

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

“I Must Have St. Louis...Then Huzza!” The Strategic Significance and Uniqueness of the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern, March 7-8, 1862

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Background and Significance of the Battle of Pea Ridge / Elkhorn Tavern

The Confederate strategy was simple yet grand in scope. Advance northward through Missouri, defeat the Federal forces there, and take St. Louis. The Confederacy thus hoped to command the gateway to the west, a vital commercial and shipping center, and the middle reaches of the Mississippi River as well as the mouth of the Missouri. Then, move east across the Mississippi River and inflict a decisive defeat on Union forces driving south through Tennessee toward Mississippi. Southern aspirations were summarized by Confederate Major General Earl Van Dorn, who said: "I must have St. Louis.....Then Huzza."¹

“Van Dorn clearly understood the strategy and its significance for him and his government. Military success for the Confederacy in the west meant accolades for himself throughout the South and possibly final victory in the war for Southern secession from the Union. All that stood in the way of Van Dorn and the Confederates were the outnumbered Union forces in Missouri under the command of Brigadier General Samuel Ryan Curtis.

¹ Earl Van Dorn to Caroline Van Dorn (his wife), January 29, 1862, as quoted in Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, A Narrative*, vol. 1, *Sumter to Perryville* (New York: Random House, 1958), 290; Earl Van Dorn was born in Mississippi in 1820, and graduated from West Point in 1842. He commanded the Trans-Mississippi District Department #2 from March 4 to June 20, 1862. Van Dorn was one of the most promising general officer prospects for the Confederacy at the outset of the war. After Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern, he held other district commands, including the defense of Vicksburg in the summer of 1862. But Van Dorn's stock fell as superiors became disenchanted with him. He never lived up to his alleged potential, largely due to the arrogance and impetuosity he displayed throughout his career, including at the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern. Van Dorn was shot and killed in 1863 by the jealous husband of one of his lovers, and was thus permanently denied the military glory he sought.

The Confederacy had high hopes for its winter 1862 campaign in Missouri. The state was politically, economically, and militarily important to both the North and the South. Missouri protected the western flank of the newly formed Confederate States of America. The Mississippi River crossings and ferries were the strategic links between the eastern and western portions of the Confederacy. North to south, the river was a crucial artery of commerce and transportation. Southern capture of the vital river port and industrial center at the junction of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers was a grand prize for the Confederacy and the ambitious General Van Dorn.

Control of St. Louis would have symbolized and guaranteed control of the vital border state of Missouri. The city commanded the way west and strategic portions of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Moreover, St. Louis represented a major industrial and commercial center as well as a key point at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri.

General Earl Van Dorn, from Mississippi, was aggressive, bold, and ready for a fight. A West Point graduate, he had served and been wounded several times in the Mexican-American War in 1846-48 and also had fought Indians on the southwest frontier. Van Dorn had taken command of Confederate troops in Arkansas after Sterling Price's winter 1861-62 retreat from Missouri. Van Dorn persuaded Generals Sterling Price and Ben McCulloch to cooperate with him and each other in a bold plan to retake Missouri for the Confederacy. He then convinced General Albert Sidney Johnston, who commanded the Western Military Department and all Confederate troops west of the Appalachians, that his plan was achievable.

However, Van Dorn had a broader strategy in mind, something far more grand and glorious than simply recapturing Missouri for the Confederacy. If completed successfully, Van Dorn's plan would have had a major, perhaps decisive effect on the Civil War. Tactically, Van Dorn contended that he could move north into Missouri, take St. Louis, and recapture Missouri for the South. Then, his strategic plan was to move east from St. Louis, cross the Mississippi, and fall on the forces of Major General Ulysses S. Grant in Tennessee, pinning the Union forces between his own troops and Johnston's, thus bringing about a decisive Confederate victory in the west.

