BATTLE ANALYSIS OUTLINE

TOPIC: BATTLE OF FREDERICKSBURG

By

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I. Define the subject.

a. Who fought the battle?

1. Union Forces: The Union Forces for the Battle of Fredericksburg consisted of 31,659 soldiers from the Right Grand Division commanded by MG Edwin V. Sumner, 40,396 soldiers from the Center Grand Division commanded by MG Joseph Hooker, 46,897 soldiers from the Left Grand Division commanded by MG William B. Franklin, with the following supporting elements Engineer Corps of 1,329, Provost Guard of 1,096, Reserve Artillery 1,121, and Baynard’s Cavalry of about 3,500.

2. Confederate Forces: The Confederate Forces for the Battle of Fredericksburg consisted of 41,294 soldiers from the First (Longstreet’s) Corps commanded by LTG James Longstreet, 38,931 soldiers from the Second (Jackson) Corps commanded by LTG Thomas J. Jackson, 10,701 soldiers from the Cavalry Division commanded by J.E.B Stuart, and 793 soldiers from the Corps and Reserve Artillery.

b. When did they fight? This historic Fredericksburg Campaign was planned and executed fought over a two-month period in November – December of 1862. This was during an extremely cold and harsh winter season.
c. Where did the battle take place? Fredericksburg, Virginia is located along the
Rappahannock River in the county of Spotsylvania. The cities of Richmond and
our nation’s capital are approximately fifty miles from Fredericksburg.
(Appendix 1).

II. Review the Strategic Setting.

a. What were the causes of the battle? Fredericksburg, Virginia during the 1860s had
developed into a family oriented community. This town happened to be the
farthest point to navigate up the Rappahannock River. It was a very important site
for trading for imported and exported goods. However, the larger, newer sailing
vessels had difficulties in navigating the Rappahannock, which greatly hinders the
international trade with other less modern customers of trade. This allowed
members of Fredericksburg to live a more normal or less congested big city
lifestyle. Militarily, this river is important for resupplying soldiers critical supplies
in order to fight effectively.

b. The town of Fredericksburg changed hands many times throughout the war. Being
located so closely to Richmond and Washington, it can greatly assist or resist in a
potential attack on Richmond or Washington. Also, this town could act as a
staging area prior to launching an attack on the nation’s capital. Furthermore, four
major battles were fought within a seventeen mile radius of Fredericksburg,
Virginia. The major encounter during the Battle of Fredericksburg took place in
Virginia. Major General Ambrose Burnside’s Federal Army of the Potomac tried
to countermine General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and capture
Richmond. However, this would be a difficult task, since the Confederates were deeply entrenched into a defensive position west of town.

III. PERST

a. POLITICAL. The sixteenth President of the United States, President Abraham Lincoln, is remembered as one of the most famous of any American President. However, the Civil War understandably placed the strongest burden on this President’s political plate. President Lincoln was the leader of a nation that was split into two very divided and argumentative geographical regions (North and South). He was the sitting president during this nation’s only civil war. He probably had more domestic issues during the early war years than any other president. Also, this president did not have any military experience or training. President Lincoln did not view the war through the eyes of our great and historical generals. His point-of-view was focused on taking the Confederate purpose or cause (armies). The Confederate effort could only function as the armies in the field could be productive. Most Union and Confederate generals did not understand this concept.

b. ECONOMIC. American growth during this time period was not to be calculated by simply doing a population count or by measuring the square miles of the United States. It was a question of the quality and quantity of roads, canal and railroad mileage, number of cotton mills, ironworks, export figure, newly industrial techniques and methods, and the professional and financial management of United States revenue by the United States government agencies. Transportation was one the keys to the American development. The railroad was a
big part of this process. The railroad was carrying on the process begun by roads and canals of replacing the pattern of natural lines of communications by overcoming the natural obstacles with a new man-made network linking the far regions of the country. This was the biggest challenge of the American society to deal with the prevailing ideas and accepting new ideals, the rapid growth, especially the industrial break throughs that were occurring.

