

THIS WAS THE CIVIL WAR



CHEAP VICTORY — The Battle of Fredericksburg, fought on Dec. 13, 1862, has been called a "slaughterpen." It was that but more. It was a cheap Confederate victory in terms of casualties; the downfall of General Burnside; a display of sheer courage by Federal troops, and an indecisive battle after which the Union forces retired to recuperate. Here, from the Library of Congress collection, Federal troops are shown putting down a pontoon bridge while under fire from Confederate sharpshooters during the fight. (UPI)

The Battle of Fredericksburg

By MERTON T. AKERS

UPI Correspondent
The battle of Fredericksburg, fought on Dec. 13, 1862, has been called a "slaughterpen."

It was that but it also was much more.

It was:

—A cheap Confederate victory in terms of casualties.

—The downfall of Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside, the fourth Union commander in the East to splinter his military reputation against the Army of Northern Virginia.

—A display of sheer courage by Union troops unsurpassed in any Civil War battle.

—Another indecisive battle after which the Army of the Potomac retired to recuperate and the Confederates remained on the defensive — the same situation which had occurred after the Peninsula, Second Manassas and Maryland campaigns.

After that bloody 13th — a Saturday — the war picture remained the same except that 1,870 Americans would never fight again — 1,284 Federals, 595 Confederates. The bodies of the Union dead were frozen

into the two and one-half miles of red flats below the heights on the west bank of the Rappahannock River at the devastated city of Fredericksburg Va.

Not Deadliest Battle

Fredericksburg was not the deadliest one-day battle of the war — Antietam (Sharpsburg) holds that bloody honor.

But when the North learned the full story — 9,000 Union soldiers wounded and 1,769 missing in addition to those killed in action for a grand total of 12,653 — its morale took another plunge.

Richmond's elation bounded high with the victory. Its casualty total of 5,309 was less than half the Union losses.

But the cold truth was that the North could replace its losses, as big as they were; the Confederates could not.

The battle of Fredericksburg was Burnside's idea. When he succeeded Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan early in November of '62 he realized he was expected to fight and soon. He moved the Army of the Potomac from its position just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains eastward to Fredericksburg.

The movement was well screened, so well that Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, whose forces were divided, lost several days trying to fathom Burnside's maneuvers.

But the pontoon bridges which Burnside had ordered to cross the Rappahannock were delayed. Why they were delayed is disputed yet. Likely the reason was a mixup in orders with Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck, commander of

the Union armies, bearing a share. The error gave Lee time to move into defensive positions.

On Dec. 11 the Union army began to lay the bridges across the river, about 400 feet wide at that point.

On the Union left — downriver from Fredericksburg — three bridges were flung across overnight without opposition despite a half an inch of ice on the river.

Different Story

But in front of Fredericksburg the story was different. There Confederate sharpshooters of Barksdale's Mississippi brigade picked off the Union pontoons as fast as they appeared. An artillery barrage failed to dislodge the marksmen. Only when 200 volunteers from the Seventh Michigan and the 89th New York paddled across the river in pontoons were the Mississippians cleaned out. Then the bridges were completed but by that time it was 4:30 p.m., too late for action that day.

The next morning — the 12th — a friendly fog lay over the river and concealed the crossing of Burnside's army. Part of it pushed into Fredericksburg proper and occupied the town.

By afternoon when the fog lifted, most of the Union army was in position; drawn up in battle order on the flats.

If Burnside had been in a position to attack early that day, the story of Fredericksburg might have been different for Lee still did not have all his forces in the line that curved back of Fredericksburg on the ridges. Two of his divisions — D. H. Hill's and Jubal Early's — still were on their way from downriver.

But Burnside did not attack that day.

In fact he changed his orders. Instead of attacking the Confederate right on Dec. 13 where Lt. Gen. Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson commanded, with two full corps, he used only a part of his forces. With bands playing and banners snapping in the wind, Maj. Gen. George G. Meade's division of 5,000 men, supported by two other divisions, attacked Jackson's segment of the line under cover of a fog after an hour and a half barrage from the Federal artillery, posted across the river on Stafford Heights.

Meade's attack found a hole in Jackson's line.

Three Layers Deep

The bluecoats rushed through and it appeared the Confederate line was being rolled back. But at this point the line was three layers deep in Rebel troops. Meade, with little help from the supporting division, held on for 20 minutes but pulled back in the face of counter attacks.

The big show was at Marye's Heights in the center of the line directly in the rear of Fredericksburg. Here Longstreet commanded the Confederates. He posted a brigade of Georgians under Brig. Gen. T. R. R. Cobb behind a stone wall which rimmed a sunken road. The wall was about four feet high. Ideal breastworks for standing off assaults.

Cobb had about 2,400 men, all seasoned soldiers. Cobb was a lawyer rather than a military man but his fighting record was good. He was a brother of Howell Cobb, Secretary of Treasury under President Buchanan, and was one of those instrumental in taking Georgia out of the Union.

He died behind that stone wall from a leg wound. But before he died his men gave a good account of themselves. Beginning at 11 a.m. and lasting until winter twilight,

Scientists Hold Post-Mortems To Aid Space Work

Washington — (UPI) — Space scientists at Huntsville, Ala., operate a morgue and a clinic and what amounts to a reducing salon.

