

Samuel W. North Letter and Transcription

December 18, 1862 - Camp on Battlefield Fredericksburg

Introduction

Among the American Civil War battles, the Battle of Fredericksburg holds the distinction of several firsts. Burnside's opposed river crossing, using three pontoon bridges, was the first in American military history. When the Union Army entered the town of Fredericksburg, they fought Confederate soldiers in the street – the first urban combat during the Civil War. An annual estimate based upon the 2010 U.S. census report for Franklin County lists the total population of Franklin County, as of July 1, 2011, at 150,811. At Fredericksburg, the Union force totaled about 100,000 men vs. approximately 72,500 Confederate soldiers, the largest total (172,500) of soldiers in any one Civil War battle. Casualties were about 17,929 men, with about 8,000 Union soldiers killed or wounded in front of the Stone Wall on December 13, during the successive charges toward Marye's Heights. On December 14th, neither Union nor Confederate survivors could get away from listening to the unbearable pleas and moans of the slaughtered Union soldiers scattered on the ground in front of the stone wall, where they fell. Hours passed without medical treatment, food, and water. With great risk to his own life and in an act of humanity beyond comparison, Richard Kirkland, a young 19-year old South Carolinian soldier, with permission from Gen. Joseph Kershaw, his brigade commander, climbed over the wall with canteens of fresh water and warm clothing. For an hour or so, Kirkland attended to the basic needs of his Northern brothers, as best he could. Kirkland fought at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. He lost his own life at Chickamauga and said, "Tell my pa, I died right." In 1965, a fitting statue to honor Kirkland was erected, in front of the Stone Wall.

Why did Burnside move full speed ahead with his battle plan when few of his subordinate officers agreed with him? Was it because Lincoln expected Burnside to be more decisive and successful in battle than McClellan had been? What if Burnside's requisition for engineers and parts to build pontoon bridges across the Rappahannock River hadn't been delayed by weeks? Why did the officers continue to charge after each unsuccessful wave against the well-entrenched Confederates? How could the Union troops bear to tramp over their fallen comrades, many of whom were still living, but wounded? In researching the battle, I discovered that there are many Web sites, articles, and authors with many different opinions about the Battle of Fredericksburg. In some ways, it seems that the simple answer is – if it could go wrong, it did.

Out of the 126th, there were 27 killed, 50 wounded, 2 missing, and one prisoner taken at Fredericksburg. Sam mentions by name the comrades that he knows from the 126th who were killed or wounded. At the bottom of page three, Sam writes that Dav(e) Divel(biss) was a pioneer. Ted Alexander explained that the pioneer corps cleared obstructions ahead of the infantry, constructed and repaired roads, bridges, and temporary defenses and sometimes also destroyed the same to keep the Confederates from using them. The pioneers were separate from the Engineering Corps. When the Army of the Potomac was formed, it was decided that 2% of the enlisted men within each brigade would be assigned to the pioneers. They carried axes, shovels, and picks but no guns. The day of slaughter was Saturday, December 13. The 126th was on picket duty Sunday and Monday nights, lying within 75 yards of the Confederate pickets. Just before sunrise on Tuesday morning, December 16, still under safe cover of darkness, the 126th and the 91st brought up the rear of the Union retreat back across the Rappahannock River. The images of battle were still very vivid and the emotions raw when Sam wrote this letter to his brother.

From the article The True Battle for Fredericksburg, by Frank A. O'Reilly, "When Abraham Lincoln heard the news of Fredericksburg, he moaned, "If there is a place worse than hell, I'm in it!" Though victorious, General Robert E. Lee was moved by the awful destruction in the Slaughter Pen. When he contrasted Meade and Gibbon's magnificently tailored ranks with the shattered commands retreating across the fields, he whispered to James Longstreet: "It is well that war is so terrible, or we would grow too fond of it."

Camp, near Fredericksburg
Dec 1862

Dear Brother

Yours of the 13th is at hand. I wrote a letter to Mother in Fredericksburg on Sunday it was just a scribble with a pencil it was to let her know that I was safe then. but I knew it was not all over for the shells were flying about pretty thick at the time. we were sitting behind a stone wall along with you in Charles St. West's day I wrote to Sula but was in such a hurry that I could not write particulars. We have failed to drive the enemy from their entrenchments and have retired over to this side of the river. on Tuesday morning we were ready to meet the combat and commenced at daylight and we fought about the same time we waited all day about a mile from the river on Friday morning we were moved out to our battery on the side of the Rappahannock but on Sat morning the troops commenced firing and soon we heard the musketry through both the artillery it was most terrific. we crossed about then piled when we were going down this side the rebels threw shells at us but no one was hurt we crossed on the pontoon bridge and as soon as we were in town the artillery commenced firing at us but could not do us much damage as we were under the cover of the houses the town was all panneded holes chairs and every kind of furniture was lying in the streets. we left our knapsacks on a stove and moved out on the battle field we were moved out and drawn up in position in a meadow when a rebel officer on a white horse rode out in front of the batteries and soon a cannon was

