

15th Infantry Regiment
September 1863 and Chickamauga
By Mark W. Johnson

Nothing came of the rumored New York move and late in the afternoon on September 10 the Regular Brigade's 1,829 officers and men crossed the Tennessee via the pontoon bridge at Bridgeport. [Brigadier General John King](#) again led them, his command of Rousseau's division ending as a result of a personnel shuffle within the Army of the Cumberland. Brigadier General James B. Steedman had some "difficulty in his situation" while leading a brigade in Brannan's division and requested a transfer. Rosecrans moved Steedman to the Reserve Corps, where due to seniority he took command of [Brig. Gen. Absalom Baird](#)'s division. Baird was assigned to Thomas's corps and took temporary command of the XIV Corps' 1st Division. An 1849 Academy Graduate who would later earn the Medal of Honor during the Atlanta Campaign, Baird had a good amount of combat experience and was a capable, respected officer. The 15th Infantry's John King moved back down to the Regulars.

The 15th Infantry's 1st Battalion had a new commanders as the Regulars moved into Georgia. Captain Albert B. Dod joined 1/15th U.S. in early September at Stevenson. Since Dod ranked [Henry Keteltas](#), Dod assumed command of the battalion and [Keteltas](#) resumed his command of the battalion's Company E. Albert Dod was one of the original 1861 appointees to the 15th Regulars, but this was his first tour of field duty.

Rosecrans had been busy while the Regulars marked time on the west bank of the Tennessee. Crittenden's XXI Corps had crossed the Sequatchie River and occupied the region north of Chattanooga. Bragg evacuated Chattanooga and retreated southward on September 8. As the Army of the Cumberland threaded its way through the high ground south of the Tennessee River, Rosecrans' three corps were widely dispersed and could not support each other if attacked. This potentially dangerous situation did not worry Rosecrans, for he did not consider Bragg's army a serious threat. The Union commander thought the Confederates were heavily outnumbered and would not stop retreating short of Atlanta. This estimate of the Confederate situation was just partially correct. The Army of the Tennessee may have abandoned Chattanooga and retreated, but Bragg was simultaneously orchestrating a counterattack. Bragg had a slight numerical advantage over Rosecrans, which the Army of the Cumberland's dispersal magnified. Bragg planned to strike the far-flung Federal columns as they emerged from the mountain passes, cut them off from Chattanooga, and then recapture the city.

By the evening of September 11, Rosecrans finally realized the Confederates had stopped their retreat and were looking for a fight. To prevent Bragg from getting between the Federal army and Chattanooga, Rosecrans ordered his scattered forces to move northward and close within supporting distance.

On September 12 King's Regulars had reveille at three o'clock and moved out an hour and a half later. They were still far behind the main body of Baird's division and struggled to make up the distance. The brigade crossed Lookout Mountain at Steven's Gap on September 14. The next day King's brigade went northward on a narrow track along the eastern slope of Lookout Mountain and finally caught up with the main body of

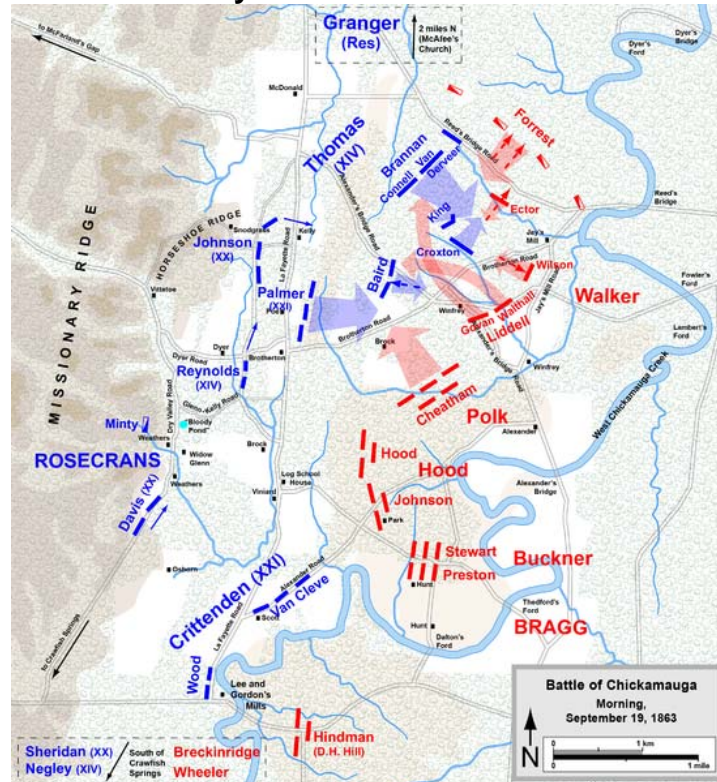
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Baird's division at Cooper's Gap. Throughout that day and the next, Thomas's and McCook's corps moved toward Chattanooga. Their route roughly paralleled Chickamauga Creek, a narrow, meandering waterway that was militarily traversable only by way of the region's few fords and bridges. Confederate troops tangled with the Federal mounted troops for control of the Chickamauga crossings on September 18, secured Reed's and Alexander's Bridges, and by nightfall established bridgeheads on the west bank. Bragg that evening positioned his gathering forces to deliver Rosecrans a punishing blow come sunrise.

The Regulars were oblivious to these events as they arrived at Crawfish Spring late in the day on September 18 after yet another hot, dusty day of marching. With Confederates west of the Chickamauga, Rosecrans knew he had to immediately shift forces north or risk being cut off from Chattanooga. He ordered three divisions of Thomas's XIV Corps northward that night and take up a position on the La Fayette Road that covered the routes to the bridges at which Confederates had reportedly crossed the Chickamauga. This was Rosecrans's key decision of the battle, for the presence of Federal troops north of Lee & Gordon's Mill ended up completely unhinging Bragg's plan for the coming battle. Instead of assailing Rosecrans' flank, Bragg would have to deal with six enemy brigades where none should have been. Soldiers down in the ranks of those Federal brigades had little idea of what was to come. Most were so exhausted they could barely keep their eyes open as they stumbled along. After marching five miles through the night, it was a little after 6:00 A.M. on September 19 when the groggy troops of the Regular Brigade, the van of Thomas's column, reached an obscure clearing on the La Fayette Road called Kelly Field. After experiencing the upcoming thirty-six hours, it was a place the Regulars would never forget.

