



THE DRUM & BUGLE
Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table
Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table Newsletter
September 2020, Volume 17, Issue 9

Speaker: David A. Welker
Topic: The Cornfield: Antietam's Bloody Turning Point
When: Monday September 14, 2020
Location: Virtual Meeting Via Zoom
Times: Start Time to be Announced

“Virtual September Meeting”

We are trying out our virtual format again this month. There will be no in-person dinner meeting in September. We will be presenting our program via the Zoom platform live on Monday, September 14th. RVCWRT members should keep an eye on their e-mail for an invitation. Virtual programming is the

best course at present, given the uncertainties of the pandemic and changing administrative requirements. We will be evaluating conditions for resuming in-person dinner meetings later this fall.

David A. Welker is a professional historian and military analyst for the US government. He is the author of three books on the Civil War, most recently *The Cornfield: Antietam's Bloody Turning Point* released this February by Casemate Publications. David's work also has been featured in numerous history journals and magazines, including most recently an excerpt from his current book in September's *Civil War Times*. He lives in Centreville, Virginia with his wife.

David A. Welker will share the story of what happened in David Miller's Cornfield on the morning of 17 September 1862, which for several hours made this once-peaceful field become the most dangerous place on earth. It is a story of two nation's armies struggling to decide their respective fates, of officers and men--both North and South--struggling to fulfill their missions and orders, to not let their families, friends, and comrades down. To simply survive the swirling maelstrom of combat at Antietam, America's bloodiest single day on which 22 thousand men became casualties of this great and terrible war.

David will offer new insights into why the fighting in Miller's Cornfield became the turning point of this great battle, as well as why an innate personal quality in Major General George B. McClellan's character made this so. His presentation will also unpack the complex ebb and flow of the Cornfield, making clear and comprehensible an action frequently glossed over by other Antietam historians. And he will share many of the personal stories of heroism, fear, and determination that spring from this singular moment in American history.

Our postponed May bus tour to Seven Days' battle sites has been cancelled for 2020. Hopefully, we will try again in 2021.

During this turbulent time, we have continued to do some good. Our RVCWRT-sponsored Bearss intern, Emily Sherrard of Bayfield, Wisconsin, completed a productive tour here in Fredericksburg with National Park Service (NPS). We are evaluating scholarship applicants and hope to award a \$2,000 scholarship soon to a deserving NPS intern. Paul Stier continues to line up speakers for later this year (we had to find some substitutes), 2021 and 2022. Paul oversees our Facebook page which posts new material daily. We

have created a RVCWRT YouTube channel. Go to YouTube, search “rvcwrt” and you will be able to view Marc Thompson’s analysis of First Manassas (our August 2020 program). We made a substantial donation to Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, raised a dollar at a time from pre-pandemic monthly raffles and occasional auction sales.

As always, we appreciate your patience and support.

"The First Battle of Manassas and the Experience of War" by Marc Thompson
A Review of the August 2020 Virtual Program by Greg Mertz

Among the officers serving on the battlefield of the first major engagement of the war, past round table president and retired Air Force Colonel Marc Thompson selected the six soldiers who were both actively involved in the combat and would gain significant prominence in the war, highlighting their roles. The performances of these officers at First Manassas was generally good, but they also gained precious experience in the largest battle in United States military history up to that time.

Both sides had two sizeable armies confronting each other in northern Virginia in July 1861. Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston was to prevent Union General Robert Patterson from entering the lower Shenandoah Valley, while a force under Confederate General G.T. Beauregard near Manassas Junction challenged Union General Irvin McDowell on the outskirts of Washington. As McDowell’s Army of Northeastern Virginia advanced toward Beauregard’s Army of the Potomac, Johnston had slipped away from Patterson, utilizing the railroads to reinforce Beauregard.

