

## **BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE**

**MEETING – May 7, 2019**

**“THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS”**

**SPEAKER – Chris Fonvielle**

Anyone can sound like a historian. The first battle of Fort Fisher (beginning the end for Wilmington) ran December 24-25, 1864, and ended a failure for the 64 ships under Admiral Porter and Major General Benjamin Butler. The second battle for Fort Fisher, January 13-15, 1865, under Porter and General Alfred Terry took the fort with a bombardment of 100 shells exploding per minute in the second greatest bombardment of the war. There. I gave you the precis of dates, commanders, and arms of the centerpiece battle for Wilmington. Dates and names do *not* make me a historian. Chris Fonvielle delivers on the lesser details. After all, he *is* a historian.

Politics cost the Union the early fall of Wilmington. The decision to invest Charleston, SC, over Wilmington politically supported Lincoln at the cost of Union blood and treasure. The port of Wilmington remained in business. Lee remained supplied in Virginia. The conquest of Charleston satisfied northern vengeance on the first state to secede and the city embarrassing the Union at Ft. Sumter.

Fort Fisher, too, paid for politics in blood. The first Ft. Fisher threw Porter and Butler (a controversial choice as he invented “contraband” slaves and as military ruler of New Orleans declared any female in town a lady of the night if she insulted a Federal soldier) together for joint operations. Porter and Butler, permanent members of a mutual hate-fest, meshed roughly. Jefferson Davis chose the infamous Braxton Bragg for Wilmington’s defense. Announcing Bragg’s appointment, Richmond papers allowed, “There goes Wilmington.” Porter bombarded Ft. Fisher fiercely in the most terrible shelling of the war, yet Butler withdrew his troops and Ulysses Grant removed him. General Terry *did* land his troops in the Second Ft. Fisher.

Only politics could delay Wilmington’s day. Wilmington boasted a rail center with three railroads. One hundred and six steamships served the port over the war. Colonel William Lamb’s fort bristled with cannon. (150 years later his Armstrong 150-pounder sits on Trophy Point at USMA.) Wilmington boasted the largest population (10,000) in North Carolina and by the end of the war had become a kind of Las Vegas (“My kind of town,” Fonvielle declared). Forty Union ships

eventually blockaded the port. The Union strategy to seize other ports ahead of Wilmington still left Lee his lifeline through North Carolina. Finally, politics turned on Wilmington.

The fall of Ft. Fisher led to the attrition of the forts up the Cape Fear punctuated by flashes of human insight. During First Ft. Fisher, the Confederates moved banners so 1/3 of the incoming 20,000 shells overshot. Also, during the bombardment Private Christopher Bland scrambled aloft on the Mound Battery to twice reattach the Confederate banner to the cheers of not only his comrades but the observing Federal sailors. At Ft. Anderson, dueling regimental bands from North and South encouraged the men. As the Union troops closed on Wilmington, the redoubtable General Bragg busily reorganized his staff in Richmond. This task executed, he returned to Wilmington in time to evacuate it for the Union army, another triumph in Bragg's twisted annals. Lifeline cut.

Dr. Fonvielle's well-deserved applause, from a record crowd of 495 members and guests, helped place him nicely bookending BCWRT's first nine years.

*By Jim Medeiros*