

Bull Run - Prelude to Battle

12 April 1861 – Bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston, SC, harbor opens the Civil War. Fort Sumter surrenders the next day. Two days later newly inaugurated President Lincoln calls for 75,000 three-month volunteers to put down the insurrection.

May-June 1861 – While minor skirmishes are fought all along the border between the North and South, four armies begin forming in the Northern Virginia area.

Around Washington and Alexandria, Virginia, the Army of Northeastern Virginia gathers under the field command of Brigadier (one star) General Irvin McDowell, 42. A Major (three ranks below BG) only months before, his unwarranted appointment and unlikely assignment is a surprise and a source of irritation to those who serve under him. McDowell, in common with the other army commanders, had served with distinction the Mexican War – but not in command of troops.

Fifty miles west of Washington up the Potomac River, Major General (two stars) Robert Patterson, 69, commands the Union's Army of the Shenandoah. A relic of the War of 1812 as well as the Mexican War, he is serving as a 90 day volunteer. Too elderly and conservative for this war, he becomes, with some justification, the scapegoat for the Union loss at Bull Run.

Facing the Union Army of the Shenandoah is the Confederate army of the same name. Commanded by Brigadier General "Jo" Johnston, 54, a competent but cautious commander, he was loved by his troops but lacked the confidence of the Confederate President.

Brigadier General P. G. T. Beauregard, 43, commands the Confederate Army of the Potomac. Flamboyant and bombastic, his war plans were often unrealistic – the loose cannon of the 1860's. He was the commander of the troops that had opened fire on Fort Sumter three months before. He now commands the troops facing Washington.

Troops of both sides are young, enthusiastic volunteers but relatively untrained and undisciplined. Leaders are mostly professional soldiers but with little experienced handling large bodies of troops.

By late June, the Union news media is clamoring for a quick victory – a march on Richmond to disable the insurrection and restore the Union. At a presidential level meeting, Major General Winfield Scott, the Union's senior military commander presents his "anaconda" plan to strangle the Confederacy. President Lincoln rejects the plan as requiring too much time and manpower to implement. Instead, he sanctions Brigadier General McDowell's plan for a quick, direct move on Richmond, the new

Confederate capital. The plan is to begin in one week.

McDowell understands that his force is not ready and pleads for more time, but with the 90-day enlistments due to expire shortly, he is instructed to act while they are still available. ["You are green, they are green; you are all green together" -- Lincoln.]

McDowell knows that Beauregard's command is in the vicinity of the rail junction at Manassas, about 25 miles southwest of Washington. McDowell also has information that the Union force outnumbers Beauregard's Rebels. McDowell is correct -- information (and misinformation) about opposing forces flows freely both in the newspapers and through persons sympathetic to the enemy. McDowell also knows that there is a sizeable enemy force west of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Shenandoah Valley. If that Rebel force can be held there, McDowell believes that even his inexperienced troops can be victorious.

McDowell's plan is to confront Beauregard's force head on. And then slip Colonel Heintzelman's 3rd Division along with other forces around Beauregard's right flank. With Beauregard's troops trapped and destroyed, the road to Richmond will be open. The plan is sound but has two faults: One, the plan relies on Major General Patterson to hold the attention of the Shenandoah Rebels, and Two, McDowell doesn't know the battleground terrain – he lacks reliable maps of the area.

16-18 July 1861 – The Union force begins a cautious advance from its bases in Washington and Alexandria. Beauregard's advance elements fall back as the Union forces advance. McDowell lacks adequate cavalry to screen his own forces and seek-out the enemy; further, he misuses what little cavalry is available by attaching them to one of his divisions. The progress of the undisciplined Union troops is slow. By 18 July the Union troops have only reached Centreville and the northern banks of Bull Run River south of Centreville.

Centreville is a small town 25 miles west-southwest of Washington on the Warrenton Pike. It is 3 miles north and 4 miles west of Bull Run. It will become the Union base during the Battle. Bull Run runs roughly southeast emptying into the Potomac River 20 miles south of Washington. It is fordable in many places, but its high southern bank make for an excellent defensive position. Manassas is 3 miles south of Bull Run – 6 miles south of Centreville – where the Manassas Gap Railway from the Shenandoah Valley intersects with the Orange and Alexandria Railway running between Alexandria and Gordonsville, Virginia.

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Beauregard has known of the Union force movement since McDowell left Washington and has been calling for reinforcements. Richmond is scrapping up troops from around Virginia and sending them to bolster Beauregard. Richmond orders Johnston to move to Beauregard's aid.

Union Brigadier General Tyler, commanding the large 1st Division, is ordered by McDowell to press but NOT to become involved in a general engagement with the Rebels on the banks of Bull Run below of Centreville. Meanwhile, McDowell and Heintzelman make a reconnaissance of the planned swing around Beauregard's right flank. The roads are found to be inadequate to support the planned move in that area.

