

Episode 114: The Battle of Fredericksburg

Week of December 9 to 15, 1862

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Early on the morning of December 11, Union engineers began to lay the pontoon bridges to cross the Rappahannock River to Fredericksburg. After crossing the Rappahannock into Fredericksburg, Union troops engaged in widespread looting and vandalism, effectively destroying the town. “The town was all ransacked. [B]ooks, chairs and every kind of furniture was lying on the Streets,” a Pennsylvania soldier wrote in a letter to his brother.

Burnside pressed ahead and Hooker’s men massed in and around the battered town. Then the signal was given. “The [Union men]...pour out upon the plain in a stream which seems to come from an inexhaustible fountain,” wrote a reporter for the Richmond *Enquirer*, crouched down among the rebel defenders. “The meadows are black with them, tens of thousands in solid columns. We can only conjecture at this distance the number. Old soldiers think they are sixty thousand.”

William Owen of the Washington Artillery of New Orleans watched from Marye’s Heights as the Union line advanced toward his guns.

How beautifully they came on! Their bright bayonets glistening in the sunlight made the line look like a huge serpent of blue and steel...We could see our shells bursting in their ranks, making great gaps; but on they came, as though they would go straight through us and over us. Now we gave them cannister, and that staggered them. A few more paces onward and the Georgians in the road below us rose up, and, glancing an instant along their rifle barrels, let loose a storm of lead into the faces of the advancing brigade. This was too much; the column hesitated, and then, turning, took refuge

behind the bank...But another line appeared from behind the crest and advanced gallantly, and again we opened our guns upon *them*.

“A Union officer watched from a church steeple as brigade after brigade charged the stone wall. They seemed to “melt,” he said, “like snow coming down on warm ground.”

Fourteen assaults were beaten back from Marye’s Heights before Burnside decided it could not be taken. Nine thousand men fell under the Confederate guns.

Lee watched it all happen from above: “It is well that war is so terrible,” he said, “we should grow too fond of it.”

Night brought quiet, as a Federal officer recalled:

But out of that silence...rose new sounds more appalling still...a strange ventriloquism, of which you could not locate the source, a smothered moan...as if a thousand discords were flowing together into a key-note weird, unearthly, terrible to hear and bear, yet startling with its nearness; the writhing concord broken by cries for help...some begging for a drop of water, some calling on God for pity; and some on friendly hands to finish what the enemy had so horribly begun; some with delirious, dreamy voices murmuring loved names, as if the dearest were bending over them; and underneath, all the time, the deep bass note from closed lips too hopeless, or too heroic to articulate their agony.

The temperature fell below freezing and a stiff wind blew across the battlefield. Men now froze as well as bled to death.

The Union lost 12,600 men. The Confederates lost 5,300. Rebel troops drifted down into what was left of Fredericksburg after the Union soldiers had finished burning and ransacking it. Stonewall Jackson came down, too, and when a member of his staff asked him what should be done with the sort of men who could do such things, he answered, “Kill ‘em. Kill ‘em all.”

After the battle, Burnside wept and took full responsibility for the carnage. Union soldiers wrote letters home suggesting that “Virginia is not worth such a loss of life,” while rumors in Washington foretold a Lincoln resignation, a radical Republican coup, even a military government with an angry McClellan at its head. Morale in the army was at an all-time low, with desertions totaling 86,330 by the end of January 1863 – almost 27 percent of the entire Army of the Potomac. Confederate independence, in December 1862, still seemed a real possibility.