

Battle of Fredericksburg: A grand but sad day for Rhode Island

Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

By SAM SIMONS
Special to The Sun

By the time the 7th Rhode Island Regiment took the battlefield on Dec. 13, 1862, three divisions of the Union Second Corps had already been destroyed trying to break the Confederate line.

Led by Colonel Zenas Bliss, a veteran of fighting on the Texas frontier, the 7th advanced across a field covered with almost 4,000 dead and wounded soldiers. Above them, a hail of artillery fire descended from the Confederate guns on the ridge known as Marye's Heights. In front, the Confederate infantry were massed behind a stone wall and swept the field with rifle fire.

The battle of Fredericksburg, Va., was already a Union debacle.

With four regiments of infantry, six batteries of artillery and one regiment of cavalry, the fields around Fredericksburg were host to the largest collection of Rhode Island troops at any battle during the Civil War. Almost 400 would be killed or wounded there in Rhode Island's bloodiest day of the war.

The scene was described by Westerly native James Barber of Rhode Island's Battery G, watching from the heights on the other side of the river.

"The Potomac Army attacked the enemy's works in the rear of the town," Barber was quoted saying in "The Boys of Adams' Battery G" by Robert Grandchamp. "They rushed on like mad men until, within 100 yards of their lines; [the Confederates] rise up out of their entrenchments and pour in fresh volleys of musketry, with deadly effect."

The 12th Rhode Island joined the 7th in the advance, while across the river, four batteries of the 1st R.I. Artillery joined in to help bombard the Confederate positions.

The advance got within 75 yards of the stonewall before the Confederate fire stopped them.

Battery B of the 1st R.I. Artillery ran their guns to within 150 yards of the Confederate position in an attempt to support their comrades, but they were quickly forced to retreat. The 12th Rhode Island also retreated, after suffering more than 100 casualties, but the 7th hung on for nearly an hour, suffering 220 casualties.

"Barrels of blood had been poured into the ground," said William Hopkins, of West Greenwich.

The outcome wasn't what the commander of the Army of the Potomac, Major General Ambrose Burnside, had envisioned.

Facing Confederate General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, entrenched on the heights behind Fredericksburg, Burnside massed 65,000 men on his left to outflank the formidable position. One division would be used to hold the Confederates in their entrenchments until the flank attack succeeded.

The plan fell apart as Burnside failed to keep tactical control. A small division commanded by Brigadier General George Meade was the only unit to attack on the flank. Supported by Battery C of the 1st Rhode

Island Artillery, Meade's Pennsylvanians broke through the Confederate line but were eventually sent reeling back by the 35,000 men of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson.

The rest of the First Corps and the Sixth Corps sat idle though their support might have meant the end of Lee's army and the war.

Meanwhile, six divisions were wasted in what was supposed to be a small demonstration against the entrenched position at Marye's Heights. Eight thousand soldiers in blue fell in front of the stonewall, against only 1,000 casualties among the Rebels. In all, the Federals suffered more than 12,500 casualties.

Lee summed it up succinctly.

"It is well that war is so terrible," he said. "Otherwise we should grow too fond of it."

Rob Grandchamp's latest book, "Rhode Island and the Civil War: Voices from the Ocean State," details the contribution of every Rhode Island unit formed during the Civil War and is available from Amazon.com.

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