

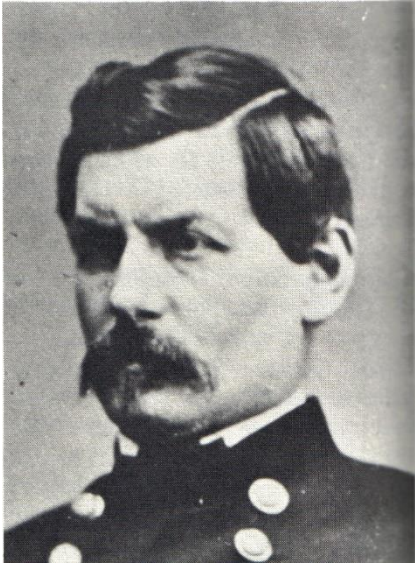
# The Battle of Fredericksburg

The valley of the Rappahannock River, in the piedmont and tidewater sections of northeast Virginia, and composed of the city of Fredericksburg and the counties of Stafford, Spotsylvania, Fauquier, Culpeper, and Caroline, would become the site of one of the Civil War's most significant and bloody battles. A vital transportation center since the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, this region would strongly influence military operations in the first two years of the conflict.



General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, following a strategic standoff at Sharpsburg or Antietam in September of 1862, assumed a defensive posture in the Gordonsville-Culpeper sector with the dual intentions of blocking pursuit by General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac and stopping a drive toward Richmond along the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. In October 1862, Lee received authorization to reorganize his army into two corps and to promote his top two subordinates. The First Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General James Longstreet, was positioned with Lee; and the Second Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, was deployed in the Shenandoah Valley. In assessing his situation, Lee

correctly concluded that further advance into Virginia by McClellan would either come directly at Culpeper-Gordonsville or would move in the direction of Fredericksburg. As Lee's troops effectively blocked the Federals at Culpeper from the Orange and Alexandria route, he suspected the Fredericksburg direction, with its vital access to the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad, would form the basis for General George B. McClellan's next campaign.



McClellan had that precise plan in mind – to deploy pontoon bridges across the Rappahannock River while marching the army to cross into an unoccupied or lightly occupied Fredericksburg, secure the dominant terrain below the city, and force Lee's regrouping to the North Anna River, where some historians state Lee would have preferred to fight. With his army at its highest strength in the war – some 68 brigades in 8 corps with 135,000 men, supported by approximately 410 artillery pieces in 83 batteries – McClellan's plan had a sound chance of success in stunning and dislocating Lee's forces for the first time. The commanding general and his plan, however, bold, did not receive support from the Lincoln Administration, which desired his advance along the equally sustainable Orange and Alexandria logistical axis and concentrating his combat power on Lee's army rather than a movement toward the Confederate capital.



These concerns were the culmination of the Administration's numerous command troubles with McClellan and his operations. Some observers believed that Lincoln was waiting for the completion of the off-year congressional elections before ridding himself of McClellan's services. Others

believed Lincoln was exasperated by the incredible fact that McClellan had remained at Antietam Creek for six weeks after the battle while Lee withdrew his army to Winchester and beyond.



Another dimension in the Administration's plans was the fact that turning back Lee's invading army from Maryland at Antietam had finally provided a window of opportunity to issue the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Freeing slaves in most federally controlled and occupied territories, this document represented a fundamental shift in war aims from preserving the Union – universally accepted by all Federal troops – to one headed toward the full emancipation of some 3.5 million slaves in the seceded states and eventual freedom for the other half million slaves in the loyal border states. This appealed to the abolitionist and emancipationist elements of the Army of the Potomac, but it also threatened the largely "War Democrat" loyalties of the majority of soldiers



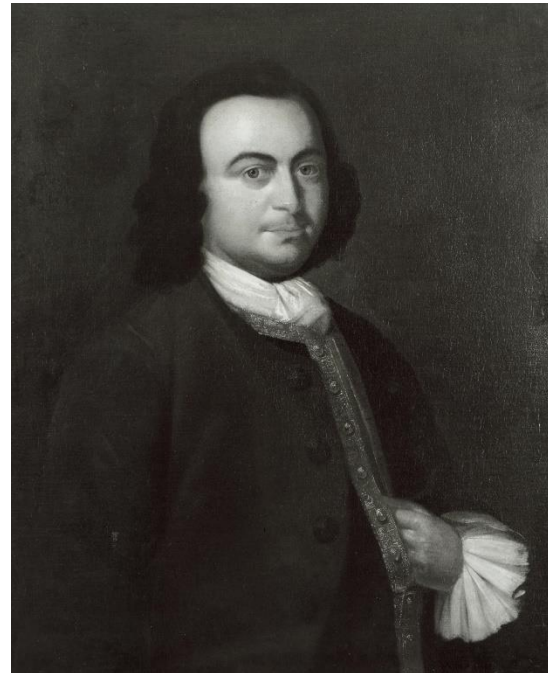
and officers. Within the troop ranks and at staff conferences, many officers and men openly talked of mutiny and marching on Washington to install a military dictatorship for the proper conduct of the war.