Meanwhile back on the banks of Bull Run, Tyler HAS become involved in a general engagement with Beauregard's forces. McDowell chastises Tyler for contesting the Rebels at Blackburn's and Mitchell's Fords. The Union troops who left their bases with three days rations are now out of food. McDowell's original plan has fallen apart.

19-20 July 1861 – At Centreville, McDowell calls for more rations from Washington and sets to devising a new plan. With assurances from Washington that Patterson is holding Johnston in the Shenandoah, McDowell seeks another route around Beauregard's flank. He finds it. Beauregard's left flank only extends as far as Stone Bridge on the Warrenton Pike. If the Union forces can swing around that flank, the Rebels will be forced to give up their strong defensive positions on the southern bank of Bull Run.

The new plan calls for Colonel Richardson's Brigade of Tyler's 1st Division to remain facing the Rebels south of Centreville. The rest of Tyler's Division will make a demonstration against Stone Bridge on Warrenton Pike. The divisions of Colonels Hunter and Heintzelman will swing around Beauregard's left flank, cross Bull Run near Sudley Springs, and come up behind the Rebs from the west. Colonel Miles' 5th Division will stay in reserve at Centreville and Brigadier General Runyon's 4th Division will continue to guard the lines of communication between Washington and Centreville. Same plan – different direction.

McDowell instructs commanders to begin moving on the evening of 20 July, rest when they reach the ford, and begin crossing of the Sudley Fords at 0600. The unit commanders feel that the men can start in the early morning darkness and still reach the fords at Sudley Springs by 0600. McDowell accedes to their wishes. That is a mistake. Undisciplined troops coupled with inexperienced leaders will result in delays and misdirection during the night march. The crossing won't begin until 0900. A delay that will give

the Confederates just enough time to reinforce their crumbling western flank.

While McDowell has been preparing his new plan, the Confederate government has been frantically reinforcing Beauregard. Significant forces joining Beauregard are Brigadier General Holmes' Brigade and Hampton's Legion. Johnston received orders to move on 17 July and his troops began leaving for Manassas on the 18th. His troops marched 25 miles from the area of Winchester, Virginia, through the Blue Ridge Mountains to Piedmont, Virginia, where they boarded a shuttle train for the 25 mile trip to Manassas Junction. Colonel T. J. Jackson's Brigade begins arriving at Manassas Junction on the morning of 19 July.

To allow his troops to slip away from Patterson, Johnston details Lieutenant Colonel J. E. B. Stuart's 1st Virginia Cavalry to give the impression that the Confederates are still in the area. Patterson is fooled and doesn't discover until 20 July that Johnston's forces have left.

With his new reinforcements, Beauregard proposes to Johnston that the remainder of Johnson's troops attack McDowell in the rear from the north while Beauregard attacks them from the south. Johnston dismisses the plan. Coordinating inexperienced troops in a two pronged assault would be difficult and perhaps fatal if Patterson has not fallen for Stuart's ruse. Johnston directs all his troops to arrive in the area by way of Manassas Junction.

When Johnston arrives on the field, Beauregard presents a new attack plan. Beauregard believes that McDowell will renew the attack southward from Centreville. Beauregard plans for the Rebels to advance over Bull Run and move on Centreville from the southeast catching McDowell's advancing troops in their left flank. General Johnston, now the senior officer in command, agrees with Beauregard's plan and the orders go out.

So inadvertently, both armies are planning right flank attacks on the enemy. If all goes according to plans, both armies will be dancing around one another. All does not go according to plan.

21 July 1861 – About 0600 as planned, Tyler opens the engagement with artillery fire at Confederate positions behind Stone Bridge. On the move since between 0200 and 0300, Hunter and Heintzelman finally begin crossing Bull Run at Sudley Springs Ford at about 0900 – three hours late. Colonel Evan's, whose small force has been guarding Stone Bridge, is not deceived by the weak demonstration and notices the dust from the moving troops in his left rear. He boldly details his regiments to intercept that advance. The Battle of Bull Run is on.

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The Confederate attack plan misfires. Some units have gotten their orders, some have not, and some don't understand the orders that they do receive. Commanders of the era idolized Napoleon and Washington and attempted to copy their format and form for orders. Consequently, orders of the time are often unclear and easily misunderstood. This is not the only battle that will be affected by that

problem. In any event, the majority of the Confederate forces do nothing until the sound and news of the fighting to the northwest begins to arrive. Some troops move to the sounds of the battle. Beauregard rides northwest to command the engaged forces. Johnston organizes and dispatches units to reinforce the Confederate troops in battle.