General King ordered his troops to stack arms and prepare breakfast, knowing they would perform the day's work better with full stomachs. Not having had time to eat anything substantial the previous day, the famished Regulars quickly gathered firewood and sent details out for water. Water was scarce in the area and some of the troops ranged more than a mile before finding any. By eight o'clock the Regulars were gathered in small groups around campfires in the woods north of Kelly Field waiting for coffee to boil. Most of them did not finish the meal. They had heard occasional firing off to the east since daybreak. Lieutenant Henry Freeman, adjutant of 2/18th U.S., recalled that the sounds of battle started to change around nine o'clock: "To our left and front the heavy report of a single gun, followed by that of the bursting shell, then the steady rattle of musketry, warned us that our breakfast, if indeed we were to have breakfast at all, was to be a hurried one. For a moment we stood listening to the noise of the battle on our left, while it grew in intensity, coming nearer, the continuous roar of artillery almost drowning the more deadly rain of musketry, until at last it reached the division on our left and the shrill cheers or yells of the advancing Confederates piercing through the roar of battle told us that our turn had come."

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By the morning of September 19 elements of both armies were arrayed between Chickamauga Creek and Missionary Ridge. While the opposing forces were not far apart, the region's dense woods ensured that neither side was sure of the other's disposition. Thomas ordered Baird's division into the fight. General Baird formed his division with the Regulars on the left, Col. Benjamin Scribner's brigade on the right, and Brig. Gen. John Starkweather's brigade in reserve. Although the rough terrain limited artillery effectiveness, Baird did not want his division's batteries left unsupported on the La Fayette Road and had them accompany their brigades. Shortly after nine o'clock the division moved out from Kelly Field and marched to the sound of the guns.

After moving through the woods about three-quarters of a mile, the Regulars came upon Federal troops that were hard pressed by [Col. Claudius Wilson](#)'s Brigade of Georgians and were almost out of ammunition. Passing through Croxton's line, the Regulars took up the fight. After halting Wilson's Brigade and forcing the Southerners to withdraw, the Regulars pushed forward another half mile. The forest west of Jay's Mill was quiet for the next half-hour, the Regulars tending to casualties and hustling rearward their haul of prisoners.

The Regular Brigade had thus far come through the battle relatively unscathed but that was about to change. Skirmishers of George Smith's 1/18th U.S. were the first Regulars to perceive a new danger. Smith's skirmishers on the brigade's right flank detected movement in the woods to the south and opened fire. These Southern troops belonged to [Brig. Gen. St. John R. Liddell](#)'s Division. Sent north from its position near Alexander's Bridge to reinforce the Confederate right, Liddell's 3,000 men were in a

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perfect position to plow into the flank of Baird's division. Liddell's first victims were Scribner's and Starkweather's brigades. After offering slight resistance, the two brigades broke and scattered. Liddell's troops continued northward without missing a step.

When Smith's skirmishers started firing, the Regulars were facing southeast with Lieutenant Burnham's guns in battery between the brigade's two lines. John King knew he had to form the Regulars facing southwest to meet Liddell's attack or they were doomed. He ordered Burnham to limber up and escape. The brigadier then started shifting his infantry. [Major Coolidge's](#) 1/16th U.S. moved first, taking up a position immediately south of Battery H to cover the artillery's withdrawal. "We hastily faced about and marched in the direction of the new danger," Private Van Zwaluwenburg recalled. "when half way down a hillside we met the enemy in large force. we layed down and began firing." Captain Dod's 1/15th U.S. closed up on the battery's right, while Haymond's 2/18th changed front to the rear and formed a hasty line. Burnham's artillerymen attempted to bring horses forward to haul off the guns, but alert Confederates shot the animals as soon as they came within sight. Seeing the enemy just a short distance away, Burnham realized he could not possibly escape in time and instead ordered his gunners to load their four 12-pound Napoleons with double-shotted canister (the battery also had two Parrott rifles, but those weapons could not fire canister and thus were not as effective at close range as the smoothbore Napoleons).

That was about all the Regulars could do before the Southern swarm engulfed them. "We scarcely got into position before a division of Texas and Arkansas troops advanced upon us on the run," wrote Henry Haymond a week later. Battery H opened up as soon as the 18th Infantry skirmishers were clear, causing some of the enemy to take cover. The 16th Infantrymen in front of the guns occupied a slightly lower elevation and welcomed the sound of the shells flying over their heads. Private Van Zwaluwenburg noted that the battery's fire was all too brief: "our battery unlimbered back of us, but were enabled to do very little, as the men who manned the guns were shot down before they could load. I looked back once, whilst loading, to know why they were not firing and saw that the men were shot down as fast as they rallied to their guns." Battery H did not have much infantry support and Confederate fire dropped the gunners with alarming speed. Lieutenant Burnham was among the artillerymen to go down, shot through the right breast. A Regular from the 16th U.S. was the first to reach the side of the fallen officer. "Lieutenant, are you hurt?" the soldier asked. "Not much," the fatally wounded Burnham gasped, "but save the guns!" Lieutenant Fessenden was wounded shortly thereafter, as was Lieutenant Ludlow. Noncoms and gunners were swept away. The 12-pounders managed to fire about four rounds each before falling silent.

[Colonel Daniel C. Govan's](#) Arkansas Brigade surged toward the gun line. Major Coolidge's prone battalion could not stop them and was washed away in the Confederate tide. A Confederate officer called out for the Regulars to surrender, but Coolidge raised his sword in defiance. The 16th Infantry's resistance held up a portion of Govan's line for a few moments, but Coolidge's men paid dearly. Of the 307 officers