The Lincoln Cabinet's Emancipation Proclamation actions in September 1862 also had the unintended effect of re-energizing Southern recruitment. Lee's army now swelled to 78,000 men in 43 brigades in 2 corps supported by 240 artillery pieces in 55 batteries – the highest strength it would ever achieve. Another unintended consequence of the Emancipation Proclamation was encouraging what Lincoln would term a “fire in the rear” by the “Peace Democrats” or “Copperheads,” who believed that the war was unwinnable; was fundamentally changing the American political environment in the Republicans' favor; and was threatening the stability of the republic by promoting an autocratic executive branch. The “Peace Democrats,” playing on the clear lack of Union military success, sought to expeditiously bring the war to a negotiated finish or, if necessary, leaving the field in defeat.

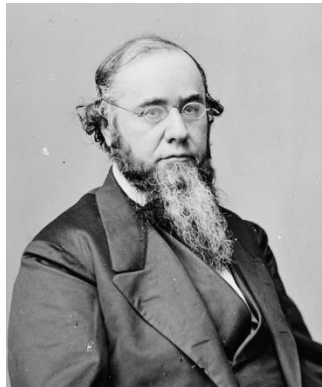


Perhaps despite misgivings about the Lincoln administration, the Union Army's "War Democrats" were sacrificing and risking their lives on the battlefields to achieve a lasting union and peace. Regardless of the lack of success by their generals and their lack of faith in the political leadership of the Republican administration, the Army of the Potomac's patriotism and commitment to the preservation of the Union would ultimately sustain them and the Federal cause. Unlike their Southern adversaries, the Army of the Potomac's soldiers identified with one another, rather than their thus far ineffective top leadership. They would increasingly come to see the war's objectives as suppression of the rebellion; freeing other men; bringing a final end to sectional strife; and solidifying a national view of America.

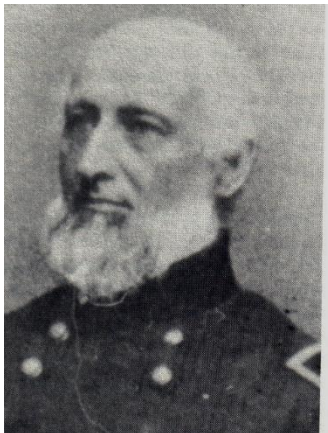


Ironically, they were all – both Northerners and Southerners -- actually returning to the roots of the sectional conflict and collectively trying to resolve those divisions left over from the earliest days of the republic. Particularly, they were re-fighting the political struggle between Federalism and Anti-Federalism, as personified by two towering revolutionary figures raised to manhood in that same Rappahannock Valley in which they were about to fight. Union and Confederates would be fighting on the same ground where George Washington and George Mason had grown to young manhood. The Federals, also anxious to redeem themselves militarily, focused on Washington's role as commander of the Continental Army and father of the Federal nation. The Confederates concentrated on Washington's role as leader of the First American Revolution to liberate the nation from the tyranny of an oppressive central government. Their "Second Revolutionary" cause was defined in the Virginia Declaration of Rights authored by George Mason, which had focused on the protected rights of the people against their own government's tyranny and strongly influenced the Declaration of Independence and refined the issues in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. From the Southern perspective those rights included the powers of state governments and the "peculiar institution" of slavery which had been legally protected under the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution.

Within sight of Washington's boyhood home at "Ferry Farm" and within hearing of Mason's boyhood home at "Chappawamsic," the two armies of Americans would battle for the political soul of the nation. Washington's iconic personage loomed especially large for both armies. Virtually every literate man on the field of battle was familiar of Washington's position in U.S. history through the books of Parson Weems and Washington Irving, the latter published in the late 1850s. When Abraham Lincoln had first come to the region in May 1862, he had been awestruck himself at its connection as he crossed through Washington's Ferry Farm boyhood home from Stafford into Fredericksburg. Yet the Confederacy's national seal depicted a mounted image of General Washington. Robert E. Lee, the husband of Washington's step-granddaughter and son of Washington's cavalry commander, had lived his entire life in the shadow of the first constitutional president. In Lee's military baggage, carried throughout the war, was a sustaining icon -- one of Washington's swords. Most ironically, men of both armies would express resentment and anger as they discovered Washington's image on the stationary and postal envelopes of their enemies.

