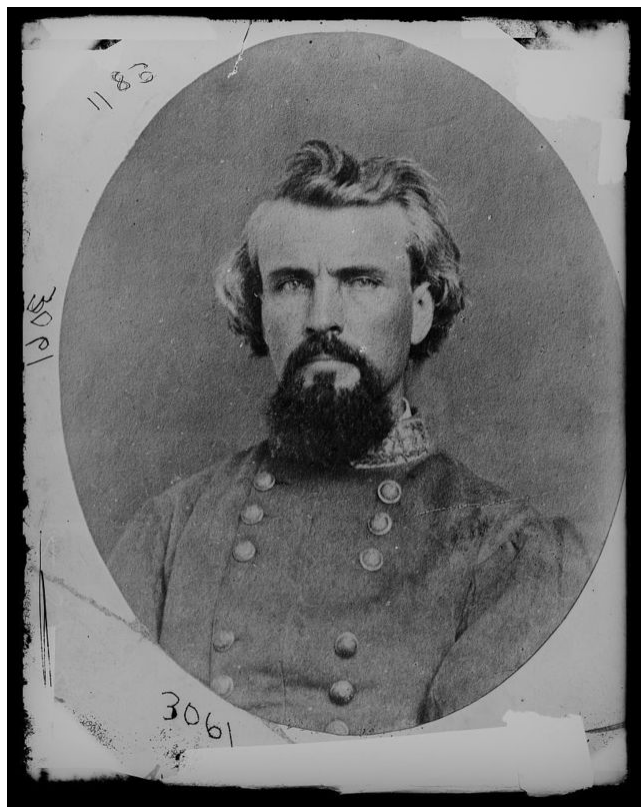
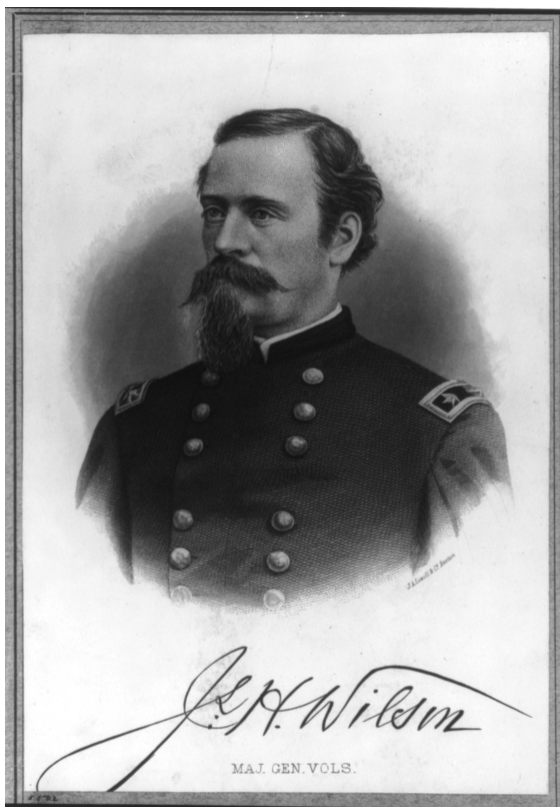




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Wilson's Raid

by Dr. Laurence Schiller – December 17, 2019

The American Civil War has so many stories to tell. Did you know that the largest cavalry raid in the war began with a challenge by Federal Military Division of the Mississippi cavalry commander Maj. Gen. James Harrison Wilson to Lt. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest to come out and fight? It was Wilson's intent to invade Alabama with an independently operating cavalry army, but to do so successfully, he was going to have to deal with the wily Forrest who had plenty of victories to his credit. As part of his intelligence gathering operation, Wilson sent one of his staff officers, West Point graduate and regular army Capt. Lewis M. Hosea, to seek out, under a flag of truce, such information as he could gather directly from Forrest. Traveling with six specially picked troopers armed, as were all Wilson's men, with sabre, revolver, and Spencer repeating carbines, Hosea hoped to impress the rebels with Federal strength and firepower.

Forrest's headquarters were in West Point, Mississippi, and Hosea telegraphed him from Rienzi that he wished to meet to discuss prisoner exchange. Forrest agreed and invited the Federal horsemen to ride over to his headquarters. On the rainy night of February 23, 1865, in a small country house lit only by tallow candles, Hosea and Forrest met. The Federal captain was suitably impressed and described Forrest as:

"a man fully six feet in height; rather waxen face; handsome; high, bull forehead, and with a profusion of light gray hair thrown back from the forehead and growing down rather to a point in the middle of the same. The lines of thought and care, in an upward curve, receding are distinctly marked and add much to the dignity of expression."[1]

During the conversation Hosea proposed Wilson's invitation to fight. According to the captain, Forrest replied,

"Jist tell General Wilson that I know the nicest little place down here...and whenever he is ready, I will fight with him with any number from one to ten thousand cavalry and abide the issue. Gin'ral Wilson may pick his men, and I'll pick mine. He may take his sabers and I'll take my six shooters. I don't want nary saber in my command – haven't got one...I ain't no graduate of West Point; never rubbed my back up agin any college, but Wilson may take his sabers and I'll use my six shooters and agree to whup the fight with any cavalry he can bring."[2]

On March 22, after one of the rainiest winters in memory, Wilson and his cavalry army of 13,480 turned south to meet whatever Forrest could throw at them. Forrest was good, but the Confederacy did not have much left for him to use, while Wilson's veterans had reached the height of their tactical powers within a combined arms force that sliced its way through Alabama. In the 1920s, Wilson's raid would become the inspiration behind the creation of American mechanized forces.

You can learn about history such as this by reading these dispatches and participating in BGES tours.



Battle of Selma, part of the Union campaign through Alabama and Georgia, 1865

[1] James Pickett Jones. Yankee Blitzkrieg: Wilson's Raid Through Alabama and Georgia. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 24.

[2] Jones, Yankee Blitzkrieg, pp 24-5.



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