

Comparing Bull Runs

The two battles fought on the same battleground near Manassas, Virginia, during the first half of the Civil War make for some interesting and instructive comparisons. Of course First Bull Run was the first major battle of the Civil War, and as such has traditionally and typically received much more attention than has Second Bull Run, which is sometimes not even mentioned in some shorter Civil War histories. Yet Second Bull Run was hardly a mere replay of the battle that had been fought only a little more than a year earlier.

Prior to First Bull Run both sides had high expectations that one good decisive battle could finish the war, especially if the enemy's capital could be captured. (See On to Richmond elsewhere on this website.) First Bull Run was fought with 30,000 mostly "green" troops on each side. Many Union soldiers were approaching the end of their ninety day enlistments and not particularly anxious to risk their lives.

After First Bull Run the belligerents took stock and realized the futility of expecting a quick, decisive, one-punch knockout blow to end the war. Accordingly, they quit relying upon 90-day enlistments with inadequate training and equipment. Instead the armies not only began to massively build up their numbers, (Lincoln issued a call for another 400,000 volunteers) but also tried to assure their units were better trained as well as being better armed and equipped to fight over the long haul. As described by David J. Eicher the summer of 1862 saw significant developments in the use and management of communications by telegraph, signal flags, and ciphered messages.¹

At the same time the leaders of both sides began to evolve strategic goals like a boxer who is unable to score an early knock out and who then begins to "work the body," the Union began to try to weaken the Confederacy with a number of strategic measures such as imposing a naval blockade.

By Second Bull Run, after a series of major battles in the Eastern theater alone, both sides became resigned to the realization that the war was likely to be a long, bloody slog, regardless of who happened to win one particular battle, especially battles that were indecisive. Indeed the notion that the war would be won only by a series of bloody battles may have clouded opportunities for achieving decisive victories. During Second Bull Run the Union engaged 76,000 troops while the Confederates had 49,000 engaged; both sides were using hardened veterans of several campaigns, including Jackson's 1862 Valley Campaign, the Peninsula Campaign, and Seven Days, among others.

The respective command structures had also seen dramatic changes. On the Federal side the Administration had created an entirely new army, designated as the Army of Virginia, commanded by John Pope, a favorite of the Radical Republicans imported from the West. Irwin McDowell, the Federal commander during First Bull Run, was retained but had been reduced to a corps commander as one of Pope's subordinates. On the Confederate side, its former commanding general, Joe Johnston, was wounded outside of Richmond to be replaced by Robert E. Lee who gave his new command a new name, the Army of Northern Virginia. (See Lee's Star

Ascending elsewhere on this website.) Johnston's chief subordinate at First Bull Run, P.G.T. Beauregard, had been sent west after wearing out his welcome with the Richmond administration.

McDowell and Beauregard were old army friends from their West Point days, both being graduates of the Class of 1838. On the other hand, Lee despised the new Federal commander, Pope, as did a number of other officers on both sides. Among other things Pope's bombastic rhetoric managed to harden attitudes of friends as well as foes.

Both battles featured two of the same terrain features: Henry House Hill and the Stony Bridge. First Bull Run lasted one day after a day's virtually unchallenged march from the Washington area; reflecting some light hearted expectations, it was witnessed by spectators who had brought picnic lunches and parasols. In contrast, prior to Second Bull Run the Union forces had been on their heels as they quickly retreated northward from the Rappahannock River to Manassas Junction to try save their stores and to find and "bag" Stonewall Jackson.

Second Bull Run lasted two days – three days if you count Groveton. Furthermore Second Bull run was preceded by other actions, including Cedar Mountain, August 9, 1862, and was followed by additional hard fighting at Ox Hill near Chantilly, September 1, 1862, as the armies maneuvered from mid-Virginia toward Northern territory.

Casualties drastically increased from the first battle to the second. Union casualties in First Bull Run aggregated to 2,645 while the Confederates suffered 1,981 losses. On the other hand, Union casualties in Second Bull Run were 16,054 while Confederate losses were 9,197. For all the bloodshed, neither battle was decisive. John Pope was dispatched to fight Native Americans in Minnesota after his short lived army was dissolved before being absorbed into George McClellan's quickly reassembled Army of the Potomac which met Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Antietam two and a half weeks later in what became the bloodiest single day on American soil. And so the war continued.

(For further reference check Timetables for both Bull Runs on this website.)

ⁱ Eicher, David J. *The Longest Night: A Military History of the Civil War* (2001) New York: Simon & Schuster , pp 298-302.