Had this happened, it is conceivable that Grant would have been greatly outnumbered and caught in a giant envelopment in southern Tennessee as he approached Mississippi from the north, with the forces he met at Shiloh attacking him from both south and east, and Van Dorn's columns moving on the Union forces from the north and northwest. However, that scenario never came to pass. Instead, van Dorn's Confederate forces were stopped at Pea Ridge, far short of their re-conquest of Missouri or their grand design of enveloping Union forces in Tennessee under Grant.

Van Dorn consolidated a force of about 16,500 Confederates under his command, including Price's and McCullough's divisions, and a contingent of between 2,000 and

3,000 Native Americans, principally Cherokees. The Indians served under chiefs who supported the Confederacy in the hope of better treatment than they had experienced at the hands of the United States government, including aspirations for independent or autonomous status within the Southern Confederacy and retention of their slaves. Opposing Van Dorn's army were about 10,000 Union troops under General Samuel R. Curtis. Curtis, a West Point graduate of no prior military distinction, was also a Mexican-American War veteran and a former Iowa Congressman.

Early in 1862, Missouri's loyalty to the Union was still in doubt. General Sterling Price's Confederate Missourians had carried the day at Wilson's Creek in August, 1861 but had been pushed out of Missouri that winter. Union control, however, was far from assured. There were still influential pro-slave elements in the state. Whichever side controlled Missouri militarily would undoubtedly control it politically, too. Control of such a strategically important political and military prize was certainly a priority for United States president, Abraham Lincoln, and the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis. Moreover, Van Dorn's and Johnston's strategy of pressing Grant from both north and south hinged on the successful completion of Van Dorn's movement into Missouri and defeat of Federal troops that blocked his way to St. Louis and the huzzas of the Southern Confederacy. But Confederate hopes, and Van Dorn's dreams of glory, were dashed on March 7 and 8, 1862 by Union forces at the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern.

The Battle of Pea Ridge / Elkhorn Tavern

Strategically, the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was one of the most important Civil War battles fought in the western theater of operations. Coming early in the war, it was politically as well as militarily significant. At the time, however, it was overshadowed by the precedent setting and crucial battle between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack* (a.k.a. *CSS Virginia*) off Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862. Yet the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was indeed important to the Federal cause. The Federal victory there allowed the Union to maintain a strong hold on Missouri for the rest of the war and use it as a base of operations for later advances into Arkansas. It prevented realization of the grand Van Dorn/Johnston strategy of flanking and surrounding Grant in Tennessee, thus forcing Johnston to take the fateful steps against Grant in April that resulted in the Battle of Shiloh.

It had been a disastrous winter for Confederate forces in the west. As the winter of 1861-1862 drew to a close, Union forces under Ulysses S. Grant represented a significant threat to Confederate positions all along the Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers. Grant had directed the capture of Forts Henry and Donelson on February 6 and 16 respectively, forcing Confederate evacuation and Federal occupation of Nashville on February 23-26, 1862. Those losses had left virtually all of Kentucky and most of Tennessee under Union control. Additionally, Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston had sustained heavy losses through combat and disorganized retreat. His remaining forces were scattered and split by the oncoming Federals under Grant, Brigadier General Don Carlos Buell, and Brigadier General John Pope.

In Missouri, west of the Mississippi, Confederate elation following the Battle of Wilson's Creek in August 1861 had turned to despair. Superior federal forces, organized under Major General John Charles Frémont and later led by Brigadier General Samuel R. Curtis, steadily pushed Sterling Price's outnumbered troops southward, out of Missouri. Thus, by late February 1862, Johnston's positions east of the Mississippi had fallen apart and the Confederate line west of the Mississippi had disintegrated and been pushed back to the Missouri-Arkansas border.

In early March 1862, as they moved north from Arkansas toward Missouri, Confederate officers were optimistic that their situation west of the Mississippi would be significantly redressed, their plans fulfilled, and their strategic goals accomplished. Moving north from Arkansas, Major General Earl Van Dorn confidently led a combined force of about 16,500 men. He had collected the force by combining the remnants of Major General Sterling Price's units that had been defeated and pushed south from Missouri that winter with Brigadier General Ben McCulloch's 8000 troops, victors at Wilson's Creek in August 1861, and five regiments, between 2000 and 3000 Indian warriors, from the Five Civilized Nations that resided in the Indian Territory located west of Arkansas.

