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Baptism at Manassas

James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, chronicles a battle that encouraged the Confederacy and at the same time bolstered the determination of the North

The first major land battle of the American Civil War took place less than 26 miles from Washington, on July 21, 1861. First Manassas, as it was called by the South (Bull Run by the North), erased any conception that the war would be short-lived and that casualties would be minimal.

In the spring of 1861, a war fever was brewing in both the South and the North. The southern press clamored for an advance against Washington, while the northern newspapers cried, "On to Richmond."

Brigadier General Irvin McDowell was appointed by President Abraham Lincoln to command the Army of Northeastern Virginia.



Maj. Gen. Irvin McDowell, officer of the Federal Army

Harassed by impatient politicians in Washington who wished to see a quick battlefield victory, McDowell appealed to Lincoln for time to train his largely green and untested troops, many of whom were nearing the end of their three-month enlistment.

Lincoln refused, saying "you are green, it is true, but they are green also..."

On July 16, 1861, against his better judgment, McDowell departed Washington with the largest field army yet gathered on the North American continent, about 35,000 men.

The Confederate Army of the Potomac (20,000 men) was under the command of Brigadier General P.G.T. Beauregard, supported

by the Army of the Shenandoah (12,000), led by Brigadier General Joseph E. Johnston.

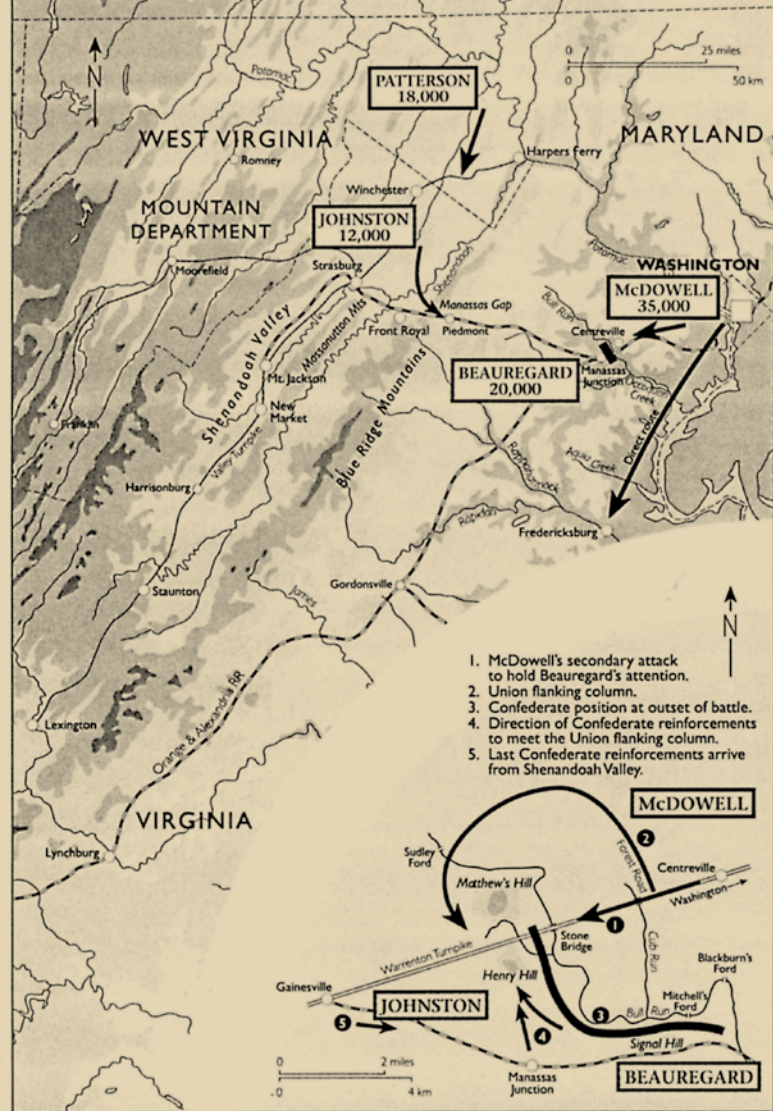
McDowell's plan was to advance on Manassas, an important rail junction that served as the Manassas Gap Railroad line's eastern terminus. The railroad was the de facto lifeline that tethered northern Virginia to the Shenandoah Valley -- the breadbasket of

Naming Battles

Confederate forces named battles after the town that served as their base, while Union forces chose the landmark nearest to the fighting, usually a river or stream. Shiloh was an exception.

Campaign and Battle of First Manassas or Bull Run, 16–21 July 1861

The strategic situation, showing J. E. Johnston's movement from the Shenandoah Valley to reinforce P. G. T. Beauregard at Manassas Junction.



Map courtesy of Osprey Publications www.ospreypublishing.com



Joseph E. Johnston
No.31082



Henry House



P.G.T. Beauregard, No.31080

the South -- and permitted the transport of troops between these locations if the Federals threatened either area.

Union success hinged on two elements -- no Confederate reinforcement of Beauregard's army and a swift attack by McDowell's

forces. Neither occurred. Shadowing the Confederates in the Shenandoah Valley were the troops of Union General Patterson. But Johnston's army in the Shenandoah gave them the slip. Travelling by train, they bolstered Beauregard's forces to where they now numbered 32,000 men. In doing so, they leveled the "playing field."

