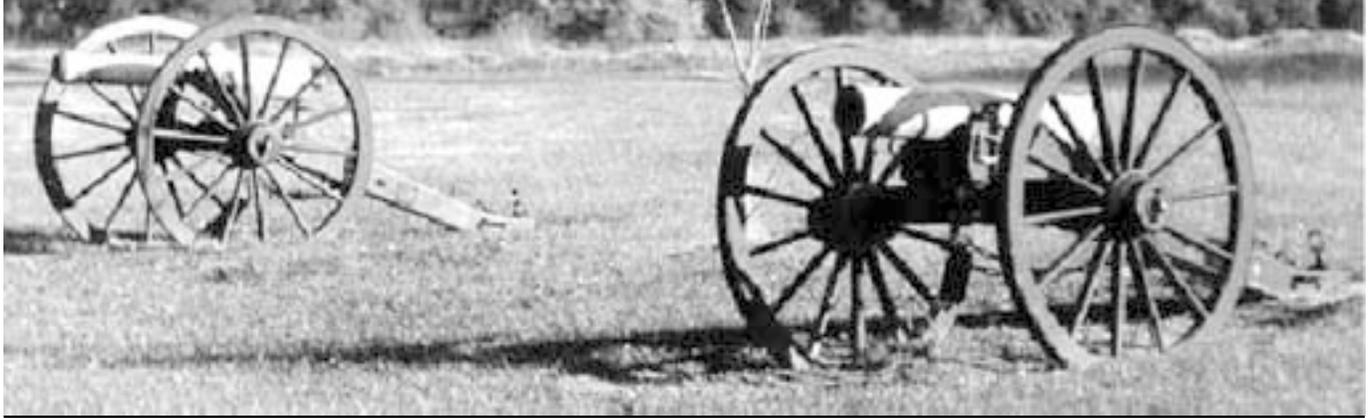


The Battle of Wilson's Creek— Its Relevancy to Today's Chemical Officers



By Major Thomas A. Duncan II

The days of staff rides to the Civil War battlefields of Chickamauga and Kennesaw Mountain are history for the Chemical Corps since its move from Fort McClellan, Alabama, to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. The question now is how can we achieve, in Missouri, the training value that a staff ride offers?

There are Civil War battlefields near Fort Leonard Wood that offer Chemical Corps officers the chance to study the art and science of warfare. Only Virginia and Tennessee had more Civil War battles, skirmishes, and raids than Missouri.¹ The Battle of Wilson's Creek (also known as the Battle of Oak Hills) is one of Missouri's most historically relevant battles. It was the second battle of the Civil War and was fought only two weeks after the first Battle of Bull Run (also known as the first Battle of Manassas). During this battle, the federal army lost 24 percent of its combat power (258 dead, 873 wounded, 186 missing or captured) while the southern forces had a 12 percent casualty rate (279 dead, 951 wounded).

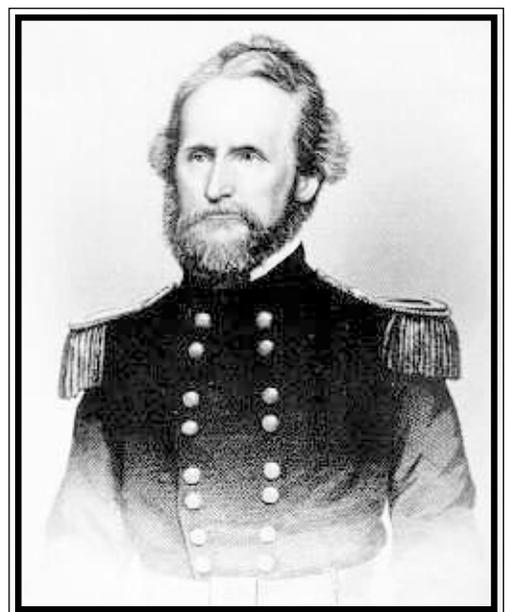
Union Brigadier General (BG) Nathaniel Lyon was the first general to die in the Civil War. Five Union men were awarded the Medal of Honor. This battle played a significant role

in Missouri remaining under Union control for the rest of the Civil War because it kept President Lincoln focused on maintaining control of the state. But the outcome of the battle is not the only thing that makes it relevant for soldiers to study. This article explains how the Battle of Wilson's Creek can be used as a tool to professionally develop officers on the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war; elements of combat power; principles of war; tenets of Army operations; and battle command.

