

Historical Notes to accompany letter dated:

12/07/62: 053

Historical Notes

Early December 1862 was a time for Cyrus Hardaway and his fellow Berdan's Sharpshooters to ready themselves for the battle that was shaping up near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Newly appointed commander General Ambrose Burnside had modified McClellan's plan and moved the Army of the Potomac to the Rappahannock River near Fredericksburg, Virginia for a crossing. Berdan's Regiments were encamped about three miles from the river close to the railroad. Nearby forests provided building materials for the log houses built by Hardaway and others of the Sharpshooters for what they hoped would be their winter quarters.

Hardaway's requested "shopping list" of items to be sent to him by his mother, confirms the undersupplied state of the Union army as it waited for pontoon bridges to cross the Rappahannock River. Regimental historian, Charles A. Stevens, in his history of Berdan's Sharpshooters, noted of these December 1862 times that ". . . rations often short were of bad quality, the clothing and shoes worn out . . . The men had not been paid for six months, . . . To make things worse, our knapsacks which had been left on the Peninsula in August, were returned . . . emptied of their former contents."

Yet, Hardaway could look across the river and realize that the Confederate army was in even worse shape. Without coats, the Rebels would be even colder than himself or the rest of the Army of the Potomac. Both armies which would normally be hunkering down in winter quarters were instead preparing for a major battle.

Burnside's (post McClellan) plans had resulted in the reorganization of the Army of the Potomac. Three Grand Divisions commanded by Generals Sumner, Hooker, and Franklin would hopefully create greater coordination in command. The 1st Regiment of Berdan's Sharpshooters was attached to the the 1st Division of the the V Corps of the newly constituted "Center Grand Division." Berdan's 2nd Regiment was attached to the 1st Division of the 1st Corp of the "Left Grand Division."

The long awaited pontoon bridges finally arrived in early December 1862. The element of surprise had of course long since disappeared; Burnside's only remaining decision was to decide where the crossing of the Rappahannock and Federal attack would occur. Burnside concluded that Lee would expect him to cross either below or above Fredericksburg, and in a stroke of "brilliance," concluded that the crossing should be directly in front of and below Lee's massed artillery and army.