



The Confederacy's Last Hurrah: Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville

Wiley Sword

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The rise of Civil War general John Bell Hood, his command of the Confederate Army of Tennessee, and the decisions that led to its downfall.

Though he barely escaped expulsion from West Point, John Bell Hood quickly rose through the ranks of the Confederate army. With bold leadership in the battles of Gaines' Mill and Antietam, Hood won favor with Confederate president Jefferson Davis. But his fortunes in war took a tragic turn when he assumed command of the Confederate Army of Tennessee.

After the fall of Atlanta, Hood marched his troops north in an attempt to draw Union army general William T. Sherman from his devastating "March to the Sea." But the ploy proved ruinous for the South. While Sherman was undeterred from his scorched-earth campaign, Hood and his troops charged headlong into catastrophe.

In this compelling account, Wiley Sword illustrates the poor command decisions and reckless pride that made a disaster of the Army of Tennessee's final campaign. From Spring Hill, where they squandered an early advantage, Hood and his troops launched an ill-fated attack on the neighboring town of Franklin. The disastrous battle came to be known as the "Gettysburg of the West." But worse was to come as Hood pressed on to Nashville, where his battered troops suffered the worst defeat of the entire war.

Winner of the Fletcher Pratt Award for best work of nonfiction about the Civil War, *The Confederacy's Last Hurrah* chronicles the destruction of the South's second largest army. "Narrated with brisk attention to the nuances of strategy—and with measured solemnity over the waste of life in war," it is a groundbreaking work of scholarship told with authority and compassion (*Kirkus Reviews*).

The Confederacy's Last Hurrah: Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville Details

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From Reader Review The Confederacy's Last Hurrah: Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville for online ebook

Dave the Rave says

The horror, the horror

Although leaning a bit too heavily on the notion of the south's struggle for independence rather than a war to protect slavery, this book does an excellent job of conveying the blood sweat and horror of what quite often is hand to hand combat. However, this book really needs a set of maps to adequately describe the complex movement of multiple military units.

Christopher says

I wanted to round out my knowledge about one of the Civil War's most decisive but lesser known campaigns. I didn't quite expect to find one of the best written accounts of military history I've come across in years.

All the requisite bits are there, primary source documentation, first hand accounts from leaders and lowly foot soldiers alike. Analysis of who gets credit and who doesn't, where blind luck prevailed or human skill. Heroism, but thankfully no romance. Lots of grit and horror among the admirable.

But perhaps as importantly, Wiley Sword was a hell of a stylist. All of the above is brought together in a way that brings the battlefields (particularly that of Franklin) alive in a way that is both thrilling and utterly horrifying to read.

Military history at its finest.

Robin Friedman says

A Fateful Winter In Tennessee

Most casual students of the Civil War will have knowledge of critical events of 1864-1865, including Sherman's capture of Atlanta and March to the Sea, and Grant's siege of Petersburg and the subsequent surrender of Lee at Appomattox. Many students without a detailed knowledge of the War will have less familiarity with the equally important and dramatic events which surround the Confederacy's disastrous invasion of Tennessee during the winter of 1864. This invasion began on November 21, 1864, and concluded with the essential destruction of the Army of Tennessee in the second day of the Battle of Nashville on December 16, 1864. Wiley Sword's sad and eloquent book, "The Confederacy's Last Hurrah: Spring Hill, Franklin, & Nashville", first published in 1993, tells the story.

There are many threads and themes developed in the book as befitting the complexity of the campaign. The story begins with Jefferson Davis' decision to relieve Joe Johnston from command of the Army of Tennessee and to replace him with J.B. "Sam" Hood, due to Johnston's lack of aggressiveness in the Atlanta campaign.

Hood had a well-deserved reputation, earned at Antietam, Gettysburg, and Chickamauga, as a bold, aggressive fighter. He also suffered from grave deficiencies in judgment, intelligence, and character. Hood had been seriously wounded in earlier combat, making him subject to fatigue and possibly to over-dependence on painkillers. Whatever Johnston's merits or deficiencies, the decision to replace him with Hood was, Sword argues convincingly, unwise.

