

3000 words

Shallow Graves:
Burying the Union Dead at Fredericksburg, 1862

by Duane Schultz

“I saw hundreds of men lying dead,” a Union soldier wrote, “shot in all parts and some with their heads, legs, arms, etc., shot off and mangled in all manner of sad shapes. I have never seen men lay so thick.”

Francis Lawley, a British newspaper correspondent, was appalled by the carnage he saw at Marye’s Heights, one of two battlefields at Fredericksburg, Virginia. “There, in every attitude of death, lying so close to each other that you might step from body to body, lay acres of the Federal dead. I doubt whether in any battlefield of modern times the dead have lain so thick and close nothing like it has ever been seen before.”

The two day-long battles took place on December 13, 1862. The bodies of Union soldiers at the primary battle site at Marye’s Heights were lying in a field a half mile long and 500 yards wide at the edge of town. At the far end of the field was a thick, 4-foot high stone wall behind which Confederate soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder four deep, so that three men could continuously load the muskets while the fourth kept up a constant rate of fire.

Marye’s Heights, a hill rising 130 feet behind the stone wall, was packed with rebel cannon lined up so that their fire would cover every square inch of the open field below them. General James Longstreet, Robert E. Lee’s “Old War Horse,” was assured by his artillery officers that once the cannon opened fire, a chicken crossing the field could not survive!

The Union troops who had to cross the field knew in advance what their fate would be. For the past three weeks they had watched the Confederates prepare their defensive positions and set up the cannon. They were well aware that no army could survive in an open field in the face of so much enemy fire.

“I am sure we cannot take those hills,” a Union private wrote. “It looks to me as if we were going over there to be murdered,” another Union soldier said. The consensus was that it seemed suicidal to attempt it. Even Lee did not believe that any Union commander would be foolish enough to send troops against such strong defenses.

And yet, that was precisely where the Union commander of the Army of the Potomac, General Ambrose Burnside, decided to send his Right Grand Division led by Major General Edwin Vose “Bull” Sumner. But the Union soldiers were not ordered to quickly charge the stone wall and overrun it. Instead, they were to march in perfect military formation at a steady cadence of 160 steps per minute.

When the rebel cannon opened fire and tore huge bloody holes in the lines, the men halted, dressed right and closed ranks just as they would on a parade ground. By the time the remnants of Burnside’s men neared the stone wall, the lines were far shorter. Soldiers fell by the score, the hundreds, then the thousands, but the rest kept pace, dutifully marching up the hill. Not a single man got within 25 yards of the stone wall.

Each new wave of troops advanced over the bodies of the dead and wounded who had preceded them; each wave waiting their turn to die as the grass grew slippery with their blood. Lieutenant William Owen, a Confederate artillery officer, watched as his guns rained fire down on the Yankees. “On they came in beautiful array . . . but our fire was murderous, and no troops on earth could stand [what] we were giving them.”

By the time the assault on Marye's Heights spent itself at the end of the day, more than 12,000 Union soldiers lay on the frozen ground. Many were still alive, trying to keep their heads below the slight rise in the ground about a hundred yards from the wall.

Many others were dead, wounded or blown to pieces. "Missing in action" the latter would be called. A Union general described the field as "a great slaughter pen. They might as well have tried to take Hell." Oliver Wendell Holmes, then a captain in the 20th Massachusetts, called it "an infamous butchery in a ridiculous attempt."

The other battle that day took place a mile downstream from the town at Deep Run where Burnside's Left Grand Division crossed the Rappahannock in a grand display of flags and banners. But the commander, Major General William Franklin, sent only one small unit of 4,500 men, led by George Meade, forward to attack the entrenched Confederate forces under the command of Stonewall Jackson and Jeb Stuart.

Those Union troops also lined up in orderly rows and marched smartly forward, only to be hit by a massive artillery barrage. They quickly broke ranks and sought shelter in the irregular farmland with its wheat stubble and dry grass poking up through a cold, sticky 3-inch layer of mud. The soldiers lay still in the frozen mud for more than two hours until the Union artillery was in position to begin a massive return fire.

Once again, the Yankee troops pressed forward in orderly rows but this time they made some progress until close to four o'clock in the afternoon, when their advance was halted. They turned back and raced toward the safety of the river, chased by incoming shells and pursued by troops screaming the fearsome rebel yell.

By then Meade's outfit had lost at least 1800 men, a casualty rate of 40 per cent, and more lay wounded and dying. Union Sergeant Reuben Schell wrote to his father that "the sights are too horrible to describe with pen and ink. We were mowed down like grass upon the field."

