



THE DRUM & BUGLE
Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table
May 2025, Volume 22, Issue 5

Speaker: Vic Vignola
Topic: “Contrasts in Command: The Battle of Fair Oaks”
When: Monday May 12, 2024
Location: Brock’s Riverside Grill
Times: Social Time Begins 6:00 pm, Dinner 6:45 pm, Meeting Begins 7:30 pm
Our Website: www.rappvalleycivilwar.org
Our Facebook: www.facebook.com/rvcwrt

Vic Vignola “Contrasts in Command: The Battle of Fair Oaks”

Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan marched his Army of the Potomac up the Virginia Peninsula during the early spring of 1862 and placed his inexperienced IV Corps at the tip of the spear south of the flood-prone Chickahominy River. McClellan’s opponent Joe Johnston took the opportunity to strike and crafted an overly complex attack plan for his Virginia army to crush the exposed corps. A series of bungled marches, piecemeal attacks, and a lack of assertive leadership doomed the Southern plan. One

of the wounded late in the day on May 31 was Johnston. The bloody two-day battle was fought on the doorstep of the Confederate capital. It was the first major combat in the Eastern Theater since Bull Run/Manassas almost a year earlier, left more than 11,000 casualties in its wake, and cost the primary Southern field army its commander. The possession of Richmond hung in its balance.

Victor Vignola is a lifelong student of the Civil War. His first book *Contrasts in Command: The Battle of Fair Oaks, May 31 – June 1, 1862*, is a recipient of the prestigious Fletcher Pratt Award (2023) – awarded by the Civil War Roundtable of New York. In addition to the Pratt Award, *Contrasts in Command* was named as a finalist for another prestigious award *Best Military History Book (2023)*, sponsored by the American Battlefield Trust. His research while developing *Contrasts in Command* directly led to the preservation of a twelve-acre parcel of hallowed ground where the Fair Oaks fighting occurred. That parcel remains the only preserved ground for the entire Seven Pines (Fair Oaks) battlefield. His work continues as he is completing a book on the Battle of Seven Pines. Vic has also authored magazine articles for Civil War publications. He also conducts Civil War history programs and tours of various sites. He retired from executive level management for New York State's Office of Mental Health. He resides with his family in Orange County, New York, home of the 124th New York "Orange Blossoms" Regiment.

"Galvanized Rebels: Traitors or Heroes?"

by Glen A. Swain

A Review of the April 2025 Program by Greg Mertz

When our speaker, Glen Swain, wrote his book on the 7th South Carolina Infantry, he noticed that one of its officers, Capt. John Hayden Brooks, was ordered to take command of a new battalion of troops in the fall of 1864. In trying to learn about that assignment, Swain embarked upon a fascinating journey, challenging him to be a detective as well as a researcher and historian. The result was his book "The Forgotten Mutineers: The Story of Brooks' Battalion," telling the improbable story of captured Federal soldiers who opted to join the Confederate army rather than endure the horrid conditions of a prison camp.

Swain was driven to determine the motivations of these soldiers, and as the title of his program asks, were these men traitors to their cause, or heroes who dared to try something unique to disrupt this Confederate experiment. While the United States Army had utilized Confederate prisoners of war to become “galvanized Yankees” enlisted to fight Indians, could the Confederates come up with an acceptable way for Federal captives to be of service?

When William T. Sherman’s Federal army captured Atlanta in September 1864, Confederate authorities feared that his cavalry might be able to reach the prison camp in Andersonville, Georgia and free some 33,000 prisoners of war being held there. So, those prisoners were sent to other locations where they might be out of reach of Sherman’s men. About 12,000 Federal prisoners from Andersonville ended up at Florence, South Carolina. The prisoners were very compliant as they were being transported because they were told that they were heading to a location where they would be exchanged, and were soon to be back home. While enroute they figured out that there was to be no prisoner exchange.

When they reached Florence, they were placed in a field while slaves constructed a stockade for the prison. The Federal soldiers had little shelter, horrible food and were completely destitute. Shortly before the opening of the stockade Confederate officers went through the camps at Florence and sought out Federal prisoners whom they thought were foreigners, and hence might have little allegiance to the United States, and recruited them for service in the Confederate army. They were generally in good physical condition, though lacking in clothing and blankets and thus craved to improve their plight. They were offered the same clothing, food and shelter as was provided to Confederate soldiers.

Eventually some 1,200 prisoners, about 10% of the prisoners at Florence, took an oath of loyalty to the Confederacy and were moved to Summerville, South Carolina. Capt. Brooks was directly informed by Robert E. Lee of his assignment. John H. Brooks was the brother of former U.S. Congressman Preston Smith Brooks, famous for nearly beating abolitionist U.S. Senator Charles Sumner to death with his cane in 1856.

Confederate Gen. William J. Hardee was Brooks’ superior, and Hardee’s staff was available to help him in any way he needed to make the experiment

work. Brooks got five or six other Confederate officers to help him, and somehow selected non-commissioned officers from among the prisoners. Brooks whittled the group down to a more manageable size of 600 picked men to serve in six companies of a hundred men each. The others were sent to a variety of locations, including skilled artisans and engineers sent to various workshops. Those who remained in the battalion were trained for about three weeks. They were told that they would never have to fight and would simply guard depots, freeing up other Confederates to go to the front. They were officially mustered in on November 17, 1864.