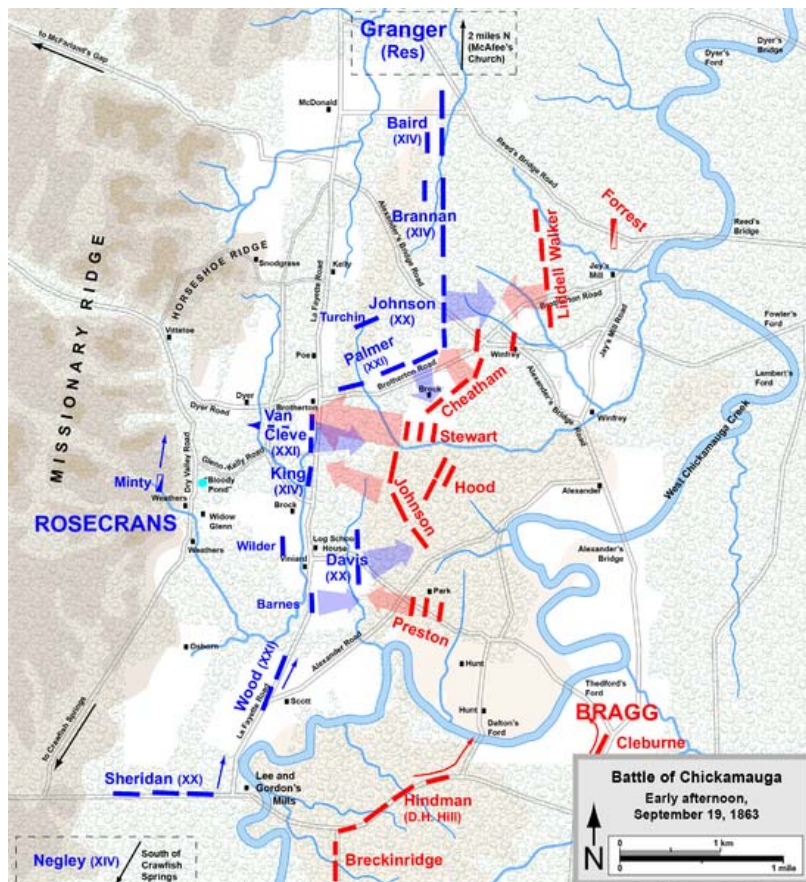
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and men in the ranks of 1/16th U.S. when the day began, all but thirty-five were killed, wounded, or missing by nightfall.

The 15th Infantry let loose a few volleys before breaking for the rear. The story was much the same in the other battalions. Pockets of Regulars here and there stood their ground and contested Govan's advance. Most of those who did were captured or killed. Govan reported bagging the guns of Battery H and more than 400 Regular troops.

The Regulars fled. [Private William J. Carson](#), a bugler in Captain Dod's 1/15th U.S., did what he could to bring order out of the chaos. With bugle in one hand and musician's sword in the other, Carson blew repeated bugle calls in an attempt to stem the tide. Attaching himself to the color guard of an 18th Infantry battalion, his rallied a portion of that regiment. The frantic bugle calls also confused and slowed down Govan's pursuit. Captain Dod reported that Carson's actions "attracted the notice and elicited the admiration of the whole brigade."

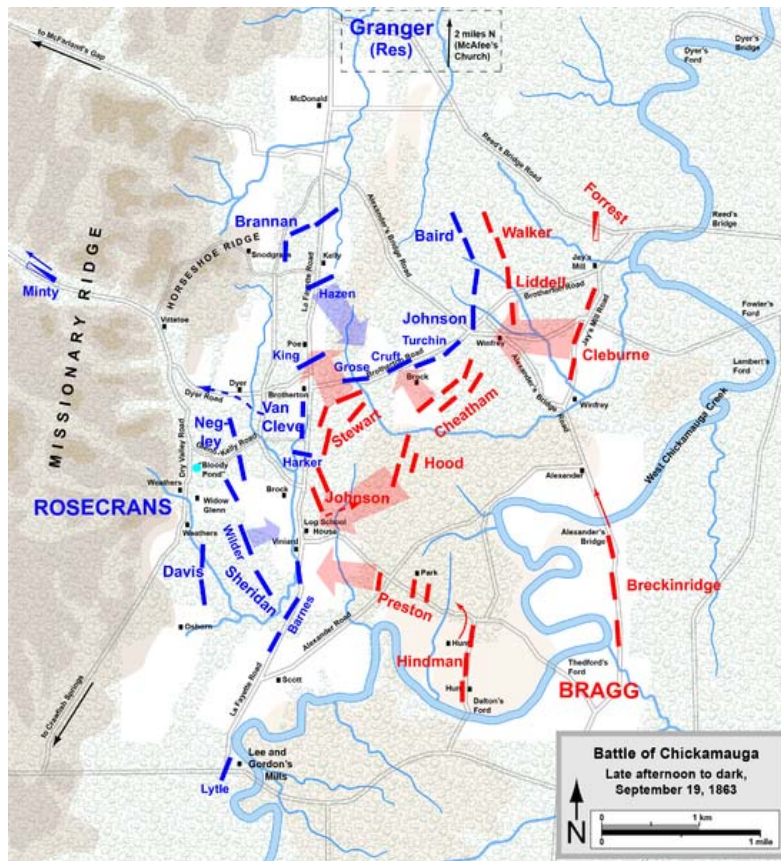
[General King](#) reformed the remnants of his brigade. Officers gathered in stragglers and sent walking wounded to the rear. The brigade withdrew at two o'clock, General Thomas moving Baird's and Brannan's spent divisions to the army's left flank near the McDonald Farm. Richard W. Johnson's and [John Palmer](#)'s divisions, the next two Federal commands to arrive in the area, took up the fight in the forest west of Jay's Mill.



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When the Regular Brigade emerged from the forest that afternoon, it was just a shadow of the strong column that had gone into action a few hours before. Battery H was wrecked beyond immediate repair. Although the guns had been saved, Fessenden's gunners had no ammunition, for they had not had time or manpower to recover their limber chests and other battery equipment. Battery H would head back to Chattanooga early the next day for refitting. The 16th Infantry had ceased to exist; King attached its few shell-shocked survivors to 1/19th U.S. The battalion of the 15th Infantry had less than half its men in ranks, numerous wounded among them.

For a few hours on the afternoon of September 19, Baird's division rested while fighting continued elsewhere. Late in the afternoon, General Thomas had to recommit Baird's and Brannan's divisions to the fight. He ordered Baird back into the woods east of Kelly Field, while Brannan moved south on the La Fayette Road to reinforce the Union center. Thomas instructed Baird to hold the Regulars on the Reed's Bridge Road near the McDonald farm. As such, the Regular Brigade was the left flank of the Union line, a position that Thomas ordered held to the "last extremity." If it were not, the Union army would be cut off from Chattanooga, the battle's outcome in jeopardy. Luckily for King's diminished brigade, Bragg ignored the isolated Regulars on the Federal left and instead attacked Rosecrans' center and right throughout the afternoon.