Sergeant Jacob Heffelfinger from Pennsylvania was hit in both legs and was unable to move. As Confederate troops ran past him, he wrote in his diary: "I am still lying where I fell. The rebels have advanced in a line over me, so that I am a prisoner. I am now exposed to the fire of our artillery, which is fearfully destructive. Death has been doing fearful work today."

The fighting at both battle sites ended late in the day and the soldiers returned to their lines, but the suffering was far from over. Thousands of wounded men and hundreds of injured horses were left on the battlefield, many howling in pain. No one on either side dared to help for there was still enough daylight to make them easy targets.

Suddenly a new horror arose at Deep Run. The exploding Confederate artillery shells had left patches of black powder smoldering in the dry grass. Fires sprang up and quickly began to spread over the field, setting fire to the uniforms of the wounded. Although they tried to crawl away, the flames spread too rapidly, and many men suffered an agonizing death.

The following day, General Franklin sent an appeal to General Jackson to allow a truce so that Union wounded could be retrieved and the dead buried. Jackson agreed but insisted that there be no fraternization among his men with the enemy. When Confederate General Robert Rodes told his command not to answer any questions the Yankee troops might ask, a cheeky private interrupted to ask, "General, may we not tell them that we whipped them yesterday?"

"Yes, you can tell them that," General Rodes said, laughing.

Another private said, "General, may we not tell them that we can whip them again tomorrow?" Rodes agreed that they could say whatever they wanted.

Confederate and Union soldiers met at the battle site. As historian Francis O'Reilly wrote, "Northerners and Southerners broke the spongy ground, digging graves for the slain. They excavated long trenches and buried the bodies *en masse*. A Confederate picket thought it 'was a grand sight' to see the parties working together."

The bodies were placed side by side in long trenches. The wounded were loaded onto ambulances that headed back toward the Union line. Soldiers dragged dead horses to bonfires so huge that they were described as shining beacons lighting up the battlefield. No record was kept of the number of Union soldiers buried at Deep Run.

While the enlisted men did the work, some of the officers enjoyed reunions with old friends from the other side. They shook hands, even hugged, while they brought one another up to date on their experiences and the fates of mutual friends. The enlisted men also found comradeship with the enemy, introducing themselves, shaking hands, and behaving as if they had not been trying to kill each other not so very long ago.

“The peaceful, almost festive, interlude seemed ludicrously out of place,” historian O’Reilly wrote, and quoted one southern soldier as saying, “What a strange thing is war.” The war would go on for three more years, but for that brief time at Deep Run, they wished each other well. And they meant it.

At Marye’s Heights, many wounded soldiers made their way back to Union lines during that first night. But the dead, and those too frightened or too seriously wounded to move, lay on the frozen field through the night, the next day, and the following night as well. “The night was bitter cold,” Union General Darius Couch wrote. “It was a night of dreadful suffering. Many died of wounds and exposure, and as fast as men died, they stiffened in the wintry air, and on the front line were rolled forward for protection for the living.”

The Union survivors piled dead bodies in front of them as barricades to protect themselves from rebel sharpshooters who were constantly on the lookout for any movement. Two brothers, Robert and Walter Carter from Massachusetts, huddled together behind corpses they had stacked in front of them. The bodies had started to decompose and one brother wrote

that the corpses' "fixed and glassy eyes stared at us in the face, and the stench from our comrades became repulsive to the last degree."

The Carters found some rubber ponchos to stretch over the heap of bodies. "This breastwork of the dead saved our lives more than once during the [next] day as they were struck several times at least, as denoted by that peculiar dull thud in the dead flesh, and a shiver ran through our spinal columns at every fresh clip."

The wounded cried out in pain, praying aloud to God until death claimed them. A Yankee private wrote how "the cries of the wounded rose up over that bloody field like the wail of lost spirits . . . cries for water, blankets, and 'to be borne off the field'."

On December 15, two days after the battle, when Burnside had withdrawn his army across the Rappahannock River, Robert E. Lee sent a courier with a message suggesting that Burnside agree to a brief truce so that a Union burial detachment could cross the river to retrieve the wounded and bury the dead at Marye's Heights.

Burnside accepted Lee's offer and sent a detail of several hundred Union soldiers across, to be met on the southern side by Confederate soldiers who escorted them to the plain below Marye's Heights. "As we approached the battlefield," one Union soldier wrote, "the sight reminded me of a flock of sheep reposing in the field. But as we approached nearer . . . I found them to be the dead bodies of our brave men, which had been stripped of their clothing."

The rebel troops, having long been without warm clothing—or in many cases even shoes—had stripped the Union dead of their uniforms and underwear. Douglas Southall Freeman wrote about one Confederate soldier who began to remove a shoe from a fallen Yankee when the man raised his head. "Beg pardon, sir," the rebel said, "I thought you had gone above."

