

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MEETING – May 25, 2021

“CIVIL WAR... OR MORE LIKELY A PANDEMIC? ”

SPEAKER: Thomas Flagle

The American Civil War produced casualties beyond any prior American war, yet the deadliest warriors of the War danced on the head of a pin: microbes. Thomas Flagle's thesis--that we may not have learned their pandemic lessons--should, if true, frighten us, specters of dead soldiers from the Civil War terrifying us, both North and South, with the message from their cold dead hands.

In 1863, John Leek, stationed in Tennessee with the 92nd Illinois, received a letter from home: “John, this war is an awful thing, and I fear many more valuable lives will be lost. You are exposed to many dangers.” As far as we can tell, John never read the letter. He was already in the hospital ward with “lung fever”--another danger--when the letter arrived, dying shortly thereafter due to invisible deadly bullets. Replete with medical advances, the end of the 19th century offered a longer lives, but not so the decade of the Civil War.

The three most efficient killing machines of the war: “camp fever”, “the speckled monster”, and the “flux”; all three flourished in the crowded military encampments and the more crowded towns that rapidly blossomed into cities of war. The speckled monster--small pox--at a 40 percent death rate remains one of the deadliest diseases in human history. Even after surviving the infection, many survivors remained debilitated for life. George Washington mandated smallpox vaccination in his war but in the Civil War even identifying good reservoirs (read donors) for serum proved problematic. For the South, not wasting the expense of vaccination on the poor consigned many counties and towns to death. Estimated combatant deaths: 15,000.

Camp fever (typhoid) followed the armies wherever they went. Cities, too, bred their own illness with drinking water contaminated both locally and upstream. Even famous civilians fell to typhoid, the death of Lincoln's son in Washington being one of the most prominent. Water, one of the basic weapons against most

disease, once contaminated caused most typhoid. Estimated combatant deaths: 64,800.

The flux (dysentery or diarrhea) cut fewer men from the battlefield killing only one in twenty-five, however, the flux revisited the ranks repeatedly. In fact, military surgeons routinely questioned soldiers on their bowels because they *expected* the men to get diarrhea. The fact remains, however, that then, as now, diarrhea remains eminently treatable so few should die. The typical 19th century treatment, however, involved such toxic substances as mercury, killing even more. By the end of the war 95,000 combatants died of the runs.

The thousands of uniformed dead formed the tip of the pandemic. Engorged cities bloated with refugees, soldiers, hospitals and war materiel imitated camp conditions. Clean water and sanitation were hard to find anywhere. The numbers of civilian dead due to disease are impossible to estimate because, unlike the army, no concentration of records with cause of death exists.

For Flagle, the final analysis is what we can learn through history. The lesson on preventing disease holds as true today as it did 150 years ago. “When I look at the Civil War I look at all of it. I see it as us just in different clothing. What can we learn from each other? We learn civic responsibility.”

By Jim Medeiros