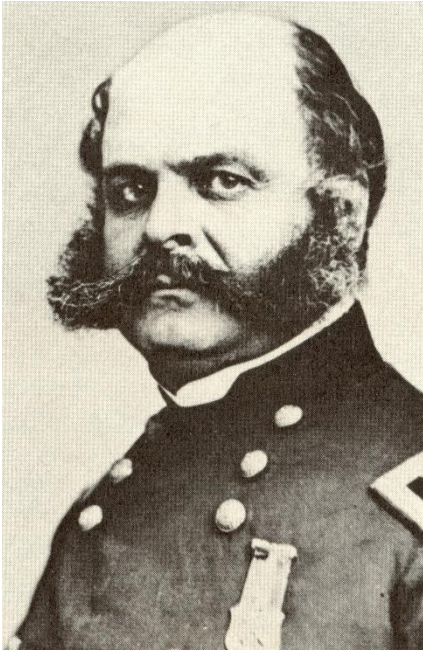


Regardless of the political and military risks and effects, President Abraham Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck had all lost faith in General McClellan's ability to carry out large-scale operations in support of their strategic objectives. After struggling with a decision as to who would be the best officer to lead the premier Federal army, they took their next operational-strategic step – firing the administratively competent, but operationally troublesome General George B. McClellan.

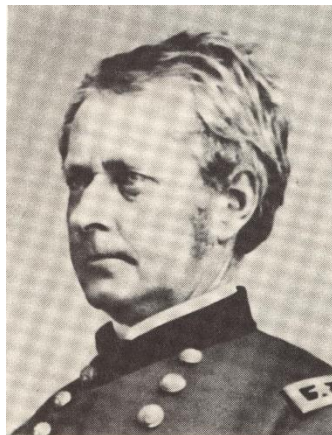
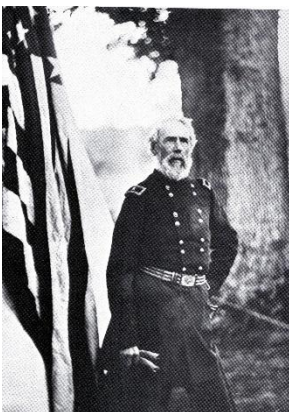




On November 7, 1862, Brigadier General Catharinus P. Buckingham, a former senior staff officer then on special duty with the War Department, left Washington carrying two sealed-envelopes. One letter relieved McClellan of his command; the other appointed Major General Ambrose E. Burnside, who had achieved a needed reputation for action, to command the Army of the Potomac.



McClellan received the news of his relief with composure; but Burnside, reluctant out of loyalty to his friend and commander, and uncertain of his own capabilities for higher command, openly expressed his doubts while accepting his duty. Burnside, who had previously avoided similar selection, apparently accepted in this instance mainly to prevent the ascension of Major General Joseph Hooker, with whom he had often struggled – most recently on the field at Antietam. To the further disappointment of the Administration, however, Burnside also took up McClellan’s basic campaign plan.



Additionally he reduced the span of control of his army by introducing the “grand division” – a two-corps structure commanded by Major Generals Edwin Vose Sumner, Joseph Hooker and William B. Franklin – and operationally centralized his artillery command under Brigadier General Henry J. Hunt.

These grand divisions, which Burnside designated Right (Sumner), Center (Hooker), and, Left (Franklin), consisted of the IInd and IXth Corps; IIIrd and Vth Corps; and Ist and VIth Corps, respectively. They would constitute the main Union combat formations which would fight in the Fredericksburg battle. Also in the order of battle were the XIth and XIIth Corps. Although brought too slowly into the zone of action to be effective, these corps would constitute a fourth or “Reserve Grand Division” under Major General Franz Sigel.



On November 9, 1862, Burnside wrote to General Halleck on the proposed movements of the army. His letter suggested a better strategic grasp than is generally credited to him; however, it also betrayed a certain naïveté concerning the difficulties in bringing the war to a conclusion. It further revealed a Federal military intelligence dependence on Virginia’s black slave population. Burnside proposed to concentrate all his forces near Warrenton and:

...impress upon the enemy a belief that we are about to attack Culpeper or Gordonsville, and at the same time accumulate a four or five days’ supply for the men and animals; then make a rapid move of the whole force to Fredericksburg, with a view toward a movement upon Richmond from that point.

The following are my reasons for deciding upon this plan: If we move upon Culpeper and Gordonsville with a fight there, or a general engagement, even with results in our favor, the enemy will have many lines of retreat for his defeated army, and will in all likelihood be able to reach Richmond with enough of his force to render it necessary to fight another battle at that place; and should he leave even one corps, with cavalry, on our right flank, it would render the pursuit very precarious, owing to the great lack of supplies in this country, and the liability to an interruption of our communication with Washington.

Should the enemy retreat in the direction of Richmond upon our approach to Culpeper and Gordonsville, we would simply follow a retreating army, well-supplied with provisions – at least, at depots in his rear – while this army would have to rely upon a



long line of communication for its supplies; and, as in the other case, a small portion of the enemy's force on our flank might tend to interrupt our communication. It may be well to add here, while on the subject of interrupted communication, that the enemy's sources for gaining information are far superior to our own. The General-in-Chief will readily understand the reason. The difference is more than usual in their favor at present, from the fact that nearly all the negroes are being run south, and we are kept on strict guard...

What Burnside didn't mention was the upheaval in his intelligence staff. McClellan's intelligence chief had been the famous detective, Allan Pinkerton, a contracted civilian. Although McClellan can be credited for instituting the first professional intelligence staff in an American army, he was poorly served by this unit's inability to correctly discern the correct information among a myriad of reports. This also led to McClellan's continual over-estimation of Lee's forces and continuous uncertainty as to their current dispositions.



