

## The Ten Costliest Civil War Battles

As we know our Civil War produced unparalleled casualties with twice as many deaths from disease as from battles. However battles also caused other types of casualties such as wounded, many which were permanently disabling, captured as prisoners of war, again often causing more deaths, and missing in action, which took various forms such as desertions, simply getting lost, or drowning, etc.

Furthermore untold casualties occurred while armies were in retreat when mustering was difficult or even impossible. Indeed precise casualty figures were almost impossible to obtain whenever armies were forced to leave the battlefield, frequently abandoning wounded to the fate of the army that captured the battlefield.

Furthermore personnel figures, including casualties, for the Confederacy were almost less imprecise than those for the Union. After some battles Confederate personnel officers could only provide estimated totals without breaking down among deaths, wounded and captured and/or missing. Additionally during the earlier portions of the Civil War the captured figures would have to be modified by paroles and later prisoner exchanges.

Nevertheless the following list is provided to give a rough gauge of which battles were the most costly in terms of personnel losses.

**1. Gettysburg** -- July 1-3, 1863: Eastern Theater; Lee vs Meade. Easily the most famous of the Civil War battles. The Confederates won the first two days but all was lost, in large part during Pickett's Charge on the third day. A long retreat ensued but the Federals were not able to successfully pursue, meaning the Confederates were able to escape back into Virginia. Not only was Lee forced to withdraw from the North but his army could never muster another offensive threat into Northern territory. Union losses: 23,186; CSA losses: 31,621

**2. Chickamauga** -- September 19–20, 1863: Western Theater; Bragg vs Rosecrans. Because there was some fighting on September 18, some historians consider this to be a three day battle. Regardless it was a fierce melee with considerable hand to hand fighting. It was the South's most significant victory in the West but Bragg still could not capitalize on his opportunity to totally crush the Northern army. Union losses: 15,851; CSA losses: 17,804

**3. The Wilderness** -- May 5–7, 1864: Eastern Theater; Lee vs Grant. This was the opening battle in Grant's Overland Campaign designed to force Lee to give battle in the open. However when it took too long to move all Union logistics through the Wilderness, Lee counterattacked with a vengeance. Although badly battered Grant ordered his army to continue moving toward Richmond rather than retreating. Union losses: 37,737; CSA losses: 11,400

**4. Spotsylvania Court House** -- May 8–21, 1864: Eastern Theater; Grant vs Lee. These battles began immediately after Grant withdrew from The Wilderness. The North tried several times to break through Lee's lines but failed. Bloody Angel featured some of the worst hand-to-hand fighting. Failing to break through, Grant eventually withdrew before continuing to sidle toward Richmond via North Anna River and Cold Harbor. Union losses: 26,461; CSA losses: 9,000.

The Wilderness and Spotsylvania were the two most costly battles of Grant's Overland Campaign that also included North Anna River and Cold Harbor, another bloody affair.

**5. Chancellorsville** -- May 1–4, 1863: Eastern Theater; Hooker vs Lee. Much of this battlefield overlapped with The Wilderness battlefield fought almost a year to the date later. Lee was vulnerable

because he had split his army but Hooker, by his own later admission, lost his nerve and conceded the initiative to Lee. Many consider this to have been Lee's greatest victory but Lee suffered a major loss when Stonewall Jackson died eight days after the battle. Lee lamented that he was not able to muster a pursuit of Hooker's battered army. Union losses: 16,030; CSA losses: 12,281

**6. Shiloh** -- April 6–7, 1862: Western Theater; S.A. Johnston vs Grant. Shiloh was the Civil War's first really major battle. At that point its casualties exceeded the combined number of all previous American wars. After Johnston was killed his second in command, Beauregard, assumed command and decided to retreat back to Corinth after the second day. The Rebels were able to return to Corinth because Federal attempts to pursue were ineffectual. Union losses: 13,573; CSA losses: 10,699

**7. Stones River** -- December 31, 1862–January 2, 1863: Western Theater; Rosecrans vs Bragg. After assuming command of the Union forces a couple months earlier Rosecrans was pressured to begin advancing toward Atlanta. The battle was fought in bitterly cold weather with the South winning a narrow tactical victory. However more supplies and reinforcements began to arrive for the North forcing Bragg to order a retreat. Rosecrans waited until warmer weather before resuming his advance. One of the larger artillery battles of the war. Union losses: 11,578; CSA losses: 25,560

**8. Antietam** -- September 16–18, 1862: Eastern Theater: McClellan vs Lee. 95% of the fighting occurred September 17, 1862, the single bloodiest day of the war. Actually McClellan would have gained a major advantage if he had struck on September 16 while much of Lee's army had arrived. As it was Lee probably had gained a narrow,

but costly, tactical victory but he had to withdraw because his position was untenable. Eventually Lincoln fired McClellan because Little Mac refused to initiate an aggressive pursuit. Union losses: 12,469; CSA losses: 25,899

**9. 2nd Bull Run** -- August 28–30, 1862: Eastern Theater; Lee vs Pope. See "Comparing Bull Runs" elsewhere on this website. In an effort to destroy Lee's army Lincoln appointed John Pope to command a new army, composed in part with units from McClellan's Army of the Potomac. Pope was quickly bamboozled by Lee's deft deployment of his units and was eventually sent back to Washington with his tail between his legs. Without too much delay Lee began his Maryland campaign causing Lincoln to reinstate McClellan to protect Washington against Lee's invasion. Union losses: 14,800; CSA losses: 10,700

**10. Fort Donelson** -- February 13–16, 1862: Western Theater; Grant vs Floyd. Hard on the heels of Grant's capture of Fort Henry on the Tennessee River (some would give the credit to naval forces under Foote), Grant moved to capture the Rebels' sister position on the Cumberland River. Surrounded two-to-one, the Confederates had no choice but to surrender but only after their top commanders plus a cavalry force under Forrest escaped. The captures of Fort Henry and Fort Donalson were important strategic victories for the Union. Union losses: 2,331; CSA losses: 15,067

Sometimes campaigns contribute to the butchers' bill, as illustrated by Grant's Overland Campaign that accrued 50,000 Union casualties and 32,000 casualties for the Confederacy. The Seven Days Battles in 1862 were also bloody affairs that accumulated 18,349 casualties for the Union and 20,733 casualties for the Confederacy. This series of battles managed to push McClellan's army away from the doorsteps of

Richmond (some might argue that McClellan's malfeasance as a field commander was a major contributor to that accomplishment). In any event, this series of battles helped establish Lee's fame as an outstanding general. See "Lee's Star Ascending" elsewhere on this website.