

## **Episode 124: The Harsh Winter of 1863 and General Lee's Concerns Over the Welfare of His Army and the Suffering of his Soldiers**

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Tuesday, February 23, 1863 saw the heaviest snowfall anyone could remember along the Rappahannock River at "Camp Fredericksburg," the winter headquarters of General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. The increasing destitution of the Confederacy was leading to insufficient clothing and shelter for the winter-bound Army. Rations for both men and animals had been several times reduced from an already scanty level. The second week of February Lee wrote to his daughter, Agnes about his worries:

"... I read yesterday, my precious daughter, your letter, and grieved very much when last in Richmond at not seeing you. My movements are so uncertain that I cannot be relied on for anything. The only place I am to be found is in camp, and I am so cross now that I am not worth seeing anywhere. Here you will have to take me with the three stools-the snow, the rain, and the mud. The storm of the last twenty-four hours has added to our stock of all, and we are now in a floating condition. But the sun and the wind will carry all off in time, and then we shall appreciate our relief. Our horses and mules suffer the most. They have to bear the cold and rain, tug through the mud, and suffer all the time with hunger. The roads are wretched, almost impassable."

Lee made it a practice, as far as possible, to live in a similar fashion as his men. When his son, Lt. Robert E. Lee, Jr. was appointed to the staff of the 9<sup>th</sup> Virginia Cavalry that winter he recalled:

"In the course of duty, I was sometimes sent to him to report the condition of affairs at the front, or on the flank of the army, and I also, occasionally, paid him a visit. At these times,

he would take me into his tent, talk to me about my mother and sisters, about my horse and myself, or the people and the country where my command happened to be stationed. I think my presence was very grateful to him, and he seemed to brighten up when I came. I remember, he always took it as a matter of course that I must be hungry (and I was for three years), so he invariably made his mess-steward, Bryan, give me something to eat, if I did not have time to wait for the regular meal. His headquarters at this time, just before the battle of Fredericksburg and after, were at a point on the road between Fredericksburg and Hamilton's Crossing, selected on account of its accessibility. Notwithstanding there was near-by a good house vacant, he lived in his tents. His quarters were very unpretentious, consisting of three or four "wall-tents" and several more common ones. They were pitched on the edge of an old pine field, near a grove of forest trees from which he drew his supply of fire-wood, while the pines helped to shelter his tents and horses from the cold winds."

Lee noted the effects this exposure was having on army morale and fitness in a letter to his wife:

Camp Fredericksburg, February 23, 1863

"My Dear Mary, the weather is now very hard upon our poor bush-men. This morning is covered with a mantle of snow fully a foot deep. It was nearly up to my knees as I stepped out this morning, and our poor horses were enveloped. We have dug them out and opened our avenues a little, but it will be terrible and the roads are impassable. No cars from Richmond yesterday. I fear our short rations for man and horse will have to be curtailed."

The dreary winter of 1862-63 gradually passed away and, with, much of strength and morale of the Army of Northern Virginia.