brought to bear on us the first shell killed three men in so close to our nest we were ordered to lay down and then we lay close down in mud and held the shells flew in among us and did terrible work one threw the mud all over me. that was the most horrid time that the shells hissed and whizzed the noise was enough to scare even if they had done nothing else I don't mind anything half as much as them but I am afraid of them. we were soon compelled to retire a hundred yards or more but were drawn up behind one of our batteries which was firing a rebel battery (across two fields) off we were drawn up and ordered to charge Boycut on the rebels the boys wounded our dear Gen. Huddyphers moved to the front and away we went at the cheering as we went we had to trample over a line of our own boys down and then passed our pickets we passed over the dead and wounded. the enemy resumed their fire then rained and poured into us a murderous volley which checked us we could not advance under that murderous fire we lay down a few minutes and fired a red loaded a few rounds and then we had to fall back. we broke and retreated double quick we were formed rallied got onto river and moved back into the town. Col. Elder was dangerously wounded when he led us out he said "now men of the 126th remember what you came out for "do your duty" "keep cool" he is a hero and a patriot capt. Brownson led us on on as cool and composedly as a man could. he is as brave a man as ever breathed hot breath was a pioneer

and when he was ordered to leave his eye went to the
left and asked for one of the "red" men's guns and
went out on the field with us. Several distinguished
guys got sick very suddenly. I went for the "red"
dal. Mowen was shot through the breast and instantly
killed. Scept. Bascally was wounded on the side and soon
he died soon after being taken off the field. Huston
Wark was dangerously wounded through the shoulder. Hays
wounded in the leg - not dangerous. Brown. Caskey
has an ugly wound in the face. Several received slight
bruises from spent balls. We went out again after being
got our knapsacks and a little rest we went into a house
and built a fire and I found that there was a school
room there I got Miss Peoples & am waiting on in
that house. We went out and held the position on
the field until morning when we were relieved and
went back into the town where we stayed Sunday and
Monday the night then we were moved out and were
put on picket until morning we lay within 75 yds
of the enemys pickets, at daylight we were brought off
at a double quick and found the city deserted we were
double quick to the river and crossed at daylight near
and the 7th were the last to cross the pontoon boys
commenced losing the bridge and we knew that
we had ~~been~~ colored the retreat we had lan-
on the east ground on our hills and it had rained
on us we were most que out we had double quicked
about two miles through mud a foot deep some places

but we got back safe to our old camp and saved
our knapsacks & contents most of us at least I brought
back all I took over and picked up a gun blowing
the streets were full of knapsacks as we came through
Some of the boys got books and some other things
Hays Boyd got millions complete works lying in
the streets. there was abundance of flour fresh
fory and in short everything but salt. the story
of the south starting it all be poor they had things
just as plenty as we have at least in Fredericksburg
one getting killed themselves as well as they could they
saw some people living in the cities here and I went
of for 10000. on night it was not safe to go in daylight
when a lady came out of the house and asked us to get her some
water in bottles for babies and she said to send to tell the
rest of them I have heard of the nervous of the battle field
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Dec 18th 1862

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but we got back safe to our old camp and saved our knapsacks and tents most of us at least I brought back all I took over and picked up a gum blanket the streets were full of knapsacks as we came through Some of the boys got books and some other thing Haze Boyd got Miltons complete works lying in the Streets. there was abundance of flour fish pork and in short everything but salt. the story of the South Starving is all a Hoax they had things Just as plenty as we have at least in Fredricksburg our soldiers helped themselves as well as they could there were some people living in the cellars Bruce and I went after water one night - it was not safe to go in daytime - when a lady came out of the house and asked us to get her some water we filled her bucket and she said it would do till the next evening. I have Heard of the horrors of the battle field but the reality is terrible. in the action and excitement it is not realized but the thoughts and impressions seem to be burned on my brain the still pale faces of the dead and the shrieks and groans of the wounded and dying oh! it is awfull I think our loss must be very severe I saw a great many dead men we could hardly step without tramping on them. I cannot praise our capt too highly and the boys with but few exceptions did their duty nobly I did not expect them to take that battery when we started but we tried the Second Maine boys say we made the eleventh charge on it we failed but we done our duty it is said we lost nine commissioned killed and wounded in the regt and over one hundred men I forgot to say that we heard of one of our missing boys Fritz of the little cove he is in the hospital has been run over and is badly injured he makes co ,C,^s loss two killed and four badly wounded Capt Doeblor of co A is wounded in the arm. but I am sick and tired of this subject and have done now. Mother was anxious to know how we got along this cold weather we have a right cozy chimney and fire place in our tent and have made ourselves pretty comfortable. and have not suffered any yet. aunt Sade sent me a sleeping cap aunt Kate sent Jacob one. I want you to write often my love to all friends your brother S.W. North

tell pap that the other \$27.00 are safe has not left here yet but it will be sent on Immediately tell him to write when he gets it.