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Might Have Become President

He was known as "the general of the one mistake." Had it not been for that mistake, on the second day of the Civil War battle of Chickamauga, Maj. Gen. William Starke Rosecrans of Cincinnati, Ohio, might have become president of the United States.

In late summer 1863, Rosecrans was perhaps the best-known general in the Union Army. His bloodless capture of Chattanooga, Tenn., the South's most important railroad center, had sent the North into joyous celebration. The end of the war seemed imminent.

But Rosecrans, goaded by an impatient War Department, barely paused at Chattanooga. With rebel Gen. Braxton Bragg's army in apparent disarray, Rosecrans split his own army into three wings and followed the retreating southerners into northern Georgia.

Bragg, however, was not in retreat. He was lying in wait for his overconfident opponent. On the night of Sept. 18, the two armies blundered into each other along the banks of Chickamauga Creek, 10 miles south of Chattanooga along the Tennessee-Georgia border. The next two days saw some of the bloodiest fighting of the Civil War.

Rosecrans, who had never seen defeat in his battles, had graduated fifth in his West Point class, and become a successful architect and engineer in Cincinnati. When the war broke out, he was pressed back into service.

Perhaps for the first time, Rosecrans realized he was in a fight for survival in the raging Chickamauga battle. Bragg attacked the morning of Sept. 19, and all day the two armies clashed in the deep woods and underbrush.

The next morning an over-tired Rosecrans checked out the Union positions. After Brigadier Gen. Thomas Wood failed to move his troops as quickly as Rosecrans wanted, Wood got a vicious public tongue-lashing from his commander. Rosecrans would come to regret that outburst.

Later in the day, Rosecrans got a report of a gap in the Union lines, and not bothering to check the accuracy of the information, ordered Wood to move his troops there. Wood, fearing another rebuke, moved quickly.

Ironically, at that same time 11,000 Confederate troops came crashing through the woods at exactly the spot that Wood had vacated. The result was a rout of the Union troops.

Rosecrans' beaten army was able to retreat into Chattanooga, but the fiasco led to Rosecrans' downfall. President Abraham Lincoln named Ulysses S. Grant to head the Union armies in the West, and Grant chose to dismiss Rosecrans.

Two months later, Grant won the admiration of the northern public when the

southern siege was broken. It was Rosecrans' plan for lifting the siege that Grant had used, but he got no credit for the victory. A broken man, he was transferred to unimportant posts and quit the Army a year later.

Vindication came to Rosecrans 25 years later, at a battlefield reunion picnic for Confederate and Union veterans at Chickamauga in 1889. Ten thousand men cheered Rosecrans as he stood atop a table under the main tent. A newspaper reporter wrote that "old veterans cried like infants" upon seeing the old commander.

Today, Rosecrans is the only commander of a major Union army without a monument anywhere. But at Chickamauga, his name lives on, as a general of undoubted ability who made one mistake, in the heat of battle, and paid for it the rest of his life. — kt

America's First, Largest National Military Park

The story of Gen. William Rosecrans is told at America's first, largest and most-visited national military park, Chickamauga-Chattanooga.

A quarter century after the end of the Civil War, Americans raised money to erect monuments, plaques and markers to the pivotal fighting that took place in the Chickamauga and Chattanooga areas in 1863.

Now, says the Chattanooga Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, efforts are underway to clean and repair all of the park's 666 monuments, in preparation for a major national celebration of the park's centennial in 1990. The monuments were funded, designed and placed by veterans from each state who fought there.

Supporters envision a major program — along the lines of the "Save the Statue of Liberty" project — to preserve the memorials.

For more information about the importance of the Chickamauga-Chattanooga area to the Civil War, or other attractions in and around Chattanooga, contact the Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1001 Market St., Chattanooga, TN 37401.
