

**Part III:**  
**First Encounters 1861; Combatant Formations Organize and Fight**  
*By Lieutenant Colonel Ed Kennedy (Ret)*

As the political crisis of 1860 morphed into secession of an increasing number of states in 1861, officers of the U.S. Army were caught in a conundrum. Many had served for years in the U.S. Army. A number had fought in the Mexican-American War together with men they respected but now were potentially on different sides politically. Military Academy graduates had all studied using the same texts stating that secession was legal. Yet, many were proud to be Americans and could not envision dividing the country. The decision was extremely tough for those from the South. Some Northerners were conflicted as well. Captain William Steele, a dragoon officer commanding Fort Leavenworth was a graduate of West Point. The New York native had served over 20 years in the west and on the frontier. He married a lady from Texas when stationed there so after preparing Fort Leavenworth for war as ordered, he penned his resignation and rode to Texas to take command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Texas Cavalry. He wasn't the only one. Captain George Thomas from Virginia married a lady from New York. He famously went North. Both men ended the war as generals.

The Army had been involved with the violence on the frontier in Missouri and Kansas between pro-slave and anti-slave groups before the shots were fired at Fort Sumter. Most of what they did was to try and keep opposing factions apart and assist in maintaining the law. Despite the appellation of "Bleeding Kansas" (the name given by the press), relatively, there was actually very little combat and few deaths. This was likely due to the active presence of Army patrols. After the war began, serious fighting occurred, especially in 1861 as the Regular Army moved back east.

COL (ret) Jerry Morelock, Ph.D. and editor of "America's Civil War" wrote in an article about the "war on the border" stating:

*... historian Dale Watts in a ground-breaking article in the Summer 1995 edition of Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains titled "How Bloody Was 'Bleeding Kansas?'" In his exhaustively-researched article, Watts discovered that "Bleeding Kansas" actually produced only a fraction of the number of deaths due to clashes of anti- and pro-slavery forces that were widely claimed by both sides – and still parroted by historians today – suffered during the so-called "Border War."*

*The truth about "Bleeding Kansas" is revealed in the "Border War's" actual casualty figures unearthed by Watts's extensive research. Watts searched the historical records to document recorded deaths along the Kansas-Missouri border during the 1854-1861 time frame in order to determine which death could be attributed to a "political killing" (i.e. a murder by a pro- or anti-slavery settler solely because of the victim's political stance in the conflict) or was due to some other motivation altogether (such as land disputes, personal animosity, or simply common criminal activities such as robbery, crimes of passion, or homicide not connected with the victim's or perpetrator's political views). Although contemporary accounts and estimates of casualties nearly always over-estimated deaths in the*

*conflict (e.g. the 1859 report of the Hoogland Claims Commission reported “the number of lives sacrificed in Kansas during [1854-1855] probably exceeded rather than fell short of two hundred”) Watts’s research of the actual historical record unearthed a verifiable casualty record that generally confirmed the 1974 conclusion of Robert W. Richmond that “approximately fifty persons died violently [for political reasons] during the [Kansas] territorial period [1854-1861].”*

*Extract from “Fake News!: The enduring myth of “Bleeding Kansas”, America’s Civil War (magazine).*

At the time of the “opening shots” at Fort Sumter on 12 April 1861, opening shots had actually been fired further south at Pensacola. On 8 January 1861, secessionists attacked Fort Barrancas only two days before Florida seceded. The U.S. commander, Lt Slemmer, abandoned Fort Barrancas and moved his force to Fort Pickens across the harbor on Santa Rosa Island. President Buchanan sent reinforcements but no further actions occurred until after those in Charleston, S.C. in April. What this action did was significantly raise the awareness and concerns of U.S. commanders at Federal installations throughout the South. Fort Pickens on Santa Rosa Island remained in Federal control for the entire war. *[NOTE: Fort Barrancas remained an Army Coast Artillery fort until WWII and closed in 1947. It is now within the confines of the Naval Air Station Pensacola and administered by the National Park Service.]*

Most Confederate states seceded in 1861 with Mississippi doing so at the same time of the attack on Fort Barrancas. The fort on Ship Island off the coast of Gulfport (not named “Fort Massachusetts” until later in the war) was occupied by Mississippi militia. The USS *Massachusetts* attacked the only Federal fort in Mississippi in July with inconclusive results. Florida’s secession occurred immediately after the attack on Fort Barrancas and was followed by Alabama the next day on 11 January. Federal installations along the Gulf Coast were now alerted although it would take time for them all to receive the news.