The Army of the Cumberland held its position, but it had been a close call. All of Rosecrans' troops were already worn out from a week of hard marching before the

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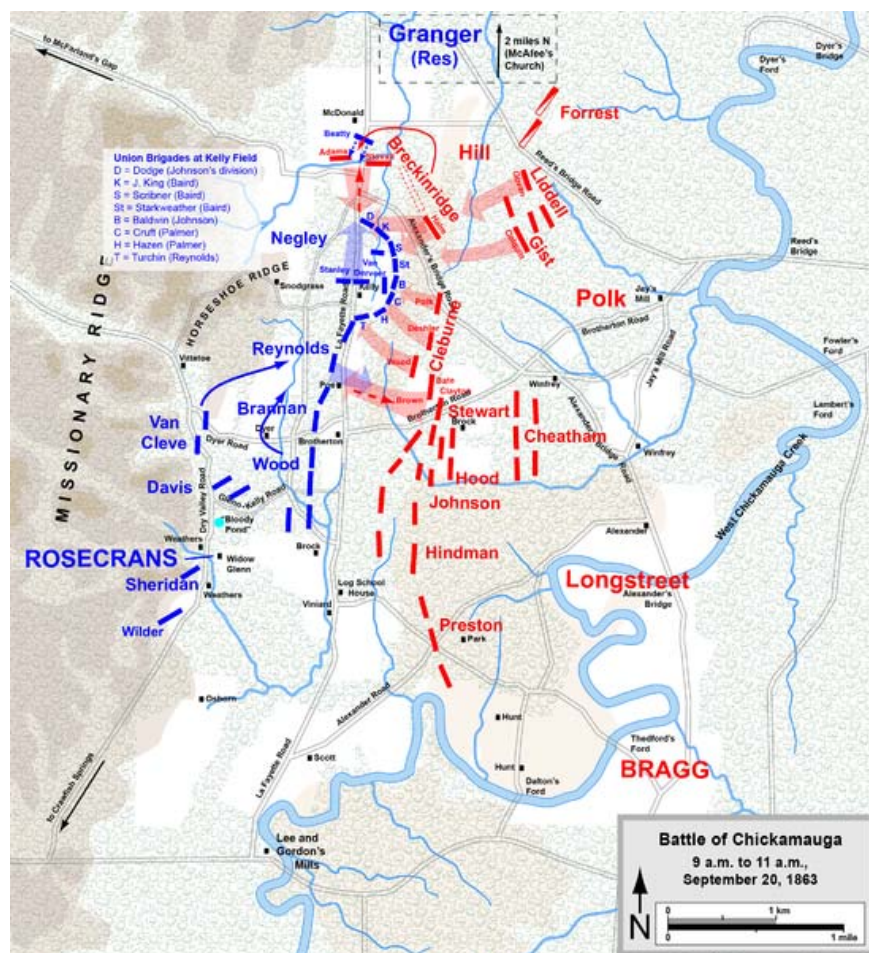
battle and, with the exception of Sheridan's and Negley's divisions, had engaged in heavy fighting throughout the day. Bragg could count a total of eleven brigades either on hand that night or due to arrive within hours that had not extensively participated in the battle. The Southern commander planned to go on the offensive the next day and inflict on Rosecrans a crushing defeat.

For the Regular Brigade, the fighting at Kelly Field on September 20 was even more desperate than that of the previous day. The Regulars held the north end of the Union line, arguably the most important Federal position on the field that morning. Knowing he had to prevent the enemy from swinging around into Kelly Field, King placed his troops in a column of battalions. Captain George Smith's 1/18th held the front, while his sister battalion held the second line in support. Each of the 18th Infantry battalions numbered about 200 rifles. Behind 2/18th, 1/15th occupied the third line, Captain Dod having about 190 men in line. In the rear were 124 troops of the 19th Infantry. Attached to Capt. Ed Smith's command was the minuscule remnant of 1/16th, five officers and thirty men. King's orders for the two rear lines were to be ready to support the 18th Infantry in front or swing around to the left if case the line was outflanked. King deployed forward two companies of the 18th Infantry as skirmishers (Lt. Charles L. Truman's D/2/18th and Lt. James Powell's D/3/18th) and sent Lt. Alfred Curtis' H/1/19th U.S. into the woods on the brigade's left, a final guard on the open flank. The Regulars constructed crude fortifications in front of their lines, as did the rest of Baird's division. Consisting of logs, rocks, and whatever else could be quickly gathered up, the barriers in most places were little more than two feet high, tall enough to lie behind and nothing more.

General King made some final adjustments at daylight. The ground in front of Captain Smith's front-rank 1/18th U.S. had sloped gently upward, restricting the battalion's field of fire. King moved the battalion about fifty paces forward across a small open space. Smith's Regulars picked up their crude breastworks and took them forward, re-stacking the barriers at the new position. Haymond's 2/18th U.S. moved up to the 1st Battalion's original position. The sloping ground placed the Regular Brigade in a reverse-slope defense, partially sheltering the rear three lines from direct enemy fire. The defenders were about to need every bit of protection they could get. Lieutenant Arthur Carpenter, temporarily attached to Lieutenant Curtis' 19th Infantry skirmish company, dreaded the ominous noises he heard to his front: "we pretty soon heard the rebels coming up into line. we could hear their commands very plain. then we knew there was to be hot work." Much of the fog had burned off by half past eight. The Regular Brigade skirmishers had targets at which to shoot.

General Bragg's plan for September 20 was exactly what Thomas feared: an attack on the Federal left. While good in concept, the Confederate attack was poorly executed. After a series of events involving botched orders, apathetic commanders, and missed opportunities. Bragg had ordered Polk's Right Wing to deliver a hammer blow against the Federal left at sunrise, but the attack boiled down to a wasted half-morning followed by just [Maj. Gen. John Breckinridge](#)'s Division approaching Thomas's position. While two of Breckinridge's brigades advanced toward the McDonald Farm, a third, [Brig. Gen. Ben Helm](#)'s Orphan Brigade of Kentuckians, moved against Baird's line at Kelly Field.

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Helm's Brigade inadvertently split in two as it approached Baird's breastworks. Half of Helm's men moved westward on the Alexander's Bridge Road while the rest advanced directly toward the Regulars and Scribner's brigade. Truman and Powell's 18th Infantry skirmishers fell back to the main line, after which Capt. George Smith's 1/18th U.S. poured a few volleys into the Confederates moving along the road. The Regulars then turned their attention to the force assailing the lines. Two and a half Confederate regiments made three determined assaults during the next hour, but the enemy's numbers were too few and Baird's position too strong for the Southerners to make even a dent in the fortifications. Helm's assault was directed mainly at Scribner's brigade on the Regulars' right; Smith characterized the action as "heavy skirmishing" rather than an attack and the Regulars suffered few casualties. Lieutenant Edgar Wilcox, deployed forward with the 18th Infantry skirmishers, reported that his company lost only "6 or 7 men when the Rebs advanced" that morning.

