

## **First Civil War Battle for Illinois Troops**

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The events at Rich Mountain in West Virginia mark the first involvement of Illinois troops in the Civil War. After the smoke cleared from the first Union victory at Philippi, defeated Confederate troops marched through western Virginia during the summer of 1861.

Confederate troops fortified two key passes under the command of Gen. Robert S. Garnett. The first pass, named Camp Garnett, was constructed of earth and log entrenchments. The second pass was the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike at Rich Mountain, just west of Beverly, W.Va. While Confederate troops set up camps, the Union, under the command of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, gathered 5,000 troops and eight cannons to send to Roaring Creek Flats located two miles west of the entrenchments.

To protect the area's vital Baltimore and Ohio Railroad line from Confederate forces, McClellan planned to secure the loyal counties of western Virginia. Among these troops were the Sturgis Rifles, a separate company organized out of Chicago. Mr. Solomon Sturgis generously funded this company for two months and equipped them with sharp rifles.

The Sturgis Rifles were sent to West Virginia to guard and protect McClellan during battle and marched with him to Washington, where he became the Command of the Armies. With the support of Illinois Soldiers, Union Brig. Gen. William S. Rosecrans suggested attacking from the left flank of the entrenchments, while 22-year-old David Hart volunteered to guide troops to the summit of Rich Mountain. McClellan, hesitant to attack from the front due to his troop's lack of experience, eventually took a frontal stance with the assistance of Hart.

Confederate Lt. Col. John Pegram, commander of Camp Garnett and its 1,300 Soldiers, learned of McClellan's movement toward the camp and sent 310 men and one cannon to Joseph Hart Homestead to protect his rear at the pass where the pike crossed the summit of Rich Mountain.

July 11, 1861, Rosecrans and 2,000 men marched up Rich Mountain, trudging through dense woods and drenching rain. At 2:30 p.m., the Federal column crossed enemy skirmishers and took Confederate troops by surprise outside Camp Garnett. Hiding behind rocks and trees in the entrenchment, the Confederates held off the Union troops for more than two hours before losing the field to Rosecrans' troops.

Outnumbered by Union Soldiers, Pegram ordered his troops to leave Camp Garnett during the night, splitting Confederate forces in two. On the morning of July 12, Rosecrans entered the abandoned camp and learned that the enemy had fled. The first half of Confederate Soldiers escaped to Beverly, while Pegram and the other 555 Confederates surrendered July 13, 1861. This battle estimated 346 casualties; 300 Confederate Soldiers and 46 Union Soldiers.

Since April 15, 1861, an estimated 259,000 Soldiers from Illinois served in the Civil War. Roughly 35,000 of them died from disease or wounds inflicted during battle. Illinois Soldier's efforts towards Union victory at Rich Mountain played a large part in shifting McClellan to command of the Army of the Potomac and admitting the state of West Virginia to the Union two years after the battles end.