

Murdered by Cuckolded Husband

Major General Earl “Buck” Van Dorn was such a notorious adulterer that he was, at times, referred to as a “serial adulterer” and the “Terror of Ugly Husbands.” It was adultery that would bring his military career and his life to an early end.

Van Dorn was born on September 17, 1820, in Port Gibson, Mississippi to Peter A. Van Dorn and Sophie Donelson Caffery Van Horn. Sophie was one of the many nieces of the wife of Andrew Jackson, the seventh U.S. president. Van Dorn’s mother died when he was ten and he had two older sisters that doted on him for some unknown reason, even though there was a brother that was younger by two years. Regardless, it seems that Earl “Buck” Van Dorn was a spoiled young man.

Van Dorn grew up longing to be a soldier and his mother’s relationship to President Andrew Jackson was enough to get him an appointment to the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. While being generally a poor student and often cited for misconduct, he showed skills in horsemanship, field soldiering and drawing. He graduated in 1842 – 52nd in a class of 56 – and was brevetted second lieutenant in the 7th U.S. Infantry Regiment. A year later he would marry an Alabama lady named Caroline Godbold. Together they would have two children.

After serving in several posts throughout the Southern United States he was sent to Texas. During the Mexican War he was sent to Mexico and saw combat in the battles of Monterrey and Vera Cruz, and received brevet promotions to major for his participation in the battles of Cerro Gordo, Mexico City, Contreras and Churubusco. After the Mexican War ended he was again sent to southern outposts where he saw action against the Seminole Indians in 1849 and 1850. He was returned to Texas where he would do battle with the Comanche Indians in Oklahoma during 1858 and 1859. He was badly wounded twice and would spend most of 1860 and early 1861 on medical leave

While stationed in Texas in 1856, Van Dorn met Martha Goodbread, a laundress at his fort, and the two of them would have three children while he was still married to Caroline. Those things were not supposed to happen in the officer ranks at that time in our history.

When the Civil War began many of the Army’s senior and combat tested officers resigned their commission and joined the Confederacy. Van Dorn was among those and he was appointed a brigadier general in the Mississippi Militia on January 23, 1861. He soon resigned this commission and on June 5, 1861, he was made a brigadier general in the regular Confederate States Army (CSA).

He was sent to Texas once again where he and his men were assigned the duty of capturing US Army soldiers before they could get out of Texas and make it North. On September 19, 1861, he was promoted to major general and was transferred to Virginia for a very brief period of time and he was made commander of the Army in the west in the Trans-Mississippi Theatre.

His first major action in this theatre was the Battle of Pea Ridge (Elkhorn Tavern) in Northeast Arkansas on March 6—8, 1862. Van Dorn did quite well in the early stages of the battle until he misjudged the Unions defensive position and was repelled and forced to retreat with his men. Despite the defeat, the Confederate Congress sent Van Dorn its

thanks for his "valor, skill, and good conduct in the battle..." Van Dorn responded, "I was not defeated, but only foiled in my intentions."

Van Dorn suffered another defeat seven months later at the second battle of Corinth. As a result of this latest setback, he was brought before a court of inquiry to explain his actions. During the trial, Van Dorn stated that he had no personal wealth – having spent his life in service to his country – but that his only real possession was his reputation, "without which life to me were as valueless as the crisp and faded leaf of autumn." He was eventually acquitted of all charges, but he was relieved of his command.

His major accomplishment in the Civil War occurred in December of 1862 when he led his troops against the supply depots of Union General Ulysses S. Grant at Holly Springs, Mississippi. They managed to destroy supplies worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, and delayed Grant's operation against Vicksburg, Mississippi. Afterwards he was a participant in several minor skirmishes until his death in May of 1863.

Following his ouster, in January of 1863 Van Dorn was appointed commander of all Rebel cavalry in the Department of Mississippi and East Louisiana. He led his horsemen in several skirmishes. In March Van Dorn was given overall command of the cavalry corps of the Army of the Tennessee. He fought his last battle on April 10, skirmishing with Union cavalry near Franklin, Tennessee. Shortly afterwards, he returned to his headquarters at Spring Hill, Tennessee. He made his office in an upstairs bedroom in a manor known as "White Hall, the home of Doctor Aaron White and his wife.

Van Dorn's reputation as a womanizer and adulterer preceded him to Spring Hill. One young Southern widow admonished him to "let the women alone until after the war is over." He replied, "I cannot do that, for it is all I am fighting for." This character flaw would prove fatal.