c. RELIGION. Since this battle was prepared and fought during the most tradition, family oriented time of year, the soldiers on both sides had to be away from their families during the holiday season. Both Thanksgiving and Christmas was spent either preparing the defensive position (South), preparing to bridge the Rappahannock River (North), or cleaning up the aftermath of intense, bloody fighting. Morale was extremely low during Christmas after this major battle for both sides. Religion helped soldiers to morn the deaths of the soldiers that were to the left and the right and now are gone. Families at home were unsure in most cases if their loved one had made it out of this bloody battle.

d. SOCIAL. There were some important social developments from the Battle of Fredericksburg. The Confederate soldiers had a massive defensive position dug-in along the Rappahannock River. If the Union forces could mass under the leadership of newly appointed OIC, General Burnside, could successfully cross the cold, icy river, which would be an awesome boost to the Union’s cause. Furthermore, it would be a severe morale crusher for Lee and his reconsolidated, well dug-in forces. However, the Union forces were in disarray at the highest commander’s position. A win at Fredericksburg would silence the Burnside and
Lincoln’s critics. This could change the confidence level of division commanders and powerful politicians in Washington.

e. TECHNOLOGICAL. The Confederate soldiers were a collection of forces that were not conventionally trained throughout the ranks by any means. Soldiers joined the Confederate forces with no uniform standard issue, weapons / equipment standard issue, as well as, other soldier needs that improves the abilities of each soldier on the battlefield. Of course, there were no armored vehicles or any other high tech machinery at this point in history. Soldiers fought with very little basic techniques such as volley firing from different formations. Both sides would try different formations during close range battles. Both armies strived to control major waterway in hope of providing quality logistical support via water vessels.

IV. Compare military systems.

Since this was a civil war, military systems will be very similar for both sides. Therefore, the systems are basic and very similar. The quality of trained forces is critical in the quality of battlefield mission accomplishment. Neither side could win this war in an overwhelming manner without sustaining a lot of casualties. Each battle required basic soldier close hand fighting techniques and good marksmanship skills. The Union forces were the most trained and most tactically proficient. However, the magnitude of casualties that were sustained in virtually all battles increased drastically the longer the war lasted. Also, the ability of forces to shift tactical positions i.e. flank the enemy as a counter move to their movement is one of the most important military tactical system that both sides attempted to instill (strong command and control procedures). The rapid speed
of modern warfare did not include was not any air superiority struggles, heavy / mobile artillery pieces, tanks, rockets, or guided missiles. All weapons were only effective at close range. Signal communications were basic and very pre-historic by today’s methods. Battle Control of the soldiers were accomplished by yelling and written messages during battles.

V. What specific events led to this battle?

After, the Battle of Bull Run both armies devoted the second half of 1861 and part of 1862 to make serious adjustments for more important battles to come. Procurement of supplies, training, recruiting new soldiers, and other military activities was the primary training mission of both armies. Neither force was in any particular hurry to conduct an offensive operation. An impatient President waited in the White House to see how his popular commanding officer will retrain and utilize his powerful forces.

MG Mc Clellan moved his forces in March, 1862, via water, to the Virginia Peninsula between the York and James Rivers. The intent of this move was to take Richmond, Virginia. However, Johnston countered this plan by moving his Confederate soldiers overland in the same direction. Therefore, Mc Clellan staged his troops at Fort Monroe. At the same time Stonewall Jackson begun his Shenandoah Valley Campaign, which is where Johnston was wounded and succeed by Robert E. Lee.

IV. Describe the Action.

a. Weather. The weather did have a major impact on his battle. It reduced both the Union and Confederate forces from quiet movements, clear line of sight during pre-dawn hours (fog on the river), heavy snowfall, which restricted movements, thick terrain made of oak, maple, cedar, and highly thick entangled brush cause
limited mobility, countermobility and reduced eyes on the enemy. So even though
the weather did not favor either side, it did not kept tactical goals of either side
from being established.

b. Observation fields of fire. The fields of fire favored the Confederate soldiers. This
was only due to their defensive posture. They were able to watch the enemy at all
times. As the Union forces attempted to breach the river via pontoons and
engineer determination. Confederate forces were able to chose high terrain to
establish their defense. As the Union forces would be forced to cross the river
with the likelihood of sustaining high causalities, they would be fighting up hills
in low lying terrain. The Confederates could fire upon the enemy in a downward
sector of fire.

