

## PEA RIDGE



7-8 March 1862

William L. Shea and Earl J. Hess

The battle of Pea Ridge resulted from Federal efforts to secure control of the border state of Missouri. Union Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon had seized control of St. Louis and the Missouri River, but was killed at Wilson's Creek in his unsuccessful effort to eliminate Major General Sterling Price's pro-Confederate State Guard. In September 1861, Price pushed north, captured Lexington on the Missouri River, and then retired in the face of converging Union forces. He took refuge in the southwestern corner of the state, where he menaced Federal control of Missouri and threatened to disrupt the logistical support for a planned Federal invasion of the Confederacy down the Mississippi River.

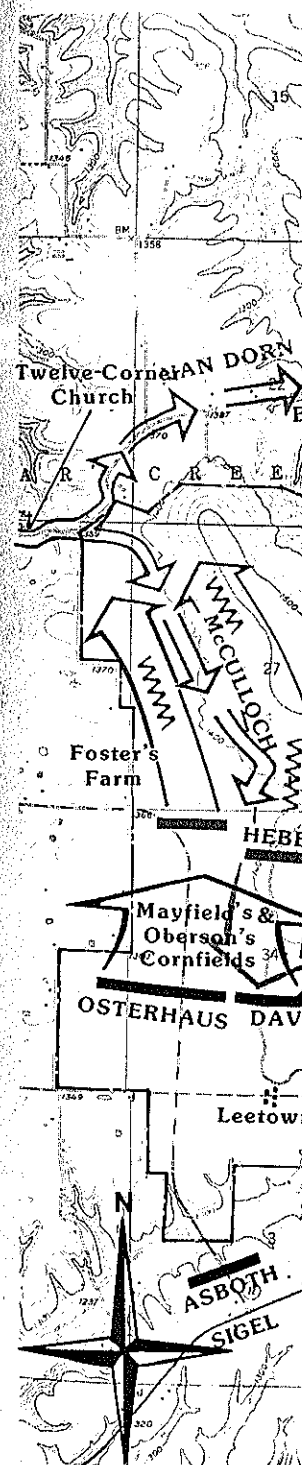
In late December, Brigadier General Samuel Ryan Curtis was appointed commander of the Union Army of the Southwest and was instructed to drive Price out of Missouri. Curtis launched his campaign on February 11, 1862, chasing Price down Telegraph Road into northwestern Arkansas. Price joined Confederate troops under Brigadier General Benjamin McCulloch in the rugged Boston Mountains. Curtis halted near Pea Ridge, forty miles north of these mountains, and assumed a defensive position to shield Missouri.

On March 2, Major General Earl Van Dorn, newly appointed commander of Confederate troops west of the Mississippi, joined Price

and McCulloch. He named their combined force the Army of the West and immediately began preparations for an invasion of Missouri. His offensive began on March 4 in the midst of a blizzard.

Learning of Van Dorn's approach, Curtis consolidated his 10,250 troops where the Telegraph Road crossed Little Sugar Creek, three miles south of Pea Ridge and the nearby hostelry called Elkhorn Tavern. The Federals fortified their naturally strong position along the creek. On March 6 Van Dorn managed to move fast enough to catch a small rear guard, led by Curtis's second-in-command, Brigadier General Franz Sigel, as it retreated from Bentonville toward the creek position. Sigel escaped from the pursuing Confederates with minor casualties.

That evening Van Dorn's army of 16,500 men, divided into two divisions led by Price and McCulloch, reached Little Sugar Creek. Rather than attack Curtis in his fortifications, Van Dorn decided to envelop the Federals by moving his army around to their rear. During the night of March 6-7, the weary Confederates marched along the Bentonville Detour, a local road that passed around the right flank of the Federal position. Price's division reached the Telegraph Road by midmorning on March 7 and turned south toward Elkhorn Tavern, but McCulloch's division fell so far be-



Combat Strength  
10,250  
16,500

## 22 Pea Ridge

hind that Van Dorn ordered it to leave the detour and strike the enemy several miles west of Elkhorn Tavern. This decision divided the Confederate army and meant that the battle of Pea Ridge actually involved two separate engagements, at Leetown and Elkhorn Tavern.