The first Confederate success of the day occurred north of Kelly Field, where Breckinridge's other two brigades, led by Brigadiers [Daniel W. Adams](#) and [Marcellus A. Stovall](#), advanced toward the McDonald Farm. The only Federal unit standing in their

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way was John Beatty's scattered brigade. Beatty managed to extract his two southernmost regiments, the 15th Kentucky and 104th Illinois, and had them retrace their steps back to Kelly Field; his other two regiments scattered and were effectively out of the battle for the rest of the day. Having gained a position on the La Fayette Road, the next task for Breckenridge was to start rolling up the Federal position at Kelly Field. After a pause to regroup following the easy victory over Beatty, the two Confederate brigades moved south toward Baird's division. Stovall's Brigade moved on the east side of the road, crashing into the Regulars and Dodge's brigade at eleven o'clock. Dodge's regiments, having neither fortifications nor much resolve, fired a single volley and fell back. The Regulars and their barricades were made of stiffer material than Dodge's men, and King's troops put up a fight as Stovall's line approached. The 1st & 3rd Florida advanced against 1/18th Infantry. Smith's line put out a "galling fire" according to the Floridians' commander, but the Southerners endured the punishment and continued to slowly advance.

After smashing Dodge's line, three of Stovall's regiments gained the edge of Kelly Field. General King moved the 18th Infantry's 2nd Battalion forward to protect the left of the 1st Battalion, and also ordered 1/15th and 1/19th to deploy from their reserve positions to cover the brigade's exposed left flank. Stovall's assault was so severe that some of the 18th Infantry's troops began to fall back. At this juncture the 18th received a one-man reinforcement. [Private William J. Carson](#), the 15th Infantry bugler who had helped rally the Regulars the previous day, picked up a discarded musket, ran forward, and designated himself a solitary provost guard for the frontline battalions. He ran up and down the line like a man possessed, sending sulkers back to the ranks, even refusing to allow an officer to pass. Carson's efforts were not enough and more troops began to leave the frontline positions. The bugler then resorted to the successful tactics he had employed the previous day at Jay's Mill: "I threw down my gun rushed out some 30 yards to the color bearer of the 18th and said to him Let us rally these men or the whole left is gone. The brave fellow stopped and waved his flag I sounded to the colors. The men cheered. They rushed into line. Still sounding the rally, I passed back and forth of the forming line, and what a few minutes before seemed a hopeless disastrous rout, now turned out to be a complete victory. The retreat had been checked and the enemy driven back with awful slaughter. So severe was their repulse, that within a few minutes we were firing toward our rear into the enemy who were pressing Beatty's troops back." Carson would be captured later in the day and spent the next three months at Pemberton Prison in Richmond. He was ill throughout his captivity and upon exchange in early 1864 weighed a mere sixty-four pounds. Years after the war, the bugler received the Medal of Honor for his actions at Chickamauga, the first in a long line of 15th Infantrymen to be so honored.

Severe fighting took place for about fifteen minutes. The 18th Infantry skirmishers to the brigade's front were able to fall back to the brigade's line, but their counterparts from the 19th Regulars on the left were cut off and destroyed in the melee. "we held them for as long as we could and then fell back," remembered Lieutenant Carpenter of his experiences in that deadly forest. "they got between us and the brigade, so we could not join the Brigade at all, which was off to the right of us. they were fighting hard. we

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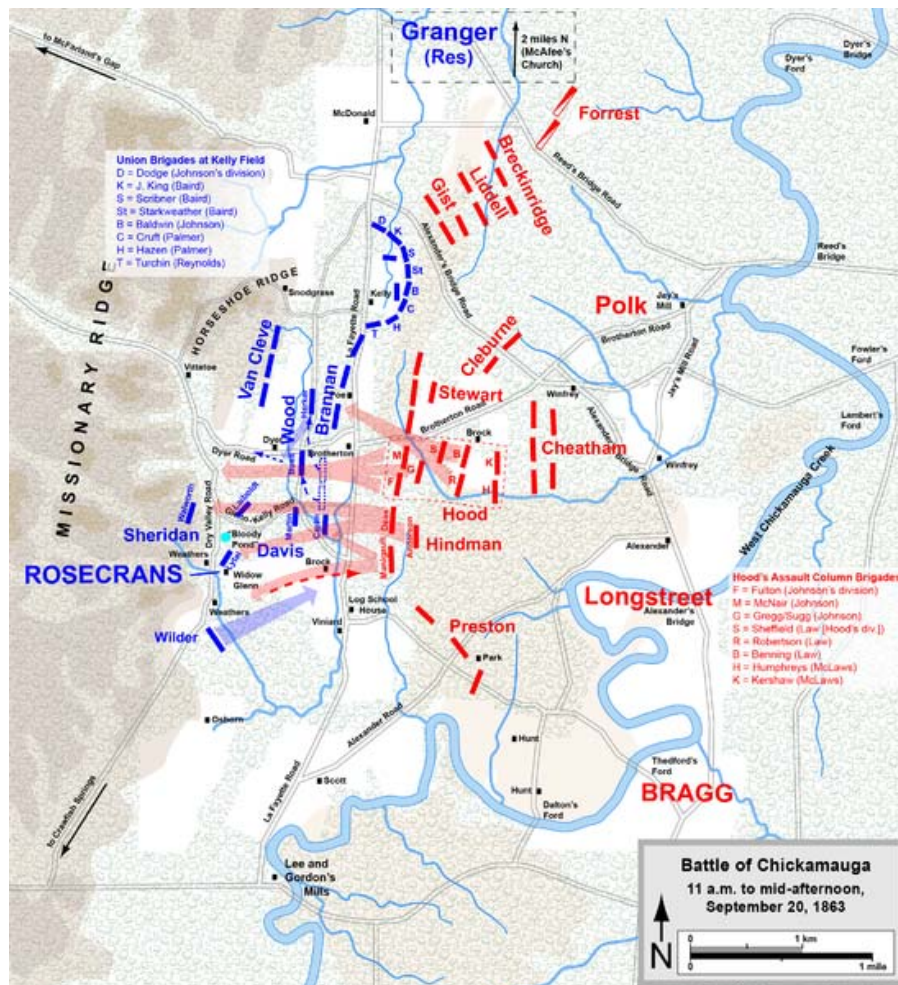
had lost all but 6 of our company and now had to fight any where we would fight in one place and then in another.” The 1st & 3rd Florida’s colors advanced to within a dozen paces of the 18th Infantry’s line. Receiving fire from the front, left, and rear, the 18th Infantry battalions and provost guard Carson retired back to the brigade’s third line, but Stovall’s troops withdrew at about this same time. Van Derveer’s brigade, just up from Poe Field, made a timely appearance and led the effort against Stovall along with a few stray regiments from Willich’s and Berry’s brigades. They counterattacked Stovall and threw the Southerners out of Kelly Field. West of the La Fayette Road Stanley’s brigade from Negley’s division, Wood’s long-anticipated relief of Negley at Brotherton Field having finally been accomplished, meted out a similar fate to Adams’ Brigade of Louisianians. Breckinridge’s tired ranks fell back to the McDonald Farm and regrouped. Colonel William Grose’s brigade and remnants of Dodge’s regiments took up positions on the Regular Brigade’s left.

