BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MEETING – February 4, 2020

"CALL IN THE CAVALRY"

SPEAKER: Wade Sokolosky

According to Wade Sokolosky, cavalry have several traditional roles which General William Sherman embraced along with some nontraditional usages extremely important for an army operating in enemy territory. Cavalry firstly probed ahead of the main army to screen the movements of the infantry from the enemy, detect ambushes, and forage for food. Because of their mobility, cavalry could also function as raiders, either to seize and destroy important objectives such as fixed defensive positions, or simply to terrorize and destroy. Raids could also misdirect, convincing the enemy the main army was where it wasn't. Sherman's Carolinas cavalry mostly fulfilled the nontraditional role of feinting to the left of his front, simulating a screening force truthfully beyond his main force, a ploy that sometimes didn't work since his General of Cavalry, Hugh Judson Kilpatrick ("a hell of a damned fool") had a Carolina streak of bad luck.

A womanizer and politically ambitious man, Kilpatrick's debacle at Monroe's Crossroads drew Sokolosky's wry attention. Kilpatrick made his headquarters in a cozy house protected by his lines. Confident of his security, he went to bed with his lady, Alice. Unknown to him and his two brigades of cavalry, two-thirds of all the rebel cavalrymen in North Carolina massed to ambush him. In the middle of the night they attacked including a group specifically detailed to kill Kilpatrick. In the midst of the firing and rout of his men, Kilpatrick (wearing nothing but his underwear) burst onto the porch of his headquarters. Never having met the general, the Confederate cavalrymen sent for the general pulled up to him and asked if he knew where to find General Kilpatrick. Without hesitation, he pointed down the road, saying the general had fled. The Confederates chased into the darkness. Meanwhile, still in his underwear, the general fled to the swamp behind his retreating men to there reform them. The Civil War, famous for many martial encounters, remembered Monroe's Crossroads as "Kilpatrick's Shirt-Tail Skedaddle."

Other ignominious Union cavalry embarrassments dogged them such as the Battle of Wise's Fork where 1000 cavalry suffered death, wounding, or capture. The whole story there, however, included the fact that infantry on foot somehow overwhelmed the horsemen, an abnormal reversal. Looking at the captured men and extensive equipment, a junior Confederate infantryman observed in a letter home that the Yankees had smelled like liquor. Again, Kilpatrick bore the onus of a commander who could not control his men.

Though not considered traditional calvary, Sherman's "bummers" and "mounted infantry" certainly also performed some traditional calvary functions. Bummers sent out daily foraged for food on horseback and returned each evening to the moving column. Then too, away from the main army they could fall victim to enemy cavalry in firefights. All this served as a screening force much as cavalry. Mounted infantry could similarly provide maneuverability and rapid response much as the flexible movement of real cavalry, however, often equipped with mules, mounted infantry lacked the true fluidity of cavalry. Sherman used his mounted infantry to his front and right flank, away from the left feint of the real cavalry. Although only a small percentage of all forces, cavalry of both sides made memorable (not always *positive*) impressions in the battle for North Carolina.