

# BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 3 ★ Issue 2

American Civil War:

## Fredericksburg

DATE:

December 11–14, 1862

LOCATION:

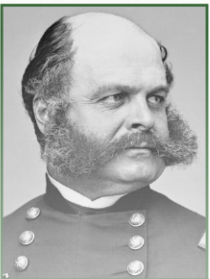
Fredericksburg, Virginia

### OPPOSING FORCES

**Confederate:** 78,000 troops of the Army of Northern Virginia, commanded by Gen. Robert E. Lee. His corps commanders were Lt. Gens. James Longstreet and Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. Lt. Gen. James Ewell Brown “Jeb” Stuart commanded the cavalry brigade.

**Union:** 120,000 troops of the Army of the Potomac, commanded by Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside. The Right Grand Division (II and IX Corps) was commanded by Maj. Gen. Edwin V. Sumner. The Center Grand Division (III and V Corps) was commanded by Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker. The Left Grand Division (I and VI Corps) was commanded by Maj. Gen. William B. Franklin.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE



Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside

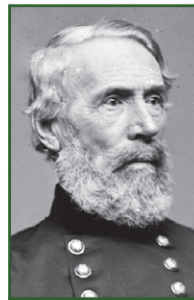
In the autumn of 1862, President Abraham Lincoln replaced the cautious Maj. Gen. George McClellan for his failure to gain any momentum after Antietam. Lincoln's new commander, Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside, promised swift action by moving south against Fredericksburg to open a route to the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia. With Gen. Robert E. Lee's Confederate army divided, Burnside believed he could do it all before Lee could react. But when his pontoon

bridges failed to arrive, Burnside's campaign started unraveling. When the bridges finally arrived, it was too late: Lee had been given the time he needed to prepare his defense. What happened next was arguably the greatest military blunder of the American Civil War. Burnside launched a piecemeal frontal assault into the strength of Lee's defenses. The result was disastrous.

### STRATEGY & MANEUVER

**Actions by the Union** – Lincoln's new commander, Burnside, was initially reluctant, thinking he did not possess the skills to lead an entire army. Nevertheless, after taking command on 7 November, he resolved to take bold action. He proposed a rapid move southeast to Fredericksburg, crossing the Rappahannock River, to strike the Confederate capital at Richmond before Lee's divided army could stop him. (Map 1)

Lincoln, appreciating Burnside's offensive spirit, approved his plan on 14 November but cautioned him via telegraph: “The plan will succeed if

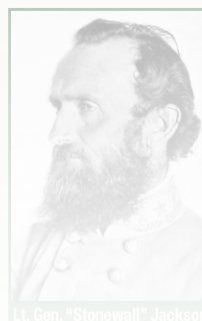


Maj. Gen. Edwin Sumner

two corps of infantry, artillery units, and a cavalry brigade. On 15 November, he ordered Maj. Gen. Edwin V. Sumner's Right Grand Division to move to Falmouth while the rest of the army followed. Since he had already requested the pontoon bridges and engineers from Washington when his plan was approved, he assumed they were on the way. But when Sumner arrived on the 17th, facing only around 500 Confederate soldiers occupying Fredericksburg, he had no bridges. With the Confederate Lt. Gen. James Longstreet still 30 miles

away, and Lt. Gen. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson still in the Shenandoah Valley, both Sumner and Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker urged Burnside to ford the river and attack. But the cautious Burnside, concerned about threatening weather, a rising river, and the lack of established lines of communication, refused. A rare opportunity was lost.

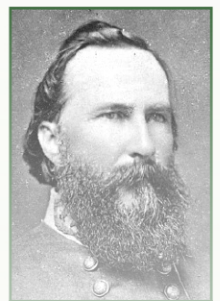
Two days later, as rains began swelling the river, Longstreet's corps arrived. Even by the 20th, after Burnside's entire army was in position – vastly outnumbering Longstreet's corps – there were still no bridges. Bureaucratic missteps, bad weather, and a delay in steamship transport all conspired to slow their arrival until 25 November – eight days after the Army of the Potomac was in place. Burnside's speed and surprise were gone.



Lt. Gen. “Stonewall” Jackson

By 30 November, with the arrival of Jackson's corps, Lee was at full strength. Burnside deliberated for hours about what to do, but with his superior numbers, the onset of winter, and a president looking for results, he pressed on. After seeing the Confederate buildup across the river, he had second thoughts about crossing near Fredericksburg. But, as he planned a crossing further south near Skinkers Neck, Confederate shore batteries drove off gunboats he was relying on for support. Additionally, when his balloon

spotters saw a large Confederate force in the area, Burnside assumed that Lee had guessed his plan, so he shifted back toward crossing near Fredericksburg. In a telegram to Lincoln's general-in-chief Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck on the evening of 9 December, Burnside stated, “A large



Lt. Gen. James Longstreet