



The Death of a Senator's Son

By Fergus M. Bordewich, Jr., July 24, 2020
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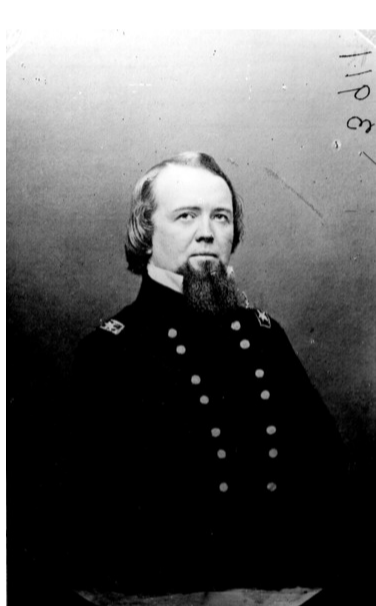
The Honorable William P. Fessenden of Maine | War Department

No political man was more crucial to the Union war effort than William Pitt Fessenden of Maine. As chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, he worked tirelessly to raise the money that was necessary to keep the North's armies in the field. Although cool and stoic by nature, and conservative in his political instincts, his commitment to total victory fostered a close collaboration with the Radical Republicans in Congress.

Of Fessenden's four sons, only 21-year-old Sam gave his father cause for worry. Always impulsive, Sam had as a teenager run off to join John Brown in Kansas and had to be hauled home before he got killed. Now a student at Bowdoin College, he was squandering his allowance on carousing and expensive clothes. "The great defect in your character is self-indulgence without thought either for yourself or others," the senator complained.

Driven by both his craving for adventure and the desire to redeem himself in his father's eyes, Sam enlisted in the army and was immediately commissioned a second lieutenant—he was a senator's son, after all—in the artillery. Posted to the Shenandoah Valley, he proved an unexpectedly sensitive observer of war's corrupting effect on otherwise decent men. He wrote to his father, "I have witnessed one continuous course of plundering, robbing, insulting women and destroying what could not be used. We are a disgrace to our country, and if we are whipped I shall not be sorry."

In July 1862, Sam's unit was deployed to reinforce the newly formed Army of Virginia, under the command of Gen. John Pope. With the Army of the Potomac dormant at Harrison's Landing, the North's hopes now rested with Pope's 70,000 men. "Advance is the Order of the Day," Pope pompously proclaimed. "Shame lurks in the rear!"



Gen. John Pope | National Archives

With action looming, Sam's spirits rose. "There is no doubt that a severe battle will occur," he wrote excitedly to his father on August 22. No longer were the senator's letters freighted with barely controlled disdain, but now with the pride that he, and doubtless Sam, had long wished for. "Your army is the center of all eyes, for the hopes of the country are resting upon it," he wrote. "May you do your duty, and may God preserve you."

Pope's modest experience in the West failed to prepare him for what ensued, as much from his fellow officers as from the enemy. Despite direct orders from Lincoln, McClellan jealously refused to provide reinforcements to Pope from his own army. When, belatedly and grudgingly, he finally did so, they were still disembarking at Alexandria when Pope collided with an entrenched Confederate force under Stonewall Jackson near the old Bull Run battlefield, on August 29.

Pope hammered the rebels all day with assault after assault. Thirty miles away in Washington, the sound of cannon fire could be heard like a distant drumbeat in the withering summer heat. Early reports claimed that the rebels had been driven from their positions with great slaughter. From Portland, Maine, where he was riveted waiting for the latest telegraphic reports, the senator wrote hopefully to his son Frank, who was serving with the army in Tennessee, "It seems Pope has fought a great battle and won it. I am most happy to believe it to be so, but shall be very curious to hear of Sam."

The next day's reports were more equivocal, then catastrophic. Confederate reinforcements poured onto the field. When they struck, they rolled up the Pope's line, sowing panic and nearly bagging the entire army. Among the dead was Col. Fletcher Webster of the 12th Massachusetts, the son of the great orator Daniel Webster. And among the wounded was Sam Fessenden, now a captain, who was serving as an aide to Gen. Zealous Tower of the Third Corps. Sam was shot in the gut when Gen. James Longstreet's corps overwhelmed Pope's exposed left flank.

The senator entrained for Washington as soon as he learned that Sam had been injured. By the time he got there, Sam was dead. He wrote to a friend a few days later, "For the loss of a beloved child there is no such thing as consolation. There is however a melancholy satisfaction in knowing that he died in a just and holy cause." Sam was just one of the Union's 16,000 casualties, far outstripping the Confederates' 9,200.



The ruins of Stone Bridge, Bull Run, Virginia | National Archives

This article is adapted from Mr. Bordewich's new book, *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery and Remade America*.



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