

MAJOR GENERAL EARL VAN DORN C.S.A.

Mike Bell



Figure 1. Confederate General Earl Van Dorn. (Library of Congress.)

During the 1980's, ABC aired the mini-series *North and South*. Based on the novels by John Jakes, the television drama told the stories of two families, the Hazards from Pennsylvania and the Mains from South Carolina. With thrilling music and lots of sex, love and intrigue, the show drew large audiences. Along the way Americans got a decent history lesson. Although historians and Civil War enthusiasts cringed at the tawdry aspects as developed by the author and producers, one must wonder if there was any history behind the salacious aspects. Did the people involved in the War Between the States ever act that way? One Confederate general may have.

Earl Van Dorn was the ideal of a Confederate officer. West Point trained with an impressive record in the Mexican War, Van Dorn had also served well in the west in the years before the start of hostilities. When the war began, Van Dorn quickly rose in the ranks, attaining the rank of major general in short order.

Sadly, his performance at Pea Ridge in March of 1862, and at Corinth later that year, demonstrated that he was perhaps better suited for smaller commands rather than being in charge of an entire army. Think Burnside and Hooker as two federal examples of this idea.



Figure 2. Battle of Pea Ridge, Ark. (Library of Congress.)



Figure 3. Battle of Corinth [Mississippi]. (Library of Congress.)

Van Dorn was a handsome man, with longish blond hair and a dashing goatee. Long periods away from his family fueled rumors among his troops that General Van Dorn enjoyed the company of local women while billeted in various locations where he served. These rumors led to his death.

On Thursday, May 7, 1863, a Dr. Peters arrived at Van Dorn's headquarters in Spring Hill, Tennessee. Being well known to the general's staff, the good doctor was admitted to headquarters. Unknown to the officers present was the reason behind the visit. Stories had reached Dr. Peters of an illicit relationship between the general and Peters' much younger wife. A few weeks earlier, he had actually confronted the couple.

But on this day, he had had enough. He walked in to the room where Van Dorn was working at his desk and shot him in the head. Peters then calmly walked out of the building and vanished into the morning mist. Van Dorn died a few hours later.

There was no real attempt to pursue a legal case against Dr. Peters. Perhaps Van Dorn's behavior was too much an affront to the code of chivalry of the south and it was deemed better to let the matter simply fade into the dust bin of history.

(Disclaimer: The author's great-great grandfather served under Van Dorn and fought at Pea Ridge and Corinth.)

PICTURE CREDITS

Figure 1. C.M. Bell, photographer. *Confederate General Earl Van Dorn.*, 1891. [between January and January 1894] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016690761/>.

Figure 2. *Battle of Pea Ridge, Ark.* Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, reproduction number LC-DIG-pga-01888.

Figure 3. *Battle of Corinth [Mississippi]*. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, reproduction number LC-DIG-pga-01847.