Burnside's new intelligence staff, indifferently formed on the eve of a new campaign, would have only one holdover, John C. Babcock. Originally from Chicago, Babcock had been a private soldier in the "Sturges Rifles," of "McClellan's bodyguard" and was asked by his friend Burnside to remain on. Amazingly, McClellan and Pinkerton had taken all of their information and intelligence on the Confederate forces with them as they departed. These were presumed to be used for writing their final reports and future memoirs. Although ultimately referred to as "Captain Babcock," he was in fact a contracted civilian in the mold of Pinkerton. Reasonably competent, and definitely a long-term asset of Union intelligence, Babcock had little foundation for running an intelligence staff and was largely working with the pieces of what had been left behind.



Perhaps in recognition of that fact (although it was a continuation of the previous command relationship), Burnside had Babcock reporting to the army's new provost marshal, Maj. Gen. Marsena R. Patrick (shown here in the center). Patrick had served in Fredericksburg during the Union Army's first occupation in April-August 1862 and was particularly adept at determining what was going on in the army's rear area.



Confederate military intelligence was primarily predicated on the organization of scouts or, more accurately, military spies, controlled by Major General J. E. B. Stuart's cavalry division. This system effectively sent cavalymen familiar with the terrain and people in particular counties to obtain information. This human intelligence provided the decided edge that Burnside had mentioned. Large cavalry raids conducted by Stuart created additional opportunities to develop and exploit intelligence on the Union forces and frustrated the Federals due to their inability to confront Stuart's large forces operating independently. Stuart had conducted another "ride" around the Army of the Potomac between October 9th and 12<sup>th</sup>. This had proven more embarrassing than Stuart's earlier, more famous ride in the Peninsula campaign. The military intelligence battle area efforts worked in cooperation with spy networks operated by the Confederate War and State Departments. Given the decided loyalties of the people in the Rappahannock region, the Confederate Secret Service found willing agents in every quarter.





For example, in the Fredericksburg sector, Confederate spies were able to cross the Rappahannock at will and cooperate with such Stafford spy-masters as Mrs. Jane Gray at “Traveler’s Rest.” “Mrs. Gray’s protégés,” as Provost Marshal Major General Marsena Patrick called them, were ubiquitous and could cross the narrow river nightly and readily. In general, other Stafford County citizens proved adept at providing all types of information to Confederate scouts and other agents – often uniformed and acting as Federal cavalry – on Union movements.



Union intelligence operations were also effective, despite a disadvantage in human sources and a poorer knowledge of the country in which they were operating. The Federals also had their military scouts and spies. Several known Federal spies were operative in both Stafford and Spotsylvania during this period of the war. Operating at great risk, men such as John Howard Skinker and Isaac Silver rendered what was surely considered treasonous service among their Stafford and Spotsylvania neighbors respectively.

Skinker, operating from his home “Oakley” in Stafford County had established himself as a reliable provider of intelligence during the first Federal Occupation of the Fredericksburg area in April-August 1862. In doing so he had raised suspicion among the residents of Hartwood. He also had a small number of operatives which had come together among Stafford’s limited number of Unionists. The Skinkers were slaveholders and prosperous planters in Stafford society, which probably bought him the benefit of some reasonable doubt. The Federals also employed spies from as far away as Washington – hired by General Banks, the commander of the D.C. defenses and Lafayette C. Baker, chief of the War Department detectives. The mistake commonly made by these hired spies was that such agents could only pass as “visitors” among the native Virginian populations. Those who lived among the natives were able to acquire a higher level of information. Skinker was thus successful, although suspicions about his activities would raw him away from Stafford during this critical juncture. Silver, because his base was in Spotsylvania, would also be less effective during the Fredericksburg fight; but, he would become a more important agent in the following, Chancellorsville campaign.



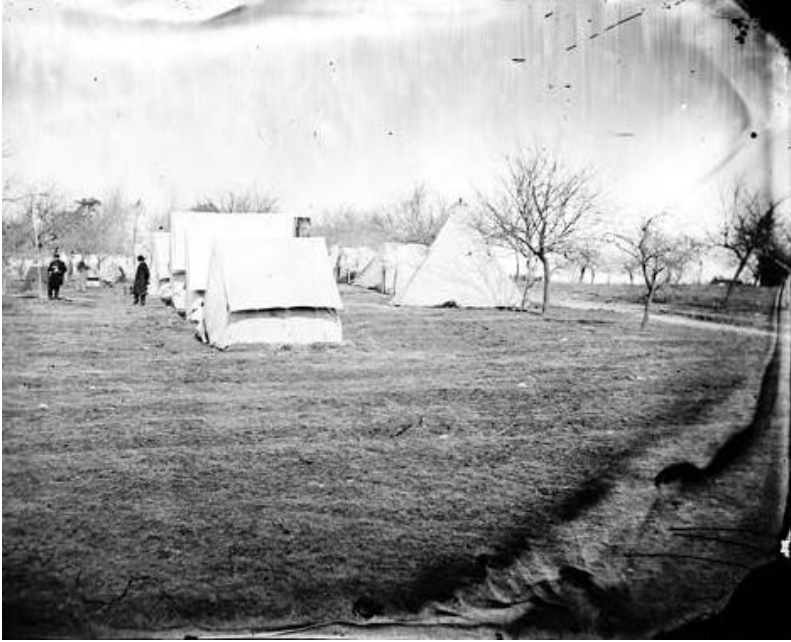
A unique Federal spy network in Stafford – and arguably the most effective at this time -- was operated by a slave spy-master known to history only as “Dabney.” He had placed agents, acting as laundresses in various Confederate headquarters’ camps. They transmitted prearranged signals equating to specific commanders by using certain items on clotheslines. This became known as the “clothesline telegraph.” Dabney’s network and tradecraft secrets were not revealed until the 1880s.



