

Historical Notes to accompany letter dated:

12/15/62: 054

Historical Notes

Cyrus Hardaway's letter home dated December 15, 1862 was written two days after the conclusion of the *Battle of Fredericksburg*. As Hardaway noted, early in the morning of December 11, Union bridge builders had completed construction of the pontoon bridges crossing the Rappahannock River. Three regiments of Federal infantry soon crossed and cleared the village of Rebel sharpshooters. Most of the Army of Potomac, including Berdan's then crossed the river and encamped in or near Fredericksburg on the south side of the Rappahannock.

On the morning of the December 13, 1862 the long awaited Union attack began. Berdan's regiments were both held in reserve throughout the battle, a condition never before experienced by the Sharpshooters. The plan of attack called for Franklin's "Left Grand Division" to attack the Confederate right under General "Stonewall" Jackson. On the Union right an attack was to occur at Marye's Heights behind the village of Fredericksburg.

The plan never unfolded properly. Despite persistent orders from General Burnside, the attack by the Union left failed to commit adequate forces to take advantage of its preliminary successes. On the right, the Federal attack was channeled by natural ravines, marshes, and a drainage ditch towards a sunken road at the base of the Marye's Height just behind the village. Wave upon wave of Federal infantry assaulted this point, the dead piling up by thousands into mountains of bodies. After 14 brigades had tried and failed at Marye's Heights, the attack broke off at dark. Nearly 13,000 Federals had been killed, wounded, or were missing. The Confederates suffered fewer than 5,000 casualties. After limited actions on the 14th and 15th, the Army of the Potomac withdrew back across the river on the evening of December 15th. The *Battle of Fredericksburg* had failed miserably in its goal of "taking the war" to the Rebels. It was one of, if not the, worst defeat for a Union army in the entire Civil War.

During the first day of battle, Hardaway's Company D, 1st Regiment remained in position on the north bank of the Rappahannock. On the 14th they crossed the river and remained in the village until the late evening of December 15th. On that date they returned to the north side of the river. The regiment was back across the Rappahannock, and in their original camps without suffering any casualties by December 16, 1862.