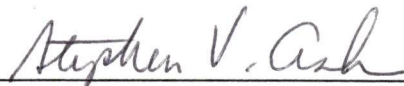


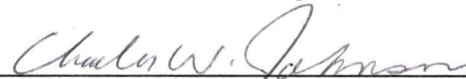
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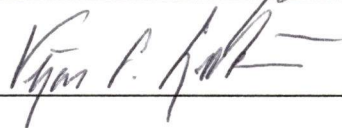
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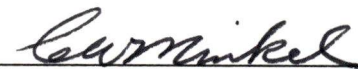
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We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:





Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

BLACK SABBATH: THE BATTLE OF MILL SPRINGS

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Kevin George Mason

May 1997

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

the memory of my father

DAVID PARK MASON, III

Major of Infantry

1916-1968

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No author works alone. I am grateful to the many people who have aided me in my research. Foremost I thank the two individuals who have had the greatest impact on anything I have achieved or will ever achieve educationally: my father, David Park Mason, III, and my first grade teacher, Miss Lucy Wilson. I also thank the faculty, staff, and graduate students in the Department of History at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Those who need to be singled out for special praise are the members of my Thesis Committee, Stephen V. Ash, Charles W. Johnson and Vejas Liulevicius. They have endured my writing style and the value of the final product is in no small measure due to their efforts.

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of gratitude is owed to Mr. Ron Nicholas, the Administrator of the Mill Springs Battlefield, for the time and effort he has expended in guiding me on the battlefield and answering my many questions. The maps in chapter three are used with the permission of Mr. Nicholas and are from the Mill Springs Battlefield Preservation Plan written by Gray and Pape in 1992. I would like to thank Mr. William Niekirk and the Mill Springs Battlefield Association, who have contributed tremendous amounts of time, money and effort to ensure that the historical legacy of this battlefield will be preserved.

Lastly, the greatest debt is owed to my family, who have had to suffer through my obsession with this project.

ABSTRACT

This is the story of a battle called Mill Springs by the North and Fishing Creek by the South. It occurred in eastern Kentucky on Sunday, January 19, 1862, in a heavy rain. Confederate forces, poorly led and armed, marched through the night to meet Union forces sent to drive them out of Kentucky. In the four-hour battle the Southerners would not only lose the charismatic General Felix Zollicoffer but also lose their first major battle of the Civil War. Their organization was so disrupted that they abandoned vast quantities of equipment in their effort to cross the Cumberland River. Once on the other side some units disintegrated and returned to their homes.

The North, however, missed a window of opportunity to invade East Tennessee in the wake of the battle. The region's Confederate forces had just suffered a devastating defeat and had ceased to be an effective fighting force. In the chaos that followed, the North had a golden opportunity to sever the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad line and cut off the Confederate forces in the Eastern Theater from the vast manufacturing and agricultural resources of Tennessee. An invasion of East Tennessee would have also liberated the sizeable number of Unionists there from Confederate control. This would have fit President Abraham Lincoln's and General George McClellan's strategy. Instead, General Don Carlos Buell chose to enter Tennessee to the west by way of the Mississippi and Cumberland Rivers, using General Ulysses Grant's forces as a spearhead.

The events of the battle foreshadowed other actions that would occur in the Western Theater during the war. These include Confederate problems with command and supply, the future actions of Union General George H. Thomas and the star-crossed actions of the

actions of the Army of Tennessee of which many of the Confederate units would soon join. Most importantly, the missed opportunity could have sharply shortened the bloody war.

PREFACE

This study has grown out of the author's research on the Twenty-ninth Tennessee Infantry Regiment, C.S.A. There is a dearth of studies covering military operations in eastern Kentucky and Tennessee in the autumn of 1861 and winter of 1862. This study will offer a new interpretation of one of the battles that occurred during this period, the battle of Mill Springs.

There are several reasons why this battle has slid into obscurity. The most important reason was due to the success that Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant would have a few weeks later by capturing Forts Henry and Donelson and opening the way to seize Nashville. Perhaps the reason Grant's actions won a place in history was due to the lack of initiative and aggressiveness displayed by both Generals Don C. Buell and George H. Thomas by not following up their success at Mill Springs with an invasion of East Tennessee. Another reason was the diluting factor of the many names for this battle. Like several other battles, this battle was known by different names in the North and South. The North called it Mill Springs and the South called it Fishing Creek. This in itself is a reverse of the norm of the North naming its battles after natural terrain features and the South naming them after towns (e.g., Stones River vs. Murfreesboro, Antietam vs. Sharpsburg and Bull Run vs. Manassas). The confusion did not end there. The battle was also known as Logan's Cross Roads, Webb's Cross Roads, Beech Grove, Somerset, Old Fields and the Battle of the Cumberland. The use of each different name further diluted its fame, until it had been all but forgotten. This lack of recognition is best symbolized in

James M. McPherson's *The Atlas of the Civil War* that depicts the battle in North Carolina instead of Tennessee. For the purposes of this study the battle is called Mill Springs simply because that is how it is listed in *The War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*.

The battle has never been the subject of its own book. Most accounts are contained in biographies of Generals Thomas and Zollicoffer or mentioned in the memoirs of veterans. Many traditional interpretations of this battle have relied heavily upon newspaper accounts with a decidedly northern bias. These accounts misinterpreted the events of the battle and have been retold by historians over time until they have gained the patina of truth.

While collecting information on this battle, the author came to the opinion that its importance had been underestimated by historians. The use of eyewitness accounts and recent archaeological evidence has led to a new interpretation of the course of the battle. A detailed study soon revealed that it presaged events that would occur in the Western Theater of war. It also resulted in a missed opportunity to seize Unionist East Tennessee and possibly lead to a quicker end to the Civil War. This study has allowed the author to offer new evidence that may lead to a new interpretation of the events surrounding this battle and to put Mill Springs back on the map.

Chapter One provides an overview of events that preceded the battle and places it in its context by explaining the strategic importance of the area of operations to both the North and South. It also chronicles the military operations of the opposing forces leading up to the battle of Mill Springs. Chapter Two consists of brief biographies of key commanders and other individuals in the battle aimed at providing background information and some

insight into their actions during the battle and the effect that they had on its outcome. The chapter also includes a discussion of the weapons issued to the Confederate units, since their reliability was critical to Confederate performance. Chapter Three is a narrative of the battle based on primary sources, some of which have never appeared in print. These sources will challenge traditional interpretations of the events that occurred at Mill Springs. Chapter Four analyzes the events of the battle and develops the author's themes concerning the Western Theater. These include the Southern command and supply problems, the lack of initiative and aggressiveness of Union General George H. Thomas and the rout and disruption of Confederate forces followed by the missed opportunity for Union forces to seize East Tennessee.

Chapter Five sets forth the author's conclusions and major theses of this study. Primarily the battle has been underestimated by historians in that it provided the North a much needed psychological boost and that it was predictive of the eventual outcome of the war in the Western Theater.

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CHAPTER I

THE ROAD TO MILL SPRINGS

General Albert Sidney Johnston found himself in a gloomy situation. He had been named the commander of Confederate Department Number Two on September 10, 1861. Arriving in Nashville, Tennessee four days later, it only took two more days for him to figure out the desperate condition of his new command. It was responsible for an immense frontage stretching from Cumberland Gap in the Appalachian Mountains on through the Indian Territory to the Kansas border. It consisted of Tennessee, Arkansas and the northern parts of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Also included in this area were the states of Kentucky and Missouri, both of which were expected to secede.¹

General Johnston sent a telegram to Richmond on September 16, asking President Jefferson Davis for help. "[W]e have not over half the armed forces that are likely to be required for our security against disaster," Johnston complained.² Even more alarming, there was a dearth of rifles or muskets to issue the recruits who were rallying to the cause, and no uniforms or other items of military equipment.³

Johnston's mission, to defend the entire western two-thirds of the Confederacy and protect it from invasion, was clearly a challenging task. To protect the huge area east of the Mississippi, he had fewer than twenty thousand soldiers. His forces were a shambles,

¹ Stanley F. Horn, The Army of Tennessee (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1941. Reprint, Norman and London: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 55-56.

² William Preston Johnston, The Life of General Albert Sidney Johnston (New York: n.p., 1878), 309.

³ Thomas L. Connelly, The Army of the Heartland: The Army of Tennessee, 1861-1862 (Baton Rouge and London: The Louisiana State University Press), 29-32, 35-36.

the soldiers untrained and ill-equipped, the officers inexperienced. Many were incompetent and held their positions due to political patronage.⁴

Geographically the situation was equally gloomy. The broad frontage did not possess any significant natural obstacles to impede Federal penetration. Quite the opposite, in fact: the Mississippi, Tennessee and Cumberland rivers all provided invasion routes. Moreover, the Mississippi split Johnston's area of operations and made troop movements, coordination and logistics more difficult.

Confederate troop dispositions had been undertaken prior to General Johnston's appointment to command. The previous commander, Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk, hoping to forestall an anticipated Federal invasion, occupied Columbus, Kentucky, on September 4, 1861. This violation of Kentucky's precarious neutrality gave Federal forces under Major General Robert Anderson of Fort Sumter fame an excuse to move into Kentucky and occupy Louisville. Any hope of Kentucky's siding with the South or remaining neutral crumbled as a result of Polk's faux pas. Richard M. McMurry comments in his book Two Great Rebel Armies that "the Rebels marched into Kentucky early enough to ensure that the state would be driven into Federal arms but too late to derive any real military advantage from doing so."⁵

September 12, found General Johnston in Knoxville, Tennessee. He ordered Brigadier General Felix K. Zollicoffer to occupy Cumberland Ford in eastern Kentucky with a force

⁴ Connelly, The Army of the Heartland, 13-22, 37-38; Horn, Army of Tennessee, 55-62; Johnston, The Life of General Johnston, 312-13; Steven E. Woodworth, Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 17-33, 37.

⁵ Richard J. McMurry, Two Great Rebel Armies (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 14.

of about four thousand soldiers. Immediately upon Johnston's arrival in Nashville, he ordered Brigadier General Simon B. Buckner and a force of four thousand soldiers to seize Bowling Green, Kentucky. These movements established by mid-September 1861 a thin gray line running from Columbus to Bowling Green to Cumberland Ford.⁶

General Johnston had been given the responsibility of guarding what historian Thomas L. Connelly calls the "Heartland." This coveted area with vast resources in agriculture, raw materials and manpower is described by Connelly as being contained in an irregularly shaped box with corners located at Bristol, Tennessee, Macon, Georgia, Jackson, Mississippi, and Columbus, Kentucky. Inside this box were located the Confederacy's greatest source of raw materials and its largest concentration of the industry required to produce war materiel.⁷

Tennessee was critical to the Confederacy's armaments production. Its manufacturing capability along with the abundance of raw materials, and especially the copper mines of East Tennessee were important assets. In close proximity to Tennessee were the rich deposits of saltpeter, niter, and lead in northern Alabama. Because of these resources, important powder mills were built in the region using the Cumberland River as a power source. Tennessee developed a considerable ordnance industry, located primarily in Nashville and Memphis, that churned out weapons, cannon, and other military equipment.⁸

Agriculturally, the Heartland was a major source of Confederate commissary stores. It produced much of the grain and livestock used to feed both the Army of Northern Virginia

⁶ Horn, *Army of Tennessee*, 55-62; Johnston, *Life of Gen. Johnston*, 306-16; Charles P. Roland, *Albert Sidney Johnston: Soldier of Three Republics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 265-67.

⁷ Connelly, *The Army of the Heartland*, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

and the Army of Tennessee. Along with Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, it provided the Confederacy with mobility by furnishing both horses and mules for its armies.⁹

Clearly the industrial base and its capability to provide for the logistical needs of the Confederacy made Tennessee a crucial asset for the rebel government. Despite the critical importance that the area held for the Confederate war machine, General Johnston could not draw fully on its abundant resources, most of which were instead directed to the Eastern Theater by order of the Confederate high command.¹⁰

James A. Rawley writes in Turning Points of the Civil War : "Kentucky was, in fact, the keystone in the arch of border states, and its adherence to the North was fundamental to winning the war for the Union."¹¹ Rawley's argument centers on Lincoln's call for troops, an action that drove Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina out of the Union. In order to stem the tide and prevent further dissolution of the Union, saving the four remaining slave-holding border states became critical. For various reasons it was easier for the Union to influence the states of Delaware, Maryland, and Missouri to remain loyal. The loyalty of Kentucky, however, was uncertain. Kentucky was not only important politically, but also strategically; holding it in the Union would deny the Confederacy a defensible northern boundary along the Ohio River and access to Kentucky's manpower. But this would not be an easy task, given the social, cultural and economic ties Kentucky had with the South. Rawley points out that the "southward

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Connelly, Army of the Heartland, 10; McMurtry, Two Great Rebel Armies, 70-73; Woodworth, Jefferson Davis and His Generals, 46-60, 307.

