When Fort Sumter was attacked by South Carolina secessionists in 1861, states across the North sent out the call for volunteers to fight. Of the original 75,000 troops President Lincoln called-up during the first few months of the War, approximately 30,000 came from New York. By the end of the Civil War, almost half a million New Yorkers would serve in the military, with more personnel serving from this state than from any other.

As a result of their serving in such large numbers, New York soldiers and sailors were involved in almost every major battle of the War. Initially, the Union suffered several tactical setbacks in the East, while in the West, under the leadership of generals like U.S. Grant, the North scored several important victories.

By July 1, 1863, the Union Army of the Potomac had had five different commanders and changed command six different times (George McClellan had two opportunities to command and ran against Lincoln for President in 1864). The army’s latest commander, Major General George Meade, had only taken command very recently when his troops met the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The next three days would rank among the bloodiest of the entire War and the Confederate’s defeat would mark the turning point in the Eastern Theatre. Nearly 28,000 New Yorkers fought at Gettysburg and of those there were over 6,700 causalities. General G.K. Warren, a graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, played a heroic role during the battle’s second day when he helped defend the Union flank at Little Round Top. Another important New Yorker at the battle was General Daniel Butterfield, who served as General Meade’s chief of staff and was wounded on the third, and final, day of fighting.

The day after the Union’s victory at Gettysburg, General Grant accepted the surrender of Confederate forces defending Vicksburg. Control of the city was vital to the Union’s attempt to control the Mississippi River, thereby splitting the Confederacy in half. These back to back victories, at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, gave the Union renewed hope for victory. Grant’s success at Vicksburg solidified his reputation as a decisive general and eventually led to his appointment as commander over all Union land forces.

The Civil War is still the bloodiest conflict the United States has ever participated in. The development of new war-fighting technologies combined with the failure of battlefield tactics to keep up contributed to this grim situation. However, in many ways, the Civil War was the first modern war and helped in the development of medical techniques, methods of transportation and communication that would later save the lives of future service members.