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Breckinridge protested that the Union position was too strong to attack, but Bragg, angry and insistent, overruled him.

toward the Union position. When men in the first line paused to climb over the fence, Gibson had his men halt. As Union artillery and small-arms fire from across the river ripped into the stationary troops, Gibson ordered them to lie down. He then started forward alone to talk to Hanson and determine when he should bring up his brigade.

Captain E.E. Wright's Tennessee battery advanced on the right with Preston's brigade. One artillery lieutenant reported: "As we were advancing at a gallop in the field, before taking our first position, the off lead horse in one of our 6-pounder gun teams was struck in the head with a ball and fell dead. Before the team could be halted, the carriage was rushed against the horse and the pole broken, which caused the piece not to be in action in our first position at all."

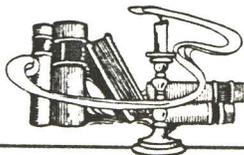
Major Rice E. Graves, Breckinridge's chief of artillery, ordered Wright's battery to the crest of the hill. Grider's brigade temporarily stopped the Confederates' advance, but Hanson's left threatened to envelop his right. Grider's three regiments soon joined Price's men in retreating toward the river. Attempts to rally the troops failed because of the heavy fire from the advancing Confederates and the closeness of their lines.

As Beatty's line collapsed, Livingston limbered up his guns and ordered his men to retreat by sections across the river. On the Union left, Grose had time only to reorient his lines before the Confederates attacked from an unexpected direction. The 23rd Kentucky (Union) and the 24th Ohio were routed and fled into the woods beyond the 36th Indiana. The Confederates continued forward until they were stopped by Grose's final line. Grose's brigade proceeded to fire volley after volley

Continued on page 101

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KENTUCKY'S ORPHAN BRIGADE

Continued from page 76

into the exposed Confederate flank, causing the troops to drift toward the center. The Confederate units became so confused that their officers could not exercise any control over them. As Beatty's men fell back toward the river, Union Corps Commander Thomas L. Crittenden turned to his chief of artillery, Major John Mendenhall, and said, "Mendenhall, you must cover my men with your guns."

Mendenhall found Swallow's battery already firing at the Confederates. He ordered Parson's battery forward and brought up Estep's and Morton's batteries. Seeing that Osborne's battery was already firing, he rode on to order Standart to fire to the left.

Breckinridge advanced up the hill, where he found both Gibson's and Preston's brigades lying down. With his cry, "Up, my men and charge!" they came to their feet and started forward with a yell. The second line soon caught up with the first.

Hanson's advance on the left continued to threaten to cut off the Union brigades from the river, causing Beatty to order them to retreat across it. The Confederate attack seemed to be succeeding, but as soon as it reached the crest, problems arose. The fact that this was supposed to be a limited attack to seize the heights apparently had been forgotten by Breckinridge and everyone else in the heat of the moment.

Just as Gibson approached Hanson, a cannon shot struck the latter in the leg. Breckinridge tried to stem the flow of blood with his hands until an ambulance was brought up. Doctors later examined the wound in the hospital and concluded that there was nothing they could do for him. Hanson calmly said to Breckinridge later that night: "General, Dr. Yandell does not think I will live, nor do I; but I have this satisfaction. I shall die in a just cause, having done my duty." On the morning of January 3, he succumbed to his wound.

Gibson had not wanted to commit his brigade to the battle so early, but when Hanson was hit, the advance of the Kentucky Brigade faltered. In a few places, men began to fall back. After sending orders for the 16th Louisiana Volunteers to advance on the left, Gibson led the 13th Louisiana toward the woods on the right. Some Kentucky units rallied behind his regiments. In the woods, Gibson found a ravine full of Confederate stragglers taking cover from Union fire. He advanced the 13th Louisiana to the other side, where they took cover behind a fence.

Within 20 minutes of receiving the order from Crittenden to cover his men, Mendenhall had 58 guns pouring more than



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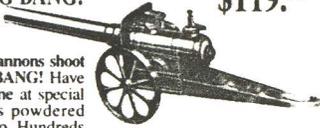
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Although he was pushed back with heavy casualties at Stones River, General Rosecrans ultimately took Murfreesboro.

100 rounds per minute into the Confederate line. Ed Porter Thompson was with the 6th Kentucky that day. In his *History of the Orphan Brigade*, he later attempted to describe what it was like when the Union batteries opened up: "The rushing host had been checked in mid-career, and now staggered back. The artillery belled forth such thunder that the men were stunned and could not distinguish sounds. There were falling timbers, crashing arms, the whirring of missiles of every description, the bursting of the dreadful shell, the groans of the wounded, the shouts of the officers, mingled in one horrid din that beggars description. In fact, no general description can convey the reader an idea of that terrible reality."

Beyond the river, Rosecrans was ready to exploit his advantage of interior lines. There, the Union reserves waited, lying in a cornfield behind a hill. When Beatty's men retreated across the river and the Confederates reached the river's edge, Colonel John F. Miller brought his brigade to its feet. Fire from a thousand rifles ripped into the Confederate ranks. As they wavered, Miller advanced his lines to a rail fence at the river's edge, where the troops fired another volley. The Confederate line crumpled under the fire, forcing the men to fall back. As the Southerners retreated, Miller's brigade crossed the river to take cover behind another fence.

