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# Fort Donelson and Pea Ridge

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## Fort Donelson and Pea Ridge

By the end of 1861 thirteen Iowa infantry regiments, three artillery companies, and five troops of cavalry had been mustered in. The men were first sent to Benton Barracks at St. Louis for training, and only three regiments saw limited service in Missouri before February of 1862. The 3rd had been in the battle of Blue Mills in September; the 7th fought under Grant at Belmont in November; and the 8th Infantry and First Cavalry fought at Milford in December.

Meanwhile, the Union and Confederate armies in the West deployed their forces. The Union troops were under Major General Henry W. Halleck, two of whose brigadiers would soon be famous: Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman. The Union strategy was to attack two Confederate forts, Henry and Donelson, on the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers respectively, near the Tennessee-Kentucky border.

### *Fort Donelson*

Four Iowa regiments were with Grant on his attacks on Forts Henry and Donelson — the 2nd, 7th, 12th, and 14th. They were all eager for a fight, especially the 2nd. Because of some horseplay in St. Louis, that regiment had been forced



to march to the steamboats without music and with their flag furled — almost the ultimate disgrace. Because of this, the men of the 2nd were determined to prove themselves.

The capture of Fort Henry, a low-lying fort on the east bank of the Tennessee River, was accomplished on February 6 by navy gunboats before the infantry, landing below the fort and marching overland, could reach it. Most of the Confederate troops escaped to Fort Donelson, which lay some twelve miles to the east, on the west bank of the Cumberland. Bad weather and impassable roads made Grant's movement toward Donelson impossible until February 11.

The four Iowa regiments were in the second division under command of Brigadier General Charles F. Smith: the 12th in the third brigade; the 2nd, 7th, and 14th, in the fourth brigade.

Fort Donelson, built on a high bluff, was protected on the land side by a line of earthworks built in a zigzag course on the ridges. Trees had been felled along these earthworks, with their tops pointing toward the attacker, the limbs trimmed and sharpened, so that the Union forces had to fight their way through this barrier and up the slopes to reach the enemy, all the time under merciless fire from the defenders.

During the daylight hours of February 13 Grant encircled Donelson with three divisions under Brigadier Generals John A. McClernand,





*Harper's Weekly*, March 15, 1862.  
Attack of Second Iowa on Batteries of Fort Donelson



Lew Wallace, and Charles F. Smith. A gunboat assault, made during the afternoon of February 14, failed, and Grant prepared to besiege the fort. However, on the morning of February 15 the Confederates attacked and scattered McClelland's troops on the right, in an effort to break out. As a diversion, Grant ordered Smith to attack on the left.

Led by General Smith, who placed the 2nd Iowa in the lead, commanded by their colonel, J. M. Tuttle, the troops fought their way through the fallen trees under heavy fire but without firing a shot until they had gained the breastworks. Scattering the enemy, they held their position until nightfall.

The following morning, while preparing to resume the fight, the men saw a white flag raised over the fort. The Confederate commander, General Simon B. Buckner, had asked Grant for terms of surrender. Grant's reply became famous: "No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted." Captured with Buckner were some 15,000 men, plus about forty pieces of artillery.

When the Union troops marched into the fort, the 2nd Iowa led the way, cheered by the other regiments and saluted by the general and his staff. To the tune of "Yankee Doodle," the regiment planted its colors on the parade ground. The recent "disgrace" at St. Louis was forgotten. The



2nd Iowa had paid heavily for the honor, however. Iowa lost 40 men killed in the battle, 33 alone from the 2nd. In addition, 251 were wounded, and one reported missing, for a total of 292.

Another Iowan won a Congressional Medal of Honor at Donelson: Voltaire P. Twombly of Van Buren County, a corporal of Company F of the 2nd, took the colors after three of the color guard had fallen. Hit by a spent ball, he still carried the flag and was the only man of the color guard on his feet at the end of the day.

