

## **BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE**

**MEETING – April 2, 2019**

**“THE RICHMOND LADIES’ BANNER SEWING CIRCLE”**

**SPEAKER – Greg Biggs**

As Greg Biggs looked up at the three giant screens with his visuals overhead he said, “I’m on the bridge of the Enterprise. Next I expect to see the Klingons coming at me.” Thus he began discussing battle flags with an allusion to a mythical martial warrior race of the future. Greg carried the night on a rushing charge of words and a regiment’s worth of visuals. No discussion of Confederate flags could work without the flags themselves, and Greg brought dozens of pictures. Greg’s slides contained only one or two things each, supporting rather than supplanting his machine gun delivery. The very numbers of samples illustrated one weakness of Confederate flags.

A persistent romantic tradition in Civil War lore holds that a Richmond ladies’ sewing circle fabricated the first Confederate battle flags for the Army of Northern Virginia out of their own silk party dresses. Alas, Greg clarified the silk came from cloth bolts that had never seen a southern lady’s tender body. Pink silk was used where we traditionally think of red amidst the Southern Cross. Some manly southern soldiers objected to the pink. One general suggested that those who objected could bathe the pink in their blood to get the shade right.

Flags filled important niches. They served as communication devices in the overwhelming riot of shot, explosions and death of battle. “Rally round the flag, boys,” gave a clear indication of proper unit location regardless of the terrain. Flags could also tell a spy the approximate numbers in armies without the tedious labor of an actual head count. For color bearers, battle flags provided enemies with the most obvious aiming point in a maelstrom of screams and fire, which often meant a short half-life for the color guard. Flags could even punish as when a unit which had failed had to campaign deprived of its colors in shame. Bits of cloth, silk, cotton and wool, flags could praise when an officer recognized heroic participation in a battle and allowed a unit to paint battle honors on the flag. The telling truth in all this for the Confederacy was that because of their consistent inconsistency in battle flags, diversity served them poorly.

The multiplicity of battle flags persisted to the end of the war. In spite of the consistent campaign of eastern Confederate units to adopt the Southern Cross, the

Army of the Tennessee would have eight different battle flags before hostilities ended. Even in Virginia, John Magruder of the Army of the Peninsula would introduce his own idea of a battle flag, looking something like an early diver's warning pennant. Nothing so much emphasizes that any man was free to push his own ideas as Biggs' comment on the process for selecting a replacement for the national flag. They solicited suggestions and, as with the battle flags, suggestions came from everywhere. Greg used the example: Mike Powell might decide to send in an idea bearing his personal likeness on the flag. (I suppose we would have called this the Powell standard.) The banner selection process may have been egalitarian but it was not neat.