Brooks thought the men drilled very well, so when Sherman's army approached Savannah, Georgia he thought that he could make good use of his battalion. He took his men, armed with poor quality Belgian rifles, to the Savannah defenses in early December. He had no trouble finding volunteers to go out on picket duty. The next morning, Brooks discovered that every one of them had "deserted," taking the opportunity to go over to the Federal army. The largest single escape of men in Brooks' battalion were 27 men who left on December 14, 1864.

One of the traitor prisoners informed Confederate officers of seven members who planned to stage a large-scale mutiny that would enable the rest of those still in the battalion to escape. They were court-martialed on December 15 and shot as traitors. Fredericksburg native and Confederate General Hugh Weedon Mercer, who commanded the brigade to which Brooks' battalion was assigned, was tried after the war for the murder of these Federal prisoners of war, but was acquitted in 1866. It became obvious that the idea was a failure and the battalion only lasted about a month.

While Swain discovered a document that he called the Pickett list, which provides information about some of the soldiers in Brooks' Battalion, he found that of 123 Federal soldiers on the list, 74 truthfully reported their federal unit, while 40 lied. Since these Federal soldiers were embarking upon what was potentially a problematic and disloyal endeavor, it is understandable that they would be deceitful about some aspects of their backgrounds. And of the 74 who were honest about their unit, 2/3rds of them lied about their place of birth. Only about 1/3rd of the battalion were of foreign birth. So, the effort of the Confederates to recruit foreigners did not pan out as expected.

While apparently none of the galvanized rebels in Brooks' Battalion were punished for seemingly siding with the Confederates, they were, however denied their pensions for serving as Federal soldiers.

Death of Former Quintessential Round Table Member Betty Ford

Betty Ford passed away on March 9, 2025 at the age of 98. For about fifteen years, she and her husband, Milton Ford lived in Stafford County and during that span, both were very active members of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table. Milton was a former president of the round table, and while I am not sure whether Betty was ever a member of the round table board, she left an impact on the organization like few others.

Betty was the informal greeter who made sure that new people and long-time members alike felt welcomed. It was Betty's idea that a nice way to help the members get to know one another was to invite one member each month to give a five-minute talk at our meeting, sharing how they got interested in the Civil War, what their favorite Civil War topic may be, etc. It was highly successful, in part because it was a great idea that was embraced by the membership, and in part because Betty did not just suggest the five-minute talk, but she was the driving force who personally invited each member to make a presentation. When Betty asked you to do something in her kind, quiet voice with a big smile, nobody could turn her down.

Back when we had round table summer picnics, we met at least once at the Ford home. Betty, ever the consummate hostess, made sure that we had a feast (and whatever she cooked or baked herself was delicious) and she had lots of activities for the children, including her granddaughter Lindsay with a face painting station.

Betty was a wonderful lady and her contributions in the early years of the round table have left a lasting impression.

Friends of Central Virginia Battlefield Trust

As you know CVBT is a land trust. We focus on purchasing endangered battlefield properties. We do produce a large three-day annual conference,

standalone events and need to interpret and maintain our lands, we need help in all of these. In the past, CVBT has had individuals from organizations assist us, and we are grateful, but now we would like to create an official volunteer group who would enjoy being part of CVBT's volunteer core.

We have created "**The Friends of CVBT.**" The intent is for this all-volunteer group is to be the "On Call" core of CVBT's volunteer group assisting in events and battlefield related needs. Active volunteer members will have the unique opportunity to be involved with events hosted by nationally acclaimed historians, assist in tours, and work on preserved battlefields. Participating volunteers will also be enrolled in the membership ranks of CVBT every year they contribute. CVBT will provide each volunteer with a CVBT volunteer staff shirt and CVBT official hat to wear at events or whenever wanted. We will be limiting this new group to 18 volunteers.

CVBT is now beginning our 27th year of preserving our local battlefields, the very battlefields you study and walk upon. We would be honored to have you join the ranks of CVBT volunteers to help us further our mission of preserving our Nation's history.

If interested please email our Executive Director **Terry Rensel** at executivedirector@cvbt.org .

Office: 540-374-0900

The CVBT Annual Conference

Mark your calendars! The CVBT's Annual Conference will be held on September 12-14. The conference will be held at the Jepson Alumni Executive Center at 1119 Hanover St. in Fredericksburg. The focus will be on the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House. Chris Mackowski will lead a tour of the battlefield. The keynote speaker will be Kenneth Noe. He will talk about his work "The Howling Storm." Details and registration can be found at the provided link.

<https://www.cvbt.org/cvbt-annual-conference>

CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE OF FREDERICKSBURG (CWRTF)

CWRTF meets 9 times a year on designated Wednesdays at Mary Washington Jepson Alumni Executive Center, 1119 Hanover Street. They offer a buffet dinner followed by a Civil War-themed presentation. Reservations are required. Speaker/topic schedule can be found on their website at www.cwrtf.org, and will be updated here when the schedule is released for 2025.

May 26,2025 Barton Myers – General Winfield Scott

June 18, 2025 Patrick Schroeder - Forgotten Friday: April 7, 1865
Actions in Cumberland County VA

Who We Are

The Drum and Bugle Newsletter is published monthly by the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table, Post Office Box 7632, Fredericksburg VA 22404. The newsletter is available on our website at www.rappvalleycivilwar.org. Yearly membership dues are \$40 for individuals and \$50 for families. Students are free. Membership is open to anyone interested in the military, political and social history of the American Civil War.

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