THE NORTHERN ILLINOIS CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

THE drum roll

382nd Regular Meeting Volume 40 Number 1 Sept. 9, 2022

For our June meeting, the scheduled speaker came up ill, so it was time for a pinch-hitter. The natural choice was the Round Table's resident baseball expert; on June 3, Bruce Allardice spoke about the famous-or infamous, if you prefer-March to the Sea by William Tecumseh Sherman and his veterans.

Sherman's original orders for the 1864 campaign had been to break up the Confederate Army of Tennessee, then get into the interior of the Confederacy and do all possible damage. While successful in defeating that army and capturing the vitally important city of Atlanta, Sherman was unable to break up the opposing army (led by John Bell Hood for the latter part of the campaign). Following Atlanta's fall, Hood spent some time striking against Sherman's line of communication, eventually drawing off into Alabama. Unable to "break up" Hood, Sherman now prioritized the second half of his instructions.

In mid-November of 1864, Sherman began the march, after first destroying anything of military value in Atlanta (and some non-military property, incidental or otherwise). Sherman's orders for the upcoming campaign were to "forage liberally on the country;" he proclaimed that he would "make Georgia howl." Nonetheless, he issued strict guidelines for foraging. Only items of military necessity were to be confiscated or destroyed; destruction was to be authorized only by corps commanders or higher. As long as the civilian population was compliant, they were to be treated with respect, left alone and not abused physically or verbally, and private dwellings were not to be entered. (Much of this was honored in the breach, as they say). Adding escaping slaves to the columns was acceptable if they would be of material service to the army-but military needs would be the overriding concern.

It was a tough, veteran army that departed Atlanta with Sherman, four infantry corps in two wings: the 14th and 20th (Henry Slocum's wing) and the 15th and 17th (Oliver Howard's wing), accompanied by a cavalry division under Judson Kilpatrick. Whenever possible, Sherman used a different road for each corps. The four columns sometimes spread out over 30-plus miles in width, widening the swath of destruction but remaining within mutual supporting distance. The multiple roads also helped to keep the Rebels guessing; Sherman threatened Columbus to the west and Augusta to the east, while ultimately reaching the sea at Savannah in mid-December.

One issue Allardice addressed was that of Augusta, Georgia. Sherman has been criticized for ignoring Augusta, one of the Confederacy's most important industrial centers. By taking the city and destroying its capacity to support war,

Sherman could have shortened the conflict even more. But is this a valid criticism? Allardice made clear that it is not. While the Augusta machinery was left untouched, Sherman's destruction of railroads as he marched limited the ability to move the city's products through the Confederacy. In addition, when they felt threatened, much of the Augusta machinery was packed up and sent to Columbia, South Carolina. Had Sherman moved directly on Augusta, the same machinery evacuation was probable. And Sherman needed to keep moving; a diversion to Augusta might have bogged him down, rather than making contact with the U.S. Navy-and a secure supply base-at Savannah.

Another question concerns the impact of Sherman's march: was it-both in its importance to the war effort and the extent of its destruction-exaggerated? Regarding the latter, Allardice pointed out that, all along Sherman's march route, many antebellum buildings stand to this day. He saw in this exaggeration a confirmation of perhaps the most important impact of Sherman's march: its effect on Southern morale. Regardless of the actual level of destruction, the exaggeration of it (which continues to this day) is a clue to the demoralization it caused, even while Southern newspapers of the time incorrectly predicted the doom of Sherman's army. (Meanwhile, Northern papers considered it a vital blow to the rebellion.) The physical impact was also considerable; by the time Sherman captured Savannah, the estimate of destruction was at least $100,000-about $1.4 million in modern dollars. And, by marching to Savannah and re-establishing contact with the Navy (and thus with supplies and with the North), Sherman positioned himself to continue the destruction northward in the spring, though he did let about 10,000 defenders under William Hardee slip through his grasp. Hardee would be an opponent in the Carolinas, primarily North Carolina.

