Cheat Summit Fort

Also referred to as Fort Milroy, Cheat Summit Fort is a Civil War period Federal fortification located near U.S. Route 250 south of Huttonsville, Randolph County, West Virginia. The fort is located on the 19th century route of the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike, approximately 1.5 miles from Cheat Bridge. The site is about 4,000 feet above sea level, on the summit of Cheat Mountain.

Cheat Summit Fort was constructed by Federal troops following a Confederate withdrawal to the Greenbrier River after Union victories at Rich Mountain in Randolph County and Corricks Ford in Tucker County. The fort was intended to secure access to Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike and thwart any attempts by the Confederates to cut the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Construction of the fort commenced in July 1861 by order of General George B. McClellan. However, McClellan did not remain in West Virginia long enough to see the fort completed as he was transferred east to command the Army of the Potomac.

The fort was built on the farm of an elderly mountaineer named White (hence the name "White Top" for this area). One of the Federal soldiers remembered the spot as "...a splendid twenty-acre farm averaging ten rocks to one blade of grass." Six companies of the 14th Indiana regiment began fortifying the position on July 16, 1861. They were soon joined by the 15th Indiana regiment, the 3rd Ohio regiment, the Cold-water Michigan Battery, and a company of Ohio cavalry. These soldiers cleared several acres of forest on each side of the turnpike.

Spruce trees along the fort perimeter were felled, trimmed, and placed to present a mass of sharp points towards the enemy. Inside this boundary large earthen breastworks were built. The walls originally were fourteen feet high, eight feet in width at the base, narrowing to four feet in width at the top.

The fort originally consisted of a large, enclosed pit and parapet fortification with a blockhouse on the hillside northeast of the point where the turnpike crosses the gap at "White Top." Another smaller enclosure was located across the turnpike to the southwest. A semi-subterranean passage connected the enclosures. Southwest of the turnpike, cabins were built along the hillside and a burial ground was established nearby. The completed

fortress was believed to be impregnable to both artillery and frontal assault by infantry or cavalry.

Robert E. Lee Attacks Cheat Summit Fort

Portions of the 14th Indiana regiment and the 24th and 25th Ohio regiments under the command of Colonel Nathan Kimball were stationed here when Confederate forces General Robert E. Lee attacked the fort on September 12, 1861. Lee divided his force into six separate columns in an ambitious attempt to isolate and capture the Union fortifications at Cheat Summit and Elkwater, in the Tygart Valley. Two columns, each approximately 1,500 men, under Colonel Albert Rust and General S. R. Anderson moved through the almost pathless wilderness west of Cheat Summit Fort. These troops arrived on the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike northwest of the fort on the morning of the 12th. A supporting brigade under General H. R. Jackson approached from the southeast on the Staunton-Parkersburg pike and planned to participate in the assault on Cheat Summit Fort in concert with Rust's brigade. The attack was to be initiated by Colonel Rust's assault on the rear of Cheat Summit Fort. Colonel Rust's wet and weary Confederates, without food or shelter for over two days, inadvertently encountered a Federal supply wagon and pickets less than one-half mile from the fort. The element of surprise was lost. Rust hastily attempted to form his men for an assault. Federal Colonel Nathan Kimball ordered two companies of the 14th Indiana to the point of attack. The densely wooded terrain kept each side ignorant of the strength of its opponent. Unaware that they ware outnumbered, approximately 200 Federal skirmishers opened fire on Rust's column of 1,500. Surprised by what they perceived to be overwhelming numbers of Union troops the Confederates retreated, littering the woods with abandoned equipment. General Jackson's supporting brigade remained on the turnpike, waiting in vain for the sound of Rust's attack. Other Federal troops briefly skirmished with Anderson's command.

Though numerous skirmishes took place over the next two days, Rust's inability to capture Cheat Summit Fort necessitated a Confederate withdrawal from the area. Robert E. Lee's Cheat Mountain was over. With the end of this campaign, the initiative switched to the Federal forces who determined to take the fight to the Confederates.