Curtis, who learned of the Confederate maneuver on the morning of March 7, was ready. He turned much of his army to the rear, so that his troops were facing north instead of south — one of the most extraordinary changes of front in the Civil War. He then launched sharp attacks against both Confederate divisions. McCulloch's division was intercepted a mile north of the hamlet of Leetown by the First and Third divisions, commanded by colonels Peter J. Osterhaus and Jefferson C. Davis. Price's troops were blocked by Colonel Eugene A. Carr's Fourth Division. Curtis held the remaining troops in reserve.

The fighting at Leetown was divided into three sectors by the vegetation, cultivated fields, and road system. The first sector was Foster's farm, where McCulloch first encountered the enemy. The farm was a partially cleared swale from which a Federal battery, supported by a small cavalry force, fired on his division. McCulloch's cavalry, supported by two regiments of Cherokee Indians, easily captured the battery and scattered the cavalry.

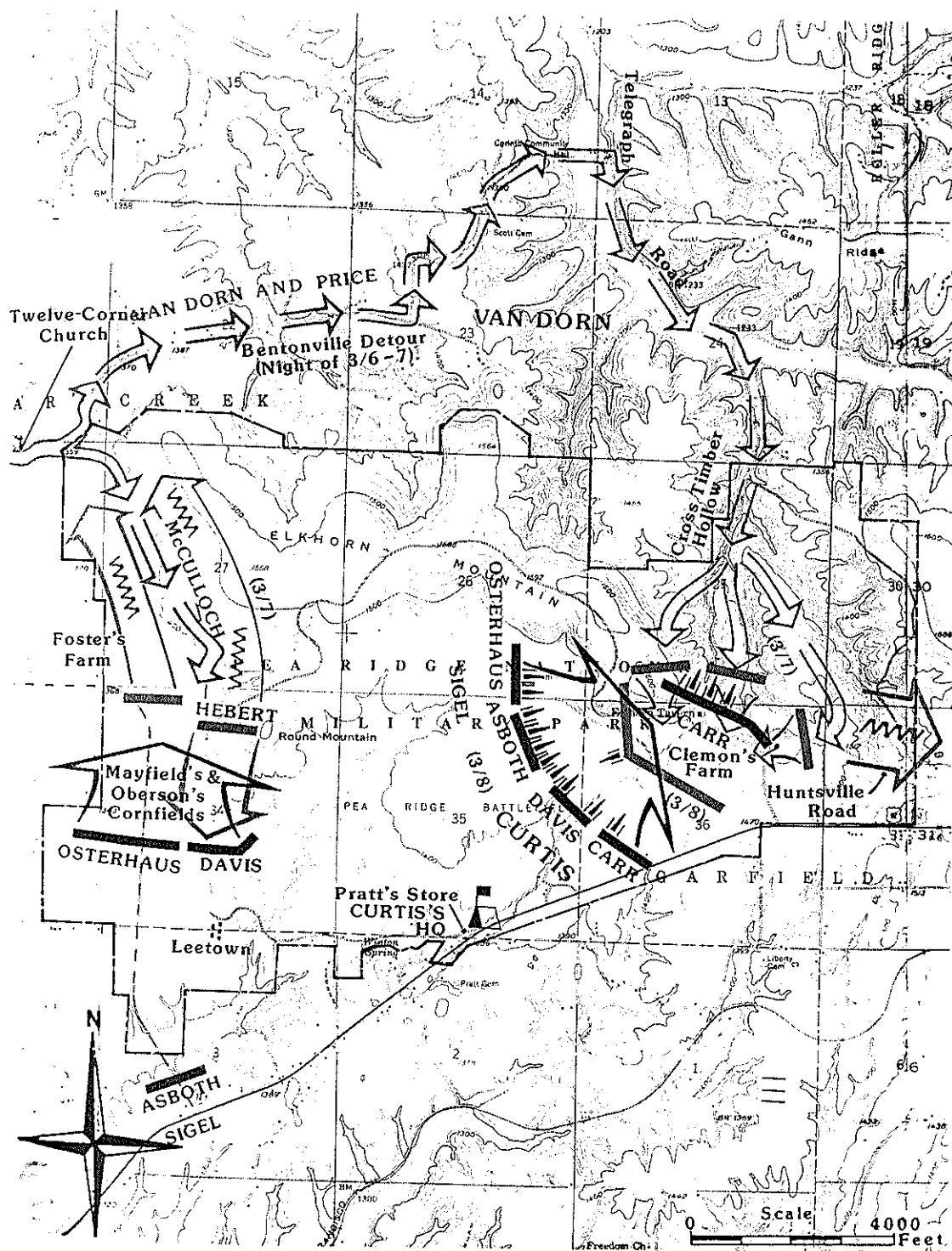
The second sector was the cornfields of Oberson's and Mayfield's farms. Osterhaus and Davis established a solid line of infantry and artillery in these fields, which were separated from Foster's farm by a belt of timber. As McCulloch led the advance, he was killed by a volley from two companies of Federal skirmishers posted in the woods. His successor, Brigadier General James McIntosh, ordered a general infantry attack. He personally led one regiment through the timber, and he too was killed by the Federal skirmishers. McIntosh's death ended the fighting in the Oberson-May-



