

Confederate Fiasco at Cheat Mountain

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As the summer of 1861 turned to fall, Confederate forces in Virginia were alert for Union attack at three major points. In eastern Virginia, following the battle of Big Bethel in June and the loss of Fort Hatteras in North Carolina in late August, the southern lines around Norfolk and on the Tidewater peninsula were strengthened. In northern Virginia, McDowell and Beauregard continued in stalemate in the wake of the First Battle of Bull Run. Of equal concern to Jefferson Davis and his overall Virginia commander Robert E. Lee, was the Federal presence in northwestern Virginia.

Union forces in that mountainous region, now part of West Virginia, were commanded by Major General George McClellan and Major General Robert Patterson and obviously had their sights set on taking control of Virginia's fertile Shenandoah Valley. Making the situation even more serious for the Confederates was the state of the troops in the region. When Brigadier General Robert Garnett had arrived in northwestern Virginia in mid-June he had reported that the few soldiers he had were lacking in arms, equipment, clothing, instruction and discipline. Garnett had done his best with what he had, but his men were defeated and Garnett himself killed at the Battle of Rich Mountain in mid-July. The news of Garnett's death caused a near panic in Richmond and Jefferson Davis would likely have sent Lee to take command in the mountains if he had not needed Lee even more to direct troop movements to the impending battle at Manassas.

On July 28, with the victory at Bull Run secured, Davis ordered Lee to take command of the Confederates in northwestern Virginia. Lee found the situation to be even worse than had

Garnett. Not only were his troops largely unprepared for war, but they were now demoralized because of the loss at Rich Mountain. The Federals had now claimed the most strategic point in the region at the top of Cheat Mountain. Control of this peak meant control of the only major east-west road in the area, the Staunton-Parkersburg turnpike.

If the Union troops could push forward 50 miles to Staunton, they would gain control of the Shenandoah Valley. On the other hand, if the Confederates were somehow able to drive the enemy back they could eventually take control of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad at Grafton and thereby sever a major east-west supply route for the Union. Over the next month Lee was able to get to know his command and the region around him. He became convinced that the Federal position on Cheat Mountain could be taken in spite of the steep slopes and nearly impenetrable underbrush.

Lee's plan called for simultaneous attacks from the east and the west of the mountain, the latter by troops who would circle around the Federal rear. The troop movements began on September 9 and due to cold weather, rain and the terrain the advance was extremely slow. Still, by September 12 Lee's forces were approaching the mountain. Unfortunately for Lee, the attack, such as it was, turned out to be chaotic and disjointed. None of the three Confederate columns were able to make contact with either of the other two columns. The column approaching from the east took several Union prisoners who misinformed Colonel Albert Rust that there were more than 5,000 Federals in front of them. Hearing this, Rust decided against the attack. As it turned out, his path had only been obstructed by about 300 Union soldiers.

Without the support from the east, the Confederates attacking from the west could make little headway and by the evening of September 17, Lee had decided to call off the attack. It was

a very inauspicious first field command for the man who would later be thought of as the Confederacy's preeminent general.