On the left, parts of the 2nd and 6th Kentucky regiments followed the retreating Union troops across the Stones River. The remainder of the Kentucky Brigade took cover behind a picket fence 80 yards from the ford. Colonel Robert P. Trabue, Hanson's successor, reported that "the enemy's artillery from the opposite side of the river directed on us a most destructive fire. Very soon, too, the crests of the op-

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posite side of the river swarmed with infantry, whose fire was terrible. Thus exposed to the fire, seemingly of all his artillery and a large portion of his infantry from unassailable positions, as well as to the flank fire from the right, it was deemed prudent to withdraw." Everywhere Union brigades counterattacked across the river, some under orders, others as the result of battlefield initiative by their leaders. Fyffe led his brigade forward on the left, and in the center Beatty rallied what he could of the rest of his division and followed.

In the woods, the 13th Louisiana had driven off two attacks when a third line of blue-clad soldiers appeared before it. Scouting to his right, Gibson discovered that the Confederates there had fled. On the left he saw Union troops crossing the river in force. Faced with the threat of being surrounded if he held his ground, he reluctantly ordered the regiment to retreat.

The 4th Florida held its ground until it ran out of ammunition. The commander then discovered Union troops advancing on both his right and left. The regiment retreated to the heights to help protect Wright's battery.

By the time Wright's battery reached the crest of the hill, the Confederate infantry was already falling back. Graves tried to organize counterfire to silence the Union cannons, but with only Wright's battery and two sections of Semple's battery, he was outgunned at a ratio of 5- or 6-to-1. The gunners quickly switched to firing canister to try to stem the Union advance. Wright's four cannons fired rapidly, but had no effect on the advancing Union troops. Roughly 150 yards from the battery, Miller ordered his brigade to charge. When the Federals were 75 yards from the cannons, rifle fire mortally wounded Wright. Graves took command and ordered the battery to limber up and retreat. Before this was accomplished, he countermanded the order and told the gunners to fire. They fired one load of double-canister from each gun before Graves gave the order to limber up again. As a wave of Union troops swept over the battery, the 21st Ohio captured two guns because there were not enough men and horses left to draw them away.

The Confederates tried to rally on the ridge where Beatty had started an hour before, but the regimental color-bearers became prime targets of Union sharpshooters. The 2nd Kentucky had four color-bearers killed in a few minutes, while the 4th Kentucky lost three. In fierce hand-to-hand combat, the 78th Pennsylvania of Colonel John F. Miller's brigade captured the colors of the 26th Tennessee.

When news of the developing debacle on the right reached him, Bragg rushed a couple of brigades over to reinforce Breckinridge, but by the time they arrived the Union troops had reoccupied the heights.

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The Battle of Stones River saw the highest casualty rates of the war, with each army losing between 20 and 25 percent of its men. In his attack, Breckinridge had thrown 4,500 men at the Union left and had suffered 1,700 casualties—a staggering 37 percent loss. Later, seeing how thin the ranks of the Kentucky Brigade were, Breckinridge was heard to lament: "My poor orphans! They have cut them to pieces!" Breckinridge's statement was forgotten for a decade, but by the end of the century, the brigade would be widely remembered as the Orphan Brigade.

Still calling Stones River a victory, Braxton Bragg abandoned central Tennessee during the night of January 3, and the next morning the Army of the Cumberland limped into Murfreesboro.

Seeking to deflect blame for his performance at Stones River, Bragg selected Breckinridge as a convenient scapegoat. In his official report, which he declined to show to Breckinridge, Bragg charged that the Kentuckian had failed to provide much-needed reinforcements on the first day of battle, and had mishandled the fatal assault on January 2. He solicited—some might say suborned—testimony from other Confederate officers on the scene to support his criticism of Breckinridge. All this he forwarded to Richmond with some dispatch.

The outraged Breckinridge, still reeling from the losses suffered by the Kentucky Brigade at Stones River, demanded a formal court of inquiry to clear his name, a demand supported by many in the Southern press. The Knoxville Register spoke for many when it defended Breckinridge and his subordinates, declaring, "[The] impression is that they made only venial mistakes, and that heroism displayed is a sufficient shield against even the official criticism of General Bragg."

The controversy smoldered for months, until Breckinridge was transferred to Mississippi in May 1863. He resisted the urging of friends to resign from the army and challenge Bragg to a duel, but the hatred and dissention that followed the disastrous defeat at Stones River were poisoned seeds that eventually would destroy both Bragg and his army in the wake of yet another military debacle at Missionary Ridge the following November. By then, with Breckinridge long since gone from the scene, Bragg would have no one to blame but himself. □

Frequent contributor Robert Collins Suhr is a native of the Bluegrass State himself, based in Edgewood, Ky. For further reading, see: No Better Place to Die: The Battle of Stones River, by Peter Cozzens; or Stones River—Bloody Winter in Tennessee, by James Lee McDonough.

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