, Grant ordered Thomas to conduct a strong reconnaissance toward the center of the Confederate line along Missionary Ridge to confirm or deny the rumors. George Thomas employed almost half of the Army of the Cumberland on this “reconnaissance” and seized a low, craggy eminence about half way between the lines known as Orchard Knob. The operation verified that the enemy was still present but unfortunately also spurred the Confederate high command into action. Alarmed that the seizure of Orchard Knob might be the preliminary step of a larger offensive, Bragg recalled Cleburne’s Division and held it in readiness to respond

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to the next Federal move. Nervous Confederate generals also began to think that perhaps an attack on Missionary Ridge would take place soon. The ridge's natural strength had lulled Bragg into thinking the Federals would never contemplate attacking it. The Southerners had not even constructed significant fortifications on this high ground during the two months they had been staring down at the Federal army in Chattanooga. They belatedly started doing so on the evening of November 23.

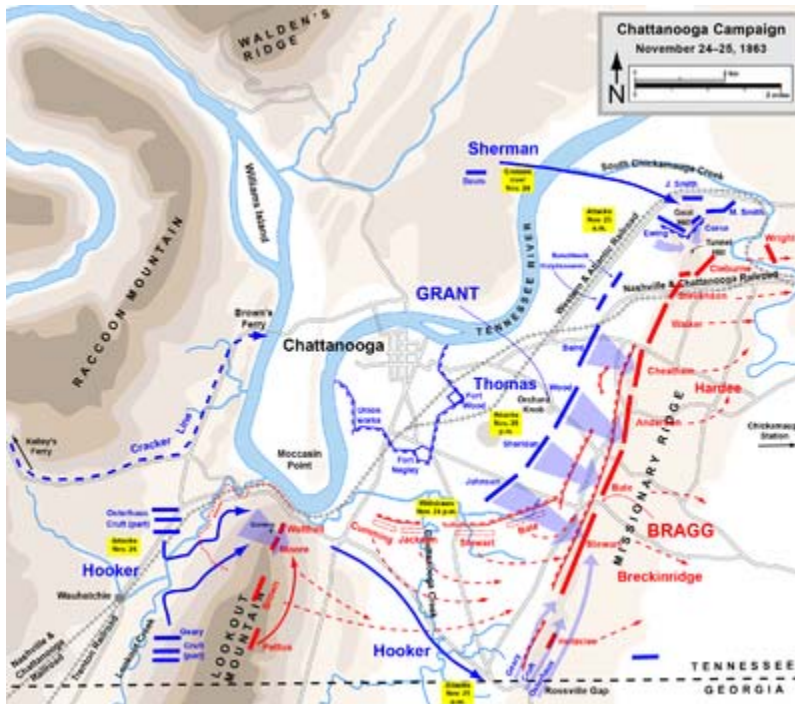
Attacking Missionary Ridge was indeed part of Grant's overall plan, but an assault there would take place only after Sherman's command had seized Tunnel Hill and turned Bragg's right flank. Sherman's operation got underway prior to daybreak on November 24, a day marked by fog, low clouds, and intermittent rain. Three divisions from the Army of the Tennessee, with Davis' division of Palmer's corps nearby in support, crossed the Tennessee near the mouth of South Chickamauga Creek, a move that caught Bragg completely off guard. Instead of immediately moving inland to press his advantage, however, Sherman had his forces advance only a short distance from the river and dig in. He was well short of Tunnel Hill, the delay providing Bragg enough time to shift Pat Cleburne's crack troops to oppose Sherman's advance. When Sherman pushed his own men forward early in the afternoon, Cleburne stopped them dead in their tracks.