Strategic, Operational, and Tactical Levels of War

FM 3-0, *Operations*, defines the levels of war as “doctrinal perspectives that clarify the links between strategic objectives and tactical actions.”² The Battle of Wilson's Creek was a direct result of the Union's leadership defining its strategic objectives and then refining them into operational and

tactical actions. “Strategy is the art and science of developing and employing armed forces and other instruments of national power in a synchronized fashion to secure national or multinational objectives.”³



BG Nathaniel Lyon

To answer how the national strategy relates to Wilson's Creek, we must examine why the state of Missouri was important in 1861.

One reason Missouri was strategically important was that the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers flowed through the center of the state and its eastern border. Control of the Mississippi was critical to Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan. The plan was "a strategy by which the U.S. military chief [Scott] sought to slowly strangle the Confederacy by blockading, or otherwise dominating, the ocean and river ports."⁴ If the Union controlled the state of Missouri, it would have a significant advantage in the struggle for control of the Mississippi River Valley. Seizing it would split the Confederacy in half.

Missouri was also relevant because of its production of corn (third in the nation), hemp (second in the nation), lead (first in the nation), livestock (second in the nation), and 2 million pounds of wool (annually).⁵ Clearly, Missouri was a strategic location and a major source of the materials needed to fight a war. This led to operational and tactical actions taken by strategic planners on both sides in Missouri.

The operational level of war is defined as a major operation that is a "series of tactical actions (battles, engagements, strikes, and others) conducted by various combat forces of a single, or several services, coordinated in time and place to accomplish operational and sometimes strategic objectives in an operational area."⁶

In June 1861, both sides in the conflict began major operations that resulted in a series of battles as each



sought to gain the advantage over the other. Claibourne Jackson, governor of Missouri, and Major General (MG) Sterling Price were the key leaders of Missourians with undeclared southern sympathies. BG Lyon's Union forces, moving from Saint Louis, forced Jackson and Price from the official seat of state power—the state capital at Jefferson City. Federal operations attempted to prevent Jackson's State Guard from joining reinforcements coming north from Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. These operations resulted in battles and engagements at Booneville, Carthage, Dug Springs, and Wilson's Creek.

Teaching our officers the strategic and operational reasoning behind the actions that led to Wilson's Creek is a fantastic example of how these thought processes shaped where and how battles are fought to achieve our national objectives.

"Tactics is the employment of units in combat."⁷ Examining the tactics used during the Battle of Wilson's Creek allows us to develop an understanding of the fundamentals of the science and art of war. Chapter 4 of FM 3-0 begins with the following quote from Frederick the

Great: "The art of war owns certain elements and fixed principles. We must acquire that theory and lodge it in our heads—otherwise, we will never get far." He understood that there are underlying tenets and principles in warfare and a leader must study and understand these concepts to be successful on future battlefields.

Elements of Combat Power

"Maneuver, firepower, information, protection, and leadership comprise the elements of combat power."⁸ "Information enhances leadership and magnifies the effects of maneuver, firepower, and protection."⁹ I will examine the element of information to demonstrate how it can be applied during a Wilson's Creek staff ride.

On 9 August 1861, Confederate BG McCulloch, southern commander at Wilson's Creek, received inaccurate information, which led him to make decisions that put his army at risk. He was told that BG Lyon was getting ready to abandon the city of Springfield. That information combined with the possibility of a storm caused McCulloch to decide to stay at his campsite on the creek instead of advancing to Springfield that night.¹⁰

At the same time, BG Lyon received accurate information from his scouts. His patrol of federal Dragoons encountered an enemy element within 5 miles of Springfield. The patrol not only confirmed the approximate location of the confederate army, but it also determined that members of the element it encountered were from a Texas unit. This confirmed the presence of the Missouri State Guard and reinforced the suspicion that elements from Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana had linked up. Lyon then realized he could not withdraw from Springfield with his predominantly infantry force; the nearest rail station was a 120-mile march to Rolla, Missouri; and the enemy possessed a large number of cavalrymen. This critical information was a key factor in Lyon's decision to attack. He hoped to seize the initiative and attempt to defeat McCulloch and Price's forces.¹¹ To understand Lyon's logic, we must understand the principles of war and how they were applied at Wilson's Creek.

Principles of War

The principles of war are objective, offensive, mass, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, security, surprise, and simplicity. FM 3-0 defines offensive as "seize, retain, and exploit the initiative."¹² It also states, "Commanders use offensive actions to impose their will on the enemy." I will use the offensive principle of war to demonstrate how these foundations "of army operational doctrine"¹³ can be taught using this particular battle.