The Confederate high command, including Davis, Beauregard, and Hood, made the decision to allow Sherman's March to the Sea basically uncontested after the fall of Atlanta and instead to make a countermarch into Tennessee with the hope of recapturing the state and perhaps moving northward to invade Ohio. In leading the campaign, Hood promised he would commit to a general engagement only on favorable ground of his own choosing and with numerical superiority. Events were to prove otherwise.

Sword's book moves effectively between the Union and Confederate sides as he describes the three key engagements of the Tennessee campaign. The first critical engagement took place at Spring Hill, Tennessee. Hood had outmaneuvered a Union Army commanded by John Schofield which was headed to Nashville to join the forces of the commanding general, George Thomas. Hood had the Federal force cut off. During the night of November 29, 1864, Schofield's entire army slipped by the Army of the Tennessee encamped in the fields on the side of the road of Spring Hill. Hood was several miles away from the action and asleep. The Confederate command was badly uncoordinated. How the Confederate Army allowed Schofield's escape has always been a mystery, and it remains so after reading Sword's account. His discussion of Spring Hill is thorough and detailed and shows the mistakes of Hood and his subordinates. I was left confused about what happened.

Schofield marched to the town of Franklin, Tennessee and hastily constructed a line of strong entrenchments with his back to the Harpeth River. Hood's angry and puzzled Army followed. When Hood caught up to Schofield on the afternoon of November 30, he impulsively ordered an attack on the entrenchments against the advice of his subordinates. The attack resulted in perhaps the greatest slaughter of the Civil War.

The Battle of Franklin, the bravery of the Confederate attack, the resoluteness shown in defense, and the folly of the charge are at the center of Sword's account. His descriptions of the fighting, unlike the confused nature of the activities at Spring Hill, are moving, clear, and masterful. There is a poignant sense of loss at the waste of it all. Sword writes:

"Franklin in many respects had become a dramatic pinnacle of the Civil War. In that magnetic and intensely charged moment of Hood's grand frontal assault, the divergent forces of destiny and human spirit had fatally collided. Magnified by the electrifying emotion of a nation dying, it was for the South one last desperate hurrah. With everything risked on a single, fateful attack, disaster for one army or the other had been certain. For a moment it became eternity in eclipse, the world asunder. No sight was more grand, spectacular, nor became more ghastly." (p. 270)

Schofield withdrew from Franklin rather than attempt to exploit his success, and Hood, for reasons that will remain unclear, followed him to Nashville and attempted to lay siege to the city. General Grant pressed Union General George Thomas to attack immediately, but Thomas refrained until his army was ready and until weather conditions permitted the movement. Thomas' restraint almost cost him his removal. But on December 15, 1864, his attack brought the Army of Tennessee close to destruction. The Army was saved because the Union attack had been delayed by a heavy morning fog. On the second day of the Battle, December 16, 1864, Thomas achieved a singular Union victory as the entire Confederate defense broke late in the afternoon. Sword describes the dramatic battle and the long, perilous retreat of Hood's survivors back to Mississippi. The Army of Tennessee was destroyed as a fighting force.

While some of the descriptions of troop movements, particularly at Spring Hill, are confusingly described, Sword takes the Civil War and the Tennessee campaign with great seriousness and a sense of tragedy rather than bravado. The book offers a portrait of the Tennessee campaign and of its protagonists that is difficult to forget. Sword offers a great deal of thought and analysis of the military situations he describes rather than only giving descriptions of combat. He tries to see the actions through the eyes of the combatants, including Hood, Cleburne, Schofield, and Thomas, as well as of the soldiers in the ranks. Some readers have taken issue with the portrayal of General Hood that Sword develops. It is difficult to argue with Sword's basic conclusion that Hood was out of his depths as a commander and that he suffered from flaws such as impulsiveness, lack of discretion, and a propensity to blame others that contributed heavily to the destruction of the Army of the Tennessee.

