

# Missouri, Battle of Wilson's Creek, 1861

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The **Battle of Wilson's Creek**, also known as the **Battle of Oak Hills**, was the first major battle of the Western Theater of the American Civil War. Fought on August 10, 1861, near Springfield, Missouri between Union forces and the Missouri State Guard, it is sometimes called the "Bull Run of the West."

At first light on the morning of August 10, the Union began a surprise attack on the opposing forces. Lyon's force overran the enemy camps and took the high ground at the crest of a ridge, which would become known as "Bloody Hill". Early Union hopes for a rout were dashed, however, when the artillery of the Pulaski Arkansas Battery unlimbered and checked the advance, which gave Price's infantry time and cover to organize lines on the south slope of the hill. Lyon organized a line on the southern slope of Bloody Hill, from which he tried to launch an unsuccessful counterattack. Price launched a series of frontal and flank attacks but was also unsuccessful; a shortage of ammunition in the Confederate army was a factor in the Confederate defeats.

The two Union forces lost contact with each other, with no means of communicating with or supporting each other if anything went wrong. Sigel's attack was successful at first; the brigade arrived in the Confederate rear soon after dawn. Artillery fire routed the Confederate cavalry units, which were encamped at the Sharp's farm. Sigel began a pursuit, but stopped along Skeeg's Branch. During the break, he failed to post skirmishers, leaving his left flank open for an attack. Meanwhile, McCulloch rallied several Confederate units, including the 3rd Louisiana Infantry and the 3rd Division from the Missouri State Guard, to lead a counterattack. Sigel's men mistook the 3rd Louisiana for the 3rd Iowa Infantry (which also wore gray uniforms) and withheld their fire until the Confederates were nearly upon them. His flank was consequently devastated by the counterattack, and his brigade was routed, losing four cannons. Sigel and his men fled the field, leaving the force under Lyon, Sweeny, and Sturgis holding out alone.

With the rout of Sigel's flank, the momentum of the battle shifted in the South's favor. Lyon was wounded twice, and his horse was killed during the fighting. He returned to Union lines on foot and commandeered a bay horse ridden by Maj. E.L. McElhanev of the Missouri Infantry. Lyon became the first Union general to be killed in the war; he was shot in the heart on Bloody Hill at about 9:30 a.m. while leading the 2nd Kansas Infantry in a countercharge. General Sweeny was shot in the leg, and Major Sturgis, as the highest ranking Regular Army officer, assumed command of the Union army. While still in a defensible position atop the hill, Union supplies were low and morale was worsening. By 11:00 a.m., the Union forces had already repulsed three separate Confederate charges. Ammunition and men were nearly exhausted, and Sturgis retreated rather than risk a fourth Confederate attack.