



Outnumbered nearly thirty-five to one and led by a politically appointed general with little military experience, the Georgians defending a key bridge over Antietam Creek didn't stand a chance. But when the enemy finally attacked, they found a...

REBEL LION AT BURNSIDE'S BRIDGE

BY RAY CHANDLER

To the end of his life, Robert Toombs insisted on being called "General Toombs" in recognition of his service as a brigadier general in the Confederate Army. His rank had been a point of contention in his frequent battles with Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who Toombs thought denied him the recognition and glory—and higher rank—he earned at the Battle of Sharpsburg. Davis denied letting hard feelings play any part in his decision, but Toombs carried his grudge to the grave.

Toombs never gained the accolades he desired, and on the

whole it is hard not to agree with Thomas R.R. Cobb, like Toombs a Georgian and a politically appointed general, who called Toombs' military career a "desperate failure." Perhaps, but Toombs and his Georgia Brigade would nevertheless taste glory one late summer day on a hillside overlooking a Maryland creek.

In September 1862, the fortunes of the Confederacy had never been higher. Its back to the wall just a few months earlier, the Confederacy had escaped disaster when Robert E. Lee took command of the army defending Richmond. In



This sketch of the Federal attack across Burnside's Bridge—with the 2nd and 20th Georgia on the hillside—appeared in the October 11, 1862 edition of Leslie's Illustrated newspaper.

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June, with a much larger Federal army in sight of the capital city's church spires, Lee embarked on a quick campaign of daring and costly attacks—the Seven Days battles—and threw the invaders back.

Just two months later, Lee had to turn his attention to northern Virginia to face another threat, and soon his army nearly annihilated a Union force under John Pope at the Second Battle of Manassas. Then Lee looked even further north, eyeing Maryland. He reckoned that dealing the Union army a crushing defeat on northern soil would fan the flames of anti-war sentiment in the North, perhaps encouraging European nations to recognize the Confederate States, and, he hoped, leading to a negotiated peace.

Confederate leaders also believed that many Marylanders harbored pro-secessionist sentiment, and that throngs of young men would join their Southern brothers in arms. In any case, there was no question that the verdant countryside, as yet untouched by war, could furnish supplies for hungry Confederate troops. Three months of hard fighting had left Lee's Army of Northern Virginia frazzled, but he held the initiative, and he advised Jefferson Davis, "The present seems the most propitious time since the beginning of the war for the Confederate Army to enter Maryland."¹

Kind to His Men

Lee entered Maryland with forty-one infantry brigades, none of which had a more politically advanced, or militarily inexperienced, commander than did Toombs' Brigade of Georgians. Robert Toombs' only previous military service had been as a militia officer during the Creek War of 1836, when he likely never even saw a hostile Indian. Afterwards he spent years in the Georgia General Assembly and United States Congress; thereafter, he narrowly missed becoming president of the Confederate States of America. Early in the war, he served as the Confederate Secretary of State for five contentious months, getting more than his fill of Jefferson Davis, a bitter political foe from the time of their positions in the U.S. government before the war.

By the time Toombs led his troops across the Potomac River into Maryland in 1862, he had commanded his brigade for nearly a year. He had just been released from arrest on charges of insubordination leveled by Gen. James Longstreet, his superior whose direct order Toombs had countermanded early in the Second Manassas campaign. Edward Porter Alexander, like Toombs a native of Washington, Georgia,



Robert Toombs

described Toombs as "not entirely a respectful and subordinate brigadier." In fact, respect for any authority but his own was almost alien to Robert Toombs' character.

West Point-trained officers were his special bugbear. To Toombs, they either failed to fight when they should have or they made costly mistakes. Toombs' Brigade had suffered nearly 30 percent casualties in three months of fighting, and he chalked up much of the damage to rash decisions by West Point-educated officers, including Lee's last ditch attempt to crush General George McClellan's army by attacking a strongly fortified Union position at Malvern Hill. West Point officers returned his disdain, regarding

Toombs as a mere political appointee.