¹¹ James A. Rawley, Turning Points of the Civil War (1966, reprint Lincoln and London: The University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 11.

currents of the Ohio and Mississippi had long pulled Kentucky's exports toward New Orleans," although he adds that northern railroads vied for the trade.¹²

The sympathies of Kentuckians were split between the North and the South. Kentucky was the birthplace of both Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis. Divisions occurred within Kentucky families, notably the Breckinridges, Crittendens, and Todds. Robert J. Breckinridge had sons in the Confederate and Federal armies. Senator John J. Crittenden had a son in each army holding the rank of major general. Mary Todd Lincoln, the president's wife, would lose three brothers in Confederate service. Political machinations to sway the state towards either the Union or the Confederacy failed and neither faction held a majority to enforce its will. Democratic Governor Beriah Magoffin, who was pro-Confederate, adopted a policy of armed neutrality and prohibited the movement of either Confederate or Federal forces within the state. Neutrality ended when Lieutenant General Polk's Confederate forces seized Columbus on September 4, 1861, and Federal forces commanded by Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant seized Paducah, Kentucky.¹³

The end of Kentucky's neutrality allowed both sides to send troops in to try to gain control of as much territory as possible. Federal forces were located at the following sites: Camp Dick Robinson, near Nicholasville, commanded by Brigadier General George H.

¹² Ibid., 9.

¹³ Lowell H. Harrison, The Civil War in Kentucky (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1975), 1-12; Rawley, Turning Points, 17-38.

Thomas; Camp Kenton near Maysville, commanded by Brigadier General William Nelson; Smithland and Paducah, commanded by Grant.¹⁴

Major General Robert Anderson, in ill-health, transferred his command to Brigadier General William Tecumseh Sherman at his headquarters in Louisville on October 8.¹⁵ Sherman found himself in a situation similar to that of his opposite number, General Johnston. He did not have enough equipment to outfit his soldiers and he did not have enough men. Federal recruiting goals were not being met. Only 29,203 Kentuckians had entered Federal service of the 42,000 that had been sought.¹⁶ Sherman's scattered forces were not tactically deployed. Overestimating Confederate strength and fearing that General S.B. Buckner's move on Bowling Green was the start of a Confederate offensive led Sherman to make a mistake. Meeting with Secretary of War Simon Cameron on October 17, 1861, Sherman presented a pessimistic overview of the theater. He proposed that to defend Kentucky adequately he would need 60,000 men and to go on the offensive he would need 200,000 men. "Great God! Where will they come from?" exclaimed Cameron. Unfortunately for Sherman, the exchange was overheard by Samuel Wilkerson, a correspondent for the New York Tribune and was published in the Tribune on October 30. The article charged that Sherman was timid and irrational. This led to his replacement by Brigadier General Don Carlos Buell on November 13, 1861.¹⁷ Buell wanted to advance into Tennessee by way of the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers. Lincoln and

¹⁴ Harrison, Civil War in Kentucky, 14.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁷ John F. Marszalek, Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 156-63; Lloyd Lewis, Sherman: Fighting Prophet (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932), 191-98; William T. Sherman, Memoirs of General W.T. Sherman (n.p. n.d., reprint New York: The Library of America, 1990), 211-232.

General George B. McClellan, on the other hand preferred to enter East Tennessee by way of Louisville to Knoxville. It would be the success of Buell's plan that would propel Grant to fame.¹⁸

Zollicoffer was appointed the commander of the District of East Tennessee on July 26. Davis expected him to "preserve peace, protect the railroad and repel invasion."¹⁹ Zollicoffer found it a daunting task. He was responsible for an approximately 128-mile front stretching from opposite Tompkinsville, Kentucky, to the Cumberland Gap. He would be hampered by the hostility of the pro-Union populace in East Tennessee. Sabotage had already started to occur on portions of the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad, specifically the burning of railroad bridges.²⁰ Even the topography of the area would work against Zollicoffer. His district was made up of rugged, forested mountains with a poor road network. The land was divided into small hillside farms that would make foraging difficult for his forces. Thomas Connelly states that in an invasion of the area the attacker would have the advantage since his route would not be revealed until his forces had appeared through one of the six avenues of approach. These six avenues were: the Cumberland Gap, Roger's Gap, Big Creek Gap, Wheeler's Gap, and the road systems connecting Albany, Kentucky, with Jamestown, Tennessee, and Tompkinsville,

¹⁸ Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Blue (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 51.

¹⁹ William M. Polk, Leonidas Polk, Bishop and General (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1893), II, 4, and U.S. Army (War Department), The War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 Vols., (Washington: GPO, 1880-1901), Series I, Volume IV, 365, 375, and 378. All citations are to Series I.

²⁰ Allan R. Ball, "Night of the Burning Bridges," America's Civil War, Vol. 9, No. 6, (January 1997), 50-56; Thomas W. Humes, The Loyal Mountaineers of Tennessee (Knoxville: Ogden Brothers, 1888), 120-37; Oliver P. Temple, East Tennessee and the Civil War (Cincinnati: The Robert Clark Co., 1899), 366-87.

Kentucky, with Gainsboro, Tennessee (fig. 1).²¹ These avenues of approach ran across the Cumberland Plateau and exited out into the parallel series of valleys of East Tennessee. Zollicoffer proposed to form a chain of infantry posts across the plateau with locations at Big Creek, Elk, Archer's, Chitwood's, Camp McGinnis and Livingston.²² The problem Zollicoffer faced was that the Federal forces would have the advantage of surprise by choosing their route and would not be discovered until they marched into the district, leaving Zollicoffer scrambling to marshal his meager forces to block the invasion.

The problem became moot with Polk's occupation of Columbus, Kentucky; Zollicoffer was no longer restricted from moving into Kentucky and denying the Federal forces the advantage of surprise. He sent a part of his force to Cumberland Ford, Kentucky, and joined it on September 19. The day he arrived, the Twentieth Tennessee Infantry Regiment commanded by Colonel Joel A. Battle raided a Federal encampment called Camp Andrew Jackson near Barbourville, Kentucky. This action had the distinction of being the first engagement of the Civil War in Kentucky.²³ General Zollicoffer continued offensive operations in eastern Kentucky by raiding the Laurel Bridge, south-southeast of London, Kentucky, and raiding the Goose Creek Salt Works. Following these successes he asked for and received general permission to attack the enemy on his own authority.²⁴

²¹ Connelly, Army of the Heartland, 14-15.

²² O.R., IV, 381.

²³ O.R., IV, 199; W.J. McMurray, History of the Twentieth Tennessee Regiment Volunteer Infantry, C.S.A. (Nashville: Privately published, 1904, reprint Nashville: Elder's Bookstore, 1976), 192; Raymond E. Myers, The Zollie Tree (Louisville: The Filson Club Press, 1964), 52-53.

²⁴ O.R., IV, 202, 435; Myers, The Zollie Tree, 53-55.

Brigadier General George H. Thomas at Camp Dick Robinson sought to check Zollicoffer's advance into Kentucky by sending the recently mustered and inadequately trained First Kentucky Cavalry under Colonel Frank Wolford to gather information on Zollicoffer's force.²⁵ While moving towards Cumberland Gap, Wolford's troopers established a camp on a commanding hill overlooking the Rockcastle River. Wolford named it Camp Wildcat. Later, Colonel Theophilus T. Garrard's Third Regiment of Kentucky Volunteers would occupy and fortify Camp Wildcat in an attempt to check the Confederate advance. Garrard received information that the Confederate forces were estimated at 5,000 to 7,000 men.²⁶ On October 18, Garrard reported that Zollicoffer was approaching "with a large force and six pieces of artillery."²⁷ Earlier Garrard had relayed to Thomas his concern over the ability of his force of 975 soldiers to halt the advance of the Confederates.²⁸

Thomas, recognizing Garrard's predicament, sent reinforcements to Camp Wildcat under the command of Brigadier General Albin F. Schoepf. These forces consisted of three companies of the Fourteenth Ohio Infantry, four companies of the Seventeenth Ohio Infantry, four companies of the Thirty-third Indiana Infantry, a 250-man detachment of the First Kentucky Cavalry and Battery B, First Ohio Light Artillery.²⁹

²⁵ Eastham Tarrant, The Wild Riders of the First Kentucky Cavalry (Louisville: Carothers Press, 1894), 18-21.

²⁶ O.R., IV, 281.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 310; Richard J. Reid, Action at Camp Wildcat (Central City: West Kentucky Printing, 1990), 9-22.

²⁸ O.R., IV, 301.

²⁹ Myers, The Zollie Tree, 56.

Zollicoffer, unaware of the reinforcements to the Federal position at Camp Wildcat, conducted a reconnaissance in force on the Federal position.³⁰ The morning of October 21 found two regiments of Confederate infantry and some cavalry climbing the rugged heights of the Rockcastle Hills. The Confederates' attack met with some initial success, causing segments of the First Kentucky Cavalry to fall back. The adjutant of the Thirty-third Indiana kept the panic from spreading by steadying his troops. The Federal infantry then unleashed a heavy volley of rifle fire, checking the initial Confederate success, and the battle continued for several hours. Unable to dislodge the Federal forces from their entrenchments, Zollicoffer withdrew, convinced that he could not continue into Kentucky by that route.³¹

Concerned that Federal forces would try to enter East Tennessee by way of Jacksborough or Jamestown, Zollicoffer returned to Cumberland Gap, improved its fortifications and positioned some of his forces to block the passes into East Tennessee. Taking the Fifteenth Mississippi, the Seventeenth, Nineteenth, Twentieth, and Twenty-ninth Tennessee Infantries and two cavalry troops he moved in the direction of Jamestown, Tennessee, passing through Clinton, Oliver's Spring and Wartburg enroute.³²

Zollicoffer's biographer, Raymond Myers, quotes him as proposing "to take and strengthen a position between Monticello and Somerset, Kentucky."³³ Historian Roger Tate applauds Zollicoffer, who he says was inexperienced but correctly guessed Federal

³⁰ O.R., IV, 209.

³¹ Connelly, Army of the Heartland, 88; Horn, Army of Tennessee, 67; Myers, The Zollie Tree, 55-58; Reid, Action at Camp Wildcat, 16-22; Tarrant, Wild Riders, 41-48; O.R., IV, 207-210, 213.

³² Myers, The Zollie Tree, 60.

³³ Ibid.

intentions. Zollicoffer then positioned his forces to block the enemy's movement into East Tennessee. The site he chose gave the rebels an opportunity to engage the enemy in detail, preventing them from massing for an offensive.³⁴

He sent the Fifteenth Mississippi and the Seventeenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Tennessee Infantry Regiments along with a battalion of the Sixteenth Alabama Infantry Regiment, Branner's Second Tennessee Cavalry, and Rutledge's Artillery Battery to Monticello. Captains Sheliha and Estell conducted an engineer's reconnaissance to determine a suitable site for winter quarters and their report recommended Mill Springs, citing its access to both a grist and saw mill.³⁵

Zollicoffer arrived at Mill Springs on November 29, 1861. He found the site easily defensible and that the location on the Cumberland River provided a natural obstacle to Federal forces and a conduit for supplies from Nashville. Zollicoffer's forces then started to work on digging entrenchments and building huts for their winter quarters (fig. 2).³⁶

³⁴ Roger Tate, "The Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs," Blue and Gray Magazine, Vol. X, No. 3, February 1993, 16.

³⁵ O.R., VII, 690, 697.

³⁶ J.H. Hinson, "Sketch of Confederate Encampment at Beech Grove and Mill Springs," Tennessee State Library and Archives. Nashville, TN.

