

The Battle of Bull Run

By Darrell Osburn

1. The Civil War was the most important event in American history. Four years it lasted, from 1861 to 1865. More Americans died in the Civil War than in all the other wars put together in which America has ever been involved.
2. At least 624,000 American soldiers died. One and a half million were seriously wounded. More than 10,000 battles were fought.
3. In a word, the reason the war was fought was: politics. For 50 years prior to the Civil War, southern conservatives had dominated the federal government. The southerners supported the ideas of states rights and the right of every state to decide if they wanted slavery. This dominance ended with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860.
4. Many of Lincoln's supporters were opposed to slavery and they wanted a strong federal government.
5. Neither President Lincoln nor the Confederate president Jefferson Davis wanted the war. Davis wanted the southern states to be left alone as a separate country, free from interference from Washington D.C. Davis and most other southerners were willing to fight to the death for this cause.
6. Lincoln believed that the American experiment in democracy would fail if the country fell apart over the results of an election. Lincoln felt he had no choice but to send troops south to put down the rebellion.
7. Confederate cannons, under the command of P.T.G. Boregard fired the first shots at Ft. Sumter, which started the war.
8. When the call to arms came, war fever gripped both north and south. Most people thought that after a quick victory or two, it would be over and everyone would soon return to what they were doing before the war.
9. At first, most of the soldiers knew nothing about war. They saw the pretty uniforms, heard the patriotic music, tasted the excitement, smelled the coming victory and felt the righteousness of their cause. After the battle, they would experience something quite different.
10. The south planned a defensive war, designed to wear out the north. The northern plan, devised by Winfield Scott, was to blockade the southern ports with ships, take control of the Mississippi River and to push on to take the Confederate capital, Richmond, Virginia.
11. Gen. Scott was too old to lead an army in the field. Lincoln asked Robert E. Lee to take command of the Federal army. But Lee refused to fight against his home state of Virginia and instead, joined the southern cause.

12. So Lincoln put Gen. Irvin McDowell in charge and ordered him to take Richmond.
13. Union and Confederate forces clashed in some small battles, such as at Philippi and Rich Mountain. But the first big showdown was yet to come. McDowell wanted time to train and equip his amateur army. But Lincoln was under great pressure. The northern public was screaming for immediate action. So Lincoln told McDowell, "It is true your troops are green, but they are green also. You are all green alike." Lincoln ordered McDowell to fight before the soldier's 90-day enlistments expired.
14. McDowell planned a diversionary attack on the main rebel force under Boregard, who was stationed along Bull Run Creek, about 25 miles west of Washington, D.C. The main Union force would try to out-flank the confederates, hoping that the rebels would fall back. Another force of 9,000 Southerners under Gen. Joseph E. Johnston was situated 35 miles away at Winchester, in the Shenandoah Valley. Union Gen. Robert Patterson had about 14,000 Yankees with orders to hold Johnston in place. Boregard had his 20,000-man army spread out to cover all of the river crossings but he kept most of his men on the right side of the line. He expected to receive or deliver an attack in that area.
15. Boregard was well aware of the approach of the Union army. He was kept informed by a system of spies, telegraph lines and semaphore flags.
16. It took McDowell's 35,000 men nearly a week to travel the 25 miles. Later in the war, troops could march farther than that in a single day!
17. Through disorganization, the troops stood halted for hours in the hot sun. The soldiers began to wander off looking for water and picking blackberries.
18. Hundreds of civilians came out from Washington D.C. to watch what they thought would be a delightful fireworks show, ending in a glorious victory for the Union army.
19. Meanwhile, Davis and Lee were pushing reinforcements to Boregard from Richmond. Johnston, pretending to attack Patterson, gave him the slip, and ordered his men to board trains, which would speed his army to the coming battle near Manassas, VA.
20. Boregard wanted to strike first. He planned to hold the Yankees off on his left flank and hit hard with his strong right flank. This would cut off the Union retreat to Washington D.C.
21. McDowell also planned a heavy attack with his right flank and a holding action with his left. If both armies had attacked at the same time, they might have spun around each other and traded positions. But the Yankees struck first.
22. On July 21st, 1861, Northern troops were ordered to wake up at 2 in the morning. After more delays and frustration, McDowell launched a diversionary attack on Mitchell's Ford, Stone Bridge and Blackburn Ford.