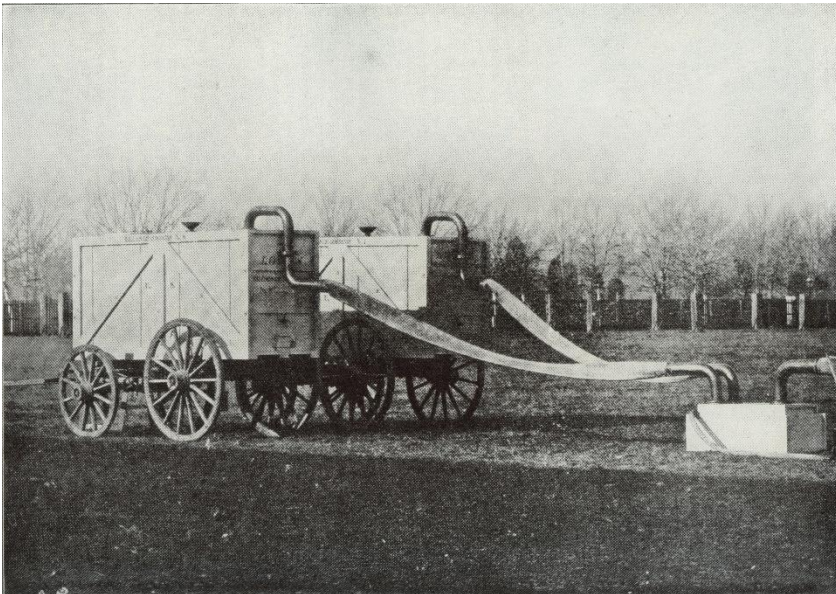
The Union also would rely on more technical and sophisticated means of determining the enemy's movements and, hopefully, intentions. These efforts included reconnaissance balloons from multiple launch sites, which observed Confederate activities across the Rappahannock from their Stafford positions, such as the one near the Phillips House.

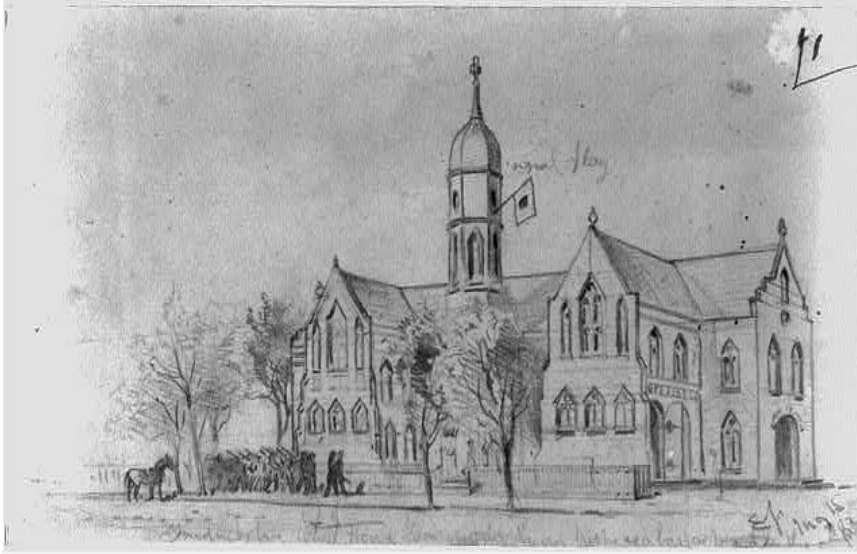
Reconnaissance balloon operations, still barely past an experimental stage, provided adequate information; however, during the Fredericksburg battle the balloons and their "aeronauts" would be hampered by fog, adverse weather and poorly thought-out means of communicating information to battlefield commanders.





The balloons required modest camps; but, elaborate launch positions and logistics sites for preparing hot-air ascensions were also needed.





A superior means of observing and reporting enemy movements were the Union signal corps posts established on prominent heights and flanks. Signal flags using a coded system of transmission would be established throughout the battle area, one notably was positioned at the old Spotsylvania Court House in downtown Fredericksburg.



