

TAC NEWS

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THE BATTLE OF MILLS SPRINGS Kentucky - 19 January 1862

"Lincoln would like to have God on his side, but he must have Kentucky," wrote a newspaper reporter from New York in 1861. It was certainly true. The President himself stated "I think to lose Kentucky would be ... to lose the whole game." A quick look at the map tells the tale: the Ohio River marks the long northern border of Kentucky. A Confederate Kentucky could have well meant defeat for the United States. Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio would be vulnerable to invasion. The primary transportation network connecting east to west would be imperiled. Conversely, if the state fell into Federal hands, the South would be in jeopardy. The lengthy border with Tennessee could be pierced in many places. The worst vulnerability was the Cumberland Gap, which provided ready access across the Appalachian Mountains into western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, and Virginia.

A slave state by law, Kentucky was more than a border state - it was quite divided in every way by the wave of secession following the 1860 election. Kentucky's slave trade was a very profitable business, serving as a source of slaves for the cotton plantations in the lower South. On the other hand, most Kentuckians did not own slaves. Major slave-

owning areas in the state were the Bluegrass Region, along the Ohio River, and four western Kentucky counties. Many men from these areas joined the Confederate army. The state's leaders were as divided as the populace. Governor Beriah Magoffin was a Union man, but many of the leaders in the state legislature were southern sympathizers. Initially, Kentucky declared its neutrality and both belligerents respected that position. By late 1861, it was doubtful that Kentucky would adopt an ordinance of secession. A Union training center, Camp Dick Robinson, was established south of Lexington. Many Kentuckians answered the call - one way or the other. One Union officer wrote, "Regiments were being recruited in the same neighborhoods for both armies, and most of the men of military age had got into one or the other; in

many cases sons of the same family enlisted in opposing regiments."

On September 10, 1861, the United States Army ordered Brigadier General George H. Thomas to command Camp Dick Robinson. A native of the Old Dominion state,

Thomas had chosen to remain in the US Army. He worked energetically to equip, arm, organize, and train his new enthusiastic volunteers.



Cumberland Gap

It was a daunting task - very few military supplies had been stockpiled in advance. Some of his men were from eastern Tennessee, and they were most anxious to have that region liberated by Federal authority. Many late night letters were drafted requesting essential material, and pleading for prompt action: the Confederates in Tennessee were on the move.



Brig. Gen. Felix Zollicoffer

In July 1861, command of the first Confederate troops raised in central and eastern Tennessee fell to Brigadier General Felix Zollicoffer - a newspaper man by trade. By October 1861, he and his command left Knoxville. They got busy mopping up Unionist sentiment in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, and preparing to begin the invasion of Kentucky. "Zollie" passed through the Cumberland Gap with about 6000 men only to be thwarted by an advance Union brigade. Commanded by Brigadier General Albin Schoep, they engaged the rebels near Rockcastle Hills in a basically bloodless campaign of maneuver. The Confederates retreated south through the gap.

For his second move, Zollicoffer advanced through Monticello in late November. He made camp on the south side of the Cumberland River in Kentucky, near Mill Springs. His men constructed entrenchments. After several weeks, he decided that the northern bank offered a better position: though his lack of training or foresight misled him into taking up a position on an isthmus.



Zollicoffer's command crossed the Cumberland River to Beech Grove where they went into winter quarters, built log huts, and again fortified the camp. Early in January 1862, Major General George B. Crittenden arrived from Bowling Green to take command of these CSA forces in person.

To meet this threat, Union troops under General Thomas moved south early in January. With about 4400 men organized in three brigades, he advanced to Lebanon. His plan was to unite with General Schoepf's Brigade near Fishing Creek, west of Somerset. Plagued by rain, snow, and terrible roads, Thomas' command did not reach the area until January 17, 1862. He made camp at Logan's Crossroads, a mere nine miles north of Zollicoffer's camp.



Brig. Gen. George H. Thomas

Since the Confederate forces outnumbered the separated Union forces, they now turned their attentions to the threat posed by Thomas' approach. Crittenden decided to attack Logan's Crossroads at dawn on the 19th, after a nightlong march. The stage was set for battle. Despite a cold, driving rain, Zollicoffer's First Brigade got onto the road at midnight, and, followed by Brigadier General William Henry Carroll's Second Brigade, plodded through the icy mud for 6 hours to surprise the Federals.