Sherman's march has led him to be characterized by some as being both the originator of hard war and of being a war criminal. Allardice demonstrated that neither of these is true. To be a war criminal, there must first be an agreed-upon code of war to violate, and there was none. (The Lieber code, intended as a guideline for conduct, was unofficial.) Moreover, by the maxims of Clausewitz (who, granted, had not been translated into English as of this time), war is an extension of politics. Since the civilian population is a key to the support of the war effort, it is a legitimate target. Democracies tend to lose war when the population grows weary of the conflict, rather than by strictly military means. Sherman's approach was cruel, no doubt; he famously wrote, "War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it." The way to end the cruelty was to end the war, and Sherman's brand of hard war may have been more humane than extended bloodshed.

Nor was hard war a novelty in 1864. It had been in existence since ancient times, all the way back to at least Sparta. European wars had often seen it, and it could be found in the Revolution (Sullivan's 1778 campaign against the Iroquois, for example.) Even Sherman himself had experienced it during campaigns against Native Americans. Moreover, compared to some previous and modern conflicts, Sherman was far from the harshest practitioner of hard war. (And what Sherman practiced was not, as it is sometimes characterized, total war.)

On behalf of the Round Table, I would like to thank Bruce Allardice for a successful pinch-hitting appearance, and for illuminating the March to the Sea and its associated myths,

Pat McCormick

The Fatal Rush
The 29th USCT at The Crater, Petersburg

Laurence D. Schiller
September 9, 2022

Early in 1863, after the Emancipation Proclamation, and facing a decline in white enlistments and opposition to the newly instituted draft, the Federal government decided to push the recruitment of African Americans into the army. One way to encourage state governments to participate enthusiastically was to credit newly enlisted Black soldiers to the state regardless of where they were recruited. One such regiment was the 29th USCI (U.S. Colored Infantry), which was the only one of 149 Black infantry, artillery, and cavalry USCT regiments credited to the state of Illinois. One company, F, was actually credited to Wisconsin.

Only six understrength companies strong, it was sent to Washington to join the Army of the Potomac, which it did in June 1864. Assigned to the all-black 4th Division of Major General Ambrose Burnside's IX Corps, its first real battle action occurred in the disastrous attack into the Petersburg Crater, July 30th. We shall examine the role of the USCI troops, including how they were denied leading the attack they had been trained for, and then how they were thrown into the breech after the IX Corps' white troops failed to gain their objectives. The 29th suffered heavy casualties, as did its sister regiments (some 35% of the total loss of the IX Corps) and although they did all they could and fought well, they were thrown into an impossible situation and were blamed by many for the defeat that day. The 29th survived, though, and was on the field at Appomattox, now as part of the all-black 25th Corps, for Lee's surrender.

Laurie Schiller was an adjunct Professor of history, as well as the Head Fencing Coach at Northwestern University for nearly forty years. In retirement he is writing a major work on the evolution of cavalry tactics in the Civil War. He is the author of a monograph on cavalry tactics, as well as several articles on the Civil War and African history. He is currently serving as the President of the NICWRT.

Programs for 2022-2023

Sept. 9: Laurie Schiller. The 29th USCT at the Crater
Oct. 7: Jerry Allen. 8th Wisconsin
Nov. 4: Phil Angelo. Morgan's Raid
Dec. 2: Dave Powell: Tullahoma
Jan. 6: Pat McCormick. North Anna
Feb. 3: Mary Abroe. Civil War Centennial, Rhetoric, Reality, and the Bounds Of Selective Memory
Mar. 3: Rob Girardi. TBA
April 7: Michael Wynne. The Real Story of The Rock Island POW Camp. This Program will be on ZOOM.
May 5: Wayne Rhine. The Kersage
June 2: Banquet. David Zarefsky. The Strategy of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address

Saturday, Sept. 17: Pat McCormick will lead A discussion on Chattanooga. It will start at 10 AM and a ZOOM link will follow.

The meeting on Friday, September 9, 2022, will be at the Arlington Hts. Library and will begin at 7 PM. It will be available on ZOOM also:

Laurence Schiller is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

https://us06web.zoom.us/j/83292409507?pwd=cGV1UStIYU96R2IyRmVVTXZKWVJvQT09

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Upcoming Events

As a note the board has decided not to collect dues for the 2022-23 year.