Intelligence dissemination and other military communications, both coded and un-coded, between field headquarters and Washington would be facilitated by the use of military telegraph machines. Although range-limited to five miles or less, the Beardslee military telegraph machine operated on an electro-magnetic basis and transmitted its messages via letter-by-letter registrations dialed from one machine to the others. This provided a capability for Union forces which did not require use of

Morse Code transmissions. A perceived shortage of Morse Code operators, due to their usage in other parts of the U.S. Military Telegraph system, had hampered operations to that point. By the time of the Fredericksburg battle, it was already clear that the Signal corps could train and deploy Morse Code-operators in sufficient numbers to meet their requirements.



Field communications lines, consisting of twisted metal wires coated with rubber vulcanization on spools of wire let out from wagons or pack animals, expedited the deployment of new communications approaches at Fredericksburg and created later possibilities. These construction corps members are shown here in 1864.





Although it was vastly overshadowed by Stuart's cavalry, the Union also possessed some capability for cavalry reconnaissance. A member of Major General Franz Sigel's XIth Corps, Captain Ulric Dahlgren, who would gain fame in the ill-starred 1864 Kilpatrick-Dahlgren Raid on Richmond, led a raid on Fredericksburg on November 10, 1862. This raid determined the town was lightly defended and Dahlgren captured a substantial number of prisoners from the Confederate garrison.



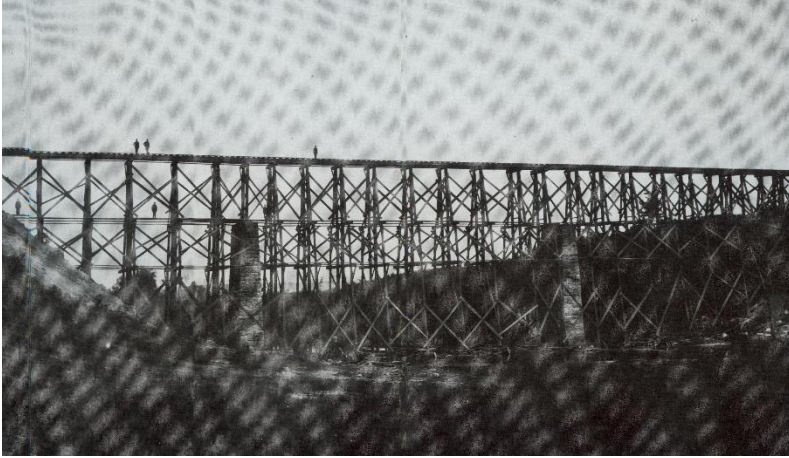
Burnside also centralized the operational control of his brilliant artillery chief, Henry J. Hunt, whose guns had successfully shattered the Confederate attacks at Malvern Hill. The Army of the Potomac's reserve artillery, organized as a separate fighting command for the first time, would initiate the fire support actions from Stafford Heights at the commencement of the Fredericksburg battle. These fire concentrations represented the first time an American army would fire on an American city, and the Union artillery superiority contributed to keeping Lee's forces from defending the river approaches more strongly. Unfortunately, the strength of the Federal guns on Stafford Heights did not offset one glaring problem. The Confederate infantry defenses (which accounted for 80-90 percent of the Union casualties) were almost 2,000 yards away and most Union guns were limited in necessary fragmentation rounds to a range of about 1,500 yards. From the Stafford shore Hunt's artillery could only fire hit-or-miss, solid shot projectiles at the Confederate defenses. Lee's gunners, however disadvantaged by numbers, could fire their fragmentation rounds to the river line. Hunt's 185 artillery weapons would also permit the advance of the other 225 Federal guns with the advancing forces, and would ultimately cover the withdrawal of the Army of the Potomac at the battle's end. Again, Confederate positioning of artillery on the Fredericksburg side made establishing Federal battery positions there extremely hazardous.

Union artillery logistics operations were particularly complex. Getting the right basic loads and resupply loads to the correct batteries would be made more difficult by a wide range of artillery weapon types. Resupply of Hunt's reserve artillery command would be difficult, but it was far more complicated to resupply the forward batteries with the corps and divisions. Bridge crossing sites were limited to the pontoon bridges which **each** had to handle roughly 10-15,000 men; 8,000 horses and mules; nearly 40 artillery pieces; 166 ambulances; and all of their supplies.



Tactical supply and resupply, and distribution and redistribution were indeed difficult. But the strategic- and operational-level transportation and other logistical efforts needed to get the materiel to the combat zone were even more daunting. These would involve combinations of steamboat, railroad and wagon transport over poor roads and in some cases no roads. Aquia Landing and, to a lesser extent in this battle, Belle Plain, provided reliable centers to deliver logistics supplies by steamboat. The earlier Federal occupation in April to August of 1862, had established the capability for a "U.S. Military Railroad" in this sector. Unfortunately, to Colonel Herman Haupt's dismay, the earlier line he had built from Aquia Landing to Falmouth had been destroyed by Federal troops – ironically of Burnside's division -- as they withdrew in August 1862. This would require furious bridge building by Haupt's Railroad Construction Corps, which had grown out of earlier Union experience in Stafford. Haupt, a bridge-building genius by any measure, had proven especially adept at designing and constructing railroad bridges.