But Toombs' men loved him. Private Ivey Duggan of the 15th Georgia wrote "General Toombs is always kind to his men and we love him for it. ... We would not willingly exchange him for any other officer."²

Four veteran Georgia infantry regiments—the 2nd, 15th, 17th and 20th—comprised Toombs' Brigade. These men were hardened veterans who understood the human cost of war. Private Harvey Hightower of the 20th Georgia wrote that he had been in two battles and had no desire to see a third: "I have seen dead men so thick you could walk on them hundreds of yards and never tutch (sic) the ground."³

Letters and diaries suggest that Toombs' men were worn and lice-ridden, many were shoeless, and nearly all were hungry. As Private George Abercrombie of the 2nd Georgia feasted on ripening corn in Maryland, he cursed the civilian officials that failed to properly provide for the soldiers: "Damn a government that won't furnish fodder," he grumbled.⁴

Critical Salient

Lee's Maryland campaign got off to a halting, discouraging start. Many of his soldiers were exhausted, and a sizeable number were reluctant to serve in an army invading another state. Straggling seriously reduced the number of men in the ranks, and Maryland, especially the central and western sections occupied by the Confederates, proved no hotbed of secession. As if that wasn't enough, a copy of Lee's orders fell into the hands of General McClellan at a moment when the Southern army was scattered over the countryside. Thus informed, McClellan was hot on the Southern army's trail.

Lee decided to make a stand near the village of Sharpsburg, Maryland, on a series of hills overlooking the bucolic countryside along Antietam Creek. There he began gathering

the scattered elements of his army to face the enemy, which outnumbered the Confederates five to two.

On September 14, 1862, Toombs received orders to move his brigade toward Sharpsburg. Two of his regiments, the 15th and 17th, were sent to guard the Army of Northern Virginia's supply wagon trains near the Potomac River crossings, but Toombs led the other two regiments to a position guarding the lower crossings of Antietam Creek. The key crossings were a stone bridge known locally as Rohrbach Bridge and two fords. Collectively, these points were a backdoor to the outnumbered Confederate army.

Toombs' Brigade was in David Jones' division, but in actuality Toombs was on his own for much of the ensuing battle. His troops occupied a critical salient near the right end of a line of battle nearly four miles long. This salient would soon be a focal point of General George McClellan's effort to turn Lee's right flank.

Old Rock

Before dawn on Wednesday September 17, McClellan uncoiled his army and struck Lee. The battle unfolded from north to south in a series of disjointed attacks, and for a time it seemed that the men guarding Rohrbach Bridge would be bystanders. But McClellan's plan called for his IX Corps, 12,000 infantry and artillery under the command of General Ambrose Burnside, to seize the vital 125-foot long stone bridge that spanned the usually placid and shallow waters of Antietam Creek.

One of Toombs' subordinates that day was Colonel Henry Lewis Benning, a 49-year-old Columbus lawyer and former justice of the Georgia Supreme Court. Benning was the officer who had assumed command of the brigade while Toombs was under arrest at Second Manassas, and there Benning earned the nickname "Old Rock." Benning's account of the events at Rohrbach Bridge on September 17, 1862, details how a small, resolute troop came to face an overwhelming enemy force:

HEADQUARTERS TOOMBS' BRIGADE

Camp near Winchester, October 13, 1862.

On the morning of [September] 15th I was ordered by General Toombs to place the brigade across the road leading from Sharpsburg to Rohrersville at the Stone Bridge over Antietam Creek and to defend the bridge.

The men of the two small Georgian regiments deployed on the side and crest of a steep, rocky, thinly forested hill



Henry Lewis Benning

looming above the bridge, and quickly built "rude barricades" of fence rails. Benning, who would command the contingent when Toombs was absent attending matters elsewhere on the battlefield, sent pickets and skirmishers across the creek and awaited the enemy.

It proved a long wait, because the Union IX Corps did not advance on the bridge until the morning of September 17, nearly two days later. Benning noted that the skirmishing grew heavier the morning of the 17th, "till about 9 o'clock, when our skirmishers were driven in." A Confederate battery then opened fire and drove back the Union troops, but the cannoners were soon ordered elsewhere. "Thus," Benning lamented, "the two regiments were left at the bridge without army artillery supports whatever."⁵

Benning worried that there were no other Confederate infantry units in the area and that his men were "without the expectation of receiving any re-enforcements." In fact, there were a few other units nearby—the 50th Georgia and a company of South Carolinians positioned downstream to guard a ford, and a Virginia battery within supporting distance—but from his perspective, the situation looked grim:

The two [regiments] together numbered not more than 350 men and officers, the Second having only 97, and the Twentieth not more than 250. In their front was Burnside's whole corps of not fewer than 12,000 or 15,000 of the enemy's best men, with numerous artillery. In this forlorn condition were the two regiments at about 9 o'clock, when the fight opened in earnest. At this time the enemy's infantry, aided by the fire of many pieces of artillery, advanced in heavy force to the attack; and soon the attack opened on our whole line as far up as the bridge. It was bold and persevering.

The Southerners faced three waves of attacks in which the fire from the Union infantry and artillery was "incessant." But the Georgians were up to the challenge and the enemy assaults were "met by a rapid, well-directed, and unflinching fire from our men, under which the enemy, after a vain struggle, broke and fell back."