Beauregard, one of the six officers Thompson highlighted, had few friends when attending West Point, but was an excellent student and had gained critical military experience when serving on the staff of Winfield Scott during the Mexican War, where he was breveted twice. On the morning of July 21, 1861, Beauregard planned to set his troops in motion at 7:00 am to attack the left flank of the enemy. Ironically McDowell planned an identical movement, only his troops got underway on a much earlier timetable – a predawn 2:30 am kick off. Despite delay’s in coordinating a rather complicated plan for a

green army, McDowell's men unleashed their attack before Beauregard could spring his plan.

McDowell would commit 26,000 of his 35,000 men to the fight. He used half of the men who would see combat, in a division under General Daniel Tyler, to pin down the Confederate front while the other half, in divisions commanded by Generals David Hunter and Samuel P. Heintzelman, struck Beauregard's left flank. Believing that the flanking column had been allowed sufficient time to get into position, Tyler fired cannon shots at 6:00 am in the vicinity of a stone bridge across Bull Run that was to be the signal for the flank attack, but the flanking troops were not able to launch the main attack until 9:00 am.

While Confederates under General N. G. "Shanks" Evans focused on Tyler's diversion in his front, young signal officer Captain E. Porter Alexander observed the Union flank maneuver and sent a message to Evans to watch out to his left. Evans boldly shifted 900 of his men to Matthews Hill to meet the flanking column, while the other 300 troops continued to keep an eye on Tyler.

The second of the soldiers emphasized by Thompson, Col. Ambrose E. Burnside, soon entered the fray. Slightly wounded while fighting the Apaches, inventor of a breach-loading carbine, and working for a railroad under his friend George B. McClellan before the war, Burnside led the brigade launching the initial attack in the Union flanking movement. Aligning the six cannon accompanying his brigade, but making the first attack with only one of his regiments, Burnside was easily repulsed by Evans. The wounding of division commander Hunter early in the conflict thrust Burnside into command of the field, but being inexperienced in both combat and command, he was observed to be "hysterically excited." Johnston had both received Alexander's warning and heard the fighting and dispatched two of his four brigades to reinforce Evans, and Burnside could never quite put more men into the fight on his front than the Confederate had amassed.

Serving with Tyler in his only battle in the eastern theater of the Civil War was William T. Sherman, the third highlighted soldier. Tyler instructed Sherman to find a ford across Bull Run, and because Louisiana Major Roberdeau Wheat had earlier ridden across a ford to shout obscenities at the Yankees, Sherman knew just where to cross. Advancing to the sound of the shooting, Sherman extended Burnside's line and contributed substantially to forcing the Confederate withdrawal to Henry Hill. Burnside would be heard of no more once the fighting left Matthews Hill.

As more Union troops arrived, the fourth highlighted officer, recent West Point graduate brevet 2nd Lieut. George A. Custer in the 2nd U.S. Cavalry, helped to protect the right flank of the Federal position. After earlier delivering a message from Scott to McDowell, Custer was assigned to command a company of regulars, recalling that just three days earlier he was a mere school boy.

After a two-hour artillery bombardment in the middle of the day, McDowell grew frustrated at not being able to drive the Confederates off of Henry Hill. He decided to run the cannon right up to the Confederate line in the spirit of Napoleon. The rifled guns of the Union army had held a decided advantage over the Confederate smoothbores when dueling at a distance across the valley between Matthews and Henry Hills, but once the Union guns advanced, the superiority of the rifled cannon over the smoothbore guns was lost.

The fighting resumed on Henry Hill about 1:30 pm. The new Union artillery position was not only then under Confederate artillery fire, but also under infantry fire. At first that infantry fire was predominantly from the fifth officer underscored by Thompson, General Thomas J. Jackson. This former VMI professor of experimental philosophy (called “physics” today) earned the nickname of “Stonewall” for the stand he made on Henry Hill that day, when he calmly reassured Confederate General Bernard Bee that all was well.

Beauregard took command of the conduct of the battle on the front lines of Henry Hill while Johnston directed reserves from the rear to Beauregard’s sector. In doing so, Beauregard was in the very thick of the fight, rallying the troops, directing reinforcements into line, and leading attacks. Beauregard excelled in managing the battlefield.