Prior to eleven o’clock on September 20 Thomas’s position at Kelly Field was the only threatened portion of the Federal line, but that situation changed in late morning when eight brigades from Longstreet’s Left Wing of the Army of Tennessee, nearly 11,000 men, attacked and smashed the right of the Union line south of Kelly Field. The southern portion of the Federal line crumpled before the onslaught. The two brigades of Jefferson C. Davis’ division were routed, as were Brannon’s men, [Col. Samuel Beatty’s](#) brigade of Van Cleve’s division, and the southernmost brigade of Wood’s northward-marching column, Col. George P. Buell’s. Sheridan’s division near the Widow Glen House was also forced back. About half of the Army of the Cumberland was soon streaming through the ridges toward Chattanooga.

Union troops at Kelly Field were unaware of the disaster occurring just to their south. For the time being they had no trouble dealing with the attacks on the northern end of the Union battle line, for Bragg and his subordinate commanders still had serious coordination problems and continued to attack Thomas’s line in piecemeal fashion. In the early afternoon, Govan’s Arkansas Brigade, the men who had overrun the Regulars the previous day made another flank attack upon the Regulars’ position. Captain Dod’s 1/15th U.S. had occupied the brigade’s front breastworks only a short while before the captain decided to fall back. “I perceived two regiments of the enemy marching in double-quick time to my left,” the battalion commander reported. “I waited until they commenced fire and were pouring an enfilading fire down my ranks—which it was impossible for me to return—when I gave the order to rise up, and the battalion marched [back]. . . under a terrific fire as steadily and in as good order as if on drill or parade.” Seeing the 15th Infantrymen retreating, the Regular Brigade’s adjutant, Capt. John W. Forsyth of the 18th Infantry, ran forward and told Dod that the line was “ordered held at all hazards.” Dod understood the order but argued that without support on the left the ground was too hot to occupy. Forsyth ordered the battalion to return to the forward position anyway, promising Dod that some left flank protection would be sent up as soon as possible. Dod’s battalion returned to the front. Other Federal troops arrived and the combined assault finally pushed Govan out of Kelly Field.

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Bragg had routed half the Federal army and was on the verge of a decisive victory. All that remained was to crush the Federal positions at Kelly Field and Horseshoe Ridge. Thomas's makeshift line on the ridge held out against heavy attacks until after sundown. Bragg sent repeated orders to his commanders opposite Kelly Field to attack, but lackluster leadership and muddled chains of command prevented the Southerners from moving out until late in the day. Polk moved [Cheatham's](#) Division, which had been largely idle most of the day, to the Confederate right at two o'clock. Cheatham moved in behind the reformed divisions of Liddell, Gist, and [Breckinridge](#) with four brigades. Bragg had earlier detached Cheatham's fifth brigade, commanded by [Brig. Gen. John K. Jackson](#), to fill the gap in the line between Breckinridge and Cleburne, the same task given earlier to Walthall's Brigade. Thus it was that Jackson's lone brigade ended up leading the effort against Baird's line when the final Confederate attack on Kelly Field began at five o'clock that evening. There was plenty of help for Jackson in the vicinity. While Liddell's Division swept across the McDonald Farm, a reinforced battalion of Confederate artillery, a total of twenty guns, pounded Kelly Field from the south. Stacked up behind Jackson were nine additional brigades of the Confederate Right Wing. Meanwhile Cleburne and Stewart were poised to once again advance toward Palmer and Johnson's men on the southern portion of the Federal line.



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Behind their bullet-splintered barricades, the Regulars knew the afternoon's respite would eventually end. Few Federal brigades at Kelly Field had seen as much action on September 20 as had the Regulars—standing fast against no less than four Confederate assaults. As they heard Jackson's Brigade approach they prepared for the next round. Jackson advanced his five regiments and Capt. John Scogin's Georgia Battery toward the 15th Infantry's frontline position. The Confederate brigadier reported that Captain Dod's battalion, supported by the 4th Indiana Light Battery and other units to the Regular Brigade's right, put up a stiff fight: "The brigade, with the battery in the center, moved forward in splendid style about 100 yards, when the enemy opened a galling fire from the front and left flank, enfilading the entire line with canister and small-arms. The engagement now became terrific and the position of my brigade extremely critical." As the battle raged, Captain Dod noticed that one of his companies was falling back off the line. Mindful of his recent dressing down from Captain Forsyth, Dod rushed to the unit. It was E/2/15th U.S., the new company that Col. Oliver Shepherd had cobbled together at Fort Adams the previous May. The unit had performed well during its baptism of fire although its commander, Lt. Samuel S. Holbrook, had been captured on September 19. The next day First Sgt. John Marrs led the formation, a veteran of the pre-war Regulars who had been cited for gallantry as a corporal with the 15th U.S. at Shiloh.