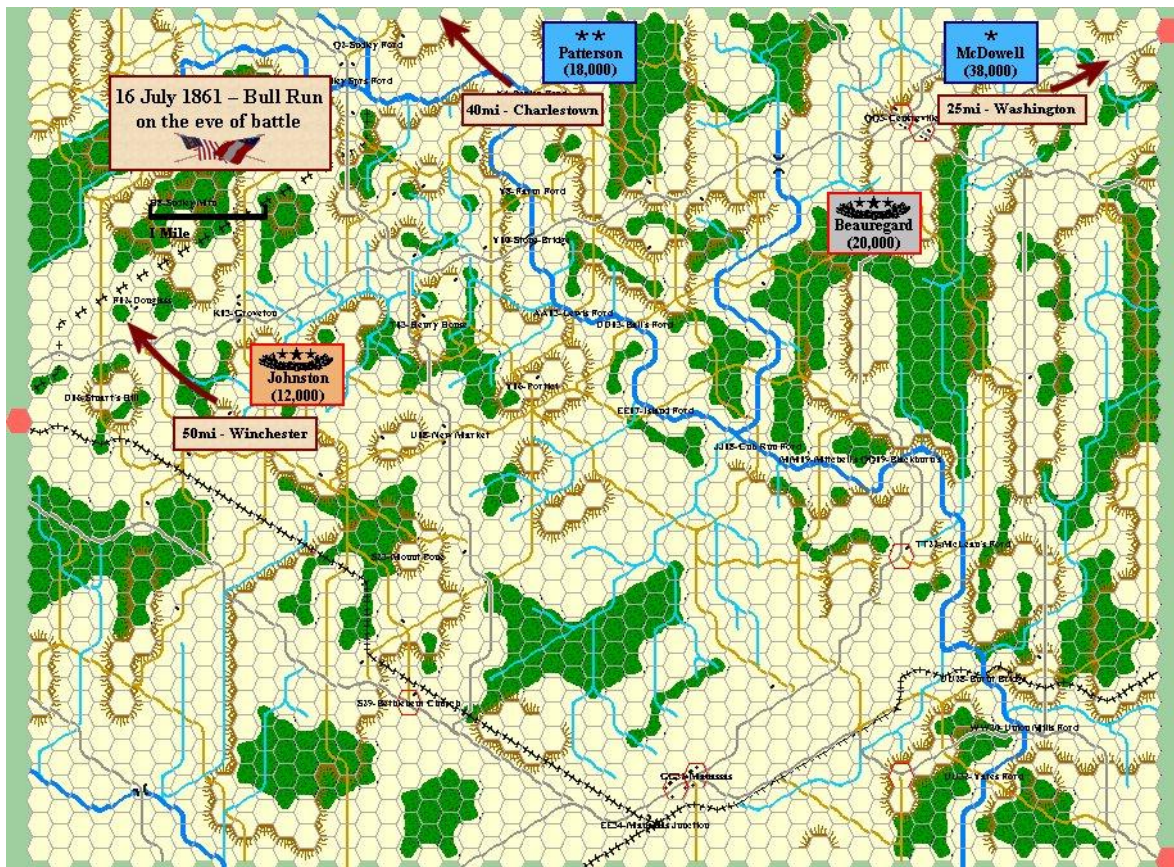
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When Richard Hamblen designed the game, he tried to introduce a rank structure that made game sense. To use the actual ranks would have been much more confusing. Here's a table to explain what I mean:

Formation	Today's Rank Nominally Commanding That Formation	Bull Run Game Rank	Union Rank, 1861	Rebel Rank, 1861
Army	General, ★★ ★ (4)	★★★ ★ (4)		General, ★★ ★ (3) w/wreath
Corps	Lieutenant General, ★★ ★ (3)			Lieutenant General, ★★ ★ (3) w/wreath
Division	Major General, ★★ (2)	★★ (2)	Major General, ★★ (2)	Major General, ★★ ★ (3) w/wreath
Brigade	Brigadier General, ★ (1)	★ (1)	Brigadier General, ★ (1)	Brigadier General, ★★ ★ (3) w/wreath

If you are familiar with the symbology use in many wargames, you will note that the stars above unit symbols indicated those size formations listed. In 1861, the highest Union rank was Major General – Lieutenant General was introduced later in the war. All Confederate generals wore three stars with a wreath surrounding. Many leaders at the Battle of Bull Run were Colonels – an eagle in the Union and three stars without the wreath in the Confederacy.

As you can see if the actual ranks of 1861 were used, there would be confusion in the game. All army commanders were actually Brigadier Generals. Two Union Division Commanders were Brigadier Generals – Tyler and Runyon. The Rebels had no division organizations. Most Brigade Commanders were Colonels although some were Brigadier Generals.



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