



Failure in the Saddle: Nathan Bedford Forrest, Joe Wheeler, and the Confederate Cavalry in the Chickamauga Campaign

David Powell

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Confederate cavalry has a storied and favorable relationship with the history of the Civil War. Tales of raids and daring exploits create a whiff of lingering romance about the horse soldiers of the Lost Cause. Sometimes, however, romance obscures history.

In August 1863 William Rosecrans' Union Army of the Cumberland embarked on a campaign of maneuver to turn Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee out of Chattanooga, one of the most important industrial and logistical centers of the Confederacy. Despite the presence of two Southern cavalry corps (nearly 14,000 horsemen) under legendary commanders Nathan Bedford Forrest and Joe Wheeler, Union troops crossed the Tennessee River unopposed and unseen, slipped through the passes cutting across the knife-ridged mountains, moved into the narrow valleys, and turned Bragg's left flank. Threatened with the loss of the railroad that fed his army, Bragg had no choice but to retreat. He lost Chattanooga without a fight.

After two more weeks of maneuvering, skirmishing, and botched attacks Bragg struck back at Chickamauga, where he was once again surprised by the position of the Union army and the manner in which the fighting unfolded. Although the combat ended with a stunning Southern victory, Federal counterblows that November reversed all that had been so dearly purchased.

David A. Powell's *Failure in the Saddle: Nathan Bedford Forrest, Joseph Wheeler, and the Confederate Cavalry in the Chickamauga Campaign* is the first in-depth attempt to determine what role the Confederate cavalry played in both the loss of Chattanooga and the staggering number of miscues that followed up to, through, and beyond Chickamauga. Powell draws upon an array of primary accounts and his intimate knowledge of the battlefield to reach several startling conclusions: Bragg's experienced cavalry generals routinely fed him misleading information, failed to screen important passes and river crossings, allowed petty command politics to routinely influence their decision-making, and on more than one occasion disobeyed specific and repeated orders that may have changed the course of the campaign.

Richly detailed and elegantly written, *Failure in the Saddle* offers new perspectives on the role of the Rebel horsemen in every combat large and small waged during this long and bloody campaign and, by default, a fresh assessment of the generalship of Braxton Bragg. This judiciously reasoned account includes a guided tour of the cavalry operations, several appendices of important information, and original cartography. It is essential reading for students of the Western Theater.

About the Author: David A. Powell is a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute (Class of 1983) with a BA in history. He has published numerous articles in magazines, more than fifteen historical simulations of various battles, and is the co-author (with David A. Friedrichs) of *The Maps of Chickamauga: An Atlas of the Chickamauga Campaign, Including the Tullahoma Operations, June 22–September 23, 1863*, a selection of the History and Military book clubs.

REVIEWS

“...a richly detailed and elegantly written study full of insightful tactical commentary, new perspectives on the strategic role of the rebel horseman, and fresh insights on every engagement, large and small, waged during the bloody North Georgia campaign.”

James Durney, 10/2010

“David A. Powell’s deeply researched and thoroughly analyzed *Failure in the Saddle* demonstrates that the vaunted Confederate cavalry under Nathan Bedford Forrest and Joe Wheeler failed miserably during the Chickamauga Campaign. Their errors mislead Gen. Braxton Bragg, lost Chattanooga to the Confederacy, and turned the great success at Chickamauga into an empty victory.” – Eric J. Wittenberg, award-winning Civil War cavalry historian

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