In assembling his army, Van Dorn had engineered two political successes. One was persuading General Albert Sidney Johnston to allow him to execute his plan of a northward thrust through Missouri with the goal of capturing St. Louis for the Confederacy. The other was convincing Sterling Price, who had command ambitions of his own, and Ben McCulloch, whose record included the victory at Wilson's Creek, to ally under his command. Van Dorn also seemed to be the beneficiary of a bit of good fortune. Together, his 16,500 man force significantly outnumbered the 11,000 Union troops under Brigadier General Samuel R. Curtis. Union strength in the region had been reduced when the Confederate threat in Missouri seemed to dissipate following Price's retreat to Arkansas and demands rose for transfer of the Union troops assembled in Missouri during the previous fall and winter for use in other theaters in the spring of 1862.

To achieve his strategic goal of recapturing Missouri for the Confederacy, Van Dorn's operational plan called for his units to move north from Arkansas, then swing west of the Union forces, outflank them, cut their supply lines, and fall on them from behind. It was a rehearsal for the grander scheme he hoped to lead east of the Mississippi against Grant following his anticipated capture of St. Louis.

Van Dorn took command of the combined Price-McCulloch forces on March 2, 1862. He wasted no time in heading north, beginning his movement on March 4. A heavy snow was falling and blizzard conditions prevailed. The rugged terrain of the Boston Mountains where they had assembled and the inclement weather added to the strain of the march. Meanwhile, Union forces under Curtis already were moving south to meet the approaching threat.

Curtis determined to foil Van Dorn's options to overrun or outflank his smaller force. He consolidated his forces and entrenched along Little Sugar Creek two miles east of Leetown near the local inn named Elkhorn Tavern. Curtis' right flank, the flank that Van Dorn hoped to turn, rested against Elkhorn Mountain and a long hill line known as Pea Ridge. The Union position was soundly chosen. The creek afforded a natural defensive barrier. The mountains immediately to the west offered additional protection. The prudent entrenchment, under the direction of the cautious and outnumbered Curtis, added to the strength of the Union positions.

As he came upon the federal positions on the evening of March 6-7, 1862, Van Dorn knew he would be unable to slip past Curtis' flank completely unnoticed. He would have to deal with Curtis before moving farther north. He decided to take advantage of his superior numbers, the static entrenched position of the Federals, and the terrain. The same mountains which provided some security to Curtis' right flank also might serve to mask Van Dorn's movements to the west of the Union lines. Van Dorn was further encouraged by a minor success on March 6, when his advance guard briefly engaged and dispatched a small Federal detachment under Brigadier General Franz Sigel. Although Sigel withdrew and lost a few hundred men in the fray, the engagement was not strategically significant, since Sigel was trying to reach the main body of Union troops anyway.²

Following the skirmish with Sigel's unit, Van Dorn determined to bring his force to the rear of the Federal line, thereby negating its entrenchments and advantageous position behind Little Sugar Creek. On the night of March 6-7, he ordered his troops, already weary from three days and fifty miles of long marches in cold, wintry weather, to make their way along a road called the Bentonville Detour. That movement would allow the Confederates to move past the west flank of the Federal positions, shielded from Union view by the mountains, and bring them behind the Federal lines. From that point, Van Dorn intended to use McCulloch's and Price's divisions as two arms of a pincers. They would fall on both Union flanks from the rear, creating a surprise double envelopment from which the outnumbered Federals would have no escape.³

In attempting to create a double envelopment, however, Van Dorn had created a double irony. His Southern troops, divided into two attacking wings, would be in position north of their Union foe, attacking in a southerly direction. And, in cutting off the Federal force from its line of supply and retreat back to Missouri, Van Dorn also severed his own communications with his rear area in Arkansas, and left the bulk of his slow and cumbersome train of supplies and ammunition behind him. Those supplies and

² Sigel made a habit of retreating throughout the war. Remarkable mostly for holding so many commands and lasting for almost the duration of the war in major posts, except for the second day at Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern, Sigel never distinguished himself on the field with courage, brilliance, or persistence. His defeats included a major Union setback at New Market, Virginia in 1864.