c. Cover and concealment. Without question cover and concealment favored the
Confederate forces. Given the winter snowfall, thick, strong vegetation, higher
elevation or with complete view of the Rappahannock River the Confederate
forces had numerous places and time to establish healthy, to standard, durable
fighting positions. The Union forces had the wide open river to get forces across,
which allows for only hasty defensive positions along the river bank at best.

d. Obstacles. The advantage of terrain lay with the defending Confederates. Nature
had provided a range of wooded hills and complimentary stream obstacles that cut
across the plain over which the Union army was eventually ordered to attack.
Gerneral Robert E. Lee is famous for his ability to utilize the terrain of his
defensive sector in the Battle of Fredericksburg. Lee had a keen ability to assess
the land’s ground features and to dispose his forces to take full advantage of them. The defensive position that Lee established stretched over a seven-mile-long area.

e. **Key Terrain.** Key terrain was one of the most important strategic points for both sides throughout the war. In close to medium range warfare, the importance of gaining tactical advantage carries even more weight in the swiftness of defeating the enemy. The Rappahannock River is key terrain where the Battle of Fredericksburg started. The Confederate forces occupied about a one hundred fifty-foot ridge on the northern bank of the river. This is a key position to any opposing force that attempts to cross the river can be used to resupply soldiers by shipping logistic needs.

f. **Avenues of Approach.** Since the northern bank is ideal for a defensive position overlooking the Rappahannock River, most avenues of approach were constantly under Confederate surveillance. The Union Commander, General Burnside will chose to cross the river in three separate simultaneously points (while Jackson’s and Longstreet’s Corps were split on 9 December). By punching through the Corps (First and Second), Burnside felt strongly that this was the best opportunity for a large portion of his force to cross the river with limited firepower. Once the Union forces reached the other side, the engineer forces would not be as effective in assisting the infantry forces breach obstacles. The engineers would sustain massive causalities building three bridges that were needed for Union forces to cross.
VII. Compare the opposing forces.

The Union and Confederate forces were the result of a split of an up and coming military world power. Breaking the nation’s military defense structure in half, caused a great amount of problems logistically for both armies. It was difficult enough to resupply our forces as one cohesive fighting machine. The Union had the advantage of having the majority of the West Point Graduates. These graduates were trained in army doctrine as skilled tactical minds for the American fighting team. The Confederates had the better conditioned soldiers. Primarily, the Southern soldiers were strong in agriculture, horsemanship, and using firearms. The personnel build up at the Fredericksburg Campaign slightly favored the Union (numerically), since they were attacking and needed a lot of engineer support. Neither force had the opportunity to rehearse their large scale fighting, due to the cohesiveness between units was weak and non-traditional. Technology would not play a strong role in this war. However, the ability to resupply and reconsolidate forces after a battle will prove to be critical to future operations.

VIII. Describe each side’s plan.

a. Phase I – The untimely build up of engineer combat power (pontoons) that General Burnside needed to cross the river in three different places based on Union intelligent reports positioning Confederate troops in certain places on the battlefield.

1. Event #1 – An order from Halleck to Berlin, near Harpers Ferry, to move the pontoons to Washington was dispatched but not by telegraph. It was dispatched via mail and did not reach the proper engineer officer until 12 November.
2. Event #2 - Thirty-six pontoons reached Washington and the information was immediately wired to Burnside by General Woodbury (commanded the engineers) “one train would start on the morning of 16 & 17 November and that General Halleck (General –in-Chief) was not inclined to send another train-by land “(Stackpole, p 97).

3. Event #3 – 17 November: Woodbury telegraphed Burnside that Major Spaulding had not be able to get started, but will start the next day.

4. Event #4 – The train started but rain and mud slowed progress. It was finally floated down the Potomac.

5. Event #5 – 21 November Half of LTG Longstreet’s First Corp arrives in Fredericksburg.


7. Event #7 – 27 November the pontoons finally turned up at the Lacy house, Summer’s headquarters opposite Fredericksburg and the engineer OIC later said that he could have emplaced two bridges across the Rappahannock River that night with no resistance from the enemy.