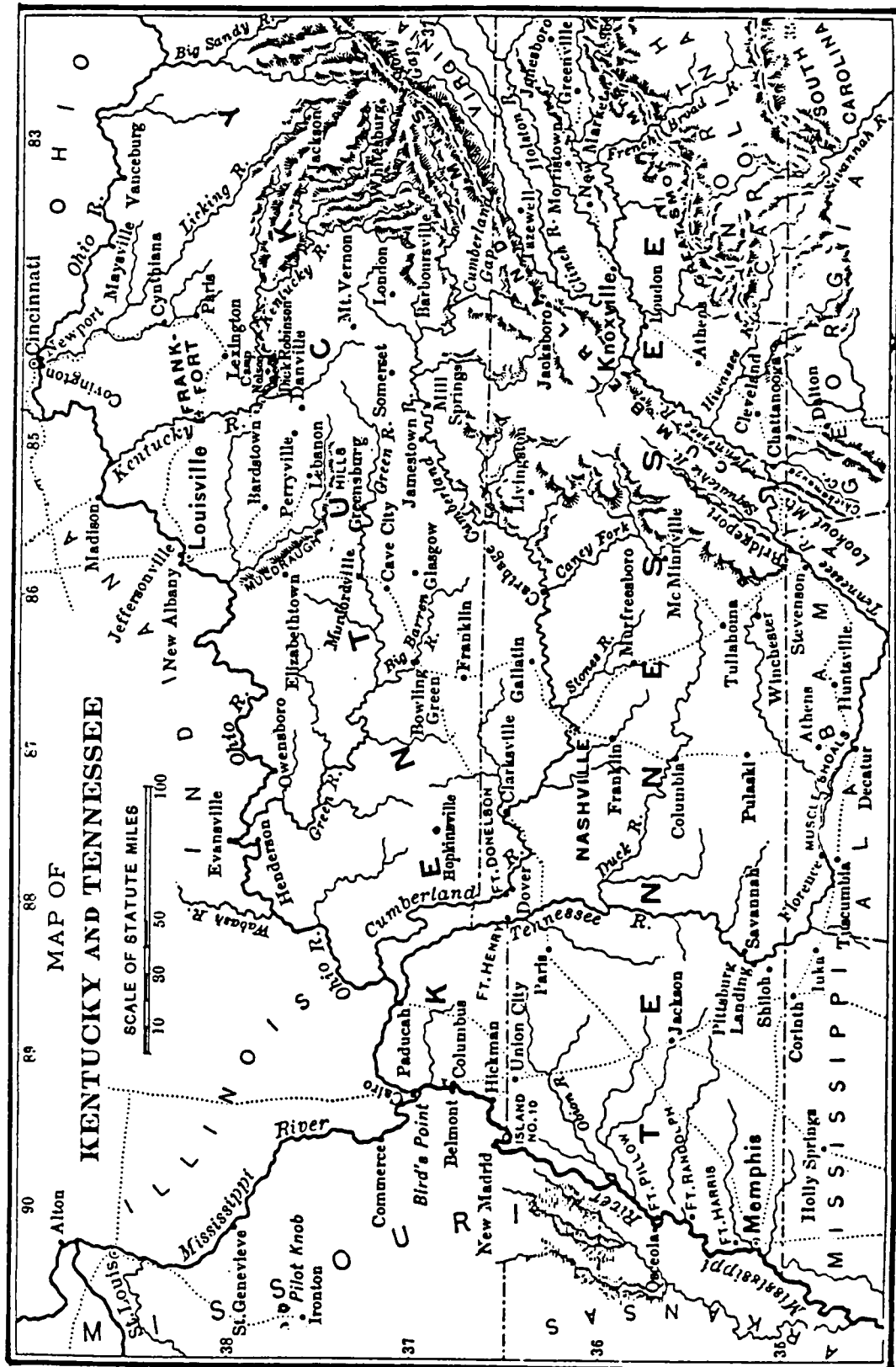


Figure 1

From Battles and Leaders of the Civil



Courtesy the Library of Congress.

Figure 2

CHAPTER II

THE COMBATANTS

Historical events have a way of propelling some individuals into fame and others into obscurity. The battle of Mill Springs is an example. It marked the start of the ascension of George H. Thomas's career while it made Felix K. Zollicoffer one of the Confederacy's first martyrs.

Neither side was adequately prepared for combat. If anything, the Federals held an advantage by having a military bureaucracy in place to aid mobilization efforts, whereas the Confederates had to start from scratch. One key to understanding the Confederates' actions at the battle of Mill Springs is to understand the problems that they had with issuing arms to their troops. Despite this handicap they were bolstered by earlier Confederate victories at Fort Sumter and Manassas and carried great hopes with them as they entered the border state of Kentucky.

A brief review of the biographies of commanders and other key individuals will provide the necessary background to understand wide variety of experience and character flaws that effected the conduct of this battle. The arming of the Confederate troops will also be discussed since it played a major role in the outcome of the battle.

George Henry Thomas was born in Southampton County, Virginia, on July 31, 1816. When he was fifteen, he and his sisters along with their widowed mother were forced to flee from their home and hide during Nat Turner's 1831 slave uprising. Thomas received an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy in 1836, and graduated in 1840 ranking twelfth. William T. Sherman was one of his classmates. At the start of the Civil War

Thomas's loyalties were suspect because he had applied for the position of commandant of cadets at the Virginia Military Institute in January 1861. Thomas did not forsake his oath and adhered to the Union cause. He had also married a woman from New York who reinforced his Unionism and loyalty to the North. He would be disowned by his Southern family, who from then on refused to communicate with him. Thomas was a very successful general and went by many nicknames, the most famous of which was the "Rock of Chickamauga." This name was given to him based on his defense of Snodgrass Hill during the battle, which probably saved the Federal army. Less flattering was his nickname "Old Slow Trot." He was a ponderous man weighing about three hundred pounds and was slow and deliberate in manner. It was rumored that he was late arriving to the Mill Springs battlefield because he was experiencing difficulty getting his bulk into a brand new uniform.¹

Albin Francis Schoepf was born in Podgorz, Poland, which was then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on March 1, 1822. He was educated in Vienna and served in the Austrian army until 1848, when he defected to the Hungarian revolutionists. In 1851, following the suppression of the revolution, he emigrated to the United States. His rise from a lowly porter to a brigadier general was due to the patronage of Joseph Holt, at one time the commissioner of patents. Schoepf would be the commander of the First Brigade at the battle of Mill Springs.²

¹ Henry Coppee, General Thomas (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1897); Freeman Cleaves, Rock of Chickamauga: The Life of General George H. Thomas (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1948); Francis F. McKinney, Education in Violence: The Life of George H. Thomas and the History of the Army of the Cumberland (Chicago: Americana House, Inc, 1961); Frank A. Palumbo, George Henry Thomas: The Dependable General (Dayton: Morningside House, 1983); Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Blue, 500-502.

² Warner, Generals in Blue, 424-25.

Mahlon Dickerson Manson was born on February 20, 1820, in Piqua, Ohio. His occupation varied. At various times he studied medicine, taught, practiced pharmacy, and served in the Indiana state legislature. He was a captain in the Fifth Indiana Volunteer Infantry during the years 1847-1848. Manson was mustered into Federal service April 17, 1861, as a captain of the Tenth Indiana Infantry and became its colonel the following month. He saw combat in July 1861 at the battle of Rich Mountain, Virginia, before becoming the Second Brigade commander under Brigadier General Thomas prior to the battle of Mill Springs.³

Robert Latimer McCook was a member of the famous "fighting McCooks" of the Civil War. This family produced fourteen men who saw Civil War service for the North. Four of them would become generals. McCook was born in Lisbon, Ohio, on December 28, 1827. He was educated in local public schools and he studied law. He practiced law at Steubenville, Columbia, and Cincinnati. In 1861 he organized the all-German Ninth Ohio Infantry, becoming its colonel on May 8. He first saw combat in West Virginia under General McClellan, and was a brigade commander under General William S. Rosecrans at Carnifax Ferry on September 10, 1861. At the battle of Mill Springs he commanded the Third Brigade and was wounded.⁴

Samuel Powhatan Carter was born in Elizabethton, Tennessee, on August 6, 1819. Ezra Warner writes that he is "the only American officer to achieve the ranks of major general in the army and rear admiral in the navy." He entered Princeton in 1834, but left in 1840 when he was appointed a midshipman in the navy. He was ordered to the U.S.

³ Ibid., 310.

⁴ Ibid., 297.

Naval Academy at Annapolis and graduated in the class of 1846. Remaining loyal to the Union, he was requested by Andrew Johnson and other prominent East Tennessee Unionists to help maintain Union sentiment in that area. In July 1861, Carter was detailed to the War Department. He used the title "acting brigadier general" until his formal commission at that grade on May 1, 1862. He would command Thomas's Twelfth Brigade.⁵

Speed Smith Fry was born in Boyle County, Kentucky, on September 9, 1817. He attended both Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, and Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, where he studied law. He recruited a company of infantry for the Mexican War and was a captain in the Second Kentucky Infantry. Fry served as a judge of Boyle County from 1857 until the Civil War. His reward for being a staunch Unionist was being appointed a colonel of the Union militia in July 1861 and was given the command of the Fourth Kentucky Infantry in October. He has the distinction of holding the most legitimate claim to killing Zollicoffer at Mill Springs.⁶

George Bibb Crittenden was born at Russellville, Kentucky, on March 20, 1812. He was the eldest son of Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden. His brother, Thomas Leonidas Crittenden, would become a major general in the Federal army. George Crittenden attended the U.S. Military Academy, graduating in the class of 1836 and ranking twenty-sixth out of forty-five. He resigned his commission after the Black Hawk War and studied law at Transylvania University in Kentucky. Bored with law, he moved to Texas. He saw service in the Mexican War as a captain of Kentucky mounted riflemen.

⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁶ Ibid., 163-4.

Against the wishes of his father he sided with the South and entered its service as a colonel of infantry. Jefferson Davis commissioned him a brigadier general on August 15, 1861, and major general on November 9 with orders to take command of the District of East Tennessee and invade eastern Kentucky. Crittenden joined Zollicoffer's brigade at Beech Grove, Kentucky, and assumed command on January 3, 1862. This was in time to command the Confederate forces that participated in the battle on January 19. Crittenden was a notorious drunkard, a weakness even his father commented on. It would be claimed that he was drunk during the planning and the battle of Mill Springs. A Nashville newspaper wrote:

But for the deplorable fact that General Crittenden of Kentucky (who is, we regret to say, generally regarded as a common drunkard) had been made the superior in command of the lamented Zollicoffer, the devoted hearts of Southern patriots might not to-day be lacerated and overwhelmed with grief almost insupportable.

On April 1, 1862, Major General William J. Hardee found Crittenden drunk in Iuka, Mississippi, and his command in a "wretched state of discipline." Hardee arrested Crittenden and General Braxton Bragg declared him unfit for command. He resigned on October 23, 1862.⁷

Felix Kirk Zollicoffer was born May 19, 1812, at Bigbyville, Tennessee. Though poorly educated, he made his way in life through journalism. This livelihood increased his political power in the state. His political career started with minor state offices, and he was elected to Congress in 1852. He helped carry the state for Whig presidential candidate Winfield Scott in 1852. Zollicoffer opposed Tennessee secession until he

⁷ Nashville Gazette, January 26, 1862; Connelly, Army of the Heartland, 146; William C. Davis, ed., The Confederate General (6 vols., n.p.: National Historical Society, 1991), II, 42-43; Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Gray (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 65-66.

learned of Abraham Lincoln's call for seventy-five thousand volunteers to invade the South. Through the political patronage of Tennessee governor Isham G. Harris, Zollicoffer was tendered the command of Tennessee troops with the rank of major general. Zollicoffer declined because his only military experience had been during the Seminole War. On July 9, 1861, he was commissioned a brigadier general and directed to travel to Knoxville and assume command of the District of East Tennessee. Zollicoffer has been heavily criticized for crossing the Cumberland River and establishing a camp at Beech Grove, Kentucky where his command was exposed to enemy attack with the path of retreat blocked by the rain-swollen river to their rear. It resulted in the battle of Mill Springs, where he lost his life.⁸

William Henry Carroll was probably born in 1810 in Nashville, Tennessee. He was the eldest son of six-time Tennessee governor William Carroll, a close friend of Andrew Jackson. William Henry Carroll's early life found him running a plantation and serving as the postmaster of Memphis. Due to his political connections, he was appointed a brigadier general in the Tennessee provisional army during the secession crisis in 1861. After Tennessee's admission into the Confederacy, Carroll used his connections to be appointed the colonel of the Thirty-seventh Tennessee Infantry. During the autumn of 1861, he was sent to East Tennessee to raise troops for the Confederate army. His appointment to brigadier general on October 26, 1861, may have been a reward for raising three regiments. Carroll suffered from the same malady as George Crittenden, insobriety.