Johnston's adroit transfer of his troops by train gave the world its first demonstration of the strategic importance of railroads in wartime.

As for the second element, a swift attack, here too, McDowell suffered a setback. His soldiers, without marching experience and laden with fifty pounds of equipment, took three days to cover a distance that veterans would slog in a day. The delay enabled

Thaddeus S. C. Lowe -- Balloonist

At the battle, Thaddeus S. C. Lowe ascended in the balloon "Enterprise" to observe Confederate troop movements. The "Enterprise" bore no markings and his attempted landing in friendly territory was rebuffed by Union soldiers. He was forced to land behind enemy lines, where he was rescued before the Confederates could find him.



Professor Lowe's military balloon near Gaines Mill, Virginia



"Baptism at Manassas" -- No.'s 31139, 31117, 31118, 31119 Diorama

Beauregard -- forewarned of McDowell's advance by his espionage network in Washington -- to complete his defenses along Bull Run Creek, just north of Manassas.

Beauregard and McDowell, on opposite sides of Bull Run, had more or less identical plans, each intending to execute a turning movement by the right flank to strike the opponent's left. If both had moved according to plan, the

two armies might have grappled and spun around and around like a pair of dancers, clutching each other and twirling to the accompaniment of cannon. However, this could only happen if both moved on schedule. And late as McDowell was, Beauregard was later.



Stone bridge

The result was that McDowell achieved the initial surprise. His outflanking maneuver, however, was observed by Confederate Captain Edward Porter Alexander. Alexander sent a warning signal to Lt. Colonel Nathan Evans, as he defended the crossing at the Stone Bridge. The message to Evans was "Look out for your left. You are turned." With that, Evans



"Stonewall" Jackson, No.17926

shifted the bulk of his brigade northwest to counter the impending threat. Though outnumbered, he temporarily stemmed the Union incursion.

As the conflict wore on, the Confederates broke off the action and retreated uphill near the Henry house. It was then that Colonel Thomas J. Jackson, commanding the Virginia brigade, appeared on the scene. He rallied the troops, earning for himself the nom de guerre "Stonewall" for his defiant stand. The nickname is attributed

Wig-Wag Semaphore

The message to Evans was the first use of a wig-wag semaphore signal in combat. Positioned on three wooden towers spanning the Confederates' 17-mile defensive front, these signal stations communicated in daylight, using a signal flag attached to a hickory staff. The flag varied in size from 2 feet by 2 feet to 6 feet by 6 feet. Each square flag had a white, black or red background with a center square in a contrasting color. The flag was held overhead between signals, and was then dipped from one to four times to the right, left, or front of the signalman, to indicate letters of the alphabet.



"The Rebel Yell"



Jackson monument at Manassas



to Confederate General Bernard Bee who said, "There is Jackson standing like a stone wall, let us determine to die here, and we will conquer."

Jackson instructed his troops "Hold your fire until they're on you. Then fire and give them the bayonet. And when you charge,

Stars and Stripes...?

Confusion on the battlefield, where regiments held their fire for fear of hitting friends, can be attributed to the national flags carried by each regiment. With eleven stars on a blue field set in the corner of a flag with one white and two red horizontal bars, the Confederate "stars and bars" could easily be mistaken for the stars and stripes in the smoke and haze of battle. After the battle, Beauregard designed a new battle flag with white stars embedded in a blue St. Andrew's Cross on a red field, which became the familiar banner of the Confederacy.

yell like furies!" For the first time, troops on the field heard the eerie sound of what was to become known as the "Rebel Yell." It was likened to twenty thousand fox-hunters closing in on a quarry. An observer commented "The Rebel Yell drove all sanity and order from Union troops."

It was then that one of the great mixups of the early part of the Civil War occurred. At this time, uniforms on both sides were hardly standardized. Some Federal troops wore a kind of dark gray, while some Southerners wore blue. The 33rd Virginia Infantry was one of these units clothed in blue. Its soldiers approached two 6-gun Federal batteries. The batteries held their fire, believing the Virginians to be Federal soldiers. When the Virginians got close, they opened a murderous volley on the gunners, killing and wounding many of them. The loss of the guns proved disastrous for the Federal side. Colonel James B. Fry commented, "The battle of Manassas was not lost till they were lost."

By mid afternoon, the Union

ABOVE
"Baptism at Manassas" Includes Jackson and Officer Mounted, Company Colors and Regimental Colors, Four Infantry, No. 31139

ABOVE LEFT
Confederate Advancing at Right Shoulder Shift in Frock Coat No.1 No.31118

army was in disarray. The retreat became a rout. Hundreds of spectators from Washington had taken wagons laden with picnic supplies to see the big battle -- and what they expected to be a Union victory. These civilians, including politicians, now became caught up in the accelerating Federal retreat.

The First Battle of Manassas left 900 Americans dead and 2,500 wounded. It offered a sobering portent of the additional carnage that loomed on the horizon. As Union General William T. Sherman reflected in his memoirs, "It was one of the best-planned battles of the war, but one of the worst-fought." ■

Jim Hillestad operates under the name **The Toy Soldier Museum**. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570/629-7227, or visit his new website: www.the-toy-soldier.com