Battle of Greenbrier River

On October 2, 1861, General Joseph J. Reynolds assembled a Union force totaling approximately 5,000 men at Cheat Summit Fort and led them on a "reconnaissance in force" about twelve miles east to Confederate Camp Bartow. Camp Bartow was positioned along the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike at present-day Bartow, West Virginia. On October 3, leading elements of the Federal column encountered Confederate pickets near Camp Bartow. The Union infantry was stopped by fire from the Camp Bartow entrenchments. The engagement then settled down to an indecisive artillery duel of over four hours duration. Inaccurate intelligence provided by scouts led the Federal command to overestimate the size of the Confederate force, causing them to break off the action.

The Federals retraced their steps to Cheat Summit Fort on October 3rd. The stalemate at Camp Bartow resulted in few casualties to both sides. However, the Confederate commanders lost confidence in the ability of the Camp Bartow position to withstand a determined Federal assault. Accordingly, Confederate forces abandoned Camp Bartow and moved to winter quarters at Camp Allegheny.

The Winter of 1861-1862

The Federal troops occupying Cheat Summit Fort as winter quarters in 1861 suffered terribly from the dampness and bitter cold in that exposed position. Snow was reported falling there as early as August 13. In retrospect, a Federal captain believed Cheat Mountain to be "the severest campaign of this company. Its severity consisted in the cold and rain of this dreary and uninhabited country, the lack of sufficient rations and clothing. In the usually mild September, horses chilled to death in that camp."

Attack on Camp Allegheny

On December 13, 1861, Robert H. Milroy, having just been promoted as a Brigadier General, led an attack on Camp Allegheny from Cheat Summit Fort. Camp Allegheny was a Confederate stronghold about nine miles beyond the then abandoned works at Camp Bartow, also on the Staunton-Parkersburg pike. The Federals were repulsed in a sharp action with a Confederate force under Colonel Edward Johnson. Milroy divided his command in an attempt to attack the fort simultaneously from two directions. However, a coordinated attack never developed. The 1,200 Confederate defenders were able to maintain a tactical numerical superiority over the 1,900 Federal troops throughout the engagement. The action lasted approximately seven hours and the Confederates retained control of the fort. The Union troops were allowed to withdraw to Cheat Summit Fort without pursuit. The Federals incurred approximately 137 casualties and the Confederates 146.

Winter Duty in the Mountains

Milroy's Federals settled back into their snow-covered shelters on Cheat for the long winter. Outpost duty here, as at many military posts, fell into a tiresome routine. Soldiers' days were filled with cutting wood, carrying water, maintaining facilities, guard duty, and drill. Many soldiers died of diseases such as the measles. Entertainment opportunities in a remote outpost were few. Soldiers could amuse themselves with music, card playing, oratory, and other distractions, many of which were not permitted under strict military discipline.

Federal Troops abandoned Cheat Summit Fort in April 1862. An Indiana volunteer recalled his departure "with what a light step all started. Soon on the road tufting at the brow of the hill, the Fourteenth took what I fondly hope is their last look at Cheat Mountain."

Present Condition

Before its acquisition by the Forest Service in 1987, Cheat Summit Fort and environs were owned by a private corporation. Coal surface mining and logging took place adjacent to the fort for approximately 50 years. Portions of the extensive earthworks, the graveyard, and cabin foundations associated with Cheat Summit Fort were destroyed by this activity. However, the main fortification has been avoided and is well preserved. Surface features such as pit and parapet earthworks, cabins sites and earthen mounds representing collapsed chimneys can be plainly seen north of the turnpike. Recognizing the historical importance of this location, the Forest Service nominated Cheat Summit Fort to the National Register of Historic Places in 1990. This nomination was accepted, and the site is now listed on the National Register.

Tips for Visitors

Please make your visit to Cheat Summit Fort safe. Avoid the disturbed areas and high walls associated with coal strip mining activity. Cheat Summit Fort occurs in an area noted for its narrow and winding roads. Please exercise care in traveling.

All artifacts, earthworks, structures and archaeological resources at Cheat Summit Fort are protected by Federal law. As you visit and enjoy Cheat Summit Fort, please leave it as you found it.

If you observe artifacts, leave them in place and report them to USDA Forest Service personnel. If you observe anyone using a metal detector or collecting at this location, please contact the District Ranger in Bartow at 304-456-3335, or call 1-800-333-SAVE.

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