⁸ Davis, Confederate General, VI, 174-75; Myers, The Zollie Tree; Warner, Generals in Gray, 349-50.

Colonel S. A. M. Wood of the Seventh Alabama would complain to Major General Braxton Bragg that "[Carroll] has been drunk not less than five years. He is stupid, but easily controlled. He knows nothing, and I believe I can do pretty much as I please." On January 15, 1862, Carroll's brigade would join Crittenden's forces in time to participate in the battle of Mill Springs. Like Crittenden, Carroll would be arrested by Hardee on April 1, 1862, and be charged with drunkenness, incompetence and neglect. Carroll would resign his commission on February 1, 1863, under relentless pressure.⁹

Equal in importance to understanding the leadership involved in the battle is recognizing the difficulties that Tennessee had in arming its troops. The problems encountered in this area played a major role in deciding the outcome of the battle. The mobilization of Tennessee troops to support the Confederacy revealed a serious supply problem. Since the state did not have a Federal arsenal within its borders there were not enough modern arms available to equip the recruits. Thomas Connelly writes that Tennessee's arms "consisted of about 8,000 flintlock muskets of which more than half were damaged, 185 percussion muskets, 350 badly damaged Hall's carbines and assorted other weapons." Some of the weapons had been placed in the arsenal in 1808 and last used in 1812. Connelly added that "the arsenal even lacked tools needed to convert old country rifles from flintlock arms to military percussion weapons, and five days after the military league [between Tennessee and the Confederacy] was agreed upon, only a thousand muskets in the Nashville arsenal were classified fit for use."¹⁰

⁹ Davis, Confederate General, I, 164-65; and Warner, Generals in Gray, 44-45; O.R., IV, 248-50.

¹⁰ Connelly, Army of the Heartland, 28.

Requests for arms to the Confederate government led to a shipment of only four thousand muskets, with the stipulation that they could be used only by units mustered into Confederate service, not state service. Richmond poured more salt in the wound by sending Tennessee troops in Confederate service to the Eastern Theater. The Confederate Secretary of War, Leroy Walker, suggested that Tennesseans should arm themselves with the country rifle as had their ancestors who had fought at King's Mountain.¹¹

These problems affected the two Confederate brigades that would fight at Mill Springs. Thomas H. Moore of the Twenty-fifth Tennessee Infantry Regiment, in Zollicoffer's Brigade, would comment in his journal that when the men drew flintlocks it reminded him of the Revolutionary War.¹² J.J. McMurray of the Twentieth Tennessee Infantry Regiment, also of Zollicoffer's Brigade, wrote of the jealousy felt by Tennessee troops when they first saw the well armed Fifteenth Mississippi and Sixteenth Alabama Infantry Regiments:

The Tennesseans here felt very much chagrined when we saw that the Fifteenth Mississippi were armed with Mississippi rifles with sword bayonets, and the Sixteenth Alabama with percussion cap muskets and they armed with the old antiquated flint lock muskets, that carried one large round ball and three buckshot which was but little service in wet weather."¹³

Carroll's Brigade had similar problems. As late as November 1861, half of his troops were unarmed and consequently inadequately trained. It would be safe to assume that the

¹¹ Ibid., 28-29.

¹² T.H. Moore, "Untitled Journal," Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.

¹³ W.J. McMurray, History of the Twentieth Tennessee Regiment Volunteer Infantry, CSA (Nashville: privately printed, 1904), 190-91.

readiness of his command at Mill Springs was affected by the lack of weapons available with which to train.

On the eve of the battle there were two opposing armies, each with organizational and training problems, each with its share of political patronage appointments in leadership positions. The Tennessee units, who made up the majority of the Confederate forces, were poorly armed with antiquated weapons. Federal forces were better armed, as evidenced by the Second Minnesota Infantry Regiment's trade in of Model 1842 muskets for Enfield rifles just weeks before the battle.¹⁴ Although both forces fielded approximately 4,000 men for the battle, the Northerners with their modern weaponry had a decisive advantage over their Southern enemy.¹⁵

¹⁴ O.R., VII, 75-116; The Civil War Centennial Commission, Tennesseans in the Civil War, 2 Vols. (Nashville: n.p., 1964, reprint, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), Part 1, 25-27, 139, 148, 210-212, 214-219, 225-228, 232-237, 375-380; Tate, "The Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs," 20.

¹⁵ Mill Springs Battlefield Association Newsletter, The Zollie Tree, Vol. 3, No. 3, (Summer 1996). For a list of the units participating in the battle, see the appendix.

CHAPTER III

THE BATTLE

Buell, reacting to Zollicoffer's presence in Mill Springs, sent Schoepf to Somerset to keep an eye on Zollicoffer. Schoepf was to guard against any attempt by the Confederates to cross the Cumberland River. The proximity of these opposing units led to numerous skirmishes and artillery duels. Then, in spite of being ordered not to do so, Zollicoffer made one of the most baffling moves of the war. He crossed the Cumberland River and started to fortify the northern embankment within a peninsula formed on the west by White Oak Creek, on the east by Fishing Creek and in the south by the Cumberland River. Zollicoffer crossed the majority of his units to the new camp, called Beech Grove. Not only did this move divide his forces, it also placed them in danger of being isolated and trapped by the rain-swollen river. Schoepf, who had failed to stop the crossing, found himself in an untenable position and moved his command three miles north of Somerset, Kentucky.¹

Zollicoffer's correspondence with Johnston shows that he was aware of the weaknesses of his command. He wrote of the need for entrenching tools and arms.² In an effort to assist Zollicoffer, Carroll's brigade was ordered from Knoxville, Tennessee, to Mill Springs, Kentucky, on December 10, 1861. But Carroll experienced many of the same problems as Zollicoffer. The difficulty in arming his brigade delayed Carroll's arrival at Mill Springs until January 15, 1862.³

¹ O.R., VII, 475-76.

² Ibid., 753, 766, 780.

³ R.R. Hancock, Hancock's Diary (Nashville: Brandon Printing Co, 1887), 108.

Buell's reorganization had put Thomas in command of the First Division of the Army of the Ohio. This command started to move on December 31, 1861, to challenge Zollicoffer's forces. The movement was hampered by snow and a cold, stinging rain. The weather made the roads difficult. After two weeks, Thomas made camp at Logan's Crossroads, near Somerset and about ten miles north of Zollicoffer's Camp Beech Grove. Thomas ordered Schoepf's Brigade to come from Somerset and he was joined by Carter's Brigade, which had arrived from London, Kentucky.⁴

While the Federal forces were jockeying into position, Crittenden was enroute to take field command of his forces. He joined his troops in Kentucky and assumed field command on January 3, 1862.⁵ Two days later he learned the state of his command by inspecting the troops of Zollicoffer's Brigade.⁶ Subsequent orders issued by Crittenden and Zollicoffer indicate that there were problems in the areas of arms, uniforms, field sanitation and commissary stores in addition to the task of moving the brigade back south of the rain-swollen Cumberland River.⁷ One bright spot in the situation was the arrival of the stern-wheel steamboat Noble Ellis, which Johnston had sent to Mill Springs as a supply ship from Nashville.⁸ Thomas received orders from Buell stating that it was "not sufficient to hold Zollicoffer in check, he must be captured or dispersed."⁹ Even without

⁴ Cleaves, The Rock of Chickamauga, 94-5; McKinney, Education in Violence, 123-26.

⁵ George B. Crittenden, General Order No. 6, January 3, 1862, Chapter II, Volume 280, Orders and Letters of Brigadier General Felix K. Zollicoffer's Brigade in Tennessee, August 21, 1861-January 16, 1862, War Department Collection of Confederate Records, Record Group 109, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁶ Special Order No. 30, *Ibid.*

⁷ Crittenden's General Order No. 10, Zollicoffer's General Order No. 53, Zollicoffer's General Order No. 54, Zollicoffer's General Order No. 58, and Zollicoffer's General Order No. 6, *Ibid.*

⁸ Myers, The Zollie Tree, 78.

⁹ O.R., VII, 558.

these orders Thomas was already posting his units to accomplish that mission. The Tenth Indiana Infantry, First Kentucky Cavalry and Battery C, First Ohio Light Artillery occupied a position on the Mill Springs Road. The Ninth Ohio and Second Minnesota Infantry Regiments were three-quarters of a mile west on the Robertsport Road. Pickets of infantry and cavalry were as far south as Timmy's Branch.¹⁰

Later, on January 17, 1862, Thomas instructed Schoepf to send the First and Second Tennessee Infantry Regiments (Federal) and Battery B, First Ohio Light Artillery to Logan's Crossroads. These units made a forced march over nearly impassible roads and across the rain-swollen Fishing Creek. One soldier recounted the march for a newspaper and described how the officers waited until after dark to move the men across Fishing Creek. The crossing was difficult, as the soldiers plunged "through mud knee deep towards the creek." The darkness increased their troubles, as the men fell into unseen "sloughs and mud holes." Upon arrival at the creek bank they waded out into the "half thigh deep," swiftly moving, cold water to cross its sixty yards. All through the crossing the men were subjected to the rain, "sometimes pouring down, and sometimes slackening up into a drizzle." By the time they arrived at Logan's Crossroads they were a "cold weary, wet, ugly, sullen set of men."¹¹

The Confederates were not idle either. Crittenden called a council of war on January 17 to plan an attack on the Federal forces. The Confederates surely would have wanted to attack the Federals prior to their build-up of sufficient forces to push the Confederates

¹⁰ Cleaves, The Rock of Chickamauga, 95; McKinney, Education in Violence, 127; O.R., VII, 79-82.

¹¹ St. Louis Missouri Republican, January 27, 1862.

back across the river, but, as at Rockcastle, they missed the opportunity by a day. Colonel William B. Wood of the Sixteenth Alabama Infantry recalled that Crittenden met with his commanders and reviewed the situation. They examined the intelligence that they had received concerning Thomas's movements, obtained from their scouts and civilian sources. Each attendee was polled for his opinion on whether to attack or to remain in the fortifications and await the enemy's attack. Wood recalled that, with the exception of Zollicoffer (who abstained) and himself, who was against the attack, all the commanders favored an attack. The plans were made and the orders passed out. After the council had ended, Wood and Zollicoffer rode back to their quarters together. They discussed "Crittenden's condition, and his unfitness to go into a fight." Zollicoffer doubted "the propriety of the movement" and thought it was contrary to Johnston's intent.¹²

A note accompanying this account states the opinion of J.W. Harris, who later would be a colonel of the Sixteenth Alabama, that Zollicoffer was hesitant due "solely to his knowledge of General Crittenden's condition, and that Brigadier General Carroll was seldom in any better plight."¹³ They were referring, of course, to Crittenden's and Carroll's bouts with the bottle. In W.J. Worsham's account, on the other hand, it was Zollicoffer and Colonel Cummings who opposed the advance and attack.¹⁴

Once the orders to attack had been issued, we have a glimpse of the common soldiers' actions prior to the attack. First Sergeant T. H. Moore wrote that on January 18 the men

¹² James Edmonds Saunders, Early Settlers of Alabama (New Orleans: L. Graham and Son, 1899), 186.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ W.J. Worsham, The Old Nineteenth Tennessee Regiment C.S.A. (Knoxville: n.p., 1902), 20.

prepared for battle by drawing and cooking three days' worth of rations. They were issued ammunition and prepared their gear for the upcoming march that was to begin at midnight. At the appointed time, the soldiers were ready, carrying their haversacks and blanket rolls, to travel the rain-soaked roads.¹⁵

The Confederate troops left their entrenchments at Beech Grove at midnight, January 18 and marched against the enemy. Captain Bledsoe's and Captain Saunders's independent cavalry companies formed a vanguard. They were followed by Zollicoffer's Brigade in this order: Fifteenth Mississippi Infantry Regiment, Rutledge's Battery (two twelve pound howitzers and four rifled guns), Nineteenth Tennessee Infantry Regiment, Twentieth Tennessee Infantry Regiment, and Twenty-fifth Tennessee Infantry Regiment. Carroll's Brigade followed in this order: Seventeenth Tennessee Infantry Regiment, Twenty-eighth Tennessee Infantry Regiment, Twenty-ninth Tennessee Infantry Regiment, and two guns of Captain McClung's Battery, with the Sixteenth Alabama Infantry Regiment as a reserve. Lieutenant Colonels Branner's and McClellan's cavalry battalions guarded the army's flanks and rear.¹⁶

A cold rain fell on the Confederates just as it had on the Federals. The thinly-clad Confederates were frozen to the bone, but on they toiled over the rough and cloying mud of the road saturated with the freezing rain of past weeks. They made poor progress in the darkness and were further hampered by the rain and mud. First Sergeant Moore complained: "on we went through the muc [sic] which was from one to 18 inches deep.