It was Jackson who turned to the sixth officer to be spotlighted in the talk for help. Jackson ordered Col. J.E.B. Stuart, commander of the 1st Virginia Cavalry, to charge the flank of the Union artillery’s infantry supports, contributing to the route of a zouave regiment. Sherman’s brigade joined in the fight for Henry Hill, but the inexperienced commander committed his regiments one at a time rather than strike a concerted blow that might have been decisive. Attacks and counterattacks meant that control of the Union guns went back and forth. By 3:30 pm, Henry Hill was in sole possession of the Confederates, with eight of the Union eleven guns falling into Confederate hands. Custer was called upon to make up part of the rearguard covering the Union retreat, and was among the last soldiers to leave the field.

An assessment of the three Confederate officers examined showed that Beauregard did exceedingly well in adjusting from his planned flank attack to meeting and repulsing the Union flank attack on the opposite side of the field. Jackson performed superbly and would go on to prove that the reputation he earned on Henry Hill was deserved. Stuart was aggressive and successful in his limited role and saw what a quick, hard-hitting cavalry charge could do to the enemy.

The three Union officers did not fare so well as a group. Burnside demonstrated aggressiveness by attacking right away, but he fought a piecemeal battle, struggling to take control of the situation and failing to mass the superior numbers that he had over the Confederates on his front. Sherman also displayed initiative and made an important contribution to the morning phase of the battle, but poorly managed his brigade as the battle reached its climax on Henry Hill. Custer did well in his limited role, gaining some all-important experience in his first ever battle of his long career.

A Note About Civil War Roundtables, Including Ours

The Civil War Round Table Congress, headquartered in Olympia, Washington, is an organization dedicated to assisting round tables across the country with advice and written, audio and video resources. The Congress has some interesting statistics on its website. They currently list 247 Civil War Round Tables (RT) in the United States (242), Canada (3), United Kingdom (1) and Australia (1). There are 15 RT in the state of Virginia. At least 60 other RT have closed up shop in the last several years, including one in nearby Fauquier County. The states with the most RT are Ohio (22), Pennsylvania (19) and Illinois (16). Only one US city has more than one RT...we have two right here in Fredericksburg!

The Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table (RVCWRT) had its first meeting on February 13, 1989 at the Chancellorsville Visitor Center. Karen Rehm, then Supervisory Historian at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park (FSNMP), spoke on "The Civil War Veterans Who Gave Us FSNMP." Two of the original five officers, Greg Mertz and Melanie Jordan, are on the RVCWRT Executive Committee in 2020.

The official name of RVCWRT ends in two separate words: "round" and "table." Just like King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. You may

see it spelled frequently as a single word “roundtable,” maybe even in RVCWRT communications. Oh well, we do the best we can.



From the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (MOLLUS)- Massachusetts Photograph Collection.

Lots of Civil War Content on Youtube

Searching the following items on YouTube will lead you to many hours of informative and entertaining Civil War-related videos:

- (1) “emerging civil war” Lectures, battlefield tours and short takes on a variety of subjects from this innovative blog site
- (2) “cwrt congress” An organization formed to help round tables nationwide, Civil War Round Table Congress has begun uploading lectures by prominent Civil War historians.
- (3) “civil war battle series” Lectures on Civil War battles sponsored by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
- (4) "Tony Willoughby" this channel on Youtube includes 150th anniversary tours of Chancellorsville, Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House. The same channel also has videos of 150th anniversary tours of Shiloh, Chickamauga, 2nd Manassas, and much more.

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. Each month, The Drum and Bugle newsletter is also placed on our web-site, www.RVCWRT.org. Yearly membership dues are \$35.00 for an individual, \$45.00 for families, and only \$7.50 for students. Membership is open to anyone interested in the study of the Civil War and the ongoing preservation of Civil War sites.

The RVCWRT Executive Committee:

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