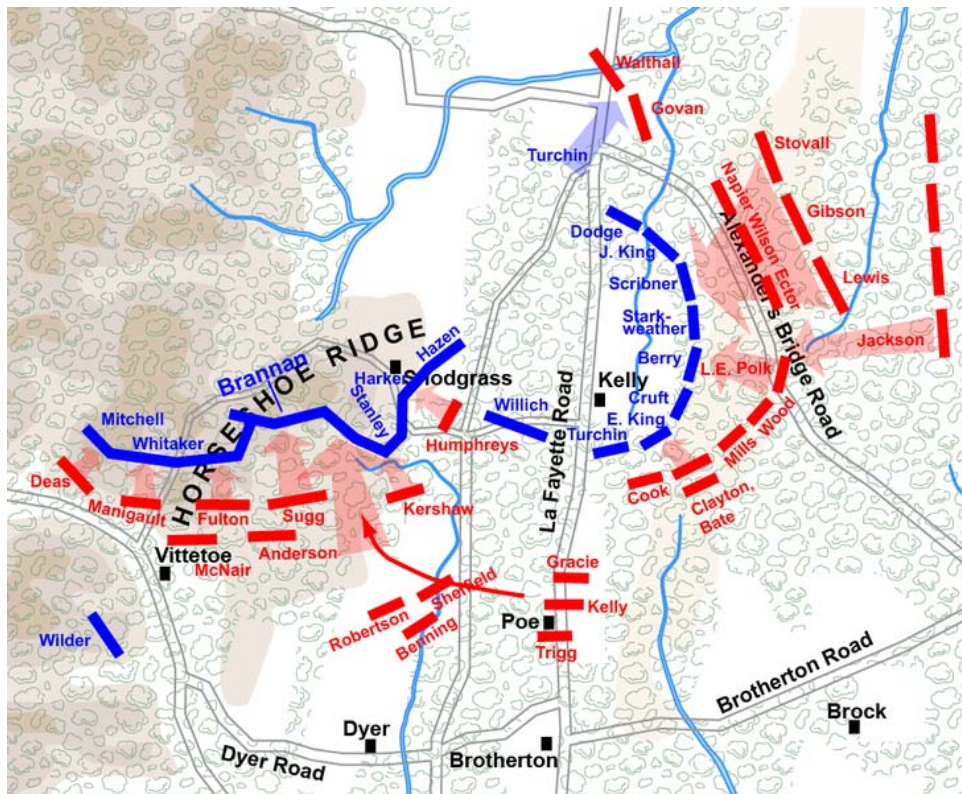
Marrs had faced his company about and was marching it toward the brigade's second line when Dod noticed the movement. Marrs marched backwards, facing his men with his rifle at right shoulder shift as he steadied the raw troops. Captain Dod ran up to Marrs and told him to halt. The first sergeant halted his line, faced about, crisply brought his rifle to present arms, and calmly asked: "Does the commanding officer know we are out of ammunition?" Dod told him no ammunition was to be had but the company could not fall back. Marrs had his men fix bayonets, faced them about, and moved them back into line. The rookies of E/2/15th U.S. became veterans at Kelly Field, the new troops returning to the front and expending their last rounds at Jackson's line. Their first sergeant was killed while they did so. Captain Dod wrote a fitting epitaph for Marrs in the battalion's report on the battle: "The cool, soldierly bearing of this man under the terrific fire of Sunday evening was most commendable."

The Federal units at Kelly Field received orders to withdraw. Rosecrans had arrived in Chattanooga at mid-afternoon following his flight from the battlefield. Not having accurate knowledge of Thomas's stand at Horseshoe Ridge and Kelly Field, Rosecrans ordered Thomas to withdraw to Rossville, about three miles northwest of Kelly Field, with whatever could be extracted of the Army of the Cumberland from the battlefield. If that bloodied army was going to prevent Bragg from advancing all the way to Chattanooga, the place to do it was atop Missionary Ridge at Rossville Gap. Thomas had planned on withdrawing come nightfall anyway and upon receiving Rosecrans' order at 4:30 P.M. decided to comply immediately, although withdrawing while in contact with the enemy would be hazardous. He ordered the troops at Kelly field to begin withdrawing first, followed by the defenders of Horseshoe Ridge. The divisions at Kelly

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Field would fall back starting with the troops on the south. Baird's division would be the last to leave that portion of the battlefield.

The opposition sensed the Federal retreat as the units to Baird's right abandoned their positions. Confederates all along the line began to swarm over the Union fortifications. Palmer's men pulled out first and in good order; they marched northward past the Regulars and routed Lidell's Division at the McDonald Farm, opening the road to Rossville. After Johnson's division headed for the rear, Baird sent staff officers to his three brigades and ordered them to retire. Continuing the right-to-left sequence, Starkweather's brigade pulled off the line first, followed by Scribner. By the time General King gave the Regulars the order to withdraw, Kelly Field was a scene of absolute devastation. Much of it was on fire. Shattered guns, caissons, and dead horses littered the ground. Retreating Federal troops streamed in many directions. Victorious Confederates seemed to be everywhere as they stormed the breastworks. King attempted to withdraw his men as cohesively as possible. He ordered the brigade's multiple lines to fall back starting with the forward most, each withdrawal to be covered by the rear lines. The 15th Infantry in the frontline was thus the first of King's units to run through the killing field. "In falling back we discovered that we had been almost surrounded," recalled Lt. William Heilman, commanding C/15th. "My company was in the centre and we hardly knew what direction to take. At length we got under cover of the woods when it was found that all the officers to my right and a large number of men had been captured. As we fell back we were heavily fired into and the ground was covered with the dead and wounded of both armies. We were crowded very closely [by the enemy] and fell far back, being entirely out of ammunition."



15th Infantry Regiment
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Confederates of [Maney](#)'s and Gibson's Brigades passed through Jackson's Southerners and occupied the 15th Infantry's abandoned line. Troops from Brig. Gen. [Lucius E. Polk](#)'s Brigade of Cleburne's Division, having passed through Starkweather's vacant position, came up on the Regular Brigade's right. Additional Southern troops moved around King's left. Scogin's Battery raked the remaining Regulars with canister. John King's plan for an orderly retrograde movement degenerated into a whirlwind of vicious close combat, narrow escapes, and sudden surrenders. Although it is hard to determine the exact sequence of events as the Regulars' position collapsed, it appears that most of the 16th and 19th U.S. fell back as the 15th retreated through the 18th's lines. "We retreated across the open field which for a while made us a fine target," Van Zwaluwenburg of the 16th U.S. recalled, "and we lost heavily, a few of us managed to cross that fatal field, which was raked right and left by shot and shell, grape and canister. All order, and formation seemed to be lost. It was every one for himself." Captain Crofton's horse was killed (his fourth mount to die in battle) but the 16th Infantry's commander made it through to safety. With most of the brigade heading for the rear, the 18th U.S. alone now faced the full fury of the enemy assault. The battalion commanders, Captains Smith and Haymond, ordered their men to fall back largely in accordance with King's plan. According to Captain Smith, part of 1/18th U.S. maintained some sort of cohesion as they escaped across Kelly Field: "Over a wide corn-field, under a terrific fire of musketry, canister, and spherical case shot, my men steadily and slowly followed their color, when, gaining the woods, they faced about, fired, and moved to the rear, where, as ordered, I reported to the general of brigade." By this point in the struggle it appears that Smith and Haymond had control of only a small portion of their battalions. Haymond conceded that after crossing the field he and Smith only "collected what men we could" and then continued to the rear, where they came upon General King and received orders to make for Rossville.