On the Atlantic coast, Georgia seceded on 19 January, and like the gulf states, had Federal installations along the coast, significantly at the port of Savannah. Louisiana and Texas both left the Union in January and February respectively. No violence attended the departure of the U.S. garrisons and former Federal installations were quickly occupied by seceding state forces.

The U.S. Army, until the events surrounding events at Fort Sumter, quietly submitted to the states and the soldiers were allowed to depart unmolested for points north. When President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to put down the “rebellion” and “restore the Union” on 15 April, the states of Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina left the Union as a direct result.

In the meantime, consolidation of the Regular Army regiments continued as they were recalled from frontier duty to go east, replaced by state militias or volunteers. In the west, this resulted in an upsurge in Indian activity as states rushed to fill the power vacuum. In the East, small skirmishes and minor battles began to occur between northern and southern forces. Nine engagements occurred in Virginia, West Virginia and Missouri between regular forces of both sides prior to First Manassas (Bull Run) on 21 July. Three of the nine battles /

engagements were Confederate victories. Four of the nine were Union victories. Two had inconclusive results.

Until the end of the 1861 calendar year, only five of the 24 conflicts by the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission (CWSAC) *Report on the Nation's Civil War Battlefields* are classified as Class A – “Decisive” or Class B – “Major” after First Manassas. Only the Battle of Wilson’s Creek is classified as a Class A event. That means that in 1861, only one in five actions were significant enough to be classified as “Decisive” but mostly “Major”. The remaining actions are classified as Class C – “Formative” or, Class D – “Limited”. Neither of these were significant enough to really impact the war’s progress.

What does this tell us about what was happening? In general, 1861 was a “shake-down” consisting of organization and training periods for both armies. Because the Union Army was expanding from 16,000 to 1,000,000 under arms and the Confederates from 0 to over 700,000, the armies of both sides were struggling just to get men equipped, trained and prepared to fight. Neither side had the requisite arms and equipment necessary to fight major actions. Both immediately sent purchasing agents to Europe to buy as many small arms as possible. What was key is that both armies got a late start, not really mobilizing until after the bombardment of Fort Sumter in April. With the exception of the multiple low intensity raids and combat in Missouri along the Kansas border peaking in 1862, fighting was confined to regularly organized units in the East. Training and equipping took a long time (weeks to months) and so it is completely understandable that only a handful of major or decisive battles took place in 1861.

Leaders on both sides were trained in tactics and with the exception of the Mexican War had never participated-in, or even planned operational-level campaigns. Almost all their experience was at the lowest level of military operations ---- the tactical level. In fact, the US Army did not have the means to even train officers in operational level campaigns (*this did not occur until the advent of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*). Strategy was not taught and “strategizing” in officer messes was a favorite past-time of many who envisioned themselves as the new Napoleon Bonaparte. In fact, Napoleon’s campaigns were widely studied in military schools since they had occurred just over 45 years prior to the beginning of the War Between the States. The fact that many officers admired Napoleon can be ascertained by viewing their war-time images made with one of their hands thrust into their unbuttoned coats ---- Napoleon style. Adding to the admiration of all things French were the writings of the Baron Antoine-Henri Jomini whose interpretations of Napoleonic warfare were the staple of many pre-war officer libraries. Jomini’s influence on the early parts of the conflict are undeniable.

When 1861 came to a close, the stage was set for a very bloody year to follow with two largely amateur armies thrashing to land knockout blows and quickly end the war. The learning curve was steep for both sides but 1862 showed that they both progressed quickly as the violence increased.