#### *Pea Ridge*

The battle fought at Pea Ridge, Arkansas, on March 6-8, 1862, saved Missouri for the Union and brought fame and promotion to several Iowans.

The Confederate commander in the West, General Albert Sidney Johnston, had given Major General Earl Van Dorn the task of holding Missouri, and under him had placed three veterans of the Mexican War: Brigadier Generals Benjamin McCulloch and Albert Pike of the Confederate Army, and Major General Sterling Price of the Missouri State Guard.

The Union troops in Missouri were now commanded by Brigadier General Samuel R. Curtis of Keokuk. In February he moved against Price, forcing him out of Springfield and into Arkansas. Curtis followed and camped on Sugar Creek, a



small stream just south of a high range of hills known as Pea Ridge. Under his command he had four small divisions. In Colonel Eugene A. Carr's division, Colonel Grenville M. Dodge of Council Bluffs commanded the first brigade, which included his own 4th Iowa and the First Iowa Artillery. The second brigade of Carr's division was under another Iowan, Colonel William Vandever of Dubuque, who had his own regiment, the 9th, and the 3rd Iowa Artillery. Unassigned in this small army was the 3rd Iowa Cavalry, Colonel Cyrus Bussey of Bloomfield commanding. In all, Curtis had about 10,500 men with him at Pea Ridge. The number in Van Dorn's army is hard to estimate. He claimed about 14,000 while reporting Curtis' army as between 17,000 and 24,000. In turn, Curtis reported that Van Dorn had 20,000 to 30,000.

Whatever the numbers, the two armies finally clashed on March 6-8 in the battle known in the North as Pea Ridge, in the South as Elkhorn Tavern. Curtis had stationed his four divisions north of Sugar Creek, facing south. To hamper Van Dorn's approach, he had had Colonel Dodge's men fell trees on the roads approaching their position. But Van Dorn avoided a frontal attack and moved his men to the left, planning to turn Curtis' flank and attack him from the rear at Elkhorn Tavern. Hearing of this maneuver from his scouts, Curtis reversed his army to face



north and sent his new left wing to cut the Confederate army, marching northward, at the same time sending Carr's division toward Elkhorn Tavern. In a violent encounter on the left, Pike and McCulloch were defeated after several hours of fighting during which McCulloch was killed.

Meanwhile, Carr's division on the right, hotly engaged with Van Dorn and Price, was forced to give ground slowly. By 5 o'clock in the afternoon, after Carr's men had been under almost constant fire for seven hours, and had suffered severe losses, help arrived when Curtis moved his victorious left wing to the support of the right. Of the 4th and 9th Iowa, fighting under Carr that day, Curtis wrote: "These two regiments won imperishable honors."

Night fell on the two exhausted armies, but Curtis gave his men little rest. Again he moved them into a new line, this time running north and south and facing the Confederates now massed to his east.

With sunrise the battle resumed, with Curtis directing the Iowa batteries on the left and in the center. As the batteries roared, the blue-clad troops moved steadily forward, and soon the Confederates were in retreat. By 10 o'clock Van Dorn had abandoned the field. Two weeks later Curtis was promoted to major general.

The victory was costly. Almost 1,400 Union men were killed, wounded, or missing after the



battle. In all, Iowa suffered 443 casualties at Pea Ridge: 64 dead, 362 wounded, and 17 missing. Most of this loss occurred in the two infantry regiments: the 4th lost 18 killed, 139 wounded, 3 missing; the 9th, 38 killed, 176 wounded, 4 missing, for a total in both regiments of 378.