³ Later in the war, the classic double envelopment was brilliantly employed by Robert E. Lee at the battle of Chancellorsville, May 2-6, 1863.

munitions remained in front of the Federal forces, which were entrenched on the north bank of Little Sugar Creek. Van Dorn, in effect, cut himself off from his own supplies and a safe path of retreat in attempting to do the same to his Union counterpart. That situation proved to be critical by the second day of the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern when the exhausted Confederate troops ran short of stamina, food, and ammunition.

The Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern began on March 7, 1862. Curtis had gathered his four divisions, now numbering about 10,500 after Sigel's losses in the March 6 skirmishes, along Little Sugar Creek. The hollow of the creek offered a natural defensive barrier, as did the obstacle of Pea Ridge, behind him about two miles to the north. Curtis realized he was outnumbered. Correctly, he had taken defensive positions and had his troops dig in. His stiff, traditional, old school demeanor, philosophy, and tactics produced the correct response and were ideally suited for the situation in which he found himself and the plan Van Dorn hoped to execute against the Federals. Later in the battle, Curtis showed singular flexibility in thinking and maneuver when he wheeled to counter the developing threat of Confederate envelopment to his rear, and later chose the perfect time to commit his reserves, thereby assuring Union victory. Despite the awkwardness of an old school soldier fighting in the first modern war, Curtis acquitted himself well throughout the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern.

At the outset, however, Van Dorn seemed confident and assured of success. With advantages of numbers, initiative, and apparently position, Van Dorn kept his campfires burning in front of the Union lines on the night of March 6-7 to mask his maneuver to the rear of the Federal position. He sent Sterling Price's divisions on the longest trek, around the Federal lines on a wide arc of march to bring them behind the Federal left [east] wing. Price was directed to attack the left rear (east) sector of the Union lines in conjunction with an attack from Ben McCulloch's Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, and Indian units also in the rear (west) of the Federal position. Thus, McCulloch had the shorter distance to travel, and Price the greater trek, around the Union positions on the night of March 6-7 to create the double envelopment that would accomplish Van Dorn's immediate goal of driving the Federal force from the field and opening the way for him to march to St. Louis.

On the morning of March 7, Curtis realized that Van Dorn's forces were absent from their camps opposite him on the south side of Little Sugar Creek. At first, he had no idea where they had gone. But a few hours after sunrise, Curtis' scouts informed him that Confederate troops were making their way in strength toward him from the rear. They were moving through the high ground along Pea Ridge. But that mountain path, along with winter obstacles, had delayed the Confederate maneuver through the cold dark night. They were coming into attack position just a few miles behind the Union lines.⁴

⁴ Curtis' scouts included the legendary "Wild Bill" Hickok.

Curtis could have retreated across Little Sugar Creek, or perhaps fled toward Arkansas or back to Missouri. But Curtis chose to fight. He ordered an about face. This was not the easiest maneuver to execute, nor was it the best way to redeploy for a fight. After turning one hundred eighty degrees, an army is disoriented. Everything is seen in reverse. Units normally to the left are now to the right. Orders and directions become confused. Yet Curtis executed the maneuver, and his subordinates maintained order and discipline.

By 10:30 a.m., when Price's men pressed down the Telegraph Road toward the Union positions, moving through the crossroads called Elkhorn Tavern from the east end of Pea Ridge, Union troops under Colonel Eugene Asa Carr were ready for them. Initially, they attacked the superior Confederate force, but Carr's outnumbered men soon were reeling under the Confederate onslaught. Again and again, Carr regrouped and formed new defensive lines. He sent word to Curtis that he needed reinforcements. The most intense fighting of the battle continued throughout March 7 in the vicinity of the Elkhorn Tavern.