combined  
mediately  
n of Mis-  
h 4 in the

ch, Curtis  
re the Tele-  
reek, three  
nearby hos-  
ederals for-  
n along the  
ged to move  
guard, led  
Brigadier  
d from Ben-  
on. Sigel es-  
derates with

ty of 16,500  
led by Price  
Sugar Creek.  
fortifications,  
e Federals by  
r rear. During  
ary Confeder-  
ville Detour, a  
he right flank  
ice's division  
y midmorning  
oward Elkhorn  
on fell so far be-



Combat Strength  
10,250  
16,500

### PEA RIDGE 7-8 March 1862

Casualties  
1,384  
1,500

## 24 Pea Ridge

field fields as fighting began in the third sector.

This was an area of thick scrub timber and densely tangled brush east of the cornfields, separated from them by the road that ran north from Leetown. Colonel Louis Hébert led 2,000 Confederate infantry troops through this thicket. They were opposed by half as many Federals in two regiments of Davis's Third Division in an hour-long fight, in which the brush reduced visibility to seventy-five yards. Hébert's men pushed these regiments back toward Leetown and captured two Federal cannon in the southeast corner of the cornfield.

This Confederate advance was repulsed as two Indiana regiments of Davis's other brigade outflanked Hébert's left and Osterhaus's division struck his right. Exhausted and unsupported, the remnants of Hébert's command retreated to the Bentonville Detour in mid-afternoon, along with the rest of McCulloch's division. Hébert was captured by the Federals. Just then Sigel arrived at Leetown with heavy reinforcements, helped to secure the battlefield, and then marched toward the ongoing fight at Elkhorn Tavern.

Price's division, with Van Dorn at its head, had encountered Carr's Fourth Division at the tavern. The Confederates were at the bottom of a deep canyon known as Cross Timber Hollow; the Federals occupied a superb defensive position on top of the Pea Ridge plateau. For several hours Van Dorn engaged the Federals with artillery before ordering Price to attack. The Confederates ascended the steep hill, pushed back both of Carr's flanks, and gained a foothold on the plateau. The most intense fighting of the entire battle of Pea Ridge occurred around Elkhorn Tavern and just to the east, at Clemon's farm. Carr's men were forced back nearly a mile before reinforcements arrived. Darkness halted the fighting.

