

# **BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE**

**MEETING – December 3, 2019**

**“MISSING 2,000 BODIES”**

**SPEAKER: Jim McKee**

“Ft. Anderson is the forgotten fort,” Jim McKee tells us. Yet it held the keys to Wilmington. Lost in the end of the Civil War, Wilmington’s fall seems distant in time and reality. The Confederate engineers never forgot its importance and Ft. Anderson (begun as Ft. Phillip) formed a prominent link in the chain of river fortifications. Begun as a two-gun battery atop the ruins of Brunswick Town, Ft. Anderson also served as the primary port for blockade runners. Ships unloaded their goods at Ft. Anderson and then returned to sea, eschewing the trip to Wilmington and avoiding delays of quarantine and other shipping. By the end of the war the few blockade runners that made the full run up the river did so only to effectuate repairs, to trade a special cargo, or because of an important passenger.

In 1864 the fort also supported advanced technology by assembling Civil War torpedoes (think naval mines) to defend the channels. Basically of two types, one torpedo featured a beer barrel (but only after its contents had been properly consumed and cherished) and rather primitive. The other type - a galvanic torpedo - operated with the latest push-button technology. Unlike modern tech where we expect an immediate flash-bang at the push of a button, McKee described pushing the button on galvanic torpedoes yet leaving the operator enough leisure to smoke a cigarette then make and drink a cup of coffee while waiting for the “boom.” Galvanic torpedoes were cutting edge, but the edge wasn’t needle sharp. Nonetheless, the idyllic life at Ft. Anderson ended.

When Ft. Fisher fell the Confederates fell back from Ft. Caswell (first they destroyed the powder magazine, an explosion heard in distant Fayetteville) and Smithville (changed to Southport in 1887), bringing a hodgepodge of troops to Ft. Anderson including a 900-man brigade, the Ft.’s own garrison, and 120 South Carolina cavalrymen. Six thousand Union troops marched from Smithville and, with the help of poor roads the 120 cavalrymen delayed them for 12 hours. On February 18 the Federals arrived at Ft. Anderson to find all the trees cut, opening devastating fields of fire. Yet again, the SC cavalry put their thumbs on the scales and delayed Major General Cox and his Union troops who marched fifteen miles around Orton Pond and finally made any Confederate defense untenable.

By 4:30 a.m. the Confederates evacuated the fort. Gloriously victorious, the U.S. Army seized the walls only to frantically signal their surrender with bedsheets when the Union

naval squadron resumed its daily bombardment. The Naval commander rowed ashore and accepted the surrender of the Confederate Fort from the Union Army commander, a grand victory for the US Navy over the US Army only rivalled by later intercollegiate football games between their military colleges.

The fiercest battle for the fort, however, involved the 104<sup>th</sup> Ohio Infantry and the 25<sup>th</sup> South Carolina. One regimental band commenced playing songs to keep up morale. The opposing line not to be outdone, fired back with a song of its own. Thus began the hour-long battle of the bands, each side firing a musical broadside at the other, piling note upon note in martial bastions in the skies.

A final note deserving further research records 2,000 people succumbing to disease. Thirty-five hundred Black refugees who followed Sherman out of South Carolina had been sent to Ft. Anderson, presumably to use the barracks for temporary shelter. An army surgeon writing in November of 1865 observed the deaths occurred in barely two months. Most horrible and mysterious of all remains the question of where the corpses were buried, a question future archeology (and perhaps Mr. McKee) may answer.

**by Jim Medeiros**