

Episode 135: The Death of “Stonewall” Jackson

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The seemingly invincible team of Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. Jackson played havoc in the last days of April with the forces of Union General Joseph Hooker in the woods of Chancellorsville, Virginia. The Federal forces were outflanked and rolled back in fearsome hand-to-hand fighting. A captured Union infantryman wrote after the war:

“I was among the [Union] wounded. Using my musket for a crutch, I began to pull away the burning brushwood, and got some of them out. One of the wounded Johnnies. . . began to help. . . We were trying to rescue a young fellow in gray. The fire was all around him. The last I saw of that fellow was his face. . . . His eyes were big and blue, and his hair like raw silk surrounded by a wreath of fire. I heard him scream ‘O, Mother! O, God!’ It left me trembling all over, like a leaf. After it was over my hands were blistered and burned so I could not open or shut them; but me and them rebs tried to shake hands.”

Hooker’s rout was total and a shocked President Lincoln requested Hooker “to come to Washington if he were not too busy.” Then, in the midst of the moment of great Confederate victory, tragedy struck.

In the late evening twilight Stonewall Jackson and some staff members rode to the front lines to check positions. Skirmishers on both sides were firing wildly. A staff officer who accompanied Jackson describes the awful scene:

“As Jackson turned toward the Eighteenth North Carolina, an officer, alarmed by the strange horseman coming from the direction of the Union forces, gave the order to fire. The volley brought down men and steeds. Jackson received three bullets—one through the right hand, two mangling the left arm and cutting the artery. As his horse Sorrel bolted, he was struck by a low branch in the face. An aide caught the steed and helped him to the ground.”

“At this moment the scene was a fearful one. The air seemed to be alive with the shriek of shells and the whistling of bullets; horses riderless and mad with fright dashed in every direction; hundreds left the ranks and hurried to the rear, and the groans of the wounded and dying mingled with the wild shouts of others to be led again to the assault. Almost fainting as he was from loss of blood, desperately wounded, and in the midst of this awful uproar, Jackson’s heart was unshaken.”

Before dawn, Jackson’s surgeon, Dr. Hunter McGuire, amputated his arm. All seemed well at first and Jackson was transported to a house at Guiney’s Station to recuperate. Here he fell ill, contracted pneumonia and his wife Anna was hastily summoned.

“His wife arrived to soothe him, and when he saw her concern, he rallied to ask her ‘not to wear so long a face. I love cheerfulness and brightness in a sick room.’ Lee said Jackson could not possibly die: ‘God will not take him from us now that we need him so much.’ And Jackson himself agreed. He was willing to abide by God’s decision of course, but ‘I do not believe I shall die at this time. I am persuaded the Almighty has yet a work for me to perform.’

“On the morning of Sunday, May 10, however, the surgeon told Jackson’s wife the general would not last a day, and she gently broke the news to her husband. ‘Doctor,’ Jackson said, ‘Anna informs me that you have told her I am going to die today. Is it so?’

The doctor nodded that it was.

“Jackson brightened a little. ‘Very good, very good,’ he said. ‘It is all right. It is the Lord’s day; my wish is fulfilled. I have always wanted to die on a Sunday.’

“He spent the afternoon dozing on and off, his breathing thin and shallow. A little after three, he called out, ‘Order A.P. Hill to prepare for action! Pass the infantry to the front. . . . Tell

Major Hawks- ‘ He smiled and closed his eyes. ‘Let us cross over the river,’ he muttered, ‘and rest under the shade of the trees.’ Then he died.

The Confederacy was plunged into gloom. Some modern day observers feel the Civil War might have been effectively lost with Stonewall Jackson’s death. The South could not afford the loss of such a leader.

“It had started out in ’61 almost as a lark, Fort Sumter and some skirmishing in the Shenandoah Valley. But then came Bull Run and Ball’s Bluff, where the carnage began in earnest, and men were shot down by the thousands; then the Peninsula Campaign and the Seven Days, where it ran into the tens of thousands; the Second Bull Run, Shiloh, Antietam, and Fredericksburg, where it ran nearly into the thirty thousands. For those who could afford them, lead-encased coffins had become a popular item for returning the remains of soldiers killed in battle; some featured a small glass window so that the face of the deceased could be viewed.

“On both sides the disruptions had been far-reaching and in many places ordinary life had come to a standstill. In the South conditions had gone from bad to worse. The Union blockade had already created shortages of food in an economy oriented to producing an inedible commodity.’

And now, one by one, the South’s most priceless commodity-effective and charismatic military leaders-were disappearing from the scene.