



NEWS RELEASE

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BATTLE OF THE HEMP BALES ANNIVERSARY MARKS THIS DAY IN ILLINOIS NATIONAL GUARD HISTORY

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SPRINGFIELD— Today, 150 years ago, Illinois troops were fully engaged in the battle of Lexington, otherwise known as “The Battle of the Hemp Bales,” in Lexington, Mo. From Sept. 10 to 20, 1861 the battle began as part of Union operations to control Missouri during the start of the Civil War.

Col. James A. Mulligan commanded a garrison of Soldiers mostly comprised of the 23rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry, known as the Irish Brigade, which was formed in Chicago. Mulligan’s troops held their ground on the north side of town at the Masonic College, protecting a cache of items they confiscated from the pro-confederate town, including nearly \$1 million from the Bank of Lexington.

Union troops waited for the Confederates at the college, a strategic position located on top of a hill that overlooked the Missouri River and Lexington, Mo. The Illinois Cavalry, members of the Home Guard, and the 13th and 14th Missouri Infantry arrived to assist Mulligan. Mulligan’s men built a massive earthwork around the college down to the warehouses full of hemp bales near the river. The men also placed the first land mines of the Civil War. At the lower part of the works stood a brick mansion called Anderson House that would be used as a Union hospital during battle.

The enemies exchanged fire for two days; neither side gave in or budged. September 12 Maj. Gen. Sterling Price arrived with 12,000 Confederate Soldiers. Mulligan sent out members of the 1st Cavalry and 13th Missouri hoping to slow the advancement of Price. The men skirmished on the south side of town, but were quickly pushed back to the earthworks at the college.

Mulligan’s force of nearly 3,500 dwarfed in comparison to the rebels. Confederate forces outnumbered and surrounded the Irish Brigade. Although flood waters made water easily accessible, Mulligan’s men were cut off from the river. The cavalry’s horses drank all the limited supply of water the men had, and left Soldiers no way to quench their thirst. With the Union forces trapped, Price decided to wait for supplies before continuing battle. Mulligan continued to hope for reinforcements that would never arrive.

September 18 the battle commenced. Although low on ammunition, Mulligan's men held their ground. The Confederates attempted to close in on them without success. The rain of bullets on the hillside prevented the Confederates from advancing the Union stronghold. With lips cracked and bleeding from thirst, Mulligan's forces continued to hold off the tide of Rebel forces. The stand-off raged throughout the night. Mulligan's small force continued to hold the advantage on the hill top.

September 19 brought little advancement until an area resident approached the Rebels with a plan, soak hemp bales with the flood waters and use them as moving breastworks. The Rebels adopted the plan and on the morning of the Sept. 20 Union forces woke to bales of hemp snaking the hillside and rapidly advancing toward them. The men fired down hitting the bales with rifle fire and heated shot; however, the wet bales worked to the Rebel's advantage keeping them free from danger. Two long lines of hemp bales surrounded the Anderson House hospital and confined Mulligan and his thirsty men to Masonic College.

By mid-afternoon, Mulligan and his men held a council of war and voted to surrender, resulting in a Confederate victory. Union troops stacked their arms and left the college. For the time being, the Confederate's held the Missouri Valley. Price was praised throughout the South for his victory. Confederates recovered \$960,000 found buried under Mulligan's tent. Nearly 1,100 battles were fought in Missouri during the war. The Union would not gain control of the state until 1864 after the Battle of Westport.

For more information, contact the Public Affairs office at ngilstaffpao@ng.army.mil or call 217-761-3569.

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