BG Lyon's informational advantage allowed him an opportunity to seize the initiative on 10 August 1861. One of his commanders, Colonel Franz Sigel, came up with a plan that relied on surprise and audacity (two characteristics of offensive operations). Sigel proposed that the Union forces split into two elements: Lyon



Colonel Franz Sigel

would move across the plains to make contact with McCulloch's forces while Sigel attempted to envelop him, "interdicting the enemies withdrawal routes."¹⁴ Lyon agreed to Sigel's plan and ordered the attack at daybreak on 10 August.

At about 0500, Lyon's forces attacked. They completely surprised the enemy and quickly seized the most prominent terrain feature on their axis of advance—the hill that later became known as *Bloody Hill*. This hill overlooked the encampment of the Missouri State Guard (under the command of MG Price) and McCulloch's southern forces. When Sigel heard Lyon's attack at the northern end of the enemy's camp, he began firing his cannons into the southern end. At this point in the battle, Lyon and Sigel had the initiative. Even though they were outnumbered 10,125 (southern) to 5,400 (federal), accurate and timely information allowed Lyon to undertake offensive operations and seize the initiative early in the fight.¹⁵

Tenets of Army Operations

"The tenets of Army operations—initiative, agility, depth, synchronization, and versatility—build on the principles of war. They further describe the characteristics of successful operations. These tenets

are essential to victory but do not guarantee success; however, without them the risk of failure increases."¹⁶

I have mentioned *initiative* several times in this article. "Initiative is setting or dictating the terms of action throughout the battle or operation."¹⁷ McCulloch's forces awoke and began eating breakfast only to be attacked from the north and the south simultaneously and without warning. This certainly set the "terms of action" early in the battle. Lyon's ability to seize and exploit the initiative at the outset of the battle probably led to the federal forces' initial success.

Battle Command

General George S. Patton wrote, "You can never have too much reconnaissance."¹⁸ That was true in Patton's time and is still true today. "Battle command is the exercise of command in operations against a thinking, hostile enemy."¹⁹ Each commander's ability to see himself, the enemy, and the terrain must be studied to maximize the use of a staff ride. There are many aspects of battle command that can be discussed, but this article focuses only on the visualization aspect.

The key to conducting a staff ride and the reason it cannot be replaced with a PowerPoint® presentation is that it allows the students to see how the terrain helped shape the outcome of the battle. Mission, enemy, terrain, troops—time available, and civil considerations (METT-TC) help lead commanders through a thought process that enables them to better *see* the battlefield.

Doctrinally, leaders use METT-TC to assist in visualizing the battlefield. To demonstrate how METT-TC is used for training, I will briefly describe how each area relates to Wilson's Creek, using the staff ride as the training tool. For the sake of



General Lyon leads his men into action in this illustration from *Harper's Weekly*.

simplicity, I will use Lyon's perspective as the example.

Mission. Lyon believed his mission was to hold Springfield. "The general [Lyon] appreciated the great calamity that would befall the people of the Union proclivities residing in southwestern Missouri if the Union army were to evacuate the area. Besides, he observed that Springfield was the place to defend Saint Louis."²⁰ Being outnumbered almost two to one, Lyon knew he could not hold Springfield without maneuvering to gain the advantage.

Enemy. Lyon knew the enemy was poorly equipped, inexperienced, and at the end of its supplies. A quick strike might force the army to withdraw from southwestern Missouri.

Terrain. Bloody Hill and Wilson's Creek dominated the battlefield. Lyon immediately realized this and took appropriate actions. He ensured control of the high ground (Bloody Hill), anchoring his left flank against the creek. Although he

failed, Lyon ordered Captain Plummer's 1st Infantry across the creek to ensure that McCulloch's forces could not use it to screen the enemy's movement and flank its army. He also used his army's knowledge of the terrain to facilitate Sigel's envelopment of McCulloch's southern forces.

Weather shaped the outcome of the battle. The chance of rain the night of 9 August delayed the Confederate and State Guard advance on Springfield. Exhaustion caused by the August heat also contributed to Price and McCulloch not pursuing the federal forces when they withdrew from the battlefield.

Troops. Lyon had several elements in his command whose enlistments were about to expire. The first was the 1st Iowa, whose enlistment expired on 14 August 1861.²¹ He knew that—

- The numerical odds against him would increase every day he delayed an attack and that his force was predominantly infantry.