Some of the Regulars made it across Kelly Field and into the hills beyond, but many from all the battalions were captured. [Brigadier General Lucius Polk](#), sweeping into the Regular Brigade's position from the right, asserted that during the final assault on Kelly Field his brigade captured "more than 200 prisoners—all of them regulars." General King and his staff attempted to assemble what remained of the brigade while continuing to head toward Rossville in the gathering gloom. Whatever attempt the brigade made to reform was quickly overwhelmed. Once off the field and sheltered from enemy fire, the Regulars and the rest of the Kelly Field defenders continued to scatter to all points save toward the enemy.

The road to Rossville was jammed with the broken remnants of the Kelly Field defenders as darkness descended on the battlefield. Thomas's troops from Horseshoe Ridge were also moving north, having pulled off their line after sunset. Throughout the chilly night and into the next morning, commanders gradually regrouped units and gathered in scattered formations. General Crittenden of the XXI Corps came across a Regular officer, probably Capt. Andrew Burt of Rosecrans' staff, during the corps commander's exodus from the battlefield: "On reaching the crest of the next hill I found only a small number of men, less than 100, who had been rallied by a captain of the

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Eighteenth Regulars, as he told me, and whom he kept in line with great difficulty.” Lieutenant Edgar Wilcox had better luck than Burt, reigning in twenty Regulars with the assistance of a sergeant from G/3/18th U.S. and a corporal from 2/18th’s Company H. Things began to improve somewhat the next morning. Lieutenant James Powell of the 18th U.S. reported to General King shortly after daylight at the head of a small mixed group of Regulars. The Regular Brigade subsistence officer, Lt. Samuel S. Culbertson of the 19th U.S., pulled into Rossville at daybreak with a much-needed train of provisions. There were so few of the brigade’s troops present that Culbertson had enough rations left over to distribute food to Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan’s entire division as well as Battery I/4th U.S. of Van Derveer’s brigade. Another welcome event happened later in the day, as [Maj. Gen. Lovell Rousseau](#) finally arrived on the scene and resumed command of his old division from General Baird.

By sunrise on September 21 the skeletal remains of the formations that had defended Kelly Field and Horseshoe Ridge were on Missionary Ridge astride Rossville Gap. Baird’s division held the gap itself and the general placed the remnants of the Regular Brigade at the point of greatest danger, blocking the Rossville-Chattanooga Road. Another Confederate attack may have taken this line also, but Bragg was content with resting his own tired troops and collecting up abandoned Federal equipment from the bloodied fields west of Chickamauga Creek. A contingent of Forrest’s cavalry advanced up the Rossville Road on the morning of September 21 but fire from the Regulars kept the Southern horsemen at a distance. One of Forrest’s batteries shelled the Union position during the afternoon and that was the extent of Confederate pursuit of the battered Army of the Cumberland. The Regular Brigade was on the receiving end of this last shellfire. Lieutenant Wilcox witnessed the incoming rounds: “About 4 P.M. enemy commenced to shell the road and the ord[nance] train some 500 yds down the road started to the rear. Shells burst unpleasantly near and [I] concluded [I] better follow suit. shell burst in road front of me some distance but a piece hit me on left knee—but so spent it made no injury.” Other Regulars were not as fortunate. Five of them were wounded during the barrage, the only Federal casualties of the day. They are the final names on the long list of Union soldiers maimed at the Battle of Chickamauga.

[Lieutenant Henry Freeman](#) of the 18th Infantry was captured during the battle, and his journey from Chickamauga eventually ended at Richmond’s infamous Libby Prison. During the first two months of his captivity, he saw at various places more than 200 other prisoners from the Regular Brigade. Not knowing what had happened to the Regulars at Kelly Field, he feared the worst. “I believe the Regular Brigade is very nearly wiped out,” Freeman wrote in a November 17 letter to a fellow 18th Infantry officer. Freeman’s statement was unfortunately more accurate than the lieutenant probably realized. The Army of the Cumberland suffered more than 16,000 casualties along the banks of Chickamauga Creek, making the clash the bloodiest battle in the Western Theater. Fifty-six percent of the Regular Brigade’s members were on the casualty rolls, the highest percentage of loss of any Federal brigade on that field. The 15th Infantry had taken 275 officers and men into the battle; on the morning of September 21, 1863, there were only 115 members of the regiment present for duty.

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Rosecrans withdrew Thomas's force from the Rossville line on the evening of September 21. Baird's division, now led by its old commander Lovell Rousseau, covered the retreat and arrived in Chattanooga during the wee hours of the next morning. The establishment of Rosecrans' bloodied army there was a significant accomplishment, for the capture of Chattanooga had been the campaign's immediate objective. While the tactical defeat at Chickamauga was a serious setback for the Union war effort, Bragg's victory was a hollow one as long as Chattanooga was in Federal hands. The Army of Tennessee had also been gutted, losing between 15,000 and 20,000 men that the Confederacy would be hard pressed to replace. Chattanooga's fate was still in the balance as the opposing forces regrouped after the bloodletting of September 19 and 20. "Our Brig. has fallen back to the fortifications in the edge of the town & there will probably be a heavy fight tomorrow," a sick and lame Lt. Edgar Wilcox scribbled in a note to his sister a few hours after arriving in Chattanooga. "Our Brig. is now all cut to pieces and numbers about 200 men but they will fight to the last & you may bet I will be with them if I am able to stand up." More than two months would pass before Wilcox's expected "heavy fight" for Chattanooga took place, and seven months would transpire before a Federal army again ventured deep into Georgia.

The Army of the Cumberland was defeated at Chickamauga but the actions of a handful of Union formations prevented that defeat from being far worse. Many of these events have been chronicled in detail over the years, such as the delaying actions of Union cavalry guarding the Chickamauga crossings, the Federal counterattacks at Kelly Field, and the timely arrival of Gordon Granger's Reserve Corps on Horseshoe Ridge. The stand of the 15th Infantry and the other regiments of the Regular Brigade at Kelly Field ranks just behind these more familiar events. By never budging from its position throughout the day, the Regulars provided Federal counterattacking units at Kelley Field with a firm anchor upon which to base maneuvers. Standing fast while the rest of the field's defenders withdrew helped to prevent a disorganized retreat from becoming a complete rout. "It was a juncture when failure on the part of any one, there engaged, to do his full duty would have brought infinite disaster to our cause," [Gen. Absalom Baird](#) wrote years afterward about the Regular Brigade's stand on the left of the line. "Viewed in the light of to-day, we know that had the point we held [at Kelly Field] been lost our army would have been scattered into the mountains and a race for the [Tennessee] River would have followed. The rebel forces would have occupied the line of that river in triumph and it would have been necessary to raise a new army in the north to confront them." That the Regulars accomplished these feats on September 20 in the aftermath of the pounding they had received the previous day makes their actions all the more noteworthy.