While no progress was made on the Federal left, the right was a different story. Grant at first had envisioned only a limited role for Hooker in the overall Federal plan. A few days before the attack Grant had detached from Hooker the XI Corps (three divisions under [Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard](#)), moved these troops into Chattanooga, and placed them under George Thomas's immediate command. The only units that remained under Hooker were a single division of the XII Corps and a small division temporarily attached to Hooker from Granger's corps (two brigades under Brig. Gen. Charles Cruft). Events that took place the day prior to Sherman's attack on Tunnel Hill caused Grant to recast Hooker's role in the upcoming battle. First, the Confederates floated downriver some heavy rafts that seriously damaged the pontoon bridge at Brown's Ferry. Heavy autumn rains had raised the Tennessee River sharply and put the bridge under enormous strain; the impact of the enemy rafts broke the pontoon span on the afternoon of November 23. Stranded in Lookout Valley with Hooker was Brig. Gen. Peter J. Osterhaus's division of the XV Corps, one of Sherman's divisions that had just marched up from Bridgeport. Also on November 23 Thomas's signalers intercepted and decoded a message from Confederate Maj. Gen. Carter L. Stevenson, whose division was responsible for defending Lookout Mountain, that stated a Federal attack was expected against the Confederate left. Since the enemy was watching the Lookout area closely, Grant ordered Hooker's larger-than-expected command to make a demonstration against Lookout Mountain in support of Sherman's simultaneous attack on the opposite flank. Hooker, who had long wanted to push the opposition off that dominating piece of terrain and was spoiling for a fight, seized the initiative and turned the demonstration into a full-scale attempt to capture Lookout Mountain.

They were riding toward the right flank of Thomas's battle line. Two divisions from Granger's corps, Wood's and Sheridan's, held the center while Baird's division of Palmer's corps, which had been sent to Sherman's aid but had recently been recalled, held the left. [Brigadier General Richard W. Johnson](#)'s division was on the right with two

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brigades in line (his final brigade, Brig. Gen. John C. Starkweather's, had been retained as a reserve in the Chattanooga fortifications). Johnson arrayed his men in line-of-battle a few miles outside of town during the early afternoon, facing Missionary Ridge from a narrow patch of woods astride the Rossville Road. Brigadier General Carlin's Brigade was on the right, with the mixed Brigade of Regulars and volunteers (Colonel [William L. Stoughton](#) of the 11th Michigan in command) on the left. In Stoughton's Brigade, Colonel Moore commanded the Brigade's left wing of volunteer regiments. In the right wing, [Maj. John Edie](#) formed the Regular Battalions with the front rank consisting of the 15th Infantry Battalions on the right and the 16th Infantry on the left. The 18th and 19th Infantry formed Edie's second line. About ten minutes after forming up, six cannon on Orchard Knob were fired in succession, the Army of the Cumberland's signal to advance. An aide from General Johnson galloped over to Stoughton's Brigade and relayed a message to its commander. "The general commanding sends his compliments," the staff officer informed the Michigan colonel, "and directs you to charge to the hill."



The Federals faced a daunting task. Missionary Ridge loomed ahead, enemy infantry and artillery dotting its crest 500 feet above the Tennessee River flood plain. Additional Confederates were dug in at the base of the slope. Between the opposing lines stretched about a mile of open or sparsely covered ground. Ahead of the Regulars on [Missionary Ridge](#) was the Confederate division of Maj. Gen. Alexander P. Stewart, which included many of the Tennessee regiments that had fought so furiously against the Regulars in the cedars at Stones River. With the exception of the recently arrived troops of 2/15th U.S. and a few others, all the Regulars were veterans of Chickamauga.

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There was no doubt in their minds about what was in store: a whirlwind of shot and shell cutting through their formation, many comrades being hit before they ever reached the ridge.

The Regulars and the rest of the Federal army at Chattanooga were about to find out that the Confederate position was not as strong as it appeared. The fortifications on the ridge were not well planned and the disposition of the troops manning them bordered on ludicrous. Bragg kept half his infantry in rifle pits at the base of the ridge, ordering them to fire a single volley if attacked and then fall back on the main line at the top. It was not clear to anyone what good this would do, and the troops manning the lower line were unsure about what was expected of them. Cold, hungry, tired, and confused (in terms of logistics the Confederate troops surrounding Chattanooga were no better off than their opponents), many of the soldiers defending Missionary Ridge had little fighting spirit.