¹⁵ Moore, "Journal."

¹⁶ O.R., VII, 106; Saunders, Early Settlers of Alabama, 187; and Worsham, The Nineteenth Tennessee, 21.

Still it rained and on we pressed.”¹⁷ General Carroll remembered that “the night was dark and gloomy; a cold rain was constantly descending, rendering the march extremely difficult and unpleasant.”¹⁸ They had taken six hours to cover eight miles and the column was stretched out over three miles.¹⁹

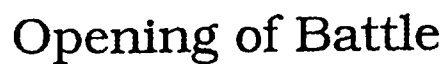
Contact between Thomas’s pickets of the Tenth Indiana Infantry and First Kentucky Cavalry and the leading elements of Crittenden’s force was made at approximately six o’clock on Sunday morning, January 19 (fig. 3). Eastham Tarrant wrote, in his regimental history of the First Kentucky Cavalry, that Sergeant George D. Thrasher commanded a strong advanced picket on the Mill Springs road. As had happened the day before, Confederate cavalry came upon them. The Union pickets fired upon the rebels after they had been challenged and refused to halt. The pickets were unaware that the rebels were attacking in force and they put up a stiff resistance. Wolford, awakened by the sound of musketry, ordered Lieutenant Jonathan Miller and Company H to reinforce the pickets. Miller’s troops were ambushed by a Confederate regiment just as they arrived on the scene and Miller was wounded. Sergeant J.E. Chilton carried his body into a ravine to protect it from further harm. Following the battle, Company H conducted a search only to find that the lieutenant had bled to death during the battle.²⁰

¹⁷ Moore “Journal.”

¹⁸ *O.R.*, VII, 111.

¹⁹ Cleaves, *The Rock of Chickamauga*, 95-7; Connelly, *Army of the Heartland*, 97; Richard C. Neul, “The North’s First Victory,” *America’s Civil War*, Vol. 6, No. 4, (September 1993), 41; *O.R.*, VII, 111.

²⁰ Tarrant, *Wild Riders*, 57-8; Roger Tate, “The Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs,” 52.



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The dark, overcast morning and the drenching rain limited visibility and caused difficulty in determining friend from foe. Compounding the problem was the fact that many Southerners wore blue uniforms. In an attempt to prevent friendly fire incidents, Crittenden had developed a password – “Kentucky.” Unfortunately the choice of this word would cost several soldiers their lives, as soon would become clear.²¹

As the Confederate forces continued to pressure the Federal pickets, the latter fell back and regrouped at a log house on the west side of the road and made a temporary stand, sending a brisk fire into the Confederate column. Seeing the line of armed men and being informed that they were part of Colonel Battle’s Twentieth Tennessee Infantry, Colonel Walthall of the Fifteenth Mississippi made his unit lie down in defilade and approached the skirmishers at the log house. He called out: “What troops are those?” “Kentucky” came the response. He called again: “Who are you?” and received the same reply. Still having some doubt, Walthall returned for his colors and moved toward the Federal line. Once more he asked the same question and received the same reply. He unfurled the colors and was greeted with a volley of Federal fire. Walthall turned to issue an order and saw that he had been followed by Lieutenant Harrington, who was now lying dead, pierced by “more than twenty balls.” The colors were riddled with bullet holes and the staff damaged, but miraculously Walthall was unscathed. The Mississippians attacked and drove the bluecoats from their covered position after a fierce struggle.²²

The Fifteenth Mississippi and the Twentieth Tennessee continued the attack on the east side of the road. They drove the Federal forces back with a determined charge.

²¹ Palumbo, The Dependable General, 87; Saunders, Early Settlers of Alabama, 187.

²² Saunders, Early Settlers of Alabama, 187.

The Confederate forces overran the camp of the First Kentucky Cavalry and within an hour fought their way into Logan's cornfield and to the edge of the camp of the Tenth Indiana Infantry. The fierce fighting of the dismounted First Kentucky Cavalry and the Tenth Indiana Infantry would eventually drive back the Fifteenth Mississippi and Twentieth Tennessee. The fiercest part of the battle was yet to come, as the Confederate troops on the right flank sought protection in a ravine to the west of the road. Federal forces moved up to a fence approximately two hundred yards distant. Frustrated by the Confederates, Fry (Fourth Kentucky) climbed up on the fence, hurled some verbal insults and then invited the rebels to stand up, come forward and fight like men. Fry then launched a counterattack, pushing the Confederates back across Logan's field, over a branch, and up the hillside. The Tenth Indiana followed and took cover behind a fence. The two sides exchanged heavy rifle fire.²³

Cumming's Nineteenth Tennessee moved up on the west side of the road and then straddled it to form up on the left flank of the Fifteenth Mississippi. About this time, the Nineteenth Tennessee began exchanging fire with the Fourth Kentucky Infantry. The Twenty-fifth Tennessee then made its appearance on the battle field. Moore remembered the confusing series of turning movements, conducted under enemy fire, that brought the unit into the battle. The men of the Twenty-fifth dropped their haversacks and blanket rolls and waited to reform as tired soldiers were still joining their lines from the march. Once reformed they marched up to the enemy's line and fired a volley. The Federal line

²³ Judson W. Bishop. "The Mill Springs Campaign," in Glimpses of Our Nation's Struggle (St. Paul Book and Stationary Co., 1890), 66; McMurray, The Twentieth Tennessee, 200-201; James B. Shaw, History of the Tenth Indiana Volunteer Infantry (Lafayette: n.p., 1912) 139; Tarrant, Wild Riders, 58; Tate, "The Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs," 52; Worsham, The Nineteenth Tennessee, 22.

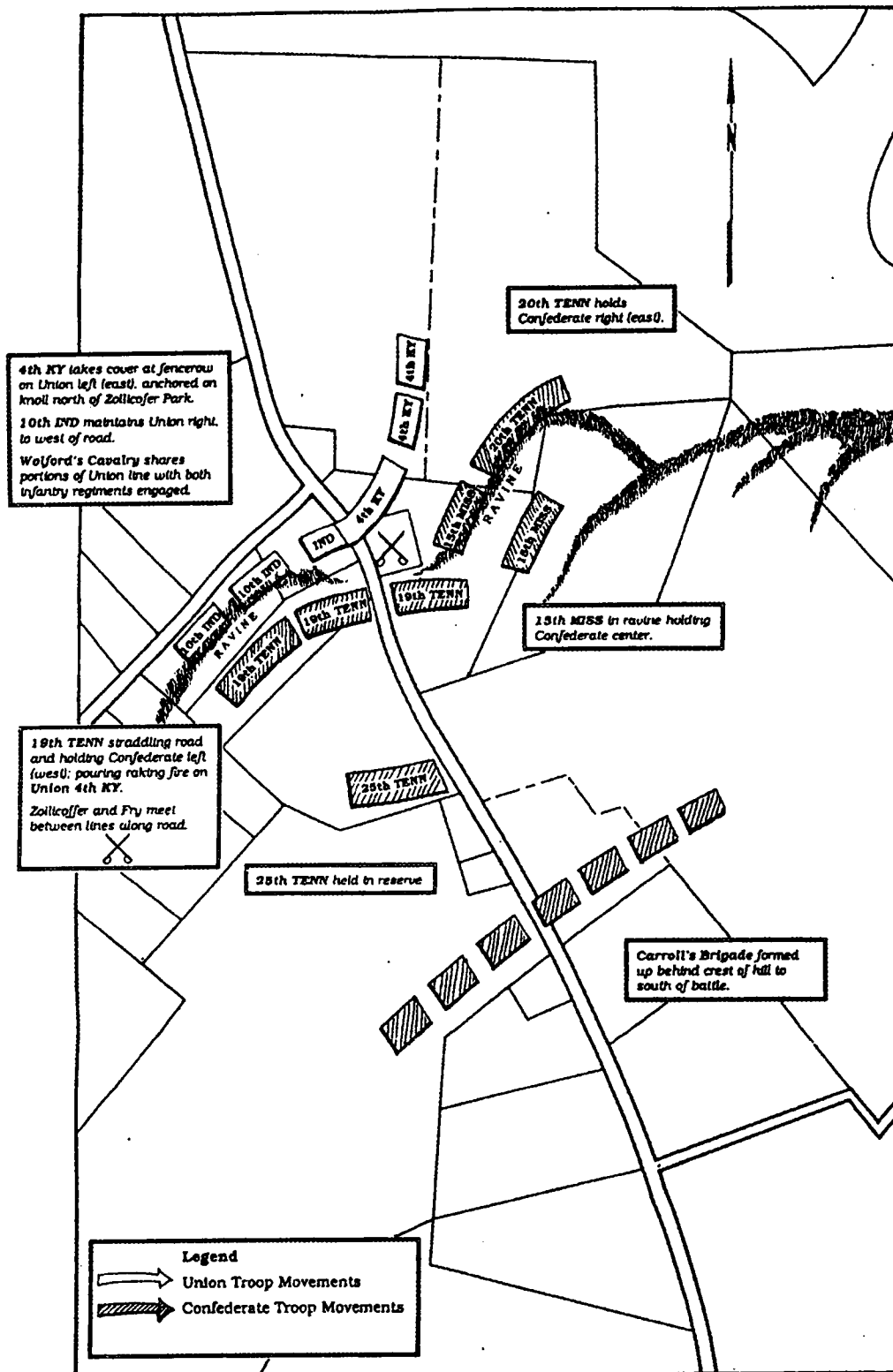
broke and moved back. Zollicoffer approached the Twenty-fifth's commander, Colonel Stanton, and ordered him to fall back. Zollicoffer mistakenly believed that the Twenty-fifth had fired into the Fifteenth Mississippi.²⁴

In the darkness of the morning, and with the similarity of the uniforms, Zollicoffer became convinced that the regiment to his front (Fourth Kentucky Infantry) was Confederate. He ordered the men of the Nineteenth Tennessee to stop firing, as they were firing on their own troops. The ensuing lull in the action is reported to have occurred about 7:00 A.M. Worsham wrote: "Unfortunately, Gen. Zollicoffer, owing to the darkness of the morning, mistook the 4th Kentucky regiment as one of his own and passing through our regiment he rode up to Colonel Fry."²⁵

Fry recounted that he rode from the right flank of the Fourth Kentucky down to a fence that had provided the regiment cover during the fighting. He looked for the enemy and, not seeing any, turned his horse to return to his own lines. He saw an officer mounted on a white horse approach him. The officer, Zollicoffer, was wearing a long white overcoat that covered all of his uniform except his trousers. The trousers were of the same blue color that the Federal officers wore. This led Fry to believe that Zollicoffer was a Federal officer. Zollicoffer approached Fry and said: "We must not shoot our own men." The two officers were so close that their knees were touching. Fry responded: "Of course not, I would not do so intentionally." Zollicoffer pointed out his position and said: "Those are our men." Fry, still convinced that Zollicoffer was a Federal officer, returned

²⁴ Moore, "Journal".

²⁵ Worsham, Nineteenth Infantry, 22.



