

Two Generals in Trouble

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On January 20, 1863, Major General Ambrose Burnside began to once again set his Army of the Potomac in motion with the intention of capturing Fredericksburg. His attempt five weeks earlier had been soundly crushed by the Confederates and Burnside was anxious to restore his reputation. In the meantime, Burnside had learned that a large contingent of Confederates had been sent south from Fredericksburg to reinforce the Carolina coast, so he felt that his chances of success were now much improved.

His plan called for one of his three grand divisions to make a demonstration of attacking directly across the Rappahannock River at the city of Fredericksburg while the other two grand divisions made their way northwest to cross the river there. These two grand divisions would then sweep in on Fredericksburg from the west while the Confederate attention was focused on the attack coming directly across the river. It was not a bad plan, but Burnside could not control the weather. As the troops marched toward their crossing point at Banks' Ford, the weather was mild and sunny. But on the night of the 20th the rains began and continued through the next day and the next.

The men and the wagons and the horses found themselves in a mud-drenched hell that few would ever forget. Nothing they tried could get the wagons to advance and horses and mules drowned in the mud. The conditions slowed the advance so that Robert E. Lee was able to send Confederates to the scene of the intended crossing. Not only did Southern sharpshooters take potshots across the river at the miserable Union soldiers, but they also made signs mocking the Yankees, stating "This way to Richmond" and "Burnside Stuck in the Mud." This fiasco,

ever after called “The Mud March” was finally called off by Burnside on January 23 and the men and equipment slowly made their way back to Fredericksburg.

But Burnside’s week was about to get worse. His soldiers and now his commander-in-chief had lost confidence in his leadership. This had been exacerbated by two of his subordinate officers, brigadier generals John Newton and John Cochrane, traveling to Washington earlier in the month with the intention of complaining to their congressmen about Burnside. Finding congress in recess, they ended up having an audience with Abraham Lincoln and while Lincoln did not approve of their undermining their commander, he seems to have taken their concerns to heart. On January 25, 1863, Lincoln removed Burnside from command of the Army of the Potomac and replaced him with Major General Joseph Hooker the next day.

There was also dissension with command on the Confederate side. Braxton Bragg’s subordinate officers continued to be dissatisfied with his leadership. They felt that he had missed numerous opportunities to defeat Union forces in the Kentucky Campaign and at the Battle of Stones River. Much like their counterparts on the Union side, these generals took their complaints right to the top, crafting a letter to Confederate president Jefferson Davis.

In response, on January 21, Davis dispatched General Joseph Johnston, the new commander of the Department of the West, to Tennessee to review the situation. Although Davis probably hoped Johnston would relieve Bragg of command and step into the job himself, Johnston felt that he could not take advantage of the situation. Finding the troops in reasonably good shape, he provided Davis with a positive report and Bragg would remain in command. Unfortunately, his problems with his fellow officers would continue in the coming year.