A less courteous southerner took an expensive Belgian rifle from a dead Union man and was reprimanded by a Yankee officer in the truce party. The rebel soldier stared at the Union officer's shiny new boots and said, "Never mind, I'll shoot you tomorrow and get them boots."

Historian Stephen Oates wrote that the dead Yankees lay "in every conceivable position, some on their backs with gaping jaws, some with eyes as large as walnuts, protruding with glassy stare, some doubled up like a contortionist, here one without a head, there one without legs, yonder a head and legs without a trunk, everywhere horrible expressions, fear, rage, agony, madness, torture, lying in pools of blood, lying with heads half-buried in mud, with fragments of shells sticking in oozing brains with bullet holes all over the puffed limbs."

The Union burial party started to dig but found that the ground was still frozen, requiring strenuous effort with pickaxes and shovels. They hoped to get the job done quickly so they could get away from the horrible sights and smells, and so they began to rush, having neither time nor inclination to linger enough to show proper respect to their fallen comrades.

Soldiers dragged the remains to a ditch carved out of the frozen earth; it was six feet wide, a hundred yards long, but only a foot and a half deep. Bodies were dropped in side by side and the trough quickly filled, so a second layer of the dead was piled atop the first. And then a third, covered a few with only a thin layer of dirt.

By late afternoon, since there were still many more corpses to gather and bury, another truce was arranged for the following day. Only 609 fallen soldiers had been accounted for. When the burial detail returned the next day, a few of the Confederate soldiers taunted them, showing off the blue uniforms they had stripped from the Union dead.

Bruce Catton described a confrontation between two officers: the southerner reportedly said, "You Yankees don't know how to hate. You don't hate us near as much as we hate you."

He gestured toward the Union corpses stripped naked. "Do you think we could ever treat your dead that way if we didn't hate you?"

The majority of the rebel soldiers, however, were far friendlier to the Union burial detail. As at Deep Run, officers greeted former West Point classmates like the old friends they had once been. Enlisted men on both sides mingled freely, shaking hands, trading coffee for tobacco, reminiscing about the fighting, and talking about their families. Nearly all expressed the wish that they could soon go home.

A few Confederate generals, including Jeb Stuart, William Barksdale, and Lafayette McLaws, watched in disgust at what they considered to be the callous way the Union men were treating their own dead. Stuart's friend and aide, the Prussian mercenary Major Heros von Borcke, wrote that he was "painfully shocked" at seeing a Union burial party dispose of the bodies by tossing them into a hole in the ground that had once been used as an ice house.

"The bodies of those poor fellows," he wrote, "were gathered in huge mounds around the pit, and tumbled neck and heels into it; the dull 'thud' of corpse falling on corpse coming up from the depths of the hole until the solid mass of human flesh reached near the surface, when a coverage of logs, chalk, and mud closed the mouth of this vast and awful tomb."

These corpses, numbering several hundred, were not discovered until three years later. By then the remains were in such a terrible condition that it was not possible to identify them or even obtain an accurate count.

Toward the end of the day, Union soldiers packed up their tools and headed back to the river, having buried 913 bodies, according to their official report.

As page after page of casualty lists from Fredericksburg were printed in newspapers throughout the northern states and people realized the extent of the loss, a sense of despair spread. A reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, Joseph Medill, wrote that "the feeling of utter

hopelessness is stronger than at any time since the war began. The terrible bloody defeat of our brave army . . . leaves us almost without hope.”

Harper's Weekly, an influential magazine, described the battle at Fredericksburg as a massacre, leaving the North “filled with sickness, disgust and despair.” General Montgomery Meigs, Quartermaster General of the Union Army, wrote that “exhaustion steals over the country. Confidence and hope are dying.”

Many of the dead and buried did not stay buried for long. Edward Heinichen, a Fredericksburg resident recalled that the Union dead received such superficial burials “that parts of them after a short time showed above ground [and] dogs brought home many a limb.” For many months, heavy rains brought the bones of fallen soldiers to the surface.

Well into the twentieth century farmers in nearby fields continued to find parts of bodies. In 2015, more than 150 years after the fighting, during an excavation of a building along the riverfront, more than 100 bone fragments were found, along with Union Army buttons and pieces of blue fabric from uniforms.

When the war ended on April 9, 1865, three years after the battles at Fredericksburg, the War Department learned about the deplorable condition of the Union dead on Marye's Heights. This was the impetus to establish the Fredericksburg National Cemetery. Over the following four years the remains of 15,243 Union dead from Fredericksburg and other Virginia battlefields were collected and buried there. Only 2473 of them were identified.

Duane Schultz has written numerous articles and books on military history, including *The Dahlgren Affair: Terror and Conspiracy in the Civil War* and *The Fate of War: Fredericksburg, 1862*. See www.duaneschultz.com.

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