

# This Day in History... July 21, 1861

## First Battle of Bull Run

On July 21, 1861, Confederate forces won the First Battle of Bull Run, also known as the Battle of First Manassas. It was the first major land battle of the Civil War and the grisly fighting led both sides to realize that the war wouldn't be won quickly.

Both the Union and the Confederacy predicted a short war and an easy victory in the days following the attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina. Impatient Northerners pushed President Lincoln to attack the Confederate capital in Richmond, Virginia. Southern troops threatened the US capital and Confederate First Lady Varina Davis sent out invitations to a reception at the White House in Washington, DC.

Across the nation, young men who had never been more than a day's ride away from home prepared for battle. Many arrived for service without uniforms, guns, or the skill to write a letter home. Union and Confederate officers scrambled to equip and train the men, while warily waiting to see which side would strike first. Residents of border states, which had mixed allegiances, provided the opposing sides with information on troop movement and military strategy.

Abraham Lincoln pressed Brigadier General Irvin McDowell of the Union Army of Northeastern Virginia

to move aggressively. Never one to share his strategy, even with his commander-in-chief, McDowell stalled, blaming his lack of action on his ill-prepared forces.

Ultimately forced to act, McDowell gathered 35,000 untrained Union soldiers on July 16, 1861, and marched toward Richmond. His plan was to move toward the west in three columns. While two of the columns attacked the Confederate line at Bull Run, the third would move to the south, cut the railroad to Richmond and attack the rear of the rebel forces. Major General Robert Patterson's forces were dispatched to the Shenandoah Valley, where they were to engage Confederate troops under Joseph Johnston and prevent them from reinforcing Beauregard.

McDowell's men traveled two days through sweltering heat before reaching Centreville, Virginia, where they rested and regrouped. In nearby Manassas Junction, an equally inexperienced Confederate army of 34,000 men under General Beauregard waited, protecting the vital supply line to Richmond.

*Sherman commanded the 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, of the Army of Northeastern Virginia*

McDowell divided his troops, sending 5,000 men to the rear to protect his army. He then sent a division of 3,000 under Brigadier General Tyler to outflank Beauregard. Frustration grew as McDowell's complex plan encountered critical setbacks. Beauregard's men drew a line along Bull Run River and guarded its fords, which McDowell planned to cross. Tyler's division was drawn into a skirmish at Blackburn's Ford and stalled. Patterson didn't stop Johnston, and McDowell himself delayed long enough for most of Johnston's troops to arrive at Manassas Junction by train and reinforce Beauregard before the fighting began.

After decades of heated debate and a humiliating Union defeat at Fort Sumter, many were anxious to see the outcome. Congressional families and Washington, DC, elite traveled thirty miles by carriage to picnic as the two armies met at Virginia's Bull Run River on July 21, 1861. Logistics immediately worked against McDowell. Tyler's division blocked McDowell's main column's advance and others found several roads to key crossings to be little more than cart paths. Instead of attacking the Confederates together, the two columns arrived hours apart.

Beauregard learned the offensive had begun when artillery rounds hit his headquarters as he ate breakfast. The Confederate general issued counterattacks, but some of his orders were communicated incorrectly. Brigadier General Richard S. Ewell was to lead the attacks at Union Mills Ford; however, the instructions he received were to "hold – in readiness to advance at a moment's notice." Some 20,000 Union soldiers were moving toward Colonel Nathan Evans and his force of only 1,100 men before new intelligence prompted the Confederate officer to move them. With reinforcements, Evans's men were able to slow the advance across Bull Run River until Colonel William Sherman found an unguarded ford and attacked their right flank. The Confederates were forced to retreat at 11:30 a.m.

McDowell failed to press his advantage, which allowed Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's brigade to arrive at noon, joined by the Hampton Legion and Colonel J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry. Fighting continued throughout the afternoon. At 3 p.m., the 33rd Virginia overran the Union artillery. Major William F. Barry ordered his men not to shoot at the Confederate troops because their blue uniforms caused him to mistake them for Union soldiers.

Capturing the artillery turned the battle in favor of the Confederates. By 4 p.m., the last Union troops were driven from Henry Hill House to the hair-raising sound of the "rebel yell." Two additional Confederate brigades arrived from the Shenandoah Valley, delivering more crushing defeat as the Union forces crumbled. Further chaos occurred as the retreating army reached crossings at Bull Run River. Soldiers dropped their weapons and ran, hundreds were taken prisoner by the Confederates, and frightened civilians trying to flee the violence clogged the roads to Washington.

The first major land battle of the Civil War resulted in 460 Union and 387 Confederate deaths with thousands more injured and captured. The jubilation that had greeted the day dimmed quickly as both sides realized they were in for a long and bloody war.



*Stamp pictures a reproduction of Sidney E. King's painting, The Capture of Rickett's Battery.*



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*Johnston stamp from the 1995 Civil War sheet*

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