



**THE DRUM & BUGLE**  
**Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table**  
**Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table Newsletter**  
**November 2020, Volume 17, Issue 11**

**Speaker:** Bert Dunkerly  
**Topic:** Brown's Island Explosion in 1863  
**When:** Monday November 9, 2020  
**Location:** Virtual Meeting Via Zoom  
**Times:** Start Time to be Announced

**“Virtual November Meeting”**

This month we will continue virtual Zoom programming with a presentation on the Brown's Island Explosion in 1863 by Bert Dunkerly. Watch for your invitation. Remember that you can watch all RVCWRT virtual programs in their entirety by searching "rvcwrt" on YouTube. The lineup consists of three excellent presentations: Marc Thompson on "First Battle of Manassas and the Experience of War"; Dave Welker on "The Cornfield: Antietam's Bloody

Turning Point" and Dr. Lauren Thompson on "Friendly Enemies: Soldier Fraternization Throughout the American Civil War.

The Brown's Island explosion of March 1863 was the worst home front disaster in the Confederacy. Over 50 were killed, including many teenage girls. This talk will not only examine the cause of the explosion, which is well established, but discuss research into the final resting place of the victims. Only about half of the burial locations for the dead are known, and we will learn about the search to find the rest.

Robert M. (Bert) Dunkerly is a historian, award-winning author, and speaker who is actively involved in historic preservation and research. He holds a degree in History from St. Vincent College and a Masters in Historic Preservation from Middle Tennessee State University. He has worked at fourteen historic sites, written twelve books and numerous scholarly articles. His research includes archaeology, colonial life, military history, and historic commemoration. He is a past President of the Richmond Civil War Round Table, and serves on the Preservation Commission for the American Revolution Round Table-Richmond. He has taught courses at Central Virginia Community College, the University of Richmond, and the Virginia Historical Society. Dunkerly is currently a Park Ranger at Richmond National Battlefield Park. He has visited over 500 battlefields and over 1000 historic sites worldwide. He enjoys exploring local bookstores, battlefields, and breweries, not necessarily in that order.

### **The Passing of Ed Bearss**

Our friend Ed Bearss, the legendary historian, author, tour guide and preservation pioneer, died peacefully on September 15, 2020 at the age of 97. Ed was a Life Member of our Round Table and lent his name to our annual sponsorship of a National Park Service intern. He graced us with his presence at every July meeting and took great pleasure in interacting with our local interns. He was the most frequent speaker at RVCWRT meetings over the past decade. You can read more about Ed and donate in his memory at the American Battlefield Trust website:

<https://www.battlefields.org/preserve/champions/rememberingbearss>

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**"Friendly Enemies: Soldier Fraternization throughout the American Civil War" by Lauren K. Thompson**  
**A Review of the October 2020 Virtual Program by Greg Mertz**

"How can you be friendly with your enemy?" That was a question that our speaker, Dr. Lauren K. Thompson asked when she read the title "Friendly Enemies" on an exhibit in a Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park visitor center when she was employed as a seasonal historian at the park. That was the start of a project that resulted in her master's thesis, her doctoral dissertation and her first book.

She examined the exhibit explaining how soldiers in opposing armies posted on opposite banks of the Rappahannock River in Fredericksburg sometimes traded with each other and enjoyed each other's company between battles. She wondered whether it occurred at other places during the Civil War, or whether it was a phenomenon unique to the Fredericksburg area.

Her research led her to eleven archives in eight states and 500 letters and diaries. Searches for documents that might be candidates for her topic were complicated by the fact that "fraternization" is a post-Civil War term, and originally pertained to relationships between a soldier and a civilian, rather than soldiers in opposing armies. But despite the complications, she discovered 150 accounts of soldiers who either participated in or observed fraternization between Union and Confederate soldiers.

Who fraternized? The soldiers were typically from anywhere, except that Confederate soldiers and United States Colored Troops never fraternized. The participants in fraternization were from branches that were typically on picket or vidette duty, so they were infantrymen or cavalrymen, but not artillerymen, who would have been posted back on the army's main positions. Participants in fraternization more typically volunteered for service rather having been conscripted. The participants were political moderates, with Union soldiers usually indifferent to the emancipation of slaves. They were loyal soldiers, dedicated to doing their duty and committed to seeing the war through to the end.

