

The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock

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Review

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O'Reilly, Francis August *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock*. Louisiana State University Press, \$24.95 ISBN 807131547

Whiskers Alone

Burnside's Blunders and Confederate Victory

When Major James A. Magruder of the 15th New York Engineers arrived on the banks of the Rappahannock River on December 11, 1862, and looked across to the Virginia town of Fredericksburg, he and thousands of other Union soldiers probably never dreamed they would soon be part of one of the Civil War's largest battles, and the Union's most embarrassing defeat.

The Fredericksburg Campaign is Woodford, Virginia author Francis August O'Reilly's comprehensive history of the Civil War battle that proved beyond doubt that nothing fails like a bad plan poorly executed. This is O'Reilly's second Civil War history, following *Stonewall Jackson at Fredericksburg: The Battle of Prospect Hill* (Harold E. Howard, ISBN 1561900508, \$25.00 hardcover.) O'Reilly spent five years researching and writing this history, and his diligent scholarship has paid off - this book has already deservedly won four prestigious book awards.

Although the Battle of Fredericksburg was fought over three days, December 11-13, 1862, the Fredericksburg campaign actually began in mid-November and lasted until January 1863. As O'Reilly relates, the campaign began with General George McClellan being relieved of command of the Army of the Potomac by President Abraham Lincoln, and replaced by General Ambrose Burnside, a man of limited talent who did not want the job and who few people liked anyway.

O'Reilly tells of Burnside's ambitious and risky plan to engage General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia along the banks of the

Rappahannock, the two army's movements, the generals' efforts to outguess each other, the political pressure, and the jealous and petty rivalries among Burnside's own generals.

He vividly describes the Union plans and Confederate counter-moves, the poor weather, the logistical foul-ups and delays, and the Union's numerous missed opportunities that allowed Gen. Lee to correctly concentrate his forces and fortify defensive positions at Fredericksburg.

O'Reilly's accurate and detailed descriptions of the engineer effort to build pontoon bridges under fire so the Union Army could cross the river are graphic and riveting, as are all of the battlefield descriptions of artillery and rifle fire, snipers, and the bloody bayonet work of close combat. He smartly combines narrative of corps-level operations with company-level actions, frequently adding eyewitness accounts and anecdotes.

Amidst O'Reilly's colorful descriptions of battle action are sharp analyses of courage and cowardice, confusion of command and control, inspired leadership, and shameful behavior. Burnside did his best; however, impressive whiskers alone do not make a good general. By his indecision and dithering, he lost the element of surprise, and he failed to make any adjustments to his battle plan even after it was clear the Confederates were well prepared to meet his attack. He repeatedly reinforced failure by ordering uncoordinated, unsupported, piecemeal frontal assaults against strongly fortified positions. The unimaginative and forlorn assaults of Marye's Heights resulted in the predictable slaughter of brave troops as they were greeted by "a blizzard of shot, shell, and fire," as though the Yanks had stepped through "the open door to the house of hell."

The Union Army suffered more than 12,000 casualties, the army was forced to withdraw back across the river, morale plummeted, and Burnside lost the job he never wanted in the first place. However, as O'Reilly points out, Fredericksburg was more than just another Union defeat. It was "a model of defensive efficiency," proving the efficacy of fortifications and hot lead over the ~~Can~~ and vulnerability of flesh and blood in the open. It also illustrated a magnificent example of an opposed river crossing operation, the first successful use of the magnetic battlefield telegraph, and most fortunately for the Union, was the last battle for the triumphant Confederate trio of Gen. Lee, General James Longstreet, and General Stonewall Jackson.

In addition to tactics, personalities, and battle scenarios, O'Reilly adds interesting anecdotal tidbits. Learn about one Yankee regiment's orders to take no prisoners (which the troops quickly disobeyed), indiscriminate looting by officers and enlisted men, one Confederate colonel's unusual premonition and his gallon of whiskey bet, how one Union soldier lied and was awarded the Medal of Honor, and about the "Angel of Marye's Heights."

This book needs more maps to assist the reader with its numerous battlefield scenes, but it is nonetheless a well-crafted and smartly-written history of an oft-overlooked campaign and battle. For more on Fredericksburg, see *Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville: The Dare Mark Campaign* by Daniel E. Sutherland (University of Nebraska Press, ISBN 0803242530, \$40.00 hardcover), and *Lee's Terrible Swift Sword: From Antietam to Chancellorsville, An Eyewitness Story* by Richard Wheeler (HarperPerennial, ISBN 0060922443, \$29.09 hardcover).

William D. Bushnell, a retired Marine Corps colonel, is a professional book reviewer with more than 1200 reviews published, and is an instructor at the University of Southern Maine. He lives on an island on the coast of Maine.