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# The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

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## The *RUNNER*

### Newsletter of The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

Editor **Bob Cooke**

November 2009

Our next meeting will be Thursday 10 December 2009 at St. Andrew's On-the-Sound  
(Airlie Rd.)

Social Hour at 6:30 p.m., meeting at 7:30 p.m.



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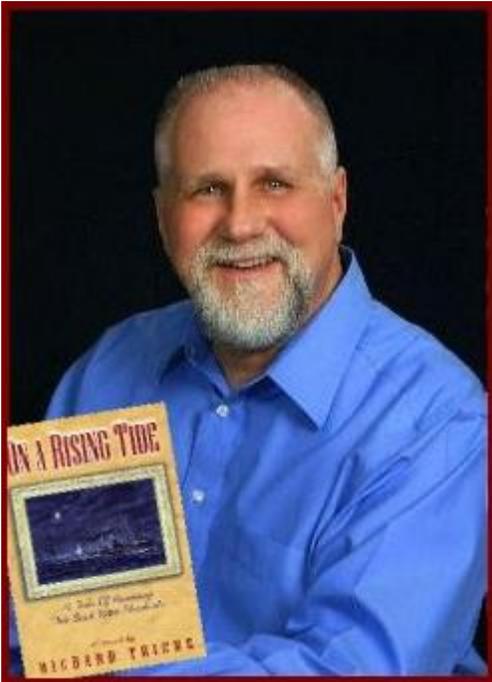
Our next speaker will be member (and editor!) **Bob Cooke**. Bob, who relocated from the northeast to southeastern N.C. in 1995, will speak about his new book, *Wild, Wicked, Wartime Wilmington: Being an Account of Murder, Malice and Other Assorted Mayhem in N.C.'s Largest City During the Civil War!* Bob, who has always had an interest in American History (and the Civil War in particular) has been a Tour Guide at several Cape Fear historical sites and is the current vice-president of the Cape Fear Round Table. The book is the culmination of several years of research into the subject of what life was like on the home front in Wilmington during the war and Bob will tell us about not only the problems the military and civilian authorities encountered, but what the doctors, the blockade runners and the railroads were doing to support the war effort.

Al Hines  
Webmaster



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**Helmira** on Earth



Member **Richard Triebe** delivered what was promised! It was a closer look at the fate of the Confederate soldiers marched off to prison camps upon the fall of Fort Fisher. While some of those men were sent to Point Lookout, Fortress Monroe, Fort Delaware or Fort Columbus, many of them (Richard pegged the number at 1,132) wound up in the infamous Elmira prison. Located by the banks of the Chemung River in south central New York state (about 15 miles from the Pennsylvania border), the camp had originally been constructed as Union training grounds to hold anywhere from 2,500 to 3,000 men.

Using a member of the 40th NCT- Thaddeus C. Davis' account of the fall of Fort Fisher and the subsequent trip to the prison, Mr. Triebe related how the prisoners overcoats and blankets, having been stored in their barracks, were burned when the Union naval bombardment set those buildings afire. Being sent northward, without suitable warm clothing, ensured that many would fall ill, even

before entering the prison gates.

The Fort Fisher prisoners and indeed, virtually all captives held by the Union authorities were victims of a new policy towards them, one espoused by the U.S. Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. This new policy, a policy of retribution, whereby food rations were deliberately reduced, compounded the distress of many of those detained in prisons throughout the north. The normal ration for a POW was that of a regular soldier, but letters to newspapers and testimony given before Congress by former Union prisoners swayed government officials (including Stanton) to strike back at the most defenseless Southern soldiers: those under their control.

Stanton's policy, although officially rejected when it was vetoed by President Lincoln, was applauded by the U.S. commissary general of prisoners, Colonel William Hoffman, himself a released POW. Hoffman's rationale was since POWs were "sedentary", they did not require as much food as a regular trooper, so their rations were cut to 2/3rds (at Elmira it was said the rations were reduced even more, to as little as 1/4 of what it had been).

In 1864, as the war progressed, the prison at Point Lookout had become overcrowded, so some men were sent off to Elmira, where those from Fort Fisher would soon arrive at. As Thad Davis recounted: "We arrived about eight o'clock in the evening, in four feet of snow, and many prisoners had neither blankets nor coats. We were kept standing in ranks ... for half an hour before starting for the prison .... We were ... robbed of all valuables ...; then sent to the barracks- board shanties about fifty feet long, containing one stove. Our beds were planks without blankets. There were about seven thousand prisoners confined there[.]"

At its peak, Elmira lodged around ten thousand prisoners who were not allowed to receive any packages nor were given even the most rudimentary medical attention, indeed, the surgeon at the post (Dr. Sanger) was heard to remark that he had "killed more rebels in his camp than any officer in battle" (some say he personally killed many by overdosing them with drugs as he was a

drug user himself). The death rate varied from over 200 to 400 per month (February 1865). The water supply was in large measure responsible for many deaths. Foster's Pond, a small tributary of the Chemung had become diseased and spread dysentery throughout the camp. There were plans afoot to alleviate the water problem by having the prisoners dig a canal whereby the pond would drain back into the river, but Secretary Stanton's refusal to assent to the project delayed it until the winter when the ground was too hard to break.

As statistics became an important tool to measure how well (or badly) a camp was doing, the federal government took pains to show that the percentages of Union soldiers who died in southern camps (Andersonville in particular) was higher than those who perished while in Union hands. Actually, using Mr. Triebe's methodology, whereby he looked at how many POWs actually made it home (many "died en route"), the death rate at Elmira climbed to 25%. The death rate at Andersonville was somewhat higher, at nearly 29%, but it must be remembered (as Mr. Triebe pointed out) that while at Andersonville, there was nothing (no railroad to bring in supplies, no food), Elmira had everything (it was on the main line and the farmers had a bumper crop that year). You might also be surprised to learn that yet another northern prison camp had the highest death rate of all- Camp Alton, Illinois saw a 31% death rate!

[In addition to Mr. Triebe's talk, the editor also referred to member Walter M. Bullard's research on Corporal Dennis L. Carlisle, Co. D, 51st NCT, who is interred at Woodlawn National Cemetery in Elmira. It was also quite interesting to note that member Royal Palmer mentioned that an ancestor of his died at Elmira.]