They perform autopsies, repair internal organs and think up new ways of eliminating unwanted poundage.

Their goal is not healthier and handsomer people but more efficient and reliable rockets.

The bodies they dissect are rocket parts that have died prematurely. The organs they refurbish are the hundreds of valves which are among the Saturn rocket's most vital organs.

The pounds they remove are part of the deadweight which cuts down the amount of payload a rocket can shove into space.

Huntsville is the home of the Marshall space flight center of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. It is the place where giant moon rockets are conceived.

Work Described

The work of the men who man the morgue, clinic and reducing salon was described recently by Don Lakey, an information official of the

Marshall center. Rockets are complex and their parts are subjected to many stresses. Sometimes under ground test conditions a piece of metal will fail. In the morgue, engineer-detectors who operate like pathologists subject a faulty part to close study.

They photograph it, x-ray it, dissect it. They determine what made it fail.

Then they figure out how to keep the specific failure from happening again.

The fact that the Saturn C-1 booster has made three perfect flight tests suggests

that the morgue crew, headed by "Doc" Rollin Wagner, has done a pretty good job of diagnosis and prevention. The so-called clinic actually looks like one in some respect. It is "a super-clean area where even the dust tracked in by foot could seriously contaminate rocket components."

The air is filtered and carefully conditioned. Germs are forbidden to enter because "enough of them could clog a valve pore and cancel a multi-million dollar space probe."

The valves reconditioned in the clinic range in length from less than two inches to 17 inches. One six-inch has 203 parts but weighs less than a pound and a half. The Saturn has more than 400 such valves.

Weight Trimmed

The reducing specialists spend their time trimming weight from the rocket to make more weight available for payloads, robot or human.

For every five pounds taken off the advanced Saturn, it is estimated, it will be possible to add one pound to the payload.

"Trying to push Saturn away from the fuel table is

not necessarily the answer," according to Lakey. The experts are always searching, for example, for low-weight metal structures which will still be strong enough to support the rocket.

As space missions become more ambitious, rockets tend to grow apace. One rocket envisaged for future lunar and planetary flights would

stand almost as high on its pad as a 40-story building. "Unless constant studies are made on weight control," Lakey says, "a rocket could reach ridiculous dimensions."

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Christmas Lighting Contest Planned

Central Point — The Christmas lighting contest, sponsored by the Central Point Junior Chamber of Commerce and Pacific Power and Light company, will be a different project this year in regards to the competition.

Every home is eligible with no entry blanks required. Every home in the radius of three miles is automatically entered, Jaycee officials noted.

Judging will be done on all electrical displays on basis of originality and ingenuity. Homes will be judged Dec. 21 and 22. Residents wishing to compete are to leave the lights on their display from 5:30 to 10 p.m.

A grand prize and several second prizes will be awarded.

Burnside threw seven divisions of infantry at Marye's Heights, brigade by brigade. As one brigade was shattered by Confederate musket and cannon fire from behind the stone wall — about a half mile long — another charged through, over and around the dead and wounded only to meet the same fate.

The Union infantry made 14 attacks, each rolled back with the few survivors ducking into a small depression or behind the few houses in the area. There they rolled the bodies of their comrades into ricks and fought from behind the barricade of human flesh which slowly froze as night came on.

Bodies Propped Up

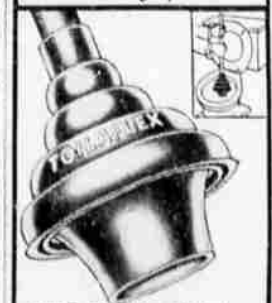
Some of the Federals hung on the fringes of Marye's Heights all night in the bitter cold. As the wounded died their bodies were piled on the barricades or propped frozen stiff as dumb sentries.

Such was the "slaughterpen" or "valley of death" called the battle of Fredericksburg.

The defeat crushed Burnside. That night he proposed to put himself at the head of his old Ninth Corps and charge the heights again, perhaps hoping he would die at its head in one last fling at victory. His corps commanders talked him out of it.

All day the 14th and all day the 15th the armies lay in their tracks. On the night of the 15th-16th Burnside withdrew his army across the Rappahannock without Lee knowing about it until the sun rose and burned away the fog.

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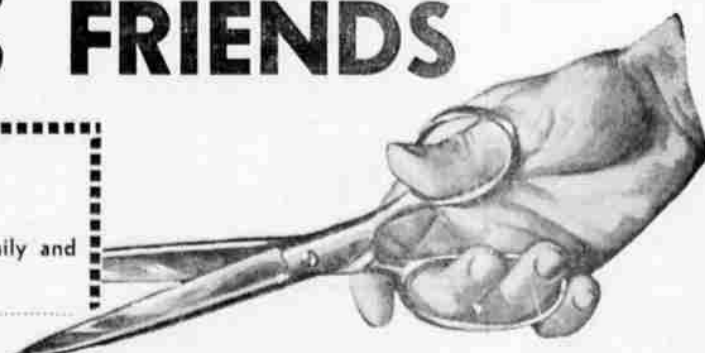
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