There was no dearth of spirit in the blue-clad ranks on the wide plain facing the Confederate positions. After being cooped up in Chattanooga for two months, the Army of the Cumberland was spoiling for a fight. But there was some confusion among the Federal troops also. Grant had ordered Thomas only to advance to the base of Missionary Ridge and capture the first line of Confederate rifle pits, hoping the move would prevent Bragg from sending additional forces northward against Sherman. As that order hurriedly made its way through the various corps, divisions, and brigades, most Federal commanders thought they had been ordered to either take the ridge itself or that they were to do so after taking the lower line of rifle pits.

Confused or not, the first step was to reach the base of Missionary Ridge. The Federal line advanced at 3:40 P.M., Thomas's four divisions totaling about 24,000 troops in eleven brigades. Major Edie gave the Regular battalions the command to move forward and the lines lurched into motion, the nervous Regulars picking their way through the sparse trees while trying to maintain proper alignment. At the edge of the wood line, the battalion commanders briefly halted their commands, dressed up the ranks and had their men fix bayonets. The battalion commanders then yelled: "Forward! Double quick! March!" With their rifles at right shoulder shift, the Regulars emerged into the open. Confederate artillery replied to the advance with a deluge of projectiles. "We moved so rapidly," recalled Pvt. J.N. Stanford of A/2/18th U.S., "their shells burst to our rear, sometimes so close as to make it uncomfortable, to say the least." The enemy fire was erratic and casualties few as the Regulars advanced. Nervous Confederates at the base of the ridge in front of Edie's battalions, elements of the 4th and 5th Tennessee of [Brig. Gen. Otho F. Strahl](#)'s Brigade, fired some scattered shots and then headed for the crest. The story was the same along the entire Union line: the enemy manning the lower line of rifle pits fled. Jubilant Federals, not realizing their opponents were following orders, cheered and ran even faster. "You better believe I done some tall running till I got to the hill," remembered Sgt. Philip Lyman, a company mate of Stanford's in Captain Haymond's battalion.

Plunging fire from enemy positions on the crest was more effective as the Federals advanced closer to the ridge. Skirmishers from the 15th Infantry battalions quickly cleared the rifle pits in front of Missionary Ridge. The rest of the Regulars, winded from the sprint, consolidated the position a few moments later. Many Federal

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units, believing their orders were to continue to the crest, moved past the rifle pits and immediately began the difficult ascent of Missionary Ridge.

A rare event during the Civil War occurred at Missionary Ridge that afternoon, a successful uphill assault against an entrenched enemy. In some places Southern troops retreating from the baseline positions obscured the fire of the Confederates on top, allowing Federal troops to advance up the ridge quickly and, occasionally, with few casualties. Making the enemy's task even more difficult was the poor quality of the upper fortifications. Hastily thrown up during the previous day and a half, most of the works were incorrectly sighted and not very strong. The men retreating from the rifle pits arrived at the upper positions in an exhausted condition. Most of them continued rearward after reaching the top, with many of their comrades from the upper fortifications joining them in flight. Even so, Johnson's division encountered some of the worst conditions among the attacking Federals. They had to run a longer distance to reach the ridge, and having been on picket duty for more than seventy-two hours immediately prior to the assault Stoughton's men were in need of rest before the advance even began. In addition, Stewart's Confederates had constructed an additional fortified line about halfway up the slope.

The Regulars took a breather after rooting the enemy out of this intermediate position. Like all the attacking units struggling up the slope the Regular battalions were badly intermixed at this point, formation and cohesion evaporating amidst the steep and broken terrain. Confederates on the crest, their line of fire now clear of friendly forces, fired more effectively. Union casualties increased. Private Stanford remembered firing back despite the opposition and poor terrain: "Away we went, dodging from stump to tree, rock or whatever would protect us, and now and then clinging to bushes to help us up (for it was very steep in places), and cracking heads wherever they showed themselves above us. . . .As my regiment reached the top the Johnnies lay down and stuck their guns over the works and shot them off without looking up." Captain [John Henry Knight](#), commanding a company in 2/18th U.S. and shouldering a Springfield rifle as he ascended the slope, was elated that friendly casualties were not heavy during the assault: "Of course I had many hair breadth escapes—ball and canister were just rained down into our faces and many, many a poor fellow tumbled backwards down the hill, though I was surprised to see so few killed or wounded. I had but two or three men injured coming across the open field where they could have moved us down like grass. After the men got to the hill they could protect themselves behind trees and rocks."