At noon, the Federals prepared to unleash a still greater force to seize the bridge. A Union artillery battery occupied a position "from which it could command...the whole face of the hill occupied by our troops," Old Rock recorded. "Soon it opened fire, and the infantry, in much heavier force than at any time before, extending far above as well as below the bridge, again advanced to the attack. The combined fire of infantry and artillery was terrific."



Burnside's Bridge was a peaceful place in this 1880s photograph.

The beleaguered Confederates stood steady for a time, but eventually had to withdraw. “[The attack was] withstood by our men until their ammunition was quite exhausted,” Benning detailed. Finally, when “the enemy had got upon the bridge and were above and below it fording the creek,” Benning gave the order to fall back.

“Under an order received from General Toombs,” he continued, the men of the 2nd and 20th Georgia Regiments “retired to a position near the right of the general line of battle.” Although the Georgians had pulled back, Benning rightly emphasized the importance of their stand: “Thus at near 1 o'clock we were driven from the bridge, but we had held it long enough to enable the advance troops of General A. P. Hill to reach their position in the line of battle; and this, I suppose, was attaining the great object of defending a place so far in front of that line - a place so untenable as was the bridge.”

In defending the Rohrbach Bridge—known thereafter as Burnside's Bridge—the Georgians suffered 110 casualties including Lieutenant-Colonel Holmes, who, Benning eulogized, was as “good officer, and as gallant a man, I think, as my eyes ever beheld.” He lauded his men similarly:

No words of mine in praise of officers and men are needed. The simple story is eulogy enough. I must, however, bear witness to one fact: During that long and terrible fire not a man, except a wounded one, fell out and went to the rear - not a man. The loss of the enemy was heavy. Near the bridge they lay in heaps. Their own estimate, as a paroled sergeant of ours taken at the bridge told me, was at from 500 to 1,000 men killed. He also told me that they informed him that at about 12 o'clock an order came from General McClellan to take the bridge, cost what it might, and that then the whole corps advanced to the attack...

His Only Reward

While “Old Rock” Benning directed the two regiments, Toombs was doing what he did best—he was seemingly everywhere, exhorting and encouraging his Georgians by the sheer force of his personality. Accounts of his actions by his own men are sketchy, in part because the soldiers were so busy fighting that they had little opportunity to observe what was happening even close by. In fact, they were loading and firing so fast that several were wounded when their powder exploded in their faces as they poured it down hot musket barrels.

But Toombs captured the eye of other observers. Private John Dooley of Kemper's Virginia Brigade, which arrived near the close of the fight, observed Toombs galloping “up and down the line like one frantic, telling the men to stand firm...”⁶ This account is consistent with Toombs' demeanor at Second Manassas, where just released from arrest, he had arrived right before the final attack against the Federal defenses and galloped along his brigade line, cursing, urging his men to victory, and waving his sword while his men cheered.

By blunting the Union attack against Lee's right flank, Toombs' Brigade helped the Army of Northern Virginia survive a battle in which it was greatly outnumbered. Afterwards, Toombs queried Captain Charles Squires, an artillery officer: “Squires, what is being said of me at headquarters?” The captain replied that it was said that with two regiments Toombs had stood off an entire Federal corps. That seemed to satisfy the normally irascible Toombs.

Other accounts, both official and in the press, gave Toombs and his Georgians their due, but in the end that proved to be Toombs' only reward for the gallant stand by his little brigade at Antietam Creek. He soon resigned from the army, spent the rest of the war contending with various Confederate officials, and thereafter remained a self-proclaimed “un-reconstructed Rebel.” He died in Washington, Georgia, in 1885. ▀

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1. *R.E. Lee letter to Jefferson Davis, Sept. 3, 1862 quoted by Tucker, Phillip, Burnside's Bridge: The Climactic Struggle of the 2nd and 20th Georgia at Antietam Creek, 2000. Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, Pa., p. 2.*
2. *Letter from Ivey Duggan of 15th Ga. published in October 14, 1862 issue of Central Georgian newspaper.*
3. *September 1862 letter from George Hightower to his family quoted in Burnside's Bridge (See Note 1) at pg. 42.*
4. *Letter from Henry Abercrombie published in a September 1862 issue of the Daily Columbus Enquire newspaper and quoted in Burnside's Bridge (See Note 1) at p. 41.*
5. *All quotes from Benning come from his after action report found in The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Vol. 51, Part1 (Ser #107), pp. 161-165.*
6. *Durkin, Joseph (Editor), John Dooley, Confederate Soldier: His War Journal, 1945. Georgetown Press, p. 47.*