Fall of Zollicoffer

Figure 4

to his regiment and wheeled around in time to see a Confederate officer with his pistol aimed at Fry. The pistol fired and the ball struck Fry's horse. Fry drew his Colt revolver to return the fire, but the Confederate had gone behind a tree. Seeking a new target, Fry shot Zollicoffer, who he was now convinced was a Confederate officer who had tried to lure him to his death (fig. 4).²⁶

Worsham wrote that it was Major Fogg of Zollicoffer's staff who fired at Fry, hitting his horse. Immediately following the pistol shots a volley of rifle fire came from the Fourth Kentucky, hitting Zollicoffer and mortally wounding Major Fogg. The Nineteenth Tennessee received a galling fire from the Fourth Kentucky and was forced to fall back in some disorder. The Federal forces pressed forward, capturing the body of Zollicoffer.²⁷

Crittenden then placed Zollicoffer's Brigade under the command of Colonel D. H. Cummings of the Nineteenth Tennessee. The tide had started to turn against the Confederates as more of the Federal forces entered the battle.²⁸

The Twenty-fifth Tennessee came to the aid of the Nineteenth Tennessee (fig. 5). The Federal forces also received reinforcements as the Ninth Ohio Infantry moved up on the Federal right flank. This added support enabled the Tenth Indiana and the Fourth Kentucky to drive the Nineteenth and Twenty-fifth Tennessee back some distance. Colonel Stanton, commander of the Twenty-fifth Tennessee, fell severely wounded. The Twenty-eighth Tennessee moved up to bolster the Nineteenth and Twenty-fifth Tennessee and all three units charged the Federal forces, forcing them back a short distance. These

²⁶ W.H. Perrin, J.H. Battle, and G.C. Kniffin, Kentucky: A History of the State (Louisville and Chicago: Battery, 1887), 393.

²⁷ Worsham, Nineteenth Tennessee, 22-23.

²⁸ O.R., VII, 107.

Confederate forces on the west side of the road then took shelter behind an old fence and kept up a heavy fire.²⁹

The Confederate right flank made another determined charge, almost flanking the Fourth Kentucky Infantry. The Second Minnesota Infantry was sent in to halt the Confederate advance. Federal and Confederate forces ended up on opposite sides of a split rail fence and fought it out at close quarters. Captain Judson Bishop, a company commander in the Second Minnesota Infantry, wrote that the Second formed a new line and used the road as a guide to advance through the thick underbrush in the woods. The rain had stopped, but the air was filled with mist and smoke. The visibility was so bad that a man could hardly be seen a musket's length away. Stumbling upon a fence, with an open field to its front, the Second could dimly see a line formed by the enemy about twenty rods distant. Firing at once the men of the Second then watched as the enemy line disappeared. Unknowingly, they had fired at the second line of the Twentieth Tennessee. The first line of that unit was directly under the Second's rifles on the other side of the fence. Both units were surprised by the chance encounter.³⁰

The fighting along this fence was hellish. Colonel Van Cleve, of the Second Minnesota Infantry would write his wife: "We were so close on them that one of the men had his beard and whiskers singed by the fire of one of the muskets . . . another caught hold of one of their muskets and jerked it through the fence; two stood and fired at each other,

²⁹ McMurray, The Twentieth Tennessee, 202; Myers, The Zollie Tree, 97-99; Worsham, The Nineteenth Tennessee, 23.

³⁰ Bishop, "The Mill Springs Campaign," 66-67.

their muskets crossing; both fell dead.”³¹ Private James Cooper of the Twentieth Tennessee wrote of fighting the enemy with “only a fence between us.”³²

About 9:00 A.M., Thomas committed the Ninth Ohio Infantry (fig. 6).³³ About an hour earlier he had started to move the Ninth Ohio into a position to outflank the Confederate left, particularly Carroll’s brigade. The Ninth was ordered to make a bayonet charge on the Confederate flank. Because some of the Confederate force directly faced the Ninth, four of its companies had difficulty in completing the wheeling maneuver. The regiment proceeded at the double and the acting regimental commander, Major Gustav Kammerling, yelled: “Macht die Augen zu, Jungens, wenn es Euch zu heiss wird, Vorwaerts! [Close your eyes, boys, if it gets too hot for you, Charge!]”³⁴ The left flank of the Confederate line started to disintegrate as the Twenty-fifth and Nineteenth Tennessee fell back in disorder. The Sixteenth Alabama and the Twenty-ninth Tennessee were brought over to cover the retreat. The men of the Twenty-ninth sent a raking fire into the flank of the Ninth Ohio. They were unable to keep up their fire when their colonel, Samuel Powel, was seriously wounded and was carried from the field. Some confused soldiers of the Twenty-ninth Tennessee, seeing their colonel borne off the field,

³¹ St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat, January 29, 1862.

³² MSBA, The Zollie Tree, Vol. 3, No. 3, (Summer 1996).

³³ The Ninth Ohio Infantry Regiment, “Die Neuner,” was composed of mostly foreign born, ethnic Germans from Cincinnati’s Over the Rhine quarter. Two thousand men answered the call to fill one hundred slots and those not selected wept because they were not chosen. The unit was German-speaking, organized and administered in a German manner. It mustered out of service in June, 1864. See Frederic Trautmann’s introduction in his translation of Constantine Grebner’s Die Neuner titled We Were the Ninth: A History of the Ninth Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry, April 17, 1861, to June 7, 1864, (Kent and London: The Kent State University Press, 1987), xi-xiv.

³⁴ Constantine Grebner, Die Neuner (Cincinnati: Rosenthal & Co, 1897), 68.

retreated in great disorder, leaving only a small segment under Major Horace Rice to continue firing into the flank of the Ninth Ohio.³⁵

First Sergeant T.H. Moore recounted the panic that gripped the Confederate forces. Moore helped a wounded officer off the field, but was forced to abandon him as the enemy neared. Moore ran off and left his gun. He tried to rejoin his regiment, which was one hundred yards away. He described the exhausting run up a hill, with the balls passing all around, until he found cover behind a straw pile and rested. Moore picked up another abandoned weapon and ran after his regiment, which had since moved. He continued to run until he reached the Confederate entrenchments, pausing only for a drink of water from a stream.³⁶

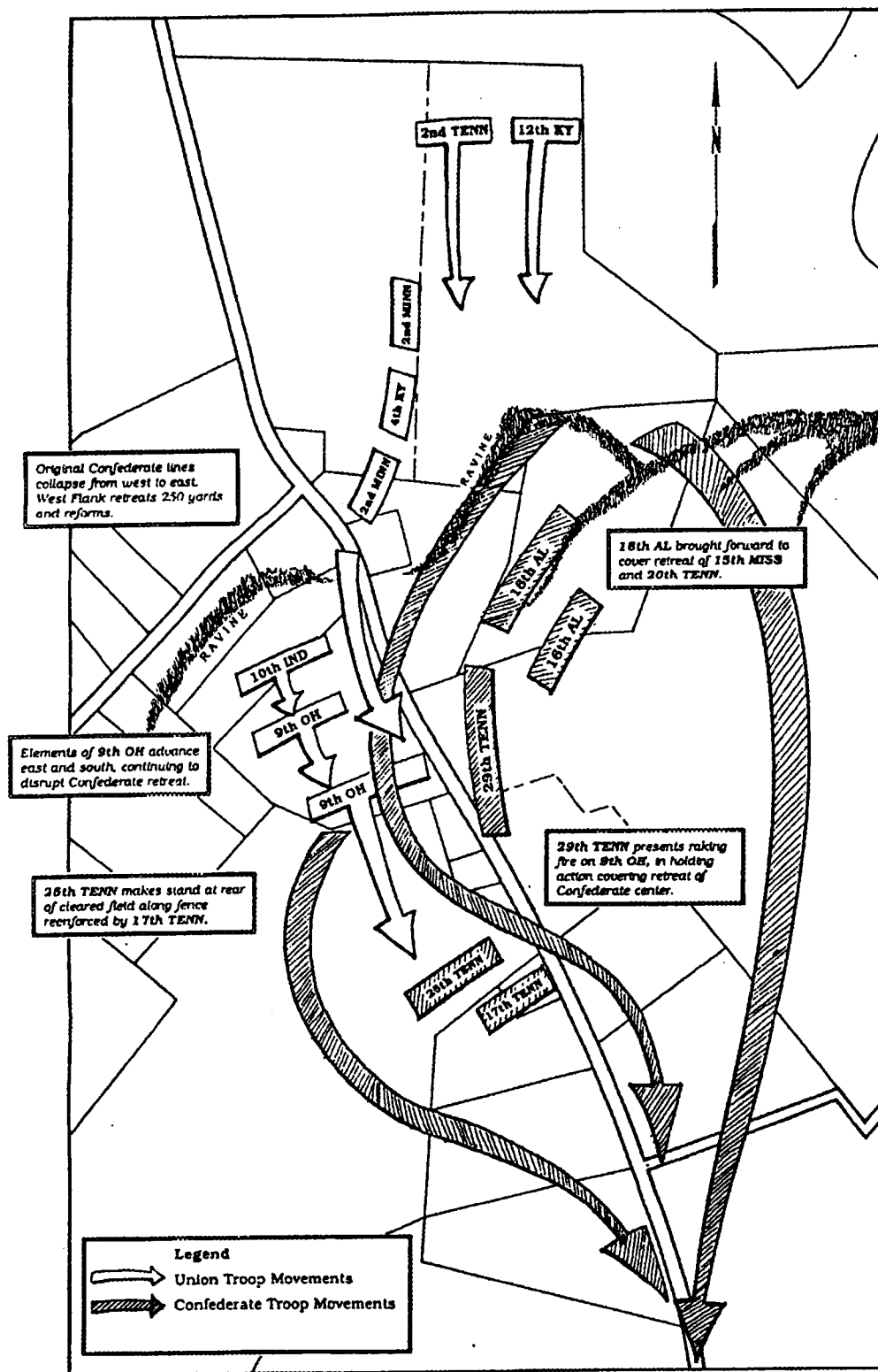
The Confederate right flank was in an equally bad situation. Carter's Twelfth Brigade, composed of the Federal First and Second Tennessee Infantry and the Twelfth Kentucky Infantry, flanked the Fifteenth Mississippi and Twentieth Tennessee, making their position untenable. Federal artillery poured shot into those hard fighting Confederate units and forced them to fall back.³⁷

About the same time that the Ninth Ohio began its charge, the Second Minnesota assaulted the Confederate center. Despite a desperate attempt by the Confederates to form up on a hill to cover their retreat, the situation ended in a rout (fig. 7). The Confederates fled back to their entrenchments at Beech Grove. The Confederate cavalry provided a screen to keep the Federal forces from pursuing too closely. The demoralized

³⁵ O.R., VII, 115-116.

³⁶ Moore, "Journal."

³⁷ Myers, The Zollie Tree, 100.



Final Rout

Figure 7

Confederates reached their camp at about 3:00 P.M. First Sergeant Moore remarked: "We had just got our position when the enemy come in sight in a line about four mile long."³⁸ The Federal advance was halted by Confederate artillery. Once the Federal artillery had been set up, an artillery duel ensued and lasted into the night. During the night Crittenden ordered the evacuation of Beech Grove. First Sergeant Moore recounted that it was just after dark that the orders came down to evacuate but he was kept uninformed until 2:00 A.M. The Noble Ellis was put to work ferrying the Confederate troops across the river. The Confederates were forced to leave behind a tremendous amount of material. Thomas would list in his report some of the items captured:

Twelve pieces of artillery, with their caissons packed with ammunition; one battery wagon and two forges; a large amount of ammunition; a large number of small-arms, mostly the old flint-lock muskets, 150-160 wagons, and upwards of 1,000 horses and mules; a large amount of commissary stores, intrenching tools, and camp and garrison equipage.³⁹

The Federal forces made extensive arrangements for bombarding the Confederate positions. After lobbing some shells in a futile effort to hit the Noble Ellis, the Federals watched as the Confederates set her afire. With the cessation of artillery fire, the Federal infantry marched in several columns into the Confederate camp. When the Stars and Stripes were hoisted over the Confederate camp, the whole force came to a halt and the band played "The Star Spangled Banner."⁴⁰ The Federal victory was complete.

At the end of every battle there is the tallying up of the losses incurred. In the case of Mill Springs the Federal loss was 40 killed, 207 wounded, and 15 missing, for a total of

³⁸ Moore, "Journal."

³⁹ O.R., VII, 81.

⁴⁰ Moore, Journal, January 20-25, 1862.