The earlier bridge over Potomac Creek, which President Lincoln had said seemed built of beanpoles and cornstalks, covered a gap 400 feet long by 80-100 feet high, and was built in nine days with no dedicated construction troops only troop details. It used two million feet of green lumber, provided by Stafford's wooded areas.



The second bridge, completely built by Haupt's Railroad Construction Corps, used pre-fabricated arches in the construction and reduced construction time to 19 hours.



As important as the bridges over Stafford's Accokeek and Potomac Creeks were, the difficulty in off-loading and loading supplies from and to railcars was more critical to logistics efforts. For this Haupt devised a transshipment scheme which used two coupled-barges and equipped with small sections of rail line. These could be towed by steamship to Aquia Landing. Once there, they could be aligned with the dockside rail lines, assembled with trains and sent south to Falmouth.



There supplies could be off-loaded at depots along the rail line, such as at Stoneman's Switch shown here, and stored or sent immediately to troop supply distribution points. This same system could be used in reverse to evacuate wounded men and prisoners.





Burnside's greatest strategic blunder – aided and abetted though he was by General Halleck and others – was to assume that McClellan's orders were still in effect directing the pontoon bridge trains to be dispatched from Berlin, Maryland, and the Washington Engineer Depot to the planned Fredericksburg battle area.



Failure by Halleck and Burnside to specifically inform Brigadier General Daniel P. Woodbury (at Berlin) of both the critical nature and urgency of the movement of the bridging to the



Rappahannock, as well as other command and staff failures to adequately follow up on the implementation of the orders, all condemned the entire campaign to failure.

As the Army of the Potomac began its march toward Falmouth and Fredericksburg, Lee's cavalry and espionage networks provided necessary intelligence that Burnside had assumed command and was presumed to be acting decisively to bring the fight to the Southerners. Uncertainty still prevailed in Lee's headquarters as to whether Burnside was headed in their direction or to Fredericksburg. Somewhat against Lee's preference to next defend along the North Anna River south of Fredericksburg, he now suspected more strongly (from reports of Federal troops guarding the march routes) that Fredericksburg would become the next battle. Consequently, he began to redeploy parts of Longstreet's First Corps to Fredericksburg and to plan for a strong defense on the hills below the city. Lee also alerted Jackson's Second Corps that they would be required to rapidly move to the Fredericksburg sector. Due to the late arrival time of the pontoon bridging trains into the Rappahannock Valley – which continued to confuse the Confederate intelligence -- Lee was nevertheless able to recognize the Federal deployment and regroup all of his available forces to the threatened sector. Burnside had lost the advantage of surprise and, from this point, his overall plan would unravel.

The Army of the Potomac's routes of march led it from Warrenton in Fauquier County, through western Stafford County down the Warrenton, Spotted Tavern and Poplar Roads, to Hartwood Church and on to the Marsh and Warrenton Roads to Falmouth.



Sumner's grand division arrived first at Falmouth, on the Stafford side of the Rappahannock, followed by Hooker's grand division at Hartwood Church and U.S. Ford. Sumner, detecting Fredericksburg to be only lightly defended, suggested a preemptive move into the city. Burnside, still engaged with the complicated march, uncertain as to Lee's dispositions, and concerned not to split his forces, refused his request.



Sumner initially took up headquarters at the Phillips House. Burnside would displace Sumner there and the Phillips House, nestled among the hills in Stafford County, would remain Burnside's Headquarters for the rest of the battle of Fredericksburg.



Sumner's Right Grand Division (II<sup>nd</sup> and IX<sup>th</sup> Corps) headquarters were established at the "Lacy House," known earlier and later as "Chatham." From there, he would challenge the city's mayor Montgomery Slaughter and threaten bombardment if the city were to be used to defend. Slaughter and his council, walking a fine line, promised that the noncombatants would evacuate and the Confederates agreed not to defend in the city proper. From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of November, Sumner and his subordinates would only be able to stare across the narrow valley and watch the Confederate buildup and fortification of the heights behind the city.



On the march at Hartwood Church, Hooker with his Center Grand Division sent a remarkable message to Burnside. Grossly breeching the chain of command, he also sent a duplicate message to Secretary of War Stanton. In his message, Hooker proposed to react to the situation at hand. Asserting that the planned bridging was not in place, Hooker proposed to alter the plan by crossing the Rappahannock and heading cross-country to Port Royal. There the army could be re-supplied by the river and Richmond would still be approachable by road and the R. F. and P. rail line from Hamilton's Crossing and Guiney's Station around and below Fredericksburg, rather than all the way from Aquia Landing and Belle Plain in Stafford. Burnside's concerns – again over splitting his army and over the potential of rising river water due to winter conditions, as well as his natural reluctance to give up on his plan – led to a further refusal. He believed, or at least hoped that his plan's execution was now underway. Realizing that no surprise was now possible, Burnside contented himself with the prevailing situation: namely his intact army (less the XIth and XIIth Corps continuing to move in from the north and west); his solid position on dominant terrain on Stafford Heights; his superior strength in men, weapons and materiel; and his fire power and logistical superiority. He believed that he had the opportunity to strike Lee at several places and remained confident that his stronger army would prevail.

