

LOOKING BACK AT OUR CIVIL WAR

Burnside: a 'want of success'

Rhode Island's best-known Civil War leader had a mixed record

Ambrose Everett Burnside, Rhode Island's most famous Civil War general, had a military career with actions sometimes very competent and praiseworthy but at other times incompetent and ineffective. After his military service, he gave distinguished service to our state as a political leader.



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He also gave his name — in altered form — to the style of whiskers he wore.

Born in Indiana to poor Quakers, Burnside attended West Point, graduated with the Class of 1847 and was commissioned as an artillery officer. Early in his career, he had a short tour at Fort Adams in Newport, and then spent three years in the New Mexico Territory, where he was wounded fighting Apaches. He returned to Newport, and met and married Mary Bishop of Providence in 1852.

In 1853, he resigned his commission and moved to Bristol, where he developed a breech-loading carbine. Failing to secure a government contract, he left Rhode Island and took a position with the Illinois Central Railroad under his classmate and friend George B. McClellan.

At the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, Rhode Island Gov. William Sprague invited Burnside to lead the state's first infantry unit, the 1st Rhode Island Volunteers. He ascended to brigade command and led his unit in the First Battle of Bull Run in July. In August, he was promoted to brigadier general.

Over the next four years, he obtained many commands and saw action in numerous campaigns. In the first half of 1862, Burnside led a combined Army-Navy force to North Carolina to seize coastal fortifications and to help enforce the blockade of the Confederacy. Within a few weeks, Union troops had secured all of Carolina's ports in the main sound, a success that brought Burnside a promotion to major general.

His next major operation came at the Battle of Antietam (Maryland) in September 1862. Burnside commanded the 9th Corps in McClellan's Army of the Potomac. In the battle, Burnside showed a lack of imagination in securing a bridgehead across Antietam Creek but finally succeeded by early afternoon. However, later that day fresh Confederate units forced his three divisions to retreat.

After tolerating McClellan's timidity in battle for many months, President Abraham Lincoln replaced him in November 1862 with Burnside, who had twice earlier refused to accept the position, indicating he felt unqualified for the command.

With high expectations from both Lincoln and the public for an offensive, Burnside decided to engage Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee and his army at Fredericksburg, Md., on Dec. 13, 1862. His plan of attack was questionable and his execution was flawed as his written orders were confusing. A total of 14 Union brigades charged without success the Confederate forces that occupied the Marye Heights. It was at this battle that Lee remarked to Gen. James Longstreet: "It is well that war is so terrible — we should grow too fond of it!"

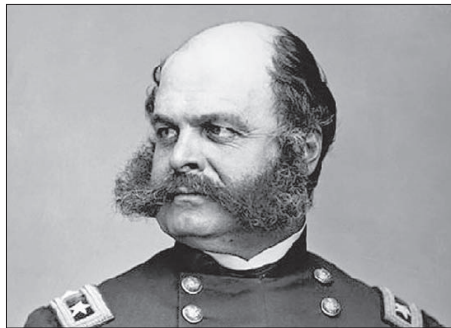
One newspaper reporter wrote: "It can hardly be in human nature for men to show more valor, or generals to manifest less judgment." With almost 13,000 Union casualties, the battle proved to be one of the worst Union defeats. Burnside quickly accepted responsibility and offered his resignation to Lincoln, which he did not accept.

During the following month, Burnside made another attempt at a



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Gen. Ambrose Burnside, who served three terms as governor of Rhode Island, is commemorated with a statue in Providence's Kennedy Plaza.



Burnside was known for his distinctive whiskers, which in his honor become known as sideburns.

campaign against Lee. However, as soon as the operation began, heavy rains made movement impossible, giving the operation the name of the "Mud March." Within two days, Burnside called off the operation. Morale plummeted; Burnside's generals opposed him; desertions and sick call lists increased. When Burnside again offered his resignation, Lincoln accepted it and assigned him as the commander of the Department of the Ohio. In the fall of 1863, Burnside successfully seized and held the city of Knoxville, Tenn.

His final major operation was in the summer of 1864 in the siege of Petersburg, Va. Burnside once again commanded the 9th Corps. He approved an unusual plan for digging a tunnel under a Confederate fortified position. Union troops of the 48th Pennsylvania Regiment succeeded in digging a tunnel 511 feet long and loaded it with four tons of gunpowder. The explosion on July 30 blew a hole 170 feet long, 60 feet wide and 30 feet deep. Changes to the battle plan from higher headquarters at the last minute seemed to confuse Burnside, who with his subordinate leaders did not control their troops well. Instead of

skirting the crater, they attacked into it, stopping to look at the carnage and spectacle. When the battle ended, the Union had suffered 4,000 casualties with little to show. Gen. Ulysses Grant stated, "It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in the war."

In April 1865, after a court of inquiry found him "answerable for want of success" at Petersburg, Burnside resigned. He worked as a director of railroads, was elected three times as governor of Rhode Island and served as a senator from 1875 until his death in Bristol in 1881.

A retired Army officer, Fred Zilian teaches history and political science at Portsmouth Abbey School and Salve Regina University and is a member of the Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission Advisory Council. He is writing an occasional series of columns highlighting various aspects of the Civil War and their impact on Newport County and Rhode Island for The Daily News. Send him email at zilianf@aol.com or check out his blog at www.zilianblog.com and his Abe Lincoln website at www.honestaberi.com.