

THE SIEGE OF CHATTANOOGA

A STUDY IN PLANE TABLE BATTLEFIELD MAPPING



In the autumn of 1863, after a stunning defeat at Chickamauga, General William S. Rosecrans Union Army of the Cumberland found itself surrounded by the Confederate Forces under the command of General Braxton Bragg. With both armies nearing starvation and similar numbers of soldiers, neither army could gain a clear advantage to attack the other. General Bragg laid siege to the Union Army in the hopes he could eventually starve Rosecrans forces into submission before he depleted his own



supplies. Secretary of War Stanton re-organized the Army of the Cumberland, Army of the Tennessee and the Army of the Ohio into the Department of the Mississippi under the command of Major General Ulysses S. Grant with the instructions to raise the siege of Chattanooga. Brigadier General William F. “Baldy” Smith is appointed Chief Engineer of the Military Division of the Mississippi in early October and initiates plans to open a supply line. In late October General Grant arrives at Chattanooga at the same time as two U.S. Coast Survey Topographers, John W. Donn and Frederick W. Dorr in the midst of a starving army. Grant relieves

Rosecrans and places Major General George Thomas in Command of the Army of the Cumberland. At the same time, under Baldy Smith’s directive, Dorr and Donn immediately established two baselines and undertook plane table surveys of the terrain surrounding Chattanooga. Each topographer was mindful of the catastrophe that befell Lt. Wagner while performing a plane table battlefield survey during the Peninsula Campaign in 1862. Dorr and Donn were required to perform



their observations from secluded positions to avoid fire from the Confederate’s rifled cannon. Their maps of the enemy positions and the surrounding terrain were put to good use on November 23-25, 1863 as the forces of Major General George Thomas, Major General Joseph Hooker and Major General William Sherman over ran Bragg’s Confederate forces thus raising the siege of Chattanooga.



Once again, nearly 150 years later Union topographers and their Confederate counterparts will return to Chattanooga at the Surveyors Historical Society 2010 Rendezvous to re-enact the surveying and mapping that was crucial in ending the Siege of Chattanooga. Each topographical engineering unit will be using standard chains to measure baselines and perform plane table surveys for the purpose of mapping terrain surrounding Chattanooga. Their efforts will result in “period” maps which will be offered at auction at the banquet at the culmination of the Rendezvous. Rendezvous participants have the opportunity to step back into history and experience the same difficulties and achievements of those Civil War Topographers; hopefully, without sniper fire.