George Thomas was not likely to be surprised! A career officer who had graduated with West Point's class of 1840, Thomas had fought Indians in Florida and Texas,

taught at the military academy for 5 years, and served throughout the Mexican War. His division's camp was laid out around Logan's Crossroads, with all units within supporting distance and with both grand guards (infantry) and videttes (cavalry) flung several miles from the encampment. The sun was but a glow in the eastern sky at 6:30 when the Confederate van was still 2 miles from the crossroads. They were met by determined resistance from the 1st Kentucky Cavalry (250 men) and the infantrymen of the 10th Indiana Volunteers (710 men). Zollicoffer deployed his lead regiment, the 15th Mississippi (854 men), into line of battle. For an hour, the Union *avante garde* delayed their enemy's advance, allowing precious time for the rest of the Union boys to climb out of their tents and prepare for battle. Meanwhile, the Confederates slogged along on the muddy road, unable to advance to the sound of the guns.

Having spent all of their ammunition - 40 rounds for the infantry - the 10th Indiana & 1st Kentucky Cavalry withdrew slowly toward Logan Crossroads. They crossed a large field backed by a rail fence on a low-rise perpendicular to the road. There they met reinforcements, 400 men from the 4th Kentucky Infantry, who had marched south. This stiffened the Union defense.



Col. Speed S. Fry

Finding the road blocked, the 15th Mississippi took cover in a wooded ravine, allowing them to close on the Union fence line. Colonel Speed S. Fry of the 4th Kentucky hailed the Mississippians and ordered them to stand

up and "fight like men." The scene was smoky and rainy, making visibility poor. As the 15th Mississippi worked to their right, space opened for Zollicoffer to lead the 19th Tennessee (676 men) into line and on the 15th's left flank. Both sides blazed away as best they could -

many of the Confederates were carrying flintlock muskets and the weather caused repeated misfires.

When Zollicoffer reached the field, he made a tragic mistake. Believing that some of his men were firing upon Confederates, he rode forward and intercepted Col. Fry of the Union 4th Kentucky. Both assumed the other was on his side: "Zollie" was quite near-sighted, and was wearing a raincoat over his gray CSA frock coat. The two men drew apart, but those escorting Col. Fry realized the situation. A hail of bullets engulfed General Zollicoffer who fell mortally wounded. General Crittenden was well back in the column, attempting to bring up more CSA troops. At a critical juncture, command failed and the Confederate attack stalled on the west side of the road.

On the east side of the road, the 15th Mississippi, supported by the 20th Tennessee launched a series of furious assaults, some even reaching the fence line. As the fighting reached a hand-to-hand tussle for the fence, the Union regiments 2nd Minnesota and 9th Ohio reinforced the 4th Kentucky. This was timely, as the Confederates were threatening the Union left flank. At about this time, elements of the 1st Ohio Artillery arrived behind the left of the infantry line, further bolstering the position.

Crittenden was unable to deploy enough of his exhausted men to counter these Federal forces. Some later claimed that he was drunk. He never sent for his cavalry to harass the enemy's flanks, nor to reconnoi-



Maj. Gen. George B. Crittenden

ter another route of advance. To make matters worse, the rain had rendered almost all of the Confederate Tennesseans' weapons useless. By one participant's estimation, only about 20% of CS weapons were functioning at the end of the engagement.

At this critical juncture, George Thomas struck the final blow. His Third Brigade had been on the move. Col. Samuel Powhatten Carter of the 2nd Tennessee Infantry (USA) led his three regiments with 1530 men against Zollicoffer's exposed right flank. As the 2nd Tennessee (CSA) began to waver, Thomas ordered a general advance of all Union forces. The 9th Ohio charged with bayonets leveled. The Confederate left crumbled. Other regiments withdrew to avoid envelopment and capture. Lt. Bailie Payton of the 20th Tennessee (CSA) refused to surrender and fell, firing his pistol at the Ohioans. Soon, the Southerners were streaming back down the pike toward Beech Grove.

Some CSA regiments formed a hasty rearguard at the crest of the first ridge. The 16th Alabama, 29th and 17th Tennessee regiments (about 1200 men) formed line. Their fire allowed the front line Confederate units to disengage and delayed the Union pursuit. But most of the Confederates had lost heart, and the routed army poured south until they reached the entrenchments around their winter camp.

By late afternoon, the Union troops had closed in on Beech Grove. The situation looked promising. If the trenches could be breached, the 'rebels' would have to swim for their lives. Union artillery opened a spirited bombardment. Dusk closed in early that January evening, and the Federal troops slept on their arms in the wet woods, preparing for a dawn assault on the isolated camp. But when dawn came, they found that the Confederates had crossed the Cumberland River to safety. After searching the huts and gathering the 14 artillery pieces and wagon train, the victorious Federal forces returned to their camp at Logan's Crossroads.

The Battle of Mill Springs was the first solid Union victory of the American Civil War. It set the stage for Grant's advance into Tennessee, culminating in the capture of Forts Donelson and Henry. It ruined one man's career - Crittenden resigned soon afterward; and made another's. George Thomas's star was on the rise, and would lead him to the command of a Union Army before the bloody war ended more than 3 years later.

In the next Tac News - Mill Springs Scenario

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