

The Wilson's Creek Staff Ride and Hootenanny

By Bill Stacy

One of the required missions for Army military history detachments (MHDs) is to develop the ability to plan, organize, and conduct a staff ride. During the week-long annual MHD Training Course held in July 2000 at Camp Robinson in North Little Rock, Arkansas, the course instructors and detachment personnel conducted a staff ride at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield in Missouri. Maj. Sherman Fleek and Capt. Les Melnyk of the National Guard Bureau Historical Services Office served as staff ride leaders.

The Battle of Wilson's Creek receives relatively little public notice today, although it was one of a series of critical early battles that kept Missouri in the Union during the Civil War. It occurred while the contenders' attention was directed primarily toward other key theaters. Even the Union's Western Department commander, Maj. Gen. John C. Frémont, did not consider the battle very important. He focused his attention and resources instead on the threat to Cairo, Illinois, posed by the Confederate force under Brig. Gen. Gideon Pillow that had taken New Madrid, Missouri, on the Mississippi River.

The Union force at Wilson's Creek consisted of regular and volunteer units gathered mostly from Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa. Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon, a U.S. Military Academy graduate, led the main Union column, while Col. Franz Sigel, a graduate of the military academy at Karlsruhe, Germany, led a subsidiary column. The Confederate force that was attacked at Wilson's Creek comprised elements of the newly formed Missouri State Guard led by militia Maj. Gen. Sterling Price, a former governor of Missouri, and a composite Confederate Army force led by Brig. Gen. Ben McCulloch, a former Texas Ranger and U.S. marshal in that state. After a certain amount of wrangling, McCulloch assumed overall command of the Confederate force.

Missouri had spiraled into violence quickly in the spring of 1861. After Lyon's troops had arrested some 700 state militiamen mustering near St. Louis, an angry and aggressive St. Louis crowd confronted Lyon's

forces. The bloody and uneven confrontation that ensued on 10 May left twenty-eight civilians and two of Lyon's troops dead. In reaction, the Missouri legislature created the Missouri State Guard, to which pro-Confederate governor Claiborne Jackson appointed commanders favorably disposed toward secession. Fearing that the state government was preparing to desert the Union, Lyon in June attacked Jefferson City and drove the governor and the nascent Missouri State Guard out of the capital, forcing the latter to retreat to Cowskin Prairie in the southwestern corner of the state. General McCulloch moved his Confederate force from Arkansas into Missouri at the end of July 1861 and with Price began to maneuver to isolate Lyon's force, then headquartered in Springfield. Lyon, however, stole a march on them and attacked them in their camp at Wilson's Creek early on the morning of 10 August 1861. Not only did Lyon achieve complete surprise, but he had also launched a secondary column, led by Colonel Sigel, which had succeeded in interposing itself on the Confederates' best available line of retreat.

Initially it appeared that the Union force would win a complete victory, but the Confederates stood their ground, and the weight of their superior numbers eventually turned the tide. What ensued was a stand-up battle, with both sides often facing each other across short distances without any defensive works whatsoever. This was one of the first major battles of the war, and neither side fully understood the lethality of rifled muskets and the advantages of defensive works. In addition, both combatants benefited from excellent artillery support. The result was that each side suffered very high casualty rates: 1,317 Union casualties in a force of 5,600, compared to 1,230 Confederate casualties in a force of 10,175. The outcome of the battle was inconclusive. The Union troops retreated to Springfield, and the Confederates held the field of battle. After the bruising they had received, however, McCulloch's Confederates were unwilling to push farther into Missouri. Although Lyon

lost his life in the effort, his daring attack kept the bulk of Missouri under Union control.

Staff ride methodology calls for the student participants to study the battle in detail and to come prepared to give presentations during the course of the staff ride. One of the major difficulties in conducting a staff ride at a course to which the students deploy from all over the country for only a week is to arrange adequate preparation and coordination. Major Fleek and Captain Melnyk designed and conducted the staff ride, while Sfc. Bill Roche of the 44th Military History Detachment coordinated administrative support. All three soldiers did a great job of pulling off this major training effort in what would prove to be very adverse conditions.