Dr. Thompson found that the expectations of war versus the realization of the reality of war helps to explain why soldiers were involved in fraternization. The soldiers experienced a crisis and sought to fill the gaps between the idealistic expectation of what war would be like and harsh reality

of the conflict. Fraternization was a form of resistance, and an alternative to other forms of opposition against the army that would not be tolerated, or would at least be subject to a more severe form of punishment. Fraternization helped the soldiers make it through another day. Although Lee, Grant, Sherman, Meade and Hooker all issued orders forbidding fraternization, the common soldiers participated in it, wrote about it and did not criticize fellow soldiers who engaged in it.

Fraternization occurred where the tactical and environmental conditions were favorable. Tactically, the armies needed to be close together for a relatively long period of time for fraternization to occur. Dr. Thompson has been asked whether she could provide examples of fraternization on battlefields such as Gettysburg or Antietam, but she had not found any examples during battles in which the soldiers were in close proximity for only a short period of time. Picket lines during sieges and long campaigns including Vicksburg, Chattanooga, Atlanta and Petersburg were strong candidates for fraternization.

Environmentally rivers provided an obvious and easily defined neutral zone between the pickets. The Rappahannock, Rapidan and Chattahoochee Rivers were among the natural features that were common settings for fraternization.

The list of what happened during the visits between the lines is long and varied. Just about anything that soldiers liked to do in their spare time was done in the company of an enemy soldier as well. They liked to carry on conversations. What often began as banter changed in tone once the men who faced each other day in and day out developed a level of trust between them. In Atlanta in July of 1864, one soldier admitted that they had "lost any feelings of hatred toward each other." Troops often commiserated with each other agreeing that they wished that their officers could be made to fight it out among themselves and settle the conflict without troubling the enlisted men.

Trade was commonplace. Confederate tobacco traded for Union coffee was particularly common. On the Rappahannock, those commodities were often sent across the stream in toy boats. A soldier who had been stationed at Kelly's Ford on the Rappahannock and was later sent to service along the Chattahoochee reported that trading occurred to a greater extent in the west.

The men also exchanged information, either verbally or in terms of swapping newspapers. Dr. Thompson thought that the main purpose of seeking information about the conditions and thoughts of the opposing forces was not

to try to gain any secrets – in part because the men in the ranks generally didn't know anything of value – but rather an attempt to understand whether their sacrifices and hardships were worth it. Because when trading tobacco or coffee, the product was typically consumed soon after obtained, the possession of newspapers from places supporting the opposing army were often tangible evidence that the owner had engaged in fraternization. Even so, only about half of the soldiers court-martialed for intercourse with the enemy received any penalty. Dr. Thompson knows of nobody who was either discharged or who received a strict punishment for trading newspapers.

Often the arrangement of an informal cease fire was in and of itself the benefit of fraternization. Signals were arranged to communicate to the other side if the cease fire agreement had to be broken. For example, the firing of two blank shots in a row or firing into the air were signs that the opposing side needed to take cover and resume picket line operations.

Dr. Thompson concluded by making some observations about post-war accounts of opposing soldier comradery, particularly accounts from officers in high command positions. These accounts need to be read and evaluated in conjunction with the post-war reconciliation narratives meant to influence the reader's memory of the conflict. One must consider whether those examples of fraternization are meant to demonstrate that the opposing sides had much in common, that both sides were brave and honorable, and try to argue that both sides likewise fought for noble causes. Many of these reconciliation accounts of fraternization had an agenda and are highly suspect.

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### **A Bit of RVCWRT History**

Here are the speakers who appeared most frequently at our meetings between 2011 and 2020. Our thanks to all for sharing their time and considerable expertise over the years!

- (1) ED BEARSS - 6 appearances
- (2) GARY CASTELLINO - 5 appearances
- (3) ERIC MINK and MARC THOMPSON - 4 appearances each

(4) DANIEL DAVIS, JOHN HENNESSY, CHRIS MACKOWSKI, PETE MAUGLE, BETH PARNICZA, MAC WYCKOFF - 3 appearances each

We have always welcomed appearances by our own RVCWRT members. These programs, by the likes of GREG MERTZ, SCOTT WALKER, MARC THOMPSON, JIM SMITHFIELD and RYAN QUINT, have often been among the most illuminating on our schedule.

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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) "cwrvt 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.

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## 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](http://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.

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### The RVCWRT Executive Committee:

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