Meanwhile, McCulloch's wing struck at the federal left (west) wing near Leetown, or what would have been its right rear had Curtis not wheeled. Curtis had assigned Colonels Peter Osterhaus and Jefferson Davis (not the C.S.A. president) to meet this threat. As at the Elkhorn Tavern under Carr, Union troops on the left (west) of the line were ready and met the approaching Confederates head on. But they too were outnumbered and soon hard pressed to hold.

On both flanks, the Confederates had employed to advantage their superiority in numbers of men (about 16,500 to 11,000) and artillery (about 60 guns to the Union's 50). In fact, the two segments of the battle over the course of both days on which it was fought often resembled more a series of artillery duels. This was especially true on the west wing early in the battle. On both fronts, east and west, the Confederates had the better of the artillery duels. Then, with superior numbers on both flanks, their infantry pressed against but did not break the Union lines.

Curtis was under pressure to reinforce both his wings, Carr's to the right (east) around the Elkhorn Tavern and the Osterhaus/Davis front to the left (west) near Leetown at the western base of Pea Ridge. Osterhaus was particularly hard pressed. He had given much ground, and in the process had lost guns and equipment. Sigel was sent to support him. Carr also was reeling from the aggressive assaults of Price's veterans in gray. A third assault wave pushed Carr's Union forces back from Elkhorn Tavern. But so far neither Union wing had broken.

Time was now on the side of the Union forces. The repeated Confederate artillery and infantry assaults on both wings had consumed much of the remaining daylight. More importantly, two other factors, both attributable to tactical decisions made earlier by Van Dorn, became factors in the evolving battle.

After repeated barrages and assaults, the Confederate forces were running low on ammunition. But the ammunition and supplies were in the rear, or in this case in the rear of the opposing Union force, on the south side of Little Sugar Creek, separated from the Confederate troops by several miles of rough terrain and a determined Federal army.

Additionally, the Confederate forces were by this time exhausted. They had marched for several days in cold winter weather over some of the toughest territory in that part of the country. They had had no sleep and no food for almost two days. They had no sooner encountered the Federal force positioned at Little Sugar Creek than they were on the move again, making the long trek through the cold night of March 6-7 to maneuver to their jumping off points in what was supposed to have been the rear of the Union lines. But the Union lines had become the new Union front following Curtis' about face. Instead of an attack directed against the rear of a surprised and outnumbered enemy, the Confederates had encountered a determined and ready foe prepared to contest every yard of ground and not at all inclined to flee or succumb.

Elements of their early success now haunted the Confederate effort. Their Indian allies had engaged early against the Osterhaus/Davis divisions on March 7 and had enjoyed success as they pushed back the outnumbered Federals. But following the initial success of the first assault, Native American leaders refused to pursue direct frontal assaults against fixed defensive positions so common to most Civil War engagements. Instead, they declined to reengage, and later withdrew from the battle.

On the same wing, Van Dorn suffered the loss of McCulloch and the next two senior officers. McCulloch's death was particularly demoralizing to the men under his command. His death and the other losses of top commanders left a gap in leadership that, along with the diminishment of their strength by the withdrawal of the Native American warriors, created a severe disadvantage for the Confederates on the west side of Pea Ridge by nightfall on March 7.

On the east end of the Ridge by Elkhorn Tavern, Price's men had been stymied by a determined force half their size. Van Dorn, headquartered with Price's units and closer to them than to his equally exhausted west wing, became desperate. He ordered Price forward in a late afternoon assault on March 7 despite the exhausted state of the troops and severe shortage of ammunition. Once again, Confederate artillery did its deadly work, wrecking Union pieces and pressuring the line of Federal troops. The Confederate assault pressed the Federals back from Elkhorn Tavern and forced Carr to establish yet another defensive line in an attempt to hold back the gray tide.