8. Event #8 – Jackson’s corps arrived at Fredericksburg and two wings of Lee’s army were ready to fight. The moment to cross the river was lost due to poor timing of getting logistical assets to key positions on the battlefield.

b. Phase II. The Union Army replans and is ready to cross the river.

1. Event # 1 - General Hunt, able Chief of Artillery of the Army of the Potomac, positioned 147 of the total 312 guns at appropriate intervals along Stafford Heights.
2. Event # 2 – MG Mc Law’s division of Longstreet’s corps had upon its arrival on 25 November been ordered to occupy Fredericksburg with part of the command. Consequently, Barksdale’s Brigade was assigned the mission of occupying Fredericksburg and to establish a wall hugging the river specifically to kill the engineers as they started to build to bridge.

3. Event # 3 – The crossing points were determined and disseminated.

4. Event # 4 – Burnside’s battle orders were issued to all division commanders. Much confusion was throughout the ranks! Hence, the orders were vague and not decisive.

c. Phase III. Execution of General Burnside’s instructions, thus the battle starts.

1. Event #1 – The bridges are laid under enemy fire. The three crossing points were all scheduled to received their bridge simultaneously. Engineers were looking sharp and ready to execute.

2. Event #2 – Lee was fairly confident in the defensive positions that were established in the north. Therefore, it was time to strengthen the tactical situation in the south were Jackson and Stuart will be ordered by Lee to launch A.P. Hill’s Division to Yerby’s and Taliaferro’s from Guney’s Station. This move temporarily extend Longstreet’s line to the south in preparation from a possible Union flank from the south. Also, this move overextended Longstreet’s right flank cover.

3. Event # 3 – Due to General Burnside’s slow reaction to his army’s initiating the attack even after the bridgeheads were safely established and secured, Lee was given a free day and two nights of preparation.
4. Event # 4 – The crossing of the Rappahannock finally occurs on the morning of 12 December on six swaying pontoon bridges. Jackson’s last two divisions were on the move to reinforce the points of Union crossing.

5. Event # 5 – Since General Burnished was hesitate in issuing attack orders and even when he did they were unclear, all division commanders were confused. MG George G. Meade, division commander, launches his force against Confederate positions at Prospect Hill. Jackson will eventually counterattack this move by Meade. Confederates hold their defensive positions. The Federal soldiers were unable to overtake the Confederates defensive wall. Burnished contemplates another frontal attack. However, no commander supported this plan. Therefore, all Federal soldiers were on the other side of the river by the end of 16 December (Union soldiers did maintain possession of Fredericksburg).

IX. Describe the outcome of the battle. The evening of 13 December was an extremely cold night. Soldiers were on the battlefield suffering from their wounds and needed to be evacuated. Unfortunately, many soldiers died from their wounds or from the exposure to the cold weather. Sunday morning, 14 December rolled around, men were chilled to the bone from having lain for hours on the cold, wet ground. The Confederates spent a large portion of their time burying their dead and improving their defensive positions.

Casualties of only 5,588 for the Confederates and the Union soldiers sustained 12,660 which totaled to over 18,000 soldiers that were wounded (Stackpole, p.276). General Robert E. Lee’s very brief initial report on the Fredericksburg action highlighted Longstreet’s frontal attack in these short terms (Stackpole, p.234):
Soon after his repulse on our right, he (the enemy) commenced a series of attacks on our left with view to obtaining possession of the heights immediately overlooking the town. These repeated attacks were repulsed in gallant style by the Washington Artillery, and a portion of Mc Laws’ Division, which occupied these heights. The last assault was made after dark, when Colonel Alexander’s battalion had relieved the Washington Artillery and ended the contest of the day (Stackpole, p 234).

X. Relate Cause to Effect.

a. **Key Event 1.** On 27 November 1863, the pontoons finally showed up at Lacy House near Sumner’s Headquarters. However, the bridges were very late. This logistical blunder was a nightmare to the Union’s Plan.