He was described in one biography as, "Van Dorn proved to be a Southern cavalier incarnate, with his slim-waisted, broad-shouldered physique. His handsome face, blue eyes, light chestnut hair and mustache were much admired by the ladies. Added to his physical characteristics, he was also an accomplished painter, amateur poet, a dedicated romantic, and considered one of 'the finest horseman in the cavalry of the old United States Army.'"

Jessie McKissack Peters, the beautiful and young wife of Doctor George Peters, arrived at the White House in June of 1863 and inquired of Mrs. White if she might visit with General Van Dorn in private. Mrs. White stated that she would ask and started up the stairs. Mrs. Peters brushed past her and said she would introduce herself. She entered the bedroom that Van Dorn was using as an office and did not leave until an hour later. Mrs. White found such behavior very displeasing and when it happened again in three days she had her husband ask Van Dorn to move his office to another location.



The general was only too happy to move his headquarters and chose a house that was called Ferguson Hall. Oddly enough it was located just across a field from Mrs. Peters' home. From his window he had a great view of the Peters' home.

Jessie's unsupervised visits to Van Dorn's headquarters and their long carriage rides without supervision set the local gossip's tongues to wagging. Doctor Peters had been away from home for an extensive period attending to family business. When he returned he was hearing some of this gossip. The doctor and Jessie seemed to have a different kind of marriage. This was not the first time she had been caught placing her shoes under the wrong bed. Doctor Peters and Mrs. Peters were first cousins and he was 24 years older than her. It was believed that their marriage was just a way to keep family money in the family.

In his own words, Dr. Peters later stated: "I arrived at home on the 12th of April and was alarmed at the distressing rumors which prevailed in the neighborhood in relation to the attentions paid by General Van Dorn to my wife." Then the doctor caught one of Van Dorn's servants delivering a note to his wife. He sent a message back with the messenger "...tell his whiskey-headed master, General Van Dorn, that I would blow his brains out, or any of his staff that stepped their foot inside of the lawn..." Enough to keep most men away, but not Van Dorn.

Doctor Peters then had to take a trip to Nashville and upon returning learned that the general had spent every night of his absence in his home with Jessie. George Peters determined to set a trap to catch them red-handed. He let it be known that he had to go to Shelbyville, Tennessee for a few days, but he never left the area. Instead he doubled back to Ferguson Hall. About 2:30 in the morning he found the two of them in bed together. According to Peters' statement to the police, Van Dorn was intoxicated and ran from the house and hid under the porch. Doctor Peters reported that he pulled him from under the porch by the hair on his head. Van Dorn was pleading for his life and the doctor said he would grant that wish under two conditions. He was to write out a letter admitting his guilt and exonerating his wife from any guilt and write a letter to Mrs. Van Dorn in Alabama confessing his sins. He agreed to do this.

Two days later Doctor Peters rode to Ferguson Hall where a number of Confederate officers were standing around the home. A visit by the doctor created no alarm as he was a frequent visitor to the estate. He found out the letters had not been written. He gave the general thirty minutes to get it done, left the headquarters and returned a bit later. Again the letter had not been written. Shortly, the doctor returned to his horse and rode away.

In a matter of moments, the officers heard the loud sobbing of the daughter of the mansion's owner. She cried out, "The doctor has shot the general!" The officers rushed up the stairs to find the general slumped over his desk, a bullet wound in the back of the head. The small caliber round had lodged behind Van Dorn's forehead but had not killed him. He lay in a comatose state for four and a half hours without uttering a word, and then his philandering days came to an end.



Ferguson Hall where Van Dorn was killed

The doctor rode to Nashville where he turned himself into the police and made a complete confession. He was never prosecuted for the incident. He then made his way to Arkansas where he owned a lot of land. The couple were divorced, but would reunite again when she joined him in Arkansas and she evidently was forgiven her trespasses. She adamantly denied any wrong doing committed with “Buck” Van Dorn.

Van Dorn was initially buried in Spring Hill. In 1899 his sister had his remains exhumed and moved to the family plot near Port Gibson where he was buried beside his father.



Dr. George Peters would die in Memphis, Tennessee in 1899. Jesse is quoted as saying while dressing for the funeral, "Well, I never cared much for George, but I guess I owe him this much." She survived until 1921 and is buried next to George in the Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis. Because of their notoriety the family chose to bury them in unmarked graves.

In a final twist, eight and a half months after the death of Earl Van Dorn, Jessie Peters gave birth to a baby girl that she named Medora Wharton Peters. Apparently Doctor Peters had no doubt who Medora's father was. When he asked Jessie to return to his home she was told not to bring that child. And it was Medora that took care of the doctor in his final days.

One thing we will never know is whether there is any truth to the rumor that Jessie had another extramarital affair with Confederate Major General Benjamin Franklin Cheatham in 1864.