During the night of March 7-8, Curtis concentrated his remaining 9,500 troops on the Telegraph Road in order to drive the Confederates away from Elkhorn Tavern in the morn-

ing. Van Dorn ordered the remnants of McCulloch's division to the tavern. With only about half of his 12,000 troops in any condition to fight, because of exhaustion and lack of food, Van Dorn formed his men into a V-shaped defensive line running along the edge of the woods south and west of the tavern.

At dawn on March 8 Curtis deployed the First, Second, Third, and Fourth divisions in numerical order from left to right, facing north. It was one of the few times in the war that an entire army from flank to flank was out in the open for all to see. Sigel directed the First and Second divisions west of the Telegraph Road, while Curtis directed the Third and Fourth divisions east of the road and retained overall command. During the next two hours Sigel gradually advanced and wheeled his troops around until they faced northeast. In this fashion the Federal line soon roughly corresponded to the V-shaped Confederate line.

To cover this movement the Federals hammered the rebels with twenty-one cannon, most of them directed personally by Sigel. This unusually well-coordinated fire compelled the Confederates to fall back to safer positions. Van Dorn's ordnance trains had been separated from the army as a result of negligent staff work, so the Confederates did not have enough ammunition for their artillery. The Federal army then advanced. After a brief fight the Confederate rear guard disengaged and the rout began. Van Dorn retreated southeast, leading the main body of his battered army entirely around the enemy army, a maneuver unique in the Civil War. Other Confederate units scattered north and west via their approach route, rejoining Van Dorn several days later in Van Buren. However, hundreds of Confederate soldiers left the colors to return home. Curtis did not know until the next day which route Van Dorn and the main column had taken, and by that time pursuit was futile.

The Confederates began the campaign with approximately 16,500 soldiers, including 800 Native Americans, but because the advance

was so rapid, Pea Ridge and gaged. About the battle. The at Pea Ridge: Half of the Federal Carr's Fourth Elkhorn Tavern

Despite being the Federals a strategic victory the battle ended



remnants of Mc-  
tavern. With only  
troops in any condi-  
haustion and lack  
his men into a V-  
ing along the edge  
st of the tavern.

urtis deployed the  
Fourth divisions in  
t to right, facing  
w times in the war  
flank to flank was  
e. Sigel directed the  
is west of the Tele-  
directed the Third  
of the road and re-  
During the next two  
anced and wheeled  
ey faced northeast.  
al line soon roughly  
shaped Confederate

t the Federals ham-  
twenty-one cannon,  
sonally by Sigel. This  
ed fire compelled the  
to safer positions.  
ains had been sepa-  
a result of negligent  
derates did not have  
their artillery. The  
ced. After a brief fight  
ard disengaged and  
retreated southeast,  
of his battered army  
ny army, a maneuver  
r. Other Confederate  
nd west via their ap-  
Van Dorn several days  
however, hundreds of  
t the colors to return  
ow until the next day  
and the main column  
ime pursuit was futile.  
an the campaign with  
oldiers, including 800  
because the advance

was so rapid, about 15,000 were present at Pea Ridge and even fewer were actually engaged. About 1,500 Confederates were lost in the battle. The Federals had 10,250 soldiers at Pea Ridge and suffered 1,384 casualties. Half of the Federal losses were incurred by Carr's Fourth Division during the fighting at Elkhorn Tavern on March 7.

Despite being outnumbered three to two, the Federals achieved a decisive tactical and strategic victory at Pea Ridge. The outcome of the battle ended any serious Confederate

threat to Missouri and led to the conquest of Arkansas. Van Dorn's impulsiveness, his obsession with speed and surprise, and his unconcern for logistics and staff work gravely weakened the Confederate effort. Conversely, Curtis's coolness and tactical boldness were major factors in the Federal victory.

Pea Ridge National Military Park is on State Route 71 near Pea Ridge, Arkansas, 20 miles northeast of Fayetteville. There are 4,300 acres of the historic battlefield within its authorized boundaries.