

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MEETING – October 6, 2020

“THE FIRST PETERSBURG OFFENSIVE”

SPEAKER: Will Green

Despite Grant’s failure to take Petersburg with his brilliant subterfuge of crossing the James River on a 2000-foot pontoon bridge (the largest bridge to that date) and a flotilla of river boats, Will Greene, in the fall’s first Zoom meeting, assessed that the greatest reasonable explanation for the failure was the exhaustion of the Union troops after fighting their way to Richmond in nearly 60 days of battle. In spite of his 5 to 1 advantage in force size, in spite of nearly 16,000 casualties suffered on both sides, in spite of the 125,000 men in gray and blue grappling over Petersburg, Grant would clash in eight more offensives over Petersburg--months more of added war--due to his loss at First Petersburg.

Other questions begged by First Petersburg: Why, in spite of his surreptitious movement of Union troops across the James and Chickahominy Rivers, did Grant’s armies fail at Petersburg? Was his choice as grand commander a fluke and was he really incompetent? Were Lee and his lieutenants inspired military leaders? Did the Virginia terrain beat the Union troops? Did the bluecoats beat themselves? Will Greene’s answer seems transparent, that the 60,000 Union casualties suffered in near continuous fighting through the battles at the Wilderness, Cold Harbor and Spotsylvania had left them exhausted in the face of even opposition from old men and boys, General Beauregard’s thin entrenchments and Lee’s skepticism of Beauregard’s bleats for help. Armies may march on their stomach, but souls need rest and repair. But both Grant and Lee faced further bugaboos.

Union and rebels alike suffered from poor communications. Upon Union General Hancock’s being called to support General Smith, he not only did not know where to go but also lost one unit on the roads. Confederate Beauregard sent messages to Lee where Lee was no longer. General Smith told to wait in place for provisions being sent from General Butler--provisions he did not need because he already had 3 days rations--suffered a useless six-hour delay awaiting the provisions that never

arrived. Other Union generals called upon to advance their lines often mistrusted troops guarding their flanks and failed to move. Even worse, Meade grew so frustrated with his various subordinate commanders' failure to advance as ordered that he angrily commanded each general to advance when their individual units were ready. The piecemeal stops and starts lead to the First Maine Heavy Artillery's charging rebel works so that 632 of its 900 men lay killed or wounded in a mere ten minutes, the largest unit loss of the entire war. General Beauregard kept pleading for Lee's reinforcements yet somehow his scouts repeatedly failed to locate the small matter of the 2000-foot pontoon bridge.

For those who could not get enough of the long battle for Petersburg during our meeting, watch for the publication of Will Greene's definitive analysis.