While checking on what troops of the 18th Infantry he could locate amidst the confusion, Captain Smith came to [Lieutenant Phisterer](#)'s position. As they talked a piece of shell struck the lieutenant in the right breast and knocked him over. "Smith asked if I was hurt, I said, I'll see, put my hand under my coat and found the place...took my hand out and it was not red. I have heard of men being saved by bibles, prayer-books and cards even; I was saved by a package of bills I carried in a pocket book inside of my overcoat. The bills had been given me by our sutler at Columbus, Ohio to give to the parties concerned. While resting I saw our line to the left halfway and advancing up the ridge, and in the plain below our second line crossing in double time with colors flying." Phisterer continued climbing, perhaps glad he had a legitimate reason for losing the sutler's paperwork. Nearby in the 16th Infantry, Private Van

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Zwaluwenburg also turned around and glanced toward the Tennessee River. Like Phisterer, he was impressed by what he saw: "I looked back a moment and counted eight lines of battle of our boys marching steadily to our support. The 11th Mich was on our left. they went up the ridge in the shape of an inverted V with the colors at the apex. I saw the colors go down a number of times, but were raised at once by some strong arm. It is strange what pride men take, under such circumstances in keeping the colors up. Plenty men will quickly face almost certain death rather than see the colors touch the ground."

The eyesight of the Southerners on top of Missionary Ridge was just as good as that of Phisterer and Van Zwaluwenburg. The sight of the legions that Thomas was hurling against Missionary Ridge was enough to cause many of the ridge's defenders to think twice about standing their ground. Sheridan's division to the immediate left of Johnson's troops had already gained the summit by the time Stoughton's brigade approached the top, causing many of the defenders on Johnson's front to flee. Some resolute Confederates still remained as the Regulars neared the end of their exhausting climb. [Captain Anson Mills](#) found himself crawling upward directly toward an enemy battery. "Half second fuze!" the chief of the piece called out, meaning the shell would explode a half second after leaving the muzzle. Mills hugged the earth, the shell exploding nearby but fortunately not hurting anyone. His ears ringing, the captain led the troops near him the short distance remaining to the top.

The shell fired at Mills was one of the Confederates' parting shots. The first soldier of Edie's battalions over the top was Sgt. James A. Elliot of A/1/18th U.S. Infantry. Jumping over a breastwork, Elliot single-handedly rounded up two Confederate officers and ten men as prisoners. Lieutenant John Gill, leading from the front in the best tradition of an ex-sergeant, was the first officer of the Regular battalions to gain the summit. Elliot and Gill were joined a moment later by a swarm of Regulars. Sergeant Elliot's exploits were repeated many times over. After mounting the crest Private Stanford suddenly found himself face to face with a group of armed Confederates. "We surrender; don't shoot!" one of them called out as the sweating, excited Federal soldier jumped into their midst and took aim. Stanford and his companions disarmed this group and then turned their attention "to those who were making Maud S time down the side of the ridge, and persuaded a few to stop and rest." While some hard fighting took place on top of the ridge, the enemy for the most part had fled or was attempting to do so as the Regulars gained the summit. By shortly after 5:00 P.M. most of Missionary Ridge was in Federal hands.

From general to private, the Federal army at Chattanooga was amazed by the victory. The advance to the top of Missionary Ridge and the resulting Confederate collapse had been so unexpected that few of the victorious commanders knew what to do next. Major General Phillip Sheridan led his division on a brief pursuit in the gathering darkness, but otherwise Federal units bivouacked on top of the ridge amidst abandoned Confederate camps. Their main problem that night was transporting rations and ammunition up the steep slope and casualties back to Chattanooga. By morning the Regulars had been issued 3 days' rations and 100 rounds per man.