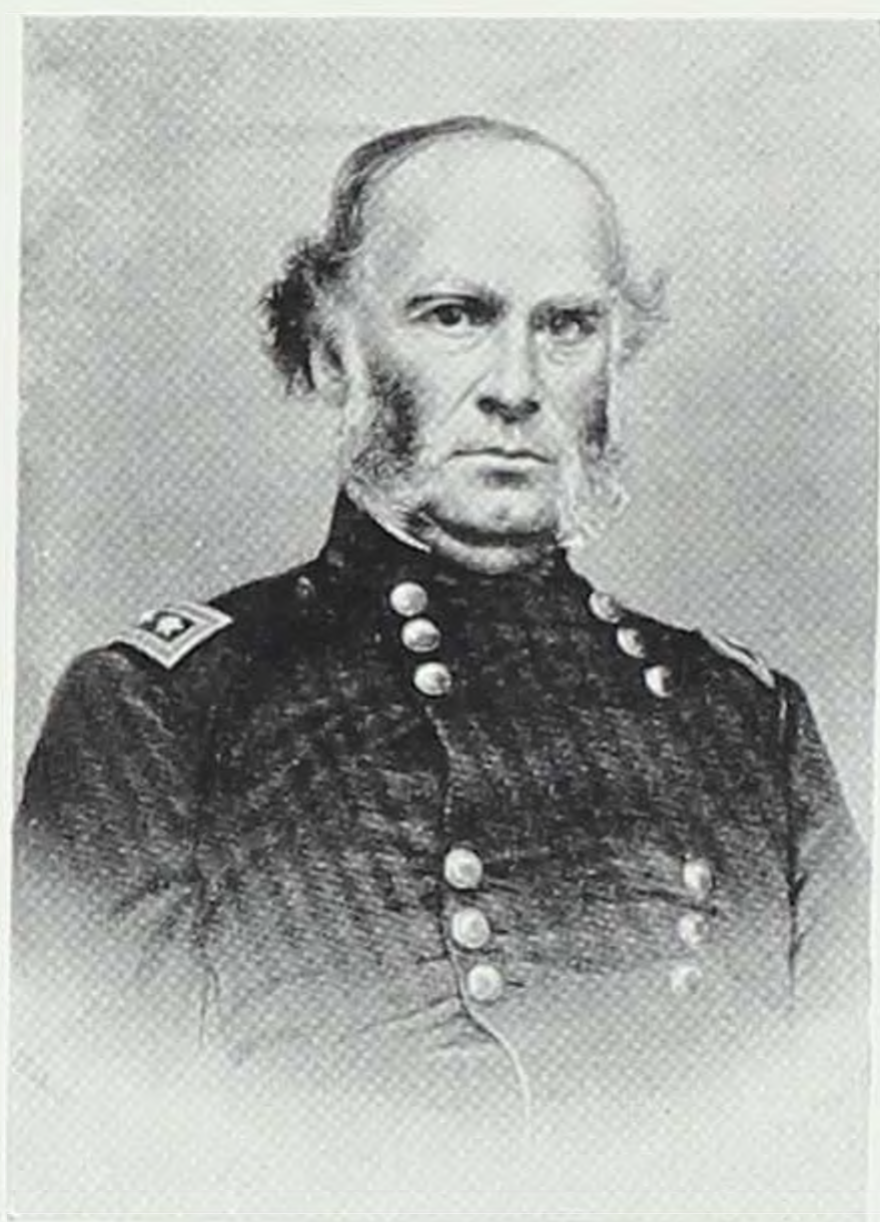
Two Iowans won Congressional Medals of Honor at Pea Ridge: Albert Power, a private in the 3rd Cavalry, who rescued a dismounted comrade; and Lieutenant Colonel Francis J. Herron of the 9th Infantry, who led his men with great bravery until disabled and captured.

Significantly, Iowa's three major generals fought at Pea Ridge. Curtis was promoted to that rank on March 21, 1862; Dodge became a brigadier on March 31, 1862, and a major general on June 7, 1864; Herron, a brigadier on July 30, 1862, and a major general on November 29, 1863.

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The site of Fort Donelson is now a national military park, and at nearby Dover, Tennessee, there is a national cemetery where many of the men who died in the battle are buried. Pea Ridge has been acquired by the National Park Service.





IOWA'S MAJOR  
GENERALS

SAMUEL R. CURTIS



GRENVILLE M. DODGE

FRANCIS J. HERRON