The first warning that the participants would be in for an unusual staff ride was the weather report from southwestern Missouri for the prior day, which stated that the area around Wilson's Creek had received up to five inches of rain. Staff ride tradition calls for conducting the staff ride no matter how adverse the weather, unless it threatens the safety of the students. Since this is military training, physical discomfort is

not allowed to be a factor.

The staff riders were delayed an hour in Little Rock awaiting their naval air transport, but the "can-do" attitude of the reserve component naval air crew more than made up for this inconvenience. The staff riders flew to the National Guard facility at Springfield, Missouri, where they boarded buses rented from Fort Leonard Wood. En route, the Navy airmen became so interested in the staff ride concept that two of them joined the ride. The participants received their first report on ground conditions at Wilson's Creek from an Army National Guard officer at the Springfield airport. He stated that quite a lot of rain had been reported in the area. However, he said that he lived close to the battlefield and had received only about an inch of rain.

The buses drove the staff ride participants to the Visitors' Center at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, where the staff ride began with an orientation at a diorama of the battlefield accompanied by an excellent narrative recording. Due to the large size of the group, the staff riders split into two platoons, one led by Major Fleek and the other by Captain Melnyk. "Sherman's Death Marchers" went to the first stop, where they



Melnyk's Marauders



High Waters on Wilson's Creek

discussed the Union's march to the battle. "Melnyk's Marauders" would follow in thirty minutes. After their preparatory discussions, both groups marched across a large field that had been allowed to return to its natural state. The purpose of this exercise was to illustrate graphically to the students the difficult terrain through which both sides had to march and fight.

"Sherman's march to the creek" unfortunately was cut short by the high waters of Wilson's Creek. As the weather report would confirm, five inches of rain had fallen upstream, and the creek had jumped its banks. As a consequence, both groups had to march upstream to a bridge in order to cross to the other side for the second stop, which was critical for explaining the opening phase of the battle. A little unintended humor awaited the students at the low-water ford: a hazardous water warning sign.

Improvisation is often required on staff rides, and the changes in the terrain conditions at Wilson's Creek because of the rain caused the staff ride leaders to improvise from that point. Not only were the staff riders unable to ford the creek on foot, but in several places even the buses had to go around overflowed bridges.

In addition, many of the planned routes of march had to be adjusted due to flooded creek-side paths. Major Fleek and Captain Melnyk both used Wilson's Creek to drive home the importance of weather and terrain in any battle. For example, if Wilson's Creek had been flooded on 10 August 1861, the day's battle might well have had a very different outcome. The majority of the Confederate force was on the opposite side of the creek from where the Union attackers approached. Had Lyon encountered floodwaters, both sides might have prepared and settled down into solid defensive positions. This might have left the Confederates more capable of pushing forward into central Missouri than they would be after the losses they suffered at the hands of Lyon's forces.

Thanks to much improvisation and outstanding teaching by both the staff ride leaders and the MHD participants, the staff ride concluded successfully. Among the many lessons the participants learned was that reconnaissance is absolutely essential to any operation. This staff ride taught that lesson in a way that the participants will not soon forget.

The Wilson's Creek staff ride soon became the

stuff of legend as it entered the collective mythology of MHD history and traditions. Back at Camp Robinson “The Combat Curators” who had participated on the staff ride regaled the participants with a ballad they had written to commemorate the event. Since building unit and soldier esprit is one of the goals of a staff ride, “The Battle of Wilson’s Creek,” transcribed below, clearly shows that this staff ride was a major success.

The Battle of Wilson’s Creek
(Sung to the tune of “The Battle of New Orleans”)

Verse 1:

At the Army MHD course, we took a little trip.
We followed Fleek and Melnyk to a swollen Wilson’s Crik.
We took some bottled water to overcome the heat,
Some blousing bands and sunscreen, and lots and lots of Deet.

Chorus:

We staggered through the briars, and we staggered through the ivy,
And we staggered through the places where the chigger critters grow.
We staggered back and forth, but we never made a crossing
Along the swollen creek banks where the rangers wouldn’t go.

Verse 2:

We left the PE Center to meet some Navy fliers.
They flew us to the staff ride in comfort, class, and style.
We left the Army buses and we trudged up Bloody Hill.
We’re good to go, it’s 12 o’clock—we started with a will.

