

Hurricane Of Bullets: Social Strife And Unorthodox Officers Bring The War To Missouri

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Review

HURRICANE OF BULLETS

Social strife and unorthodox officers bring the War to Missouri

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Piston, William Garrett and Hatcher, III, Richard W.. *Wilson's Creek*.
University of North Carolina Press, ISBN 807825158

Once in a great while the publication of a book represents a passing of the torch from one generation of scholars to the next. Such is the case with William Garrett Piston's and Richard W. Hatcher's **Wilson's Creek: The Second Battle of the Civil War and the Men Who Fought It**. It is evident that these historians have taken up the work on the coming of the Civil War to Missouri so nobly begun by Ed Bearss in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The preface explains that the authors hope not only to provide an updated military narrative of the battle, but to place the soldiers into their proper 19th century context and to provide a "substantial social analysis" between the common soldiers and the communities they represented. In the pages that follow, the soldiers, both the great and the small, largely speak for themselves through their letters or diaries.

The use of these personal stories and poignant vignettes places human faces on a battle in which the Union army alone suffered nearly 25 percent casualties. The reader is introduced to a handful of the men who would converge at Wilson's Creek, and gains an appreciation for how attachments of family, friendship, and community, and, yes, honor, bound the citizen soldiers to their respective lines of battle on that great and terrible day.

Wilson's Creek is a finely researched effort that places the swirling events unfolding in Missouri in 1861 into the national and historical context that made Missouri one of most bitterly contested states during the War. Years of smoldering resentment between free soil settlers in Kansas and pro-slavery partisans on Missouri's western border set the stage for a drama whose cast

included such men as Nathaniel Lyon, the fiery little atheist abolitionist from Fort Riley, Kansas; Colonel Franz Sigel, a compelling but incompetent brigade commander; Sterling Price, a conditional Union man who found himself leading Missouri's troops against Federal authorities; and, finally General Ben McCulloch, a Texas Ranger who some say was haunted by the fact that illness had kept him from dying with his friends at the Alamo. These lead characters are placed amongst a supporting cast of some of the most unorthodox and eccentric officers that either army produced. Over 20 of them would wear general's stars before the War drew to a close four years later.

Once the fighting begins, Hatcher and Piston paint a vivid picture -- the best-written account I have ever read -- of the expanding battle and the roles that the soldiers and leaders played in them. The extensive use of several well-drawn maps allows the reader to closely follow the phases of the battle from just before daybreak on August 10, 1861, to its conclusion shortly before noon. They trace the location of key units on the field, their movements, and the ebb and flow of the fighting. The maps are clear and will be easy, even for readers without benefit of military experience, to understand.

The authors do an excellent job documenting both armies' uniforms (where they existed), equipment, weapons, and the weapons' characteristics. The creek's terrain and its effect on the visibility and the movement of troops during the battle is amply explored, as are the effects of the day's heat and humidity. Near the end of **Wilson's Creek** the authors also take pains to explore the reasons why Nathaniel Lyon felt driven to risk a major battle with a superior enemy force.

The use of Tom Sweeny's superb collection of Civil War photographs and images adds tremendously to the overall effectiveness of the book. For example, a close inspection of a rare pre-battle photograph of Company H, 3rd Arkansas Infantry, Arkansas State Troops, reveals what appears to be an integrated unit with blacks and American Indians serving in the ranks.

This book will close the gap in many Civil War enthusiasts' libraries concerning the opening phases of the War in the Trans-Mississippi Theater. For serious historians, the footnotes alone are worth the price of the book. **Wilson's Creek** is the benchmark against which all future works regarding the battle and the struggle for Missouri will be judged.

R. Scott Price, a major in the U.S. Army Reserves, is author of Nathaniel Lyon: Harbinger From Kansas (1991) and The Ghosts of Fort Riley (1998). He has just finished a fictional work on Civil War drummer boys entitled The Shattered Drum, and currently has two other books underway.