As the battle loomed, Burnside failed to consider some dimensions of warfare as it existed in 1862. First his concentration of six forward corps in a zone of action roughly 2,000 by 5,000 yards in size – virtually all visible from either side of the river. A slightly wider zone, some 3,000 yards by 10,000 yards, fully including the smaller zone, provided for flank operations by cavalry and artillery and took in the naval gun-boats' control of the Rappahannock below Fredericksburg. The gun-boats of the Potomac Flotilla could assist in fire support to a limited extent and could apply additional pressure on Confederates along the right bank Rappahannock. Thus, in a space comparable to the footprint of one or two modern B-52 conventional strikes, some 178,000 opposing troops with 600 artillery weapons were concentrated. That would equate to the number of U.S. troops deployed in both Iraq and Afghanistan (which alone is about the size of Texas) in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A true "Valley of Death," in the tradition of the 1850s Crimean War, was thus created. And it would involve river-crossing operations on a scale never before attempted within range of enemy artillery fire. Each of the bridges would form natural chokepoints subject to heavy fire by both Confederate artillery and sharpshooters. While his bridging was evenly apportioned along the battlefield, a successful direct frontal assault would require weighting his available forces



in a main attack against either Jackson's or Longstreet's sectors with a supporting attack against the other. A further constraint, whether Burnside appreciated it yet or not, was the long canal ditch which further would hamper and delay his advancing forces. As previously mentioned, Burnside's artillery on Stafford Heights would be unable to suppress Confederate defenses with fragmentation rounds and establishing battery gun positions, given Confederate counter-battery dispositions, would also be extremely difficult. Only an attack using all eight of his available corps (weighted heavily against the perceived weakest point in the Confederate defenses) in a combination of frontal and flank assaults, crossing probably twice or three times the numbers of available bridges and fording at other points, with sustained fire from naval gun-boats in support, might have given Burnside a greater chance of success.

As the battle unfolded Burnside would use only six forward corps on six floating bridges and 185 of his 400 guns in the initial attacks. His corps and division artillery batteries moving with the attacking forces would not be used decisively. He would deploy his Center Grand Division in a piecemeal fashion largely in support the other two attacking grand divisions. He would forgo flank attacks at any depth, and designate the attack by Franklin's Left Grand Division against Jackson as the main effort, without actually informing or orienting Franklin to that effect. In practical terms, Burnside would wrong-headedly strike somewhat evenly against *both* Confederate corps (particularly considering the unequal fight and the Federals' over-commitment against Longstreet's entrenched and fortified positions on Marye's Heights). He would not use his naval component beyond the initiative of individual captains. Finally, he failed to grasp the Confederates' defensive strength and potentials, as well as the strong logistical position of Lee's forces. Every approach of the limited general attack was guarded by strong Confederate forces. Every possibility for Federal battlefield flexibility was avoided.

As we examine the details of the Battle of Fredericksburg as they will unfold on the 11<sup>th</sup> through the 15<sup>th</sup> of December 1862, and while it is tempting to deconstruct the strategy, operations and tactics, particularly of the Federal-side, we must always keep in mind the:

- severely limited battlefield command and control with personal interaction by commanders and messages from couriers as the only means of maneuver control;
- poorly understood superiority of the rifled musket in the defense over advancing forces and the reality that aimed rifle fire is still the main battlefield killer at that point;
- underdeveloped state of still operative Napoleonic battlefield tactics – still focused on maneuvering massed forces to within direct musket range of 100 to 150 yards rather than infiltrating and overpowering defenses with firepower and maneuver;
- virtual non-use of troop protective measures to provide adequate cover and concealment to exposed forces;
- inability to effectively use intelligence and reconnaissance assets to prepare and exploit the vulnerabilities of the enemy, weather and terrain or to use the latter two to the advantage of the attacking forces.

While, from a distance of a century and a half, these accounts and dimensions of Civil War battles appear clear and unambiguous, we must always recall that a minute few of the officers involved in these battles had ever seen, let alone led large formations in battles on this scale, and the Federal army had little comprehension of the territory in which it was operating. The state of military art in 1862 provided little basis for flexibility in either anticipating or reacting to changed battlefield situations. The price for lack of knowledge, lack of preparation through training, study and practice – even on a theoretical level – was impracticable. Anything remotely approaching simulated combat training was unheard of. As always, the price for this lack of national preparation would be paid in blood.

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**Albert Z. Conner**

Al was a two-time president of the Fredericksburg Civil War Roundtable and four-time president of the Stafford County Historical Society.