It was now sunset, and Carr's predicament was as desperate as Van Dorn's and Price's latest assault. But by that time, Curtis had learned and sensed that the danger on his left had diminished. He finally sent his reserve division under Brigadier General Alexander Asboth to Carr's relief. They arrived to help Carr establish his fourth defensive perimeter of the day. By then the Confederates had shot their last bolt. The

weary Confederates fell to the ground seeking sleep; fighting on the Union right wing dwindled as night fell on the scene of battle.

During the night of March 7-8, General Curtis, who had carefully avoided committing his reserves throughout the day of March 7, now calculated correctly that his foe was exhausted. Distance, weather, time, and the toll of battle had weakened a numerically superior force. Curtis correctly had counted on interior lines, steady and disciplined maneuver, earnest and capable subordinates, determined resistance, and the valor of his troops. Throughout March 7, they had preserved a bent but not broken Union line through a day of assaults by superior firepower and numbers. Curtis moved more men to his right, opposite the major concentration of Confederate troops.

The Confederates now found themselves on the defensive. Their troops still reposed in two segments, Price's on the Union right (east), and the remnants of the McCulloch/Pike wing on the Union left (west). But the two wings had drawn closer together during the course of the fighting on March 7. Some of McCulloch's men actually had been transferred eastward to the force engaged around Elkhorn Tavern. Confederate troop dispositions and the inward curvature of their lines made it apparent to Curtis that his foe was weakened and not inclined or able to renew the offensive the next day. Curtis shifted Jefferson Davis' division from the left [west] to his right, joining Carr and Asboth opposite Elkhorn Tavern. Sigel and Osterhaus remained on the left, opposite what remained of the McCulloch/Pike wing of Van Dorn's weary force.

On March 8, 1862, the Federal troops enjoyed the benefit of a hot breakfast and confidence that they had held against superior numbers the day before. For their part, the Confederates were low on food and ammunition, and hardly disposed to an inspired effort after the long marches and frustrating efforts of the previous day. Thus, March 8 offered an optimistic beginning for the Federal forces.

Van Dorn opened the hostilities on March 8 with a cannonade from his still numerically superior artillery. But it was without focus, and less designed to soften a segment of the Union lines for another assault than to test Union resolve and intentions. Yet Van Dorn recognized his superiority in numbers and the knowledge that the previous day's assaults had indeed pressed the Federal lines back on both wings and had inflicted casualties similar to his own on his foe. Van Dorn decided that retreat was out of the question, but that Curtis was not inclined to withdraw either. So the aggressive Van Dorn pressed for one more assault.

The weakness of the March 8 Confederate artillery barrage on the left indicated to Curtis that the steam had indeed gone out of the Confederate effort. He ordered Sigel's artillery units forward. They inflicted major damage on the Confederate batteries. As Confederate artillerymen withdrew or their pieces were destroyed, Union infantry on the left moved up the ridge and pushed the Confederates farther back. Sigel, surprised and elated, urged his men onward.

Union forces on the right observed this activity. The Federal enthusiasm and momentum were contagious. Curtis remained in more than nominal command. He insisted on a precisely timed artillery barrage and a properly synchronized, orderly assault on the Confederate positions, not a mad rush. Under Curtis' orders, Sigel's men on the left closed east toward the Union right wing, and both elements set off toward, around, and past Elkhorn Tavern. Their attack carried ground lost on the previous day and pushed the weakened, tired Confederates back along the entire front. Both wings of Van Dorn's previously superior force now began to drift away. The victory for the Union forces was almost too quick and anticlimactic.

For Van Dorn, the question was what to do, and how to hold his beaten troops together. But he did not have to decide; his men decided for him. Tired, hungry, and now demoralized Confederate troops beat a hasty, disorganized, and scattered retreat. The Native American contingents melted away into the wilderness and west to the Indian Territory. Much of the Confederate army lost all semblance of military order as individuals and small bands made for the hills and away from the victorious Union forces as fast as possible. Equipment and guns were left behind. Van Dorn's men became less an army than a rabble. While Van Dorn managed to hold a remnant together and maneuvered it around Curtis' force and back to Arkansas, most of his troops scattered and retreated in every direction, eliminating for weeks any serious attempt to re-concentrate and reconstitute a meaningful Confederate force in the region.

