

Battle of Pilot Knob

By the summer of 1864 Confederate army had suffered bitter, large scale defeats in the east, and the death of the Confederacy appeared near. West of the Mississippi, there were no great Union armies. The state was defended with mostly inexperienced State Militia forces. The Confederacy desperately needed a victory to boost the morale of its supporters. An invasion of Missouri made sense. Southern sympathy was strong and an invading Confederate army might expect local support. The arsenal in St. Louis would provide badly needed arms

and ammunition. After taking St. Louis the Confederate army could move on Jefferson City, and if successful, restore Thomas C. Reynolds, the Confederate Governor-in-exile. Most important, it was hoped that this offensive would help relieve the burden on Confederate armies in the East by forcing the Union to transfer troops to the West.

Maj. General Sterling Price was selected to lead the invasion of Missouri. His army was composed of three divisions of cavalry totalling eight brigades plus several unattached regiments and battalions. One division, commanded by Maj. General James F. Fagan contained approximately 5,100 men and four cannons. A second division, commanded by Maj. General John S. Marmaduke, had approximately 3,800 men and six cannons. Brig. General Joseph O. Shelby commanded the third division with approximately 3,800 men and four cannons. Price's army was, however, composed largely of untested soldiers, many equipped with inferior weapons. At least one fourth of his soldiers had no weapons. These he hoped to equip with weapons from the Union arsenal once St. Louis fell. On September 16, 1864, Price brought his army together at Pocahontas, Arkansas. Advancing in three columns, Price's army arrived in the vicinity of Fredericktown by September 25.

Acting on information that Union reinforcements had been transferred to St. Louis, Price changed his plan of a direct attack on the city. He decided, instead, to attack Fort Davidson near Pilot Knob assuming that the garrison could be easily taken. Shelby's division was ordered to destroy track and bridges on the St. Louis & Iron Mountain Railroad north of the fort to prevent rapid reinforcement from St. Louis. He then ordered Fagan's Division, followed by Marmaduke's, to march westward to Pilot Knob.

Receiving reports that Shelby's force had been seen near Farmington, Brig. General Thomas Ewing, Jr. was sent from St. Louis to Pilot Knob to determine if Price's entire army might be in the area. He was to evacuate and destroy Fort Davidson if he found he was threatened by Price's whole army. Ewing, accompanied by five companies of the 14th Iowa Infantry Volunteers, reached

Pilot Knob on September 26 and assumed command of the fort. With the arrival of the Iowa volunteers, about 1300 men were available for the defense of Fort Davidson. These included Missouri cavalry and infantry units and approximately 150 black and white civilian volunteers from the area.

As Shelby's Division left to destroy tracks and bridges on the Iron Mountain Railroad on September 26, a brigade of Fagan's Division rode toward Pilot Knob on the Fredericktown road. The brigade passed through the undefended Shut-ins gap at the southeast end of the Arcadia Valley and advanced toward Arcadia and Ironton. Union and Confederate troops clashed in the streets of Ironton until a Union cavalry charge pushed the rebels back to the Shut-Ins gap. Throughout the night Confederate forces moved through the gap until Fagan's entire division had entered the valley Marmaduke's Division was camped less than ten miles from Pilot Knob. By 1:00 a.m., General Ewing concluded that he faced Price's army but he decided to stay and fight, rather than destroy the fort and retreat.

Tuesday, September 27 dawned cool and misty. By then the Confederate battle line extended three quarters of a mile across the valley just south of Ironton. The Confederates attacked at dawn. A rebel cannon ball struck the courthouse. The Union infantry retreated to the Ironton Gap where soldiers were placed along the southern base of Shepherd Mountain, on the western slope of Pilot Knob and across the Ironton Gap. Union troops repelled several frontal attacks. Later in the morning General Price arrived. Confederate troops had gained control of the slopes of both Shepherd and Pilot Knob Mountains facing the fort. Price planned an assault on the fort from four sides, supported by fire from two cannons placed on Shepherd Mountain.

The attack began at 2:00 p. m. Union soldiers in the fort survived charge after charge by the Confederate force before nightfall ended the fighting. Realizing Fort Davidson would probably not be able to withstand an artillery shelling followed by a frontal assault, General Ewing decided to evacuate the fort during the night. Covering the draw bridge with tents and blankets to muffle the sound of the wheels of the guns and the horses' feet, the entire Union force slipped out of the fort, leaving behind a detail to destroy the fort. Gun powder was dumped out and the detail commander tossed lighted torches into the magazine. At approximately 3:30 a.m. the magazine exploded with a blast that was felt twenty miles away. A reenactment of the Battle of Pilot Knob is held every three years.

From the website: <http://www.rosecity.net/civilwar/batpilot.html>