**Causes.** On 14 November, thirty-six pontoons found their way to Washington to be railed down to the Fredericksburg link-up point. However, after arriving at Washington the two trains did not leave on the 16 nor 17th of November. General Woodbury, commander of the Engineers, was under the impression that one train would be railed and the other will be ferried to the Potomac. The pontoons did not launch from Washington until 19 November to arrive on 27 November at Lacy House. If the result had not proved so tragic, the delayed arrival of the vital pontoons would have qualified as a comedy of errors. If Halleck was careless or slow in carrying out his part of the plan; furthermore, if someone down the line misunderstood or was dilatory in carrying out his instructions, it would not have been the first and last time in the history of combat service support planning.

**Effects.** The main reason that these bridges needed to be at Fredericksburg is simple to understand. If Longstreet Corps reached Fredericksburg before the bridges could be erected by the engineers, then these bridges would have to be
erected under direct and indirect fire rather than no enemy resistance.

Unfortunately, Longstreet closed in on Fredericksburg on 25 November. By 1 December Lee’s army was ready for battle, since Jackson’s Corps arrived at Fredericksburg. Therefore, Lee’s army had two wings in position. General Burnside was not able to erect one bridge prior to Lee’s forces arrival. This gave Lee valuable time to position and rehearse his forces on the possible attack scenario that the Union may use.

Lessons Learned. The positioning of logistical tools are vital to the execution of any mission. Without the timely movement of equipment, the offensive operation will never start on time. Support personnel must be prompt and keep the higher headquarters informed of how the mission is going (SITREP). Subordinate commanders are responsible for making frequent reports to the boss’ higher headquarters not vice versa. Also, the overall commander’s headquarters must be aggressive in providing command and control factors that will increase the ability to relay accurate information.

Current Doctrine Relations. Discussed in FM 5-100, “accurate, timely information is vital to effective command and control. Engineers use information of both an operational and technical level. They communicate through operations channels to keep their higher headquarters informed on current missions and to plan future ones. Unit standing operating procedures identify the type and frequency of reports needed at each echelon and the method for reporting (FM 5-100 Engineer Combat Operations, p 34). Thus, movement of these engineer assess should be
tracked by the engineer brigade headquarters that provides engineer support to their respective division commander.

**Key Event 2.** General Burnside finally determines the crossing points and issues the movement order to his respective units on his signal only.

*Causes.* General Burnside did not communicate his intent to his subordinate commanders with urgency or decisively. He ordered the crossing of the Rappahannock River in three different points on his order simultaneously. Burnside’s decision to cross just south of Fredericksburg was made on the anticipation of Lee’s two corps being separated. The tactical cause was for the Union Army to split the two corps as they are separated to crush the left flank of Jackson’s unprotected left side.

*Effects.* Since General Burnside did not issue clear, concise instructions to his division commanders in an expeditious manner, this effected the Union Army’s ability to position their units and execute bridge construction in a timely fashion. Burnside had his forces doing nothing due to his indecisive leadership characteristics. Thus, the first attempt to cross the river was a failure due to the Confederates’ fires on the river. The Union forces were not able to cross the river and sustained a substantial amount of casualties. Burnsides’ staff had to immediately begin mission analysis on another plan to cross the river. If he was confident and swift in issuing his tactical instructions, the Union Army may have caught the Confederates unready to defend their positions properly. Additionally, the morale of the Union senior commander was not good due to the hesitation of their overall commander on not just one critical occasion but two. The other
occasion was the indecisiveness and lack of initiative in dealing with the blunder of getting the pontoons transferred from Washington. Furthermore, the inability of Burnside to consider the advise that General Halleck was trying to give on where to cross the river showed the lack of communication from the field commander to Washington Headquarters. The Union engineers had to be the unfortunate soldiers that had to die due to these awful leadership episodes. The Chief Engineer of the Army ordered his engineers in the following format (Stackpole, p122):

