

## **ADA Script: Battle of Pilot Knob SHS Diorama**

In the fall of 1864 the tide of the Civil War was turning against the South. Decisive campaigns were taking place in Virginia and Georgia. Meanwhile west of the Mississippi a desperate plan was unfolding to buy time for the southern cause.

On September 26<sup>th</sup>, Union General Thomas Ewing arrived at Pilot Knob, the terminus of the major railroad route from St. Louis to the iron mining district. Word had reached the North that Confederate General Sterling Price was planning to cross into Missouri with a large army. Accompanied by a small detachment of Federal troops, Ewing had orders to protect Fort Davidson, the year-old earthworks built there, and determined Price's intentions.

At 1 p.m. that afternoon, Union advanced guards west of Shut-In Gap were surprised into the town of Ironton and put the courthouse under siege. But by 5 p.m. Major James Wilson's aroused Union cavalry had driven them back into the gap. Wilson's men, in turn, were repulsed and retreated to the outskirts of Ironton.

After the skirmishing ended at dusk, James Fagan's entire Confederate division, the vanguard of Price's "Army of Missouri," filed into the valley. The number of campfires gave

Ewing the first indication he was facing an army of more than 12,000 men.

General Price had undertaken no less a mission to attack St. Louis and the capital at Jefferson City. IN council of war the day before, only Joseph Shelby, his best general, advised bypassing tiny Fort Davidson. Price ordered Shelby's veteran troops to proceed North and destroy the railroad and telegraph lines between Pilot Knob and St. Louis, The commanding general had no doubt the divisions of Fagan and John Marmaduke, close to 9000 men, could overwhelm the isolated outpost of 1400 men and gain badly needed weapons.

As midnight approached, General Ewing's request to St. Louis for Union reinforcements was denied, and he received orders to evacuate the Fort. By then the fort had been readied for battle, and Ewing had resolved to stay and fight.

At dawn on September 27<sup>th</sup>, the shooting was renewed in the valley in a drizzling rain and fog. William Cabell's 1800-man brigade led the Confederate charge. Soon the Union left flank was in danger, and Major Wilson ordered his men back to Wagon Road Gap between Pilot Knob and Shepard mountains.

By 10 a.m., General Price, traveling with Marmaduke's division, reached Ironton. Although Fort Davidson was vulnerable to artillery fire from Shepard Mountain, Price accepted the advice of Fagan and Marmaduke to take it quickly by assault.

By noon, the sun had come out. Confederate artillery had driven the Union troops from the near mountain slopes, and skirmished ceased as the Rebels moved over wet and soggy ground to surround the fort. Meanwhile, General Ewing sought to delay any all-out assault by deploying his men with orders to hold off the enemy as long as possible before retreating to the fort and its two rifle pits.

At 2p.m., the Rebel onslaught began. Light fire from two cannons placed on Shepard Mountain forced Federal soldiers from the south rifle pit back into the fort. But the seven big Union guns responded mightily from the earth walls, burying Fort Davidson under a cloud of white smoke.

Price's plan of a simultaneous attack from all sides did not occur. John Clark's brigade moved forward first, struggling down the rugged slope of Shepard Mountain. Their advance was checked by rifle and cannon fire, which pinned them down in the bed of Knob Creek 200 yards from the fort.

The rebel right- Slemons and Thomas McCray's brigades- attacked over Pilot Knob Mountain, cutting Major Wilson and his troops off from the fort. The rebels attempted to charge the fort itself, but heavy shelling trapped them in the east branch of Knob Creek.

Meanwhile Cabell's brigade moved through Wagon Road Gap, causing Clark's men to take heart. They rushed from the creek

toward the fort's west wall as Cabell's men converged from the south and east, subjecting the parapets to the intense fire. As Union forces scrambled inside, they failed to completely raise the drawbridge over the moat. With the rebels only twenty yards away, the deadly Union fusillade finally prevailed, and both brigades fell back.

When Confederate sharpshooters drove the Union artillerymen from their platforms, the rebels mounted a second assault. Ewing's adjutant, David Murphy, railed the gun crews, and fifty yards from the fort the cannon and rifle fire again took its toll. The rebels faltered a second time in the thick smoke and ceaseless din.

Minutes later, Alonzo Slayback and Thomas Freeman's mounted cavalry prepared to charge the north rifle pit. Federal troops countercharged from the pit, driving them off, Ewing then evacuated the pit.

At that point Cabell's brigade made its final, most desperate attack. Heedless of losses, the first line of troops reached the moat south of the fort's gate. But without scaling ladders, they could go no further; Union soldiers dropped grenades into the moat. The explosions blew bodies higher than the parapets, and the Confederates were routed once more.

After three-and-one-half hours of intense combat, and sundown approaching, the fighting gradually ebbed. Under

heavy clouds and a fresh rain, the battlefield remained lit by the eerie glow of an ignited charcoal pile at the nearby iron furnace./ By 6 p.m. the battle of Pilot Knob was over, and for 500 yards on three sides of the fort lay the dead and wounded.

Enraged at his failure and the specter of more than 500 dead and wounded soldiers, General Price resolved to attack again the next day. He ordered his tired army to build scaling ladders and prepare for the all-out artillery bombardment he had previously deemed unnecessary.

Meanwhile General Ewing and his officers hit upon a seemingly foolhardy plan. At one o'clock in the morning, the entire command of 1100 men marched fearfully out through the moat and into the north rifle pit. Sackcloth and hay muffled the sound of the horses and the wheels of the cannon as they moved across the drawbridge and north after the silent marchers.

Turning onto the Potosi-Caledonia Road, the column passed between the encamped Confederate units, who mistook them for their own troops and miraculously did nothing to stop them.

About 3 a.m., with the Union troops now safely out of sight, a small detail of Ewing's men exploded the fort's powder magazine. The ground shook for twenty miles. The Confederates mistook this spectacular farewell for a terrible accident that had perhaps done their job for them. When

daylight made it safe to investigate, they indeed found the fort a smoking ruin.

But more than the federal army had vanished. Although the Rebels did not yet realize it-and General Price would stubbornly resist the notion to the end of his days-all hopes of liberating the state of Missouri had been left on the battlefield the previous day. The dead, both North and South-many of them buried in that hallowed ground today- offered grim testament not so much to the justice or injustice of either side but to the larger tragedy of blind circumstances and even larger errors of human understanding.