Repeat Chorus

Verse 3:

We followed Lyon’s footsteps, as best as we could go
To learn about the battle that happened long ago.
The weather it was rainy, and we all commenced to sweat,
But we followed Fleek and Melnyk ‘til all were soaking wet.

Repeat Chorus

Verse 4:

Well, we hunted for the batt’ry and we hunted for the road,
But all we found was mud and crud, beside the overflow.
We felt the ticks attackin’ like Old McCulloch’s rebs,
So we called it quits like Sigel did and from the battle fled.

Repeat Chorus

The combat curators at this particular hootenanny were Rex Boggs, Dave Cole, Steve Draper, Paul Martin, Jim Speraw, and Ceilia Stratton.

Sources of Further Information

William R. Brooksher, *Bloody Hill: The Civil War Battle of Wilson's Creek* (Washington, D.C., 1995)

George E. Knapp, *The Wilson's Creek Staff Ride and Battlefield Tour* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans., 1993)

William Garrett Piston and Richard W. Hatcher III, *Wilson's Creek: The Second Battle of the Civil War and the Men Who Fought It* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000)

Bill Stacy is the command historian at U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM). CMH and FORSCOM jointly host the annual MHD training course, which has developed into a major training event for soldiers, historians, and curators involved in military history operations in the field.

New Publications

The Military History Office of the U.S. Army Forces Command has published *Army Values: Vignettes of the American Soldier Living and Demonstrating Army Values* by Mason R. Schaefer. The book is available in paperback and CD-ROM. Forces Command historian William Stacy is handling the distribution of these products. Interested offices may request copies by sending an email message to Stacyb@forscom.army.mil or by writing to Headquarters, U.S. Army Forces Command, ATTN: AFSG-MH (Military History), 1641 Hardee Avenue SW, Fort McPherson, Georgia 30330.

During 2000 the Center published the first three of five projected commemorative brochures on the actions of the U.S. Army in the Korean War. The first pamphlet, *The Outbreak* by William Joe Webb, covers the period 27 June–15 September 1950. It is CMH Pub 19–6, carries GPO stock number 008–029–00360–1, and may be purchased for \$1.75. The second pamphlet, *The UN Offensive* by Stephen Gammons, covers the period 16 September–2 November 1950. It is CMH Pub 19–7, carries GPO stock number 008–029–00361–9, and costs \$2. The third pamphlet, *The Chinese Intervention* by Richard W. Stewart, covers the period 3 November 1950–24 January 1951. It is CMH Pub 19–8, carries GPO stock number 008–029–00362–7, and also costs \$2.

The Center of Military History has also issued a four-disk CD-ROM entitled “The United States Army and the Korean War.” This CD-ROM contains all the materials the Center has published on the Korean War, with the exception of the commemorative brochures described in the previous paragraph. It is CD-ROM EM 0182 and may be purchased for \$24 under GPO stock number 008–029–00365–1. Once all five of the commemorative brochures and the fifth and final poster map the Center has been preparing for the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War have been published, the Center will release a new edition of this CD-ROM to add these additional items.

Each of the Center's new publications is also available to Army publication account holders from the Distribution Operations Facility, U.S. Army Publishing Agency, 1655 Woodson Road, St. Louis, Missouri 63114–6181.

New Articles by Army History Authors

Two authors whose articles appeared in the Spring 2000 issue of *Army History* (No. 49) have published related essays elsewhere that may also interest readers of this bulletin. Richard A. Mobley, whose article “North Korea: How Did It Prepare for the 1950 Attack?” opened that issue, has written about the implications of North Korea's attack to American military intelligence. His new article, “North Korea's Surprise Attack: Weak U.S. Analysis?” appeared in the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 13 (Winter 2000): 490–514. Vincent J. Cirillo, author of “‘The Patriotic Odor’: Sanitation and Typhoid Fever in the National Encampments during the Spanish-American War,” in *Army History*, has published another article on the medical history of that war. His article, “The Spanish-American War and Military Radiology,” appeared in the *American Journal of Roentgenology* 174 (May 2000): 1233–39.