*(These were the actual orders that were issued)*

Two pontoons bridges to be thrown at site of old pontoon bridge, one of them to have approaches for artillery. One pontoon bridge at site of old canal-boat bridge; approaches for artillery. Two pontoon bridges just below mouth of Deep Run, a mile below Fredericksburg; one to have artillery approach. Major Spaulding to throw three upper ones: major Magruder to throw the next, and Lieutenant Cross the lowest one. Bridge equipage, now at White Oak Church, to move up and go into park near Phillip’s house by dark. At midnight trains to move down within 400 yards of river, and to move down and begin unloading a 2 am. If enemy fire is kept down, bridges to be thrown as soon as are unloaded; if too hot, wait till artillery silences it (Stackpole, p122):

*Lessons Learned.* Determining crossing points for subordinate units or any other factors that place units at definite stand stills can leave units in helpless positions and loose momentum that may have previously attained. Commanders at all levels must be aware of critical information that is lacking from the original movement order. Unit commanders should have had tentative crossing points that were established in the planning phase prior to movement orders being issued.
Commanders must issue clear and concise orders so their junior leaders can understand the exact intent and what the endstate must be.

*Current Doctrine Relations.* According to FM 100-5, “a concise and comprehensive in-depth concept of operations is the basis for a successful defense… quick, violent, simultaneous action throughout the depth of the defender’s battle space can hurt, confuse, and even paralyze an enemy just as he is the most exposed and vulnerable (FM 100-5).” Since General Burnside did not issue the orders to inform division commanders on where they were to cross the Rappahannock River, it confused and took the momentum away from his forces arriving in the theater of operations.

**Key Event 3** General Burnside’s forces are marking time awaiting attack plans from the overall commander’s headquarters on the night of the 12-13 December as Confederate forces make internal adjustments and do some field reconsolidation.

*Causes.* General Franklin, Reynolds, and Smith had a meeting on the night of 12 December. They decided to make and execute, if necessary, their own attack plan. Their forces were not in a good position on the battlefield to sit idle. Therefore, they decided that the best course of action was to attack with their divisions in two assault columns in vicinity of Richmond Road. This move was designed to turn Lee’s flank. General Burnside showed up and seemingly authorized the go ahead of this plan. However, he went back to his headquarters and did not cut the execution orders to follow-up his conversation with Franklin. Thus, more hesitation by Union forces occurred again. If this meeting did not
take place between division commanders, then Burnside could have issued his instructions and intent. This wargaming among division commanders created a gap between Burnside’s staff and the division staffs.

*Effects.* Though all federal soldiers did not know everything that was going on at the division commander and above level, they continued to drive on and to try to accomplish the mission. Therefore, good initiative was displayed by Union soldiers but it resulted in disorder as seen through the eyes of Burnside’s staff. Finally, the order came at 0745 on 13 December. This delay was the most critical mistake of all that Burnside made. Franklin was to be the lead attack element with more than half of the army under his control for this particular deliberate assault. This was not understood by neither Franklin, Reynolds, nor Smith. This was not the plan that was briefed to General Burnside. The only way to defeat or destroy an exposed, vulnerable portion (Lee’s right flank) was to attack this area with three divisions. Of course, the federal forces were not successful on the southern flank.

*Lessons Learned.* This plan never had a chance since there was no rehearsal at the overall commander’s and division commander’s level. Synchronizing an operation involving corps level campaigns can not work, if commanders are not aware of what the goal is and how the higher commander wants to achieve it. The procedures on operations such as this one must be very clear to all unit commanders. Loosing two nights during a battle of close hand warfare can and normally result in the opponent (defendant) receiving valuable time to regroup and prepare.
Current Doctrine Relations. Referring to FM 100-5, Burnside was attempting to gain surprise and concentration of his forces to establish his force between the two corps of Lee. There are four characteristics of an offense. Surprise and concentration are two of these that were considered in Burnside’s planning phase. General Burnside was not able to allow his forces to divide and sweep through Jackson’s Second Corps. Burnside was unable to accomplish this due to poor planning and lack of communicating his commander’s intent. Furthermore, Burnside could have employed the simplicity concept from the principal of war. “Prepare clear, uncomplicated plans and concise orders to ensure thorough understanding” (FM 5-5-100 Engineer Operations, pp1-4 & 1-5). Simple dissemination of instructions by Burnside and his staff would have possibly caught the Confederates by surprise and may have been the break the Union needed in this battle.
Bibliography

THE BATTLE OF FREDERICKSBURG


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