

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MEETING – September 7, 2021

“SIMPLY MURDER: THE BATTLE OF FREDERICKSBURG”

SPEAKER: Chris Mackowski, Ph.d.

As expected, Chris delivered an outstanding talk. Full of suspense, factoids, humor, moving scenery (charts), a polished no-notes delivery, and ending with a better understanding of a battle that is often misunderstood. No review can do justice to seeing him in person. Nevertheless...

1862 was not a good year for Union forces in the East. After McLellan's disastrous Peninsular Campaign in the spring, and another Union loss at Second Manassas in August, an emboldened Robert E. Lee launched his first invasion of the North, only to be just-barely defeated at Antietam in September. This victory provided Lincoln a basis for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, but he was frustrated with McLellan's indecisiveness and failure to press Lee when he had him on his heels. Nevertheless, because he was a very popular Democrat, he waited until after the mid-term Congressional elections before sacking him. Lincoln offered command of the Army of the Potomac to Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside who demurred that he was not up to the task. However, when he realized the post would fall to Joe Hooker – they were not on the best of terms – he accepted the appointment.

Recognizing that he had to act decisively, Burnside decided to move his 200,000-man army directly toward Richmond rather than attack Lee's forces encamped to the west at Culpepper and Front Royal. The first elements arrived at Falmouth, directly across the river from Fredericksburg, on November 17. However, the pontoon boats he had called for in early November didn't arrive until November 25-30, wasting his opportunity to get across the river before Lee arrived. This delay enabled Lee to get Longstreet's forces entrenched along Marye's Heights above the town and Jackson's men positioned to the west on Prospect Hill.

The first attempts to get across the river on December 11 were met with sharpshooter fire from Barksdale's Mississippi brigade. He held the Union troops off for a full day. On December 12, supported by a 150-gun bombardment of the

town, men from the 7th MI forced the crossing and in house-to-house fighting cleared the town of Barksdale's men. By the end of the day all of Burnside's men were across.

On the 13th, Franklin's Corp was to attack Prospect Hill on the left while Sumner's and Hooker's forces were to attack Marye's Heights. In fierce fighting, Franklin's forces almost broke through on Prospect Hill but were stymied, in part by artillery fire from 24-year-old John Pelham's horse artillery on their left. Meanwhile, seven Union divisions attacked Marye's Heights, generally one brigade at a time, for a total of fourteen individual charges. All were repulsed with great losses. That night, Richard Kirkland, a Confederate Army sergeant, hearing the Union wounded's cries for help, gathered canteens and on the morning of the 14th brought water to numerous Union wounded lying on the field of battle. Union soldiers held their fire as it was obvious what Kirkland was doing. Kirkland was nicknamed the "Angel of Marye's Heights" for these actions. On the 15th Burnside pulled back. Over the course of the battle, Union losses were 12,600 while the Confederates lost 5,400. Afterward Lee commented that, despite the victory, the battle accomplished little. As Chris noted, Northern reactions were harsher – Burnside was relieved at the end of January after the ill-fated "Mud March" that month.

By Rob Clarke