262.⁴¹ The Confederate loss was 125 killed, 309 wounded, and 99 missing, a total of 533.⁴²

The Confederate units were in a varied state of disruption. Moore recounted that the Twenty-fifth Tennessee stayed together and marched back into Tennessee. Other units disintegrated and were reformed as soldiers straggled back in small groups.⁴³ Thomas had decisively defeated the right flank of General A.S. Johnston's line, leaving East Tennessee open for an invasion.

⁴¹ O.R., VII, 82; Neul, "The North's First Victory," 43; Tate, "The Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs," 20; Geoffrey R. Walden, "Federal Casualties, Battle of Mill Springs," The Zollie Tree, Vol. 2, No. 4, (Autumn 1995).

⁴² O.R., VII, 108; Neul, "The North's First Victory," 43; Tate, "The Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs," 20; and Geoffrey R. Walden, "Confederate Casualties, Battle of Mill Springs," The Zollie Tree, Vol. 3, No. 1, (Winter 1996).

⁴³ Moore, "Journal;" McMurray, The Twentieth Tennessee, 202; Myers, The Zollie Tree, 110; Worsham, The Nineteenth Tennessee, 29-30.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

A correspondent of the Cincinnati Commercial walked about the battlefield that afternoon and described the horrors that he found. He noted especially the large number of rebel dead with head wounds. At one point he found five dead rebels behind a log, all shot in the head. As he continued to wander about the battlefield the correspondent observed more of the human carnage. "One was shot directly in the eye and the brain was oozing from the wound," he wrote, and elsewhere he saw a fallen soldier with "a ball directly through the center of the head at the base of the brain."¹

This chapter will examine several elements of the battle to give meaning to the human wreckage that is the aftermath of battle. These elements are leadership, training, equipment, weather, and morale.

An analysis of the background of the battlefield commanders (who were discussed in Chapter II) shows that both armies had their share of professionally trained officers and of less reliable officers who achieved their position through political patronage. Although each army numbered approximately 4,000 men at the battle, there were twice as many brigade commanders in the Federal army as there were in the Confederate army. This could mean that the Federal commanders had more control over their subordinates than did their Confederate counterparts. The Federal brigade commanders, having fewer units to control, would also have had fewer distractions, providing an environment more conducive to making sound leadership decisions.

¹St. Louis Missouri Republican, January 29, 1862.

Alcohol is another important facet of the leadership issue. Alcohol consumption was a problem for both sides in the war. The most noted individual to be associated with drinking is Grant. His detractors would point out this flaw, leading Lincoln reportedly to ask if anyone knew his brand of drink, "for if it made fighting generals like Grant I should like to get some of it for distribution" to his other generals. There are instances during the war where officers on both sides were impaired by alcohol during battle. Union Brigadier General Charles Devens, Jr., was inebriated during the battle of Chancellorsville, after taking brandy to ease the pain from a riding injury. The South had the notoriously hard-drinking, hard-fighting Lieutenant General Benjamin Franklin Cheatham, whose actions early in the battle of Stones River were lackluster due to the effects of alcohol. Cheatham barely avoided the purge that caught Crittenden and Carroll. At Mill Springs there is no evidence of alcohol abuse among the Federal officers. There is however a plethora of evidence that this was a problem for two out of the three Confederate generals, and that they were drunk during the planning and conduct of the battle.²

A remarkable point is the lack of any first-hand accounts of Crittenden's actions and whereabouts during the battle, other than his after-action report contained in the Official Records. This makes it difficult to analyze what leadership he brought to the battle. There is evidence to suggest that he was too incapacitated from alcohol to

² Thomas P. Lowry, "Twenty-Seven Kinds of Drunk," Blue and Gray Magazine, Vol. XII, No. 4, (April 1995), 24-28; Stephen W. Sears, Chancellorsville, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996), 263-64; Christopher Losson, Tennessee's Forgotten Warriors: Frank Cheatham and His Confederate Division, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 38, 55, 89-91, 93, 95-96, 130, 140, 249; Horn, Army of Tennessee, 157-158; Connelly, Army of the Heartland, 146.

have been effective during the battle.³ Clearly his attempt to surprise the Federals with a night attack failed. Reaching the pickets at six in the morning, about the time of reveille for the enemy, why did he not cancel the attack knowing that surprise had been lost? The loss of surprise must have been evident because of the poor progress his force was making in the bad weather. Crittenden also failed to allow his strung-out force to close up before initiating battle and he failed to mass for the attack, the direct result being that he was forced to commit his forces piecemeal into the battle. His battle plan included detailed marching instructions but no orders for actions upon enemy contact. The absence of a formulated battle plan can explain why the Union forces were able to seize the initiative from the rebels.

Thomas also showed some poor leadership. Knowing how close he was to the enemy, he should have had his soldiers dig entrenchments for protection. His late arrival on the battlefield has led some historians to speculate that he was delayed because he was trying to fit into a new tailored uniform that was too tight for him.⁴ Thomas was forced to deploy his forces piecemeal, as they arrived at the battlefield from their encampments in the area. He followed the era's established tactics of trying to extend his flanks until he outflanked his opponent. He was able to accomplish this on both flanks. This can be seen in the charge of the Ninth Ohio Infantry on the

³ New York Herald, February 5, 1862; Rebecca Hunt Moulder, "Remorse and Repentance: The Death of General Felix K. Zollicoffer," Tennessee Historical Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 2, (Summer 1978), 173.

⁴ R. Gerald McMurtry, "Zollicoffer and the Battle of Mill Springs," The Filson Club History Quarterly, Vol. 29, No. 4, (October 1955), 308; Myers, The Zollie Tree, 98; Tate, "The Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs," 56.

Confederate left flank, and the raking artillery fire by Carter's Twelfth Brigade on the Confederate right flank.

An appropriate response to the Federal charge by the Ninth Ohio would have been to have the Confederate cavalry charge the Ninth's exposed flank after the Ninth had wheeled. Crittenden claimed that he never had the opportunity to use his cavalry or artillery effectively because of the terrain. Of the six artillery pieces that he brought with him, only two of Rutledge's Battery were deployed in the road, and those were soon retired.⁵ Analysis of the terrain seems to refute Crittenden's claim. The terrain is rolling, not excessively hilly, and with a mixture of woods and farmers' fields. Nor can Crittenden be excused for not having information on the terrain. His cavalry had been reconnoitering the area until the day before the battle. And it was he who chose the site for the attack.

Furthermore, both sides were evenly matched in terms of training. The Federal and Confederate forces involved in the battle were volunteer units. Thomas was able to use the Eighteenth U.S. Infantry (i.e., regular) only after the Confederates had retreated to their entrenchments at Beech Grove. Carroll complained that his forces did not have sufficient time to train, a legitimate point. His arrival at Mill Springs was delayed until his forces could be armed. As close to the battle as the first week in December, his brigade had only three hundred weapons.⁶ This obviously limited the brigade's ability to conduct marksmanship training and bayonet drills. This problem was not limited to the Confederates. The First Kentucky Cavalry was thrust into

⁵ O.R., VII, 107.

⁶ Ibid., 764-6.

operations at Rockcastle without sufficient training. The troopers literally had to learn in the saddle. The Second Minnesota received its new weapons only a few weeks before the battle and had scant time to become familiar with them.⁷

Next to leadership, the factor that contributed most to the Confederate defeat at Mill Springs was the Confederates' weapons. The Confederate forces were poorly armed. A newspaper account states: "You would be surprised to see some of their arms--squirrel rifles, shot guns, smooth bore flint lock muskets, Mississippi rifles, and old flint lock horse pistols."⁸ The use of archaic arms proved to be the undoing of the Confederates. In spite of poor leadership, they would have had a chance to defeat the Federals had they had better weapons. Their weapon problems were compounded by the poor weather. The driving rain dampened the powder in the flashpans and when the flint struck a spark it would fail to ignite the powder train which in turn was supposed to ignite the propellant charge. The great number of misfires is mentioned in almost all the Confederate accounts of the battle. Crittenden believed that one-fifth of his force was unable to engage the enemy effectively because of misfires.⁹ Carroll would estimate that half of his "old flint-lock muskets and country rifles" would not fire at all.¹⁰ Given the Confederates' weaker firepower, it can be argued that they were in a sense outnumbered. If the Confederate force of four thousand is reduced by one-fifth, it would appear that Crittenden had only 3,200 effective men engaged against an enemy of four thousand. The rule of thumb for carrying out successful

⁷ Tarrant, Wild Riders, 15.

⁸ St. Louis Missouri Republican, January 29, 1862.

⁹ O.R., VII, 104-10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 114.

offensive operations is to outnumber the enemy three to one. In this case the Confederates did not even have parity.

The frustration of the Confederate soldiers is manifested in what W.J. Worsham of the Nineteenth Tennessee witnessed on the field: "Many of the men had the old flintlock guns which were, in this rain, utterly useless. The author saw two or three of the boys break their guns over the fence, after several attempts to fire them."¹¹ This comment was echoed by Crittenden, who in his after-action report mentioned the flintlocks and muskets that became unserviceable because of the rain.¹² This meant that the Federal forces had the technological advantage of functioning percussion ignition systems in the rain, giving them the edge in firepower. Add to this the advantage of range and stabilized trajectory offered by the rifling of their weapons, and the Federals had a force multiplier that would be hard for the Confederates to overcome. The correspondent quoted earlier mentioned the numbers of Confederate dead shot in the head. This is consistent with good marksmanship and the use of a high-quality rifle. The only way the Confederates could have overcome this advantage would have been to use their cavalry, who were armed with Colt revolvers. This would have been extremely risky for the cavalry, unless they had closed sufficiently with the Federal infantry to nullify the range advantage of their rifles, or unless the Federals were suppressed by artillery fire.

Weather had a tremendous effect on both armies. The effect of the rain on the Confederates' weaponry and on their element of surprise have already been discussed.

¹¹ Worsham, Nineteenth Tennessee, 22.

¹² O.R., VII, 104-10.

The normal road-march speed is two and a half miles an hour. Thus, it should have taken the Confederates a little over three hours to reach the Federal pickets and, allowing another hour for the force to close up to mass for the attack, the attack should have begun at about four-thirty in the morning. This is an ideal time, for it is when the guards are most tired and the early morning hints of light favor the attacker. This would not be the case for the Confederates, who had to trudge their way through the cloying, clayish mud of the road. Their weariness would increase with each step. Add to that the driving, cold rain on an ill-clad soldier whose uniform or civilian clothes were made of cotton or wool and absorbed the water. This increased the weight the soldier had to carry. Ultimately the soldier burned up more calories to keep himself warm in the cold of a January night. These were all factors that would cause the Confederate soldier to be fatigued before engaging in battle. But the problem did not end there, for he would have to go through the mental anguish of participating in the offense, being exposed to fire while trying to close with the enemy to defeat him. Again the advantage in this situation would go to the Federals, who had had some sleep and were decently equipped for the weather.

All the factors discussed above had a bearing on the morale of the forces involved in this battle. The Federal forces, after having been initially surprised, would have received some uplift with the constant stream of new arrivals onto the battlefield. Add to this the effectiveness of their infantry weapons and the use of their artillery, particularly Captain Wetmore's Battery of two howitzers and two Parrott guns that

were able to rack the Confederate right wing with enfilading fire.¹³ Devastating fire helped stall the Confederate attack and allowed Thomas to seize the initiative and counterattack. The Confederates experienced the reverse. The battle started out poorly for them and quickly got worse. The disruption of their timetable, which cost them the advantage of surprise, along with their being unable to mass properly for the attack and the unreliability of their weapons, made it a disappointing day for them. What started off badly only got worse when their charismatic general, Zollicoffer, was killed in front of them. With their flanks turned, effective command and control lost by their unit commanders and armed with unreliable weapons, it is not hard to understand why Confederate soldiers fled the battlefield yelling “betrayed!”¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 96-98.

¹⁴ Neul, “North’s First Victory,” 42.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The question that this thesis seeks to answer is: "What is the significance of the battle of Mill Springs?" The circumstances leading up to the battle suggest that there was a two-fold reason why it was fought. The first half of the answer centers on the defense of Tennessee. The terrain dictated that the most efficient defense of East Tennessee would be based on troops deployed in eastern Kentucky. The early movements of the commander of the District of East Tennessee indicate that he disposed his forces to cover the avenues of approach into that area. The strategic situation became more complex after the neutrality of Kentucky had been violated. The grand strategy of the Confederate government seems to have shifted from the defense of Tennessee to persuading the Kentucky people to secede and controlling as much of Kentucky as possible. Thus Zollicoffer's forces changed from defensive to offensive operations in eastern Kentucky. Examples are the skirmish at Barboursville, the raid on the Goose Creek Salt Works, and the reconnaissance in force of the Federal position in the Rockcastle hills.