Readers who want to use the 150th anniversary of the Civil War to deepen their understanding of the conflict beyond general overviews or studies of more familiar battles will benefit from Sword's moving account of the 1864 Tennessee campaign.

Robin Friedman

Manray9 says

Wiley Sword's *The Confederacy's Last Hurrah: Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville* is among the best Civil War books I've read in years. Some have criticized it as a hatchet job on John Bell Hood, but the truth hurts. Hood's back-stabbing correspondence with Jefferson Davis and Braxton Bragg seeking to undermine his superior, J. E. Johnston, cannot be rationalized. Coupled with his relentless blaming of others for his own tactical shortcomings, Hood was an officer promoted far above his capabilities. His soldiers paid the price.

Thorough and comprehensive and laced with first-hand accounts to keep up the reader's interest, I give Sword Five Stars.

Kendrick Hughes says

This book is long but well worth the time. Everything you ever wanted to know about how Hood took over the Army of Tennessee and destroyed it.

Sean Chick says

A well written and moving account of the final grand Confederate offensive of the war. Much of the book is devoted to the Rebel side since their side is the one filled with pathos and tragedy in this campaign. The part

on Franklin is peerless as a work of historical drama. Nashville though is not as well fleshed out and some more soldier experiences would have been nice. Still, this is a good book and highly readable.

Francis X DuFour says

Good solid writing as you'd expect from Wiley Sword. Amazing how long Gen Hood stayed in command of the Army of the Tennessee, up until he essentially destroyed it. Love the scene of Hood eating oyster stew in a warm house while his army suffered starvation, terrible weather and humiliating retreats.

Lee says

A very in depth book about the final battles of the Tennessee campaign; Spring Hill, Franklin, Nashville, encompassing John Bell Hood's time in command of the Western Confederate armies. It details his decisions in command, who he passed over, who he punished who he rewarded and the ways John Schofield and George Thomas operated against him. Very good and very detailed sometimes you get lost in the units and generals, particularly the Tennessee and Missouri units who were in both armies. The ineptitude of Hood and how he was put in command and stayed in command is the best part of the book.

Abbey says

I'm obsessed with the Battle of Franklin as a microcosm of the Civil War. The personalities, the decision-making, the sheer mind-numbing waste of it - all the hallmarks of war in general.

Mark Adams says

A solid book full of details I didn't know about a very important battle of the Civil War that I was only vaguely aware of. There's a lot to be learned here. Read the book.

Theo Logos says

The Confederacy's Last Hurrah is an outstanding book that combines first rate research with a novelist's eye for vivid recreation of the brutal chaos that is battle. Sword's talent also shines in breathing life into the cast of characters involved, from the Generals to the common soldier.

This book seems to strike a nerve with those who only see the war through the romance-tinted glasses of the "Lost Cause". They blast Sword for his unapologetic scorn for Hood's leadership of his army, and seem to refuse to admit even the obvious - that Hood was advanced in rank beyond his capabilities. That Hood was a brave and gallant soldier and an outstanding fighter leading a brigade is without question. That he lacked the vision or intelligence to effectively lead an army would seem to be equally beyond question to any fair observer.

What those attacking Sword for his treatment of Hood overlook is that the target of his disgust is not just

Hood, who intrigued for a job beyond his ken, but Bragg and Davis, who promoted him while repeatedly snubbing the most brilliant general in the Army of Tennessee, Patrick Cleburne. Cleburne, called by Davis the Stonewall of the West, was never the less passed by for promotion four times after he had dared to suggest a plan for saving the Confederacy by freeing and enlisting slaves. The implied question of The Confederacy's Last Hurrah is how might things have been different had those in charge been less obtuse, and Cleburne's talents were put to use for his cause commanding the army, while Hood served as he served best, leading a brigade? It is clear that Sword feels that the senseless slaughter that was the battle of Franklin, and the virtual destruction of the Army of the Tennessee at the battle of Nashville happened because of the pride, vanity, and blindness of the Southern leadership who promoted the brave but wooden Hood over the brilliant Cleburne.