23. However, McDowell's main attack was to be at Sudley's Ford, which was further upstream.
24. At Stone Bridge, on the extreme left of the confederate battle line, the troops of Col. Nathan Evans were in position. Evans soon realized that the Yankees were not serious about crossing here. The signal corps spotted the main Union force and told Evans that he was out-flanked. Evans could have retreated, and gave it serious thought. But instead, Evans sent for reinforcements and moved his tiny command to the left to try to intercept and delay the Federals.
25. Gen. Bernard Bee and his men arrived just in time to hold off another serious Union effort. Boregard and Johnston soon realized the danger to the left and sent Gen. Thomas Jackson troops to reinforce Bee and Evans.
26. The Yankees pushed the outnumbered rebels back from their position on Mathew's Hill to the crest of the Henry House Hill. Gen. Jackson halted his men behind the crest of the hill, which sheltered his men from Union infantry fire.
27. Gen. Bee's men were still doing their best to hold back the Yankees. He wanted Jackson to charge over the hill to his relief. But Jackson stayed put. Bee's men soon began to panic as they retreated over the crest of the hill. Bee pointed to Jackson's crouching Virginians and yelled, "There stands Jackson like a stone wall. Rally behind the Virginians!"
28. Gen. Bee was killed in the battle soon afterwards, but from then on, Thomas Jackson would be known as "Stonewall" Jackson.
29. Jackson's men waited behind the hill until they saw the heads of the Yankees. Then they stood, delivered a volley, and with a shout, they charged into the surprised Yankees, driving them back down the hill.
30. Both sides attacked and counter-attacked for possession of the hill. By the early afternoon, both armies were exhausted and broke off the fight. The Yankees did so to organize their last big push, the rebels used the time to bring up fresh troops to stabilize their lines.
31. McDowell ordered artillery to the crest of the Henry House Hill But he did not order enough infantry to support the artillerists. And though they knew they were in an exposed position, the Union artillery gamely lobbed shells into the confederates, while hoping for infantry support.
32. In this battle, some Union troops wore gray and some confederate troops wore blue. This led to some confusion and helped to turn the tide of the battle.
33. The Union battery on the hill mistook some of Jackson's blue -coated troops to be their own expected reinforcements. The Yankees could have destroyed them with the grape-shot that was loaded in their cannons, but they were not sure which side they were on.

34. The rebels let loose a volley that obliterated the Union artillerists.
35. Now both sides charged, trying to control the cannons and the hill. McDowell got so caught up in trying to rally his men that he forgot to issue orders to bring up his fresh reserves.
36. Fresh southern troops continued to arrive by train. Trains had never before been used in war.
37. Both sides were completely exhausted from the battle and the heat of the day. But the northern troops began to panic. That fear spread to other Union regiments that had not yet been engaged in the battle.
38. Soon the rebels were sweeping down the hill, chasing the Yankees back.
39. Some Union troops were standing firm, intending to throw back the rebel charge. They had a fresh supply of gunpowder. But this turned out to be black dirt. Dishonest government contractors had substituted black dirt for gunpowder. And when the Union muskets failed to go off, this was the last straw for the Yankees.
40. Nearly the entire Union army stampeded, each soldier trying to be the first to reach the safety of Washington D.C.
41. A damaged wagon on the Cub Run Bridge and a glut of terrified civilians added to the pandemonium. A New York congressman was captured by the confederates!
42. With 5,000 fresh troops, perhaps the confederates could have destroyed the entire Union army. But the rebels were just as disorganized and exhausted as the Yankees.
43. Near the end of the battle, President Davis arrived on the field. Davis halted the pursuit.
44. It was good enough that the southerners had won an important victory. The army had done enough.
45. Along with winning the battlefield, the rebels captured dozens of cannons, hundreds of prisoners and thousands of discarded muskets. The news of the battle brought great joy to the entire south. The southerners believed that, despite being out-numbered and under-equipped, that they would ultimately win the War Between the States.
46. The north was just as depressed as the south was joyous. The humiliating defeat cost heavily on the spirits of the Yankees.
47. The battle encouraged the south to believe that the war would be short and fairly easy. But the north realized it would be long and bloody and resolved to fight on.

48. The Union troops, who trudged back to D.C. and even the victorious southerners, learned something about war that day. They, who had marched out with such high hopes, marched back with a different mindset.
49. Now, the soldiers had seen their friends and enemies killed, heard the moans and cries of the wounded, tasted the worms in their food, smelled the smell of death and felt –that this was all somebody’s fault.
50. And so it ended, known in the north as the Battle of Bull Run, and in the south, the Battle of Manassas. About one year later, a much bigger battle would be fought on the very same ground. But this battle did much to sober both sides, to the harsh realities of war.