- Withdrawal from Springfield involved marching to Rolla, Jefferson City, or Kansas City with a large enemy-mounted force potentially cutting off his route of march.
- There were no reinforcements coming and his supply line relied on maintaining a clear route to Rolla.

Time Available. The timing of the battle was driven by Lyon's desire to avoid withdrawing to Rolla in the face of a strong enemy, McCulloch's proximity to Springfield, and the impending enlistment expiration for much of his force. He also used darkness to screen his movement and dawn as a time to attack to surprise the enemy.

Civil Considerations. McCulloch's forces had camped at Wilson's Creek because of the civilian population located there. He learned from his scouts that there were a number of ripening cornfields at that location.²² Lyon's concern for the citizens who supported the Union caused

him to not give up southwestern Missouri. Local inhabitants also played a role in providing intelligence to both sides. Civilians on the battlefield informed Lyon's scouts that Texans were located with MG Price's Missouri State Guard. This indicated to BG Lyon that BG McCulloch's forces had linked up with MG Price. These examples demonstrate that the Battle of Wilson's Creek is an excellent case study for understanding how an army's involvement with civilians can actually shape why, where, and when battles are fought.

Medals of Honor

There are many reasons to study and conduct staff rides at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield besides these doctrinal applications. The Medal of Honor was established during the Civil War. There were five recipients in this battle: Nicholas S. Bouquet, Lorenzo D. Immell, John M. Schofield, William M. Wherry, and Henry Clay Wood. All received the Medal of Honor for various acts of bravery during the battle.²³ I believe it is useful to remind ourselves that the reason we have one nation today and the freedoms we enjoy is because of the heroism and self-sacrifice of those who served before us. Many heroes from our past discovered their true strength on a battlefield in Missouri. This fact is often not discussed, and many dismiss it as being irrelevant.

While I have focused on the Union Medal of Honor recipients, let there be no doubt there was heroism

on both sides of the battle. Several Confederates were recognized for honor in the official dispatches of the battle. The Confederate "Dispatches" served the same purpose as medals awarded by the Union.

Conclusion

Why is the Battle of Wilson's Creek relevant to today's chemical officers? The answer to this question has many pieces. This article just scratched the surface of what can be gained by an in-depth study of any battle, past or present. Wilson's Creek can be used as a vehicle to professionally develop officers on the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war; elements of combat power; principles of war; tenets of Army operations; and battle command. These lessons can be learned if an individual is willing to analyze the battle and walk the battlefield. A study of this or any other battle is never wasted time for a leader or commander.

Authors Note: I must give credit where credit is due. I was inspired to write this article because of Dr. Burton Wright III (Doc). He was the first to teach me about the Battle of Wilson's Creek. He also assisted me the first time I took students to the battlefield. Although he is no longer with us, he lives on in those of us who were his students.

Endnotes:

¹ Vincent Tyndall and Jewell Smith, *The Battle of Wilson's Creek 130th Anniversary Reenactment Guide*, Wilson Creek National Battlefield Foundation, Springfield, Missouri, Vincent Tyndall, Jewell Smith, 1991, p. 32.

² Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, June 2001, p.2-2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ James M. McPherson, (ed), Bruce Catton, (nar), *The American Heritage New History of the Civil War*, Viking, Penguin Group Publishing, 1996, p. 102.

⁵ "The Political and Strategic Situation in Missouri, 1861," notes compiled for instruction in the Chemical Captain's Career Course by Dr. Burton Wright, slides 2-5.

⁶ FM 3-0, p. 2-3.

⁷ Ibid, p. 2-5.

⁸ Ibid, p. 4-3.

⁹ Ibid, p. 4-10.

¹⁰ Edwin C. Bearss, *The Battle of Wilson's Creek*, LITHO Printers and Bindery, Cassville, Missouri, 1992, p. 38.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 47.

¹² FM 3-0, p. 4-13.

¹³ Ibid, p. 4-11.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 7-11.

¹⁵ Bearss, p. 60.

¹⁶ FM 3-0, p. 4-15.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, July 2001, p.13-0.

¹⁹ FM 3-0, p. 5-1.

²⁰ Bearss, p. 46.

²¹ Ibid, p. 28.

²² Ibid, p. 34.

²³ Tyndall, pp. 24-25.

Cannon and Bloody Hill photograph (page 22) and portraits courtesy of The National Park Service and Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, <http://www.nps.gov/wicr/yrvisit.html>

Map and engraving from *The Battle of Wilson's Creek*, Christopher Phillips, National Park Civil War Series, Eastern National, 2001.