

War

GRADE 8



A dead Confederate soldier lies in a ditch after the Battle of Petersburg. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-B811-3175

“I have Seen...men rolling in their own blood, Some Shot in one place, Some another....our dead lay in the road and the Rebels in their haste to leave dragged both their baggage wagons and artillery over them and they lay mangled and torn to pieces so that Even friends could not tell them. You can form no idea of a battle field...no pen can describe it. No tongue can tell its horror.”

— Maine soldier
The Civil War's Common Soldier,
National Park Civil War Series,
James I. Robertson, Jr., *Eastern National*, 1994.

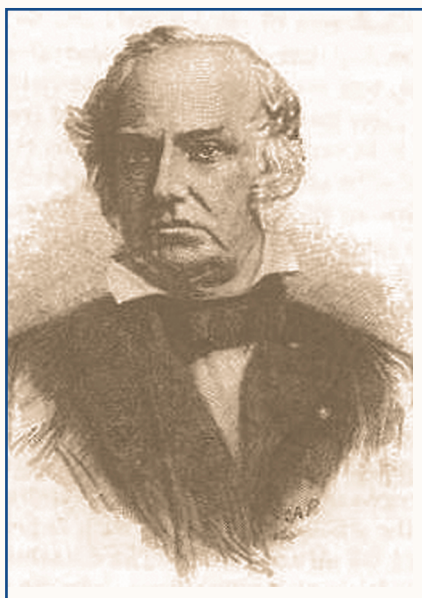


Teacher's Note: Land Advantages

Have the students read *Ball's Bluff – What Would You Do?* Pretending that they are the colonel in charge, they will have to *read the land* and decide the best course of military action. Remind your students to answer the questions on a separate sheet of paper. When they are done, give them *Ball's Bluff – What Actually Happened* to see if they would make a good Civil War colonel or not.

Ball's Bluff – What Would You Do?

GRADE 8



Colonel Baker from *Battles and Leaders II*

Throughout this reading, you are assuming the role of Union Colonel Edward Baker, a politician-turned-military-officer. Answer the question on a separate sheet of paper to see if you'd make a good Civil War colonel, or if you should stay at home!

In October of 1861, Brigadier General Stone was ordered to make a *slight demonstration* on the Virginia shore of the Potomac. His goal was to encourage the Confederate troops, who were supposedly leaving Leesburg and traveling South, to get out of the area more quickly. General Stone and his men were on the Maryland shore of the Potomac and they needed to cross over to the Virginia side.

There weren't many large boats in the area, so crossing the river with a large number of men would be a big problem. In addition, there weren't many beaches large enough to land his men. The Confederates defended the largest beach, and the next best option was a narrow

piece of land under a bluff, Ball's Bluff, which rose almost 100 feet above the water. There was a very narrow path, wide enough for only one man to walk on it at a time, which led from the beach to the crest of the bluff. At the top, there was an open field that lay in front of a large wooded area.

Stone dispatched two small scouting parties to see if they'd encounter any Confederate resistance from troops that he guessed to be at the top of the bluff. They didn't, and although Stone was worried, he ordered you, Colonel Baker, across the river to investigate the situation further. Your job was to either reinforce the men that were already there or withdraw.

You were happy to be in command at last, as you were anxiously seeking battlefield glory. As you boarded the first boat, you were quoting inspirational poetry and told your subordinate officers to look for the white plume in your hat if they wanted to find the fight. (A bit egotistical of you, don't you think?) As your boat was approaching the beach, you heard firing coming from the top of the bluff, probably between the Union troops that were already there and Confederate forces.

What would you do and why? (While making your strategy, take into account potential Union problems and Confederate advantages, most of which are tied to the land.) When your strategic plan as commanding officer is completed, give your paper to the teacher, and she will hand you a sheet that will explain what Baker decided to do and the ensuing outcome at Ball's Bluff.

For more information, read *Civil War Blunders*, 42-45

The Legacy of Ball's Bluff, Patricia Caldwell, Civil War Interactive, www.civilwarinteractive.com/wcballsbluff.htm.

Baker's Battlefield Blunder - Ball's Bluff

Baker ordered his entire 1,700-man brigade to cross the river, which was done in shifts, as there weren't enough boats to go all at once. He waited for a large group to land on the beach and then ordered his men to march up the narrow path without sending any scouts ahead to assess the situation. When Baker reached the top of the bluff and located the Union colonel from the scouting parties that were sent earlier, he shook his hand and congratulated him on finding a battle that they could fight. (Hmmm!) Again, Baker did not send out skirmishers to determine the size of the Confederate force, but he gave orders to have the rest of his men land on the beach. Soon, all four regiments had landed, and Baker had yet to realize his dangerous position. A large group of Confederates were hidden in the woods and had all their cannons in a semicircle, trained on the open field where the Federal troops were amassing. (The Confederates had previously intercepted a Union courier and were aware of Federal intentions.)



The cliff at Ball's Bluff.
From *Battles and Leaders II*.

When the last of the Union soldiers had mounted the crest of the bluff, Confederate cannon fire shot from the woods, trapping the unsuspecting Union troops in a deadly crossfire with Confederates at their front and sides and the bluff with a drop of 100 feet at their back. Before long, the Confederates were pushing the Union force backwards. Baker was now frantically ordering his men to hold their position, but that was a difficult task when they had no earthworks, breastworks, underbrush, streams, or log forts... nothing to stabilize their exposed line. By this time, the men of one of the Union's cannon crew were all dead, and when the other cannon was fired, its crew was surprised to see the cannon's recoil send it careening over the cliff. The Union soldiers were pinned between the oncoming Confederates and the bluff.

The Confederates had allowed the Union troops to land on the beach without resistance, luring them to the hopeless position that they now occupied. The Confederates charged the Union troops, and Baker was instantly killed. The Union soldiers were running toward the cliff, some jumping and landing on the bayonets of their comrades who were running down the path. Remember, the path was only big enough for one man at a time. Can you imagine over a thousand men trying to run down a path single file while being fired on from behind? Some of those who jumped landed on rocks, breaking their legs, backs, and smashing their heads. The Confederate soldiers were now at the edge of the cliff, firing and throwing rocks down on the men below.

Some of the Union soldiers had made it to the three boats on the beach (Remember that the soldiers had come over in shifts, so there weren't enough boats to take everyone back at once). The boats were already in the water, headed towards safety, when their comrades swam out and tried to board the full boats. The uninjured soldiers in the water were pulling the wounded soldiers overboard in a desperate struggle for life. The Confederates watched in amazement as the Union men killed each other!

Ball's Bluff, which was only supposed to be a reconnoitering expedition, turned into a deadly fiasco thanks to Baker's over-inflated ego and lack of common sense. The Confederates had shown themselves more skilled at using the battlefield terrain to their advantage. More than 200 Union soldiers were killed or wounded. Another 700 were listed as missing, which meant that they had drowned or had been captured. Confederate casualties amounted to 36 dead and 114 wounded.

For more information, read *Civil War Blunders*, 42-45 *The Legacy of Ball's Bluff*, Patricia Caldwell, Civil War Interactive, www.civil-warinteractive.com/wcballsbluff.htm.