Unless you become enraged when someone calls the conflict the Civil War instead of the War of Northern Aggression, you will find this book thrilling and informative

Gerry Germond says

The full title is *Embrace an Angry Wind, The Confederacy's Last Hurrah, Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville*. This was Confederate General Hood's invasion of Union-held Tennessee, which came to grief at the battles of Franklin and Nashville. I found it to be a good description of the campaign and appreciated finding, for once, a book with good maps to cover both campaign and battlefield actions. The narrative is, in places, a little histrionic; for example, "...he was also a fool with a license to kill his own men," (p. 263) and "There perhaps never beat a heart more worthy and true than that of the outcast Virginian who had triumphed over mind and matter at Nashville..." (p. 425). Better to have examined the positions and options from the viewpoints of the commanders with a goal to reporting the reasons they made their decisions. It's the play-by-plays that make the book worth reading.

John says

Yes Read it

Very well written. I lost many hours of sleep due to this book. Very revealing account of the Franklin battle. Not known to many people and widely overlooked this is a must for all Civil War enthusiasts.

Betsy says

This is the story of three battles for the Army of Tennessee, one almost successful and two disasters. 1864 was not a good year for the South. The Army of Northern Virginia fought a series of costly battles in the Overland Campaign while Sherman marched to the sea, taking Atlanta and Savannah, but in this book Wiley Sword presents Hood's efforts to hopefully divert Sherman by attacking Tennessee. It didn't work and almost destroyed the Army of Tennessee.

John Bell Hood is the focus of this work, however, the thousands of men who fought and died are the real story. Their courage, loyalty, and tenacity in the face of appalling weather conditions, artillery bombardments, and a determined Union army was amazing. Sadly for the South, it wasn't enough. A lack of decisive leadership by Hood certainly didn't help. Charging formidable breastworks over a two mile stretch

calls for more than just courage. Ironically, Hood could disingenuously claim 'victory' since Schofield pulled out overnight, making for Nashville.

Devastated by losses at Franklin, the Army of Tennessee moved on to Nashville, where they encountered George Thomas and his army. Thomas was a methodical man who would not attack until his army was ready. A two week period of bad weather delayed the attack, despite pressure from Grant and Halleck, but on December 15-16 the two armies met in another bloody battle. This time the Confederates had the breastworks, but their flanks were vulnerable due to a lack of cavalry. Nathan Bedford Forrest's men had been sent to Murfreesboro in the mistaken belief that this would force Thomas out of his works. It wasn't needed. Thomas attacked anyway and won a great victory. The only good news was that the southern army, what was left of it, escaped into Alabama.

Hood was replaced, but he tried to blame others for the debacle in Tennessee. The war ended less than six months later. Perhaps there were some veterans who could forgive him, but I can't believe there were many. There were too many graves for that.

Iain says

This title takes a few chapters to set the stage and drags a little in the end, but the bulk of the book, the running battles from Spring Hill through Nashville, is fantastic. The chapters on the struggle for Franklin in particular are exceptionally well written. With tension and pacing that would do a work of fiction proud, the book is hard to put down as the struggle unfolds. The impact of Sword's work is only heightened by the relative obscurity of the campaign. We've read dozens of books about Gettysburg, but the details of the battles herein are new to many of us.

I have read two of Wiley Swords books and I'm convinced that he is one of those rare authors who focuses so much on his craft and researching his sources that he simply can not write more than a few titles. But those titles are masterpieces. If you wonder why this is one of the few books covering this campaign, it is because this title stands as a giant that few would attempt to best.

Recommended for anyone interested in the American Civil War and a must-read for anyone looking to broaden their ACW reading or interested specifically in the campaigns in Tennessee.