The Federal pursuit began in earnest on November 26. Johnson's division led the XIV Corps' column marching southeastward from Missionary Ridge on the Bird's Mill

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Road. Repairing bridges over South Chickamauga and Pea Vine Creeks delayed the advance for many hours. It was dusk by the time Johnson's men crossed the Pea Vine and began to catch up with Bragg's fleeing troops. After crossing the creek the road forked as it headed into Georgia. The left branch led to Graysville while the other went to [Ringgold](#). General Johnson sent a brigade down each road, Carlin left and Stoughton right. Troops of Carlin's advanced guard heard what they thought was a column moving on the road some distance to their front. In the gathering darkness they could not be sure whether the troops were friendly or enemy. Word was sent to Stoughton's brigade to be on the alert. Stoughton's men had meanwhile continued their own cautious advance. They eventually saw campfires flickering around a road intersection a short distance to the front. A company of skirmishers from the 2/15th U.S. under Lt. Robert Harrison scouted the area and returned with a courier from General Bragg in tow and word that an enemy camp was ahead, in which could be seen some limbered artillery pieces. Stoughton quietly formed his brigade into line. The Confederates, members of Stewart's Division again, had no chance to react to the sudden ambush. "On approaching the road we surprised and captured his pickets," Colonel Stoughton reported, "and learning his position moved promptly forward and made a vigorous attack." The assault was so vigorous that it even startled Brigadier General Carlin: "There broke out on the still air a most frightening roar of musketry about 300 yards down the road towards Ringgold. It seemed to come from at least an entire brigade. It must have been heard for miles around in all directions. It turned out that it was Stoughton's Brigade, which had learned the location of a Confederate command bivouacked temporarily alongside of the road. There was no return to that fire. Stillness returned as suddenly as it had been broken."

Stoughton's nighttime assault scattered Stewart's men. Captain Andrew Burt led forward B/1/18th U.S. to the abandoned position, capturing an artillery piece from Capt. T.B. Ferguson's Battery and several prisoners. Skirmishers from the 16th Infantry claimed another gun, while the 11th Michigan took two others. In addition to the cannon the haul from the skirmish totaled four caissons, a battle flag, and more than sixty prisoners. The noise from the attack also frightened a party of Confederates then attempting to cross East Chickamauga Creek at Graysville. Fearing that the Federals were close, they dumped some artillery pieces into the creek and hurried on to Ringgold "in great confusion and fright." Following the engagement Stoughton marched his command to Graysville, where it linked up with Carlin's brigade and passed a quiet night.

Hooker's troops suffered a bloody repulse the next day while attacking Cleburne's Confederate rearguard at [Ringgold Gap](#). Johnson's division marched from Graysville to Ringgold that morning and stood in readiness to support the Federal assault but Hooker broke off the frustrating battle without calling Johnson forward. The fighting at Ringgold ended the Federal pursuit of Bragg and closed the book on the Chattanooga Campaign. Bragg's army suffered about 6,600 casualties, including more than 4,000 captured. During late November the demoralized Army of Tennessee gathered at Dalton, Georgia, about twenty miles to the southeast, while Federal troops secured the approaches to Chattanooga. Johnson's division returned to Chattanooga on November 29. The November battles had cost the North about 5,800 troops, but the

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combined Union armies had routed their opposition and lifted the siege of Chattanooga. Lt. Peter Cönzler of the 16th Infantry died on Missionary Ridge, and fifty-seven other Regulars were killed or wounded in the short campaign. The newcomers of 2/15th U.S. earned praise from General Johnson: "A small battalion of the Fifteenth U.S. Infantry, never under fire before, acted like veterans."

For the rest of their days, Federal soldiers who participated in the assault of Missionary Ridge would look back with pride on what they accomplished. The Army of the Cumberland went into winter quarters during the first week of December 1863. Active operations came to a temporary halt.