Conclusions

A combination of factors had produced a major Union victory at the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern. Union artillery, outnumbered throughout the battle, nevertheless displayed accuracy and aggressiveness, especially on the second crucial day. The numerical advantage of the Confederate force was partly negated by their fatigue, first day's battle losses, especially after the withdrawal of the Indian troops from active service, and low supplies of ammunition. And Union commanders throughout the battle showed more initiative, flexibility, creativity, and zeal than their Confederate counterparts.

Above all, the clear thinking, composed, and flexible leadership of Samuel Curtis produced three important and correct decisions that consistently and decisively affected the course of the battle. He boldly and adeptly turned his force completely about on March 7 to meet the threat of Van Dorn's attempted double envelopment. He patiently held his reserves, not employing them futilely or prematurely, despite pressure to use them, until their impact was decisive. And Curtis counterattacked on March 8 against a still numerically superior foe after judging that the time and situation were right for such a stroke.

Although Van Dorn reported losses of 1,000 killed and wounded and 300 captured, his report failed to measure the true impact of the defeat. His figures were conservative, and did not count the thousands of Indians who retreated on their own. But

regardless of actual numbers lost on the field, Van Dorn's army had ceased to exist. Despite writing in his report that "I was not defeated, but only foiled in my intentions," Earl Van Dorn and his grand plan for personal glory and Confederate victory no longer represented an active threat, nor did he possess a significant force in the field. In fact, Missouri was free from Confederate invasion and Arkansas was open to later Union attack.⁵

Curtis, for his part, precise engineer that he was, counted his casualties more exactly than his Confederate counterpart: 203 dead, 980 wounded, 201 missing and captured, for a total of 1,384. His victory at the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern guaranteed that Missouri would remain in the Union and safely under Union control for the rest of the war. It opened the way for the eventual Federal assault on Arkansas and devastating Union attacks later in the war on Indian tribes that had sided with the Confederate States of America. Those tribes that had been removed to the Indian territory in the 1830's suffered enormously at the hands of Federal troops in 1863-1865. They paid the price for their alliances with the Confederacy in a harsh series of treaties, land cessions, and vindictive policies by the government of the United States following the Civil War.

Despite General Earl Van Dorn's plan, efforts by Sterling Price later in the war, and the irritation of guerrilla warfare west of the Mississippi, neither Van Dorn nor the Confederates ever took St. Louis. The Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern marked the end of Confederate power in Missouri.

Uniqueness of the Battle of Pea Ridge / Elkhorn Tavern

In addition to its strategic importance, the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was also one of the most interesting battles of the U.S. Civil War. Sadly, it was overshadowed in the contemporary news accounts and the subsequent Civil War histories by the classic and transformational Battle of Hampton Roads on March 8-9, 1862. That clash of the ironclads *USS Monitor* and *CSS Virginia* [a.k.a. *Merrimack*] simply was bigger news than a battle on the far outposts of the Union and Confederacy on the Missouri-Arkansas border. However, in many ways, the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern also was quite unique among the many confrontations that occurred during the four bloody years during which the conflict raged.

The Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was one of the few major Civil War battles fought west of the Mississippi River. It also was one of the rare winter battles fought during the Civil War. Winter was generally considered unsuitable for maneuvering or campaigning. Most armies remained in camp and avoided combat or maneuver. Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was different.

⁵ Report of Earl Van Dorn to Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin, March 18, 1862 in United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 8, p. 282.

Also unique to the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was the ethnic composition of the forces arrayed. A substantial contingent of Native American troops participated in the battle. Some of the Louisianans who made up the Confederate forces spoke French. On the Federal side, many of the troops spoke German, due to the significant presence of German immigrants in the St. Louis area who enlisted in the Union cause. Federal units also represented the states of Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, in addition to Missouri.

Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was one of the few Civil War battles in which the Confederate forces outnumbered the Federals. This was largely due to the proximity of Confederate troops in Texas and Arkansas, Missouri volunteers for the Southern cause, and the substantial Indian force of over 2,000 men allied with the Confederates. Additionally, the early date of the battle in 1862 preceded the horrible casualties the Confederacy later suffered and was unable to replace as effectively as the Union replenished its ranks during the rest of the war.

The Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was a rare instance of Union troops fighting on the strategic and tactical defensive. It was also one of the few occasions in which Confederate forces faced south at the outset of a major battle. At the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern, the Confederates maneuvered to get behind the Federals and attacked in a southward direction. The Confederates clearly were on the strategic and tactical offensive at Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern. The reverse was usually the case, with Confederates generally on the tactical or strategic defensive and facing north toward the direction of advancing Union forces. While Federal troops began the engagement facing south, the movement and tactics of the Confederate forces following the skirmishes of March 6 compelled them to face north during the two principal days on which the battle was fought, March 7-8, 1862.

The Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern produced an unusual amount of maneuver and movement prior to and during the battle. While most Civil War battles were fought on a field of limited extent, the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was fought over a large area. The battle comprised several distinct actions and movements, making it one of the more complex engagements fought during the Civil War in regard to troop movement, concentration, communication, and timing. In the ebb and flow of troop movements, the timely arrival and use of reserves, regular and often efficient use of artillery for infantry support, the north-south disposition of troops when the lines engaged, and the two day extent of the fighting, the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern prefigured the battle of Shiloh, which was fought to its bloody conclusion just a few weeks later on April 6-7, 1862.⁶

⁶ The Pea Ridge National Military Park in Arkansas today comprises 4300 acres. Of course, much more land was actually included in the arena for battle preparation and movement at Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern in March 1862.

Tactically, the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was one of the rare instances during the Civil War of an attempt to execute a double envelopment. At Elkhorn Tavern, it was technically carried out by the Confederate forces. But it was of little avail. The quick reaction of General Curtis on March 7 and the Union counterattack on March 8 nullified the maneuver and turned it into a formula for defeat for the Confederates.

Finally, the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was the scene of one of the few successful instances of proper timing and use of reserves in a Civil War battle. The proper commitment of reserves is considered one of the most crucial command decisions during battle. Had the Union's General George McClellan employed his reserves at Antietam on September 17, 1862, where he had sufficient men in reserve and the additional advantage of Lee's captured orders and knowledge of the strength and disposition of Confederate troops arrayed against him, the Civil War might have ended that autumn. Curtis employed his reserves at Elkhorn Tavern in a timely and appropriate fashion, conserving them until the last possible moment despite the temptation and urgings of his field commanders to commit them sooner, saving the field and the day, as well as the state of Missouri, for the Union.

In terms of the numbers of men engaged and the casualties, the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern was considered a major engagement when it was fought early in the war in 1862. Each side lost about 1,400 men, although significantly less than 1,000 of those were killed. The casualties and forces engaged, however, later seemed small in comparison with the numbers who fought and died at Shiloh, Antietam, Gettysburg, Fredericksburg, Chickamauga, the Wilderness, and Petersburg. The numbers of killed and wounded at Shiloh alone exceeded the total casualties suffered at First Manassas, Wilson's Creek, Fort Donelson, and Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern combined (nearly 25,000 at Shiloh compared with 12,000 killed and wounded altogether in the other four battles).

While far less heralded than the classic Battle of Shiloh in the following month of April, or the historic naval battle in Hampton Roads that's same week in March between the *Monitor* and *CSS Virginia*, Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern remains one of the most interesting, under-studied, and significant battles of the U.S. Civil War; and arguably the most important battle of the conflict fought west of the Mississippi River. Like so many other Civil War battles, the dreams and aspirations, as well as the lives of many of the combatants, faded on the bloody fields of conflict. In this case, Earl Van Dorn was denied the adulation of the Confederate States of America he so deeply sought. For General Earl Van Dorn and the Confederates at the Battle of Pea Ridge/Elkhorn Tavern, there was no huzza, only defeat.