In retrospect it is hard to understand why the Confederates in the Western Theater would attempt offensive operations while they were having severe problems arming and maintaining their forces. Normally the weaker force takes up the defense until it can whittle away the enemy to the point where it can begin to conduct its own offensive operations. Rawley provides some of the answer when he writes about the significance for Federal forces of retaining the border states to prevent the total

collapse of the Union. Rawley's thesis provides a solid rationale for the Federal forces' operating in Kentucky. But it does not seem to answer the question about Confederate operations in that state. If the Confederacy had plans for occupying Kentucky, it would seem that Johnston would have exercised more control over operations in that state. Instead we find that Zollicoffer was almost completely autonomous. The lack of effective coordination of forces within the Confederate departments would plague the Western Theater for much of the war.¹

The autonomy that Zollicoffer exercised in eastern Kentucky is illustrated by his disregarding Johnston's orders and moving his force north of the Cumberland River to the camp at Beech Grove. This was not a sound military decision, and it has led historians to place the blame for the defeat of Confederate forces on Zollicoffer's shoulders. The only explanation for the move would be to allow Zollicoffer's Brigade to strike Federal forces before they had the opportunity to mass. That window of opportunity did exist for a short time before the battle. Though Zollicoffer's move across the river was a great risk, he has been criticized too harshly for it. Was that move much different from the one General Robert E. Lee made when he deployed his units at Sharpsburg with the Potomac River at his rear, leading to the battle of Antietam?

The evidence in this study indicates that the blame for the Confederate defeat does not rest on Zollicoffer's head, but on Crittenden's. Crittenden had been in overall command for two weeks before the battle. He was directed to bring his forces back

¹ Woodworth, Jefferson Davis and His Generals, 61-70, 305-16.

across the river, but he procrastinated. The evidence recorded by W.B. Wood and W.J. Worsham indicated that at the council of war on January 17, 1862, Zollicoffer opposed the plan to attack the enemy at Mill Springs. Thus, the onus of defeat should be assigned to Crittenden.

Another question that this study posed is whether the Confederate forces were routed at the battle. The simple answer is yes. The Confederate forces were completely disrupted, but this did not occur as early in the battle as most historians or newspaper correspondents have stated. The question of why the Confederates retreated in a panic is harder to determine. Clearly they were fatigued from their efforts during the night to reach the battlefield. They must have experienced a deep sense of frustration when their weapons malfunctioned. Then they no doubt suffered a severe psychological blow when the popular Zollicoffer fell within their view. Research into the pension files and the veteran's questionnaires shows that many of the men who either applied for a pension or answered the questionnaires associated the battle of Mill Springs with the death of Zollicoffer in their responses. The pension application of James E. Gosnell, a veteran of the Twenty-ninth Tennessee, contains an affidavit stating he "was in the battle of Fishing Creek when General Zollicoffer [sic] was killed."² William K. Cox, also a veteran of the Twenty-ninth Tennessee, remarked in the Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaire that his unit went: "back to Fishing Creek where Gen. Zollicoffer [sic] was killed."³ These are only two

² Affidavit of James E. Gosnell, May 2, 1902, Confederate Pension File 2101, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

³ Gustavus W. Dyer and John T. Moore, compilers, The Tennessee Civil War Questionnaires, 5 Volumes (Easley: Southern Historical Press, 1985), II, 581.

examples of the many Confederate veterans' accounts that link the death of Zollicoffer to the battle. There does not appear to be a similar linkage with the death of other commanders at other battles in the Western Theater (e.g., Brigadier General Preston Smith's death at Chickamauga). It is clear from this evidence that Zollicoffer was loved and respected by his men and that his death was a severe blow to them.⁴

After the battle, when the newspapermen were collecting information they tied the Confederate retreat to the death of Zollicoffer and concluded it was a rout, based on the equipment strewn on the road. But the battle actually continued a full two hours after Zollicoffer was shot. Archaeological evidence from the Confederate right flank shows that the Fifteenth Mississippi and the Twentieth Tennessee formed lines and fought in an organized manner for some distance. Our ability to trace the Fifteenth Mississippi on the battlefield derives from the unique caliber of its Mississippi rifles. "Dropped" Minie balls recovered from the battleground, along with regular caliber balls that belonged to the Twentieth Tennessee, have been plotted, providing an accurate picture of the regiments' movements. (If the order to move was given while a soldier was attempting to load his weapon, he would drop the unfired ball to the

⁴ Research on soldiers in combat conducted by Richard Holmes, John Keegan, Gerald Linderman, Lord Moran, S.L.A. Marshall, and others has established the necessary elements for effective battle command. These findings shed light on the battle of Mill Springs, where, on the Confederate side, those elements were being eroded minute by minute. See Richard Holmes, Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle (New York: The Free Press, 1985); John Keegan, The Face of Battle (New York: The Viking Press, 1976); Gerald F. Linderman, Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War (New York: The Free Press, 1987); S.L.A. Marshall, Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1947); Lord Moran, The Anatomy of Courage, (London: Constable Co., 1945).

ground where he was standing and move out. These dropped balls form lines on the battlefield from which can be deduced the position of the force.)⁵

A partial explanation of the newspaper accounts of the vast amount of equipment strewn on the battlefield is in the comments made by T.H. Moore and W.J. Worsham, who both cited instances where their units dropped their equipment before they headed into battle. This is a common practice for infantrymen. Why carry a haversack on your back during the exertions of battle? It would only tire you out. Instead, units drop their equipment with the intention of returning for it after the battle. However, the Confederates were unable to pick up their equipment in their haste to return to the safety of their entrenchments.

The thesis that Thomas was to blame for the lost opportunity to invade East Tennessee is inconclusive. A more aggressive commander would have engaged in the pursuit of the disrupted rebels and annihilated their army. Thomas would use the excuses of poor roads and lack forage to halt his operations. The characteristics that he showed in Kentucky and that would appear throughout the war would also be hidden by the strategy of his commander. It was the intent of his superior, Don Carlos Buell, to invade Tennessee by way of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers in the western part of that state. Francis F. McKinney criticizes Thomas for only covering sixty-five miles in seventeen days during this campaign as compared to U.S. Grant, who covered seventy-five miles in four days over similar roads and in similar weather.⁶

⁵ Ron Nicholas, interview by Kevin G. Mason, 28 April 1995, notes in author's possession; Clarence R Geier, Jr., and Susan E. Winter, eds., Look to the Earth: Historical Archaeology and the American Civil War (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 3-59.

⁶ Francis F. McKinney, Education in Violence (Chicago: American House, 1961), 129.

It would be Grant's aggressiveness and initiative that would ultimately steal the attention away from the victory at Mill Springs and relegate it to the backwaters of history.

An explanation that Thomas offered as a reason for not moving into East Tennessee was the inability to forage. Zollicoffer's official correspondence also mentioned his difficulty in foraging in that area.⁷ The reason was the predominance of the small hillside farms in the rugged region that did not produce the same quantity of food as farms in Middle and West Tennessee. This was a perceived problem, later in the war both Major General Ambrose E. Burnside and Lieutenant General James Longstreet were able to supply their troops off the bounty of the land in 1863. Added to the scarcity of forage was Thomas's concern that the road network in the winter weather would not support the supply train needed to conduct operations in East Tennessee.⁸ Despite the hopes of Abraham Lincoln and George B. McClellan, not until later in the war would Union forces seize East Tennessee.

The battle of Mill Springs foreshadowed what would later happen in the Western Theater. It presaged many of the Confederate leadership problems in the theater. It showed the lack of cooperation between forces within the departments and theaters. It gave a preview of the supply problems that the Confederate western armies would face throughout the war. Likewise, the Union experience foreshadowed certain problems. For example, "Slow Trot" Thomas displayed the deliberateness and

⁷ O.R., VII, 686-7.

⁸ McKinney, Education in Violence, 132; Tate, "The Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs," 56.

slowness to react that would so vex General Grant at Nashville in 1864 that he very nearly appointed a new commander in Thomas's place.⁹

Perhaps the greatest significance of the battle is the psychological boost that the victory gave the North. It proved that Confederate forces were not invincible. When the victory at Mill Springs was succeeded by Grant's victories in the West it signaled the inevitable end of the Confederacy.

⁹ Ulysses S. Grant, Grant: Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant, Selected Letters 1839-1865 (New York: Library of America, 1990), 654-61.

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APPENDIX

**ORDER OF BATTLE
BATTLE OF MILL SPRINGS or FISHING CREEK
19 JANUARY 1862**

UNION FORCES
Brigadier General George H. Thomas

First Brigade
Brigadier General Albin F. Schoepf

18th U.S. Infantry: Colonel Henry B. Carrington
17th Ohio Infantry: Colonel John M. McConnell
31st Ohio Infantry: Colonel Moses B. Walker
38th Ohio Infantry: Colonel Edwin D. Bradley

Second Brigade
Colonel Mahlon D. Manson

10th Indiana Infantry: Lieutenant Colonel William C. Kise
4th Kentucky Infantry: Colonel Speed S. Fry
10th Kentucky Infantry: Colonel John M. Harlan
14th Ohio Infantry: Colonel James B. Steedman

Third Brigade
Colonel Robert L. McCook

2nd Minnesota Infantry: Colonel Horatio P. Van Cleve
9th Ohio Infantry: Major Gustave Kammerling

Twelfth Brigade
Acting Brigadier General Samuel P. Carter

12th Kentucky Infantry: Colonel William A. Hoskins

1st Tennessee Infantry Colonel Robert K. Byrd

2nd Tennessee Infantry: Colonel J.P.T. Carter

1st Kentucky Cavalry: Colonel Frank Wolford

Artillery

1st Ohio Light Artillery, Battery B: Captain William E. Standart

1st Ohio Light Artillery, Battery C: Captain Dennis Kenny, Jr.

9th Ohio Battery: Captain Henry S. Wetmore

Camp Guard

Michigan Engineers & Mechanics (3 Companies): Lieutenant Colonel K.A. Hunton

38th Ohio Infantry, Company A: Captain Charles Greenwood

CONFEDERATE FORCES
Major General George B. Crittenden

First Brigade
Brigadier General Felix K. Zollicoffer

15th Mississippi Infantry: Lieutenant Colonel Edward C. Walthall

19th Tennessee Infantry: Colonel David H. Cummings

20th Tennessee Infantry: Colonel Joel A. Battle

25th Tennessee Infantry: Colonel S.S. Stanton

Tennessee Battery: Captain A.M. Rutledge

Tennessee Independent Cavalry Company: Captain W.S. Bledsoe, Captain T.C. Sanders

Second Brigade
Brigadier General William H. Carroll

16th Alabama Infantry: Colonel William B. Wood

17th Tennessee Infantry: Lieutenant Colonel T.C.H. Miller

28th Tennessee Infantry: Colonel John P. Murray

29th Tennessee Infantry: Colonel Samuel Powel

Tennessee Battery: Captain Hugh L.W. McClung

Tennessee Cavalry, 4th Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel B.M. Branner

Tennessee Cavalry, 5th Battalion: Lieutenant Colonel George R. McClellan

VITA

Major Kevin G. Mason, USA (Retired) was born in New York in 1955, the son of a career army officer from Greeneville, Tennessee. He has attended public schools in New York, Arizona, Tennessee and West Germany. He received a Bachelor of Arts in Social Science from Michigan State University in 1977. From 1977 until 1995, he was an army infantry officer serving in assignments in the U.S., Europe, Middle East and the Far East. Highlights of his military career include the command of two infantry companies, one on the Demilitarized Zone of Korea, the other as part of NATO's multi-national rapid deployment force. In 1992, he earned a Master of Arts Degree in International Relations, Strategic Studies from Boston University. His last assignment before retiring was as a curriculum designer for the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. After retiring from active duty, he entered the Master's program in History at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He currently lives in Farragut, Tennessee with his wife and daughter.