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Marching into History

The Battle of New Market, 146 years later.

BY CLARKE C. JONES ✭ PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBB SCHARETG

The Union artillery opens up on us at 4 a.m. My first thought is that the thunderstorm that drenched us earlier in the night has returned, but when shot and shell come ripping through the trees to our left, I jump up and start to run, stumbling, over occupied bedrolls and a smoldering campfire. Hardly anyone one else has stirred. “They are just messing with us,” mutters someone from beneath a wet wool blanket. “Those Yanks do that every now and then to keep us thinking they are going to follow all that noise with an infantry charge, but they just want to keep us awake. Don’t fret none—that Federal artillery commander couldn’t hit a bull’s ass with a banjo. At least he hasn’t yet.”

With that, the voice in the darkness goes quiet for a moment, and then I hear snoring. He has gone back to sleep. I do not. This is my first morning as a Confederate private, and I’m wondering if I haven’t made a big mistake. An hour later, I make my way toward the cook tent, hoping to find some coffee, and pass one of our men sharpening his bayonet. It is a grim reminder of what I might face today. It has not dawned on me until now how close I might get to my enemy—and for the first time I realize that I may have to use my bayonet on some Yankee, or some Yankee will use his on me.

Left: soldiers from the Confederate States of America, in formation on the New Market battlefield.

We privates don't get much information, just a lot of rumors, but some of the fellows tell me we are here in New Market to block a Federal army under Gen. Sigel from taking over the Shenandoah Valley. Virginia and the South depend on the valley for its crops and livestock. I am told that if we lose the valley, we lose the war. It is rumored Grant has given Sigel 10,000 men to help run us out. I hope it isn't true, because our Gen. Breckinridge only has 4,500 Confederates. I don't know much about Sigel other than he is from Germany, and that he yells orders in German when he gets excited. Breckinridge, on the other hand, must be pretty smart, since he was vice president of the United States before the war broke out.

I was hungry when I woke, but now I have got the jitters. Still, I need to eat. No one is sure of the next meal. Capt. Bunting's wife, Denise, and two other ladies, Miss Dailey and Miss Todd, are already up fixing food for our men—eggs and maybe some bacon if any is left. I'm handed a hardtack biscuit. My biscuit is so hard that I dip it in my coffee before biting into it. Pvt. Scott Williams tells me that, a week ago, his hardtack was infested with weevils. He still ate it—dipped it in his coffee and let the biscuit fall apart in the liquid. The weevils floated to the top of the coffee, he skimmed them off and then ate his biscuit and drank the coffee. I tell Williams I could never do that. He tells me to go three days without food and then tell him that again. These men are tougher than I am.

The women are too, maybe. Their eyes are bloodshot from long hours standing in the wood smoke of the cooking fire. They are on their feet constantly. When breakfast is done, dishes are cleaned in the wooden washtub with water heated from the fire. Then they start preparing the next meal. There is never a complaint from them. Capt. Bunting is with the 18th Virginia. We are lucky his wife and the two ladies choose to travel with us. It helps calm the men.

I joined up with the Fighting First just last night. Major Marc Ramsey recruited me. Our family lost the farm when my father and older brother got killed at Vicksburg, then my mother sent me east to live with my Aunt Belle. She died of the fever just before I got to Richmond, and so I had no place else to go but here. Besides, the South needed men, so I joined up.

Major Ramsey, who has fought in many battles and been promoted through the ranks, personally introduces me to some of the troops. Although the men are glad to see a new recruit, as we are outnumbered in almost every battle, they all eye me with some caution. You fight a few battles with a man, you find out quickly whether you can depend on him or not. I am untested and could be unreliable. Some of these men have been fighting for two or more years—and by now they know that many of the men they're eating with this morning will not be eating with them tonight.

When I first spoke to the major about joining the Confederate Army, I told him I wanted to be in the cavalry. I have a relative in Company B of the 4th Virginia Cavalry Regiment, and I hoped to join up with him. The major asked me where my horse was, and I told him I didn't own a horse. He explained that most cavalrymen owned their horses, which were now in short supply. Lacking one, I would have to join "the foot cavalry" instead. I learned later that just owning a horse would not get you into the cavalry. Your horse had to be able to work with other horses in close formation and not get skittish during battle, when the noise from guns, cannon and dying men is terrifyingly loud.

Last night, the major showed me the various flags around camp, and the history of each. The man who carries the colors into battle is a brave soul, because he is on, or close to, the front line—and thus a prime target for enemy shot. The colors help a unit's men know where they are supposed to be in the confusion of battle. The enemy knows that if they can drop the man carrying the colors, the unit can become scattered. If the color bearer is wounded or killed, another brave man must grab the colors and carry them next, and he becomes the next target.

Col. James Carver walks past the cook tent. He always seems to be on the move. The men like him. He is a tough man, but not without compassion, and has a reputation for looking after the men as much as possible. He tries to make sure we have good campsites, near good water, but not at the bottom of a hill where a heavy rainstorm might flood us out.

It is a hot morning, and I take a drink from my canteen. Fresh, clean water is a precious thing, and one does not take it for granted. It does not take long for the water in my canteen to become tepid. My uniform is wool, and even on a mild day I must learn to ration my water. One reason is that there is not a lot of it. Another reason is even though we are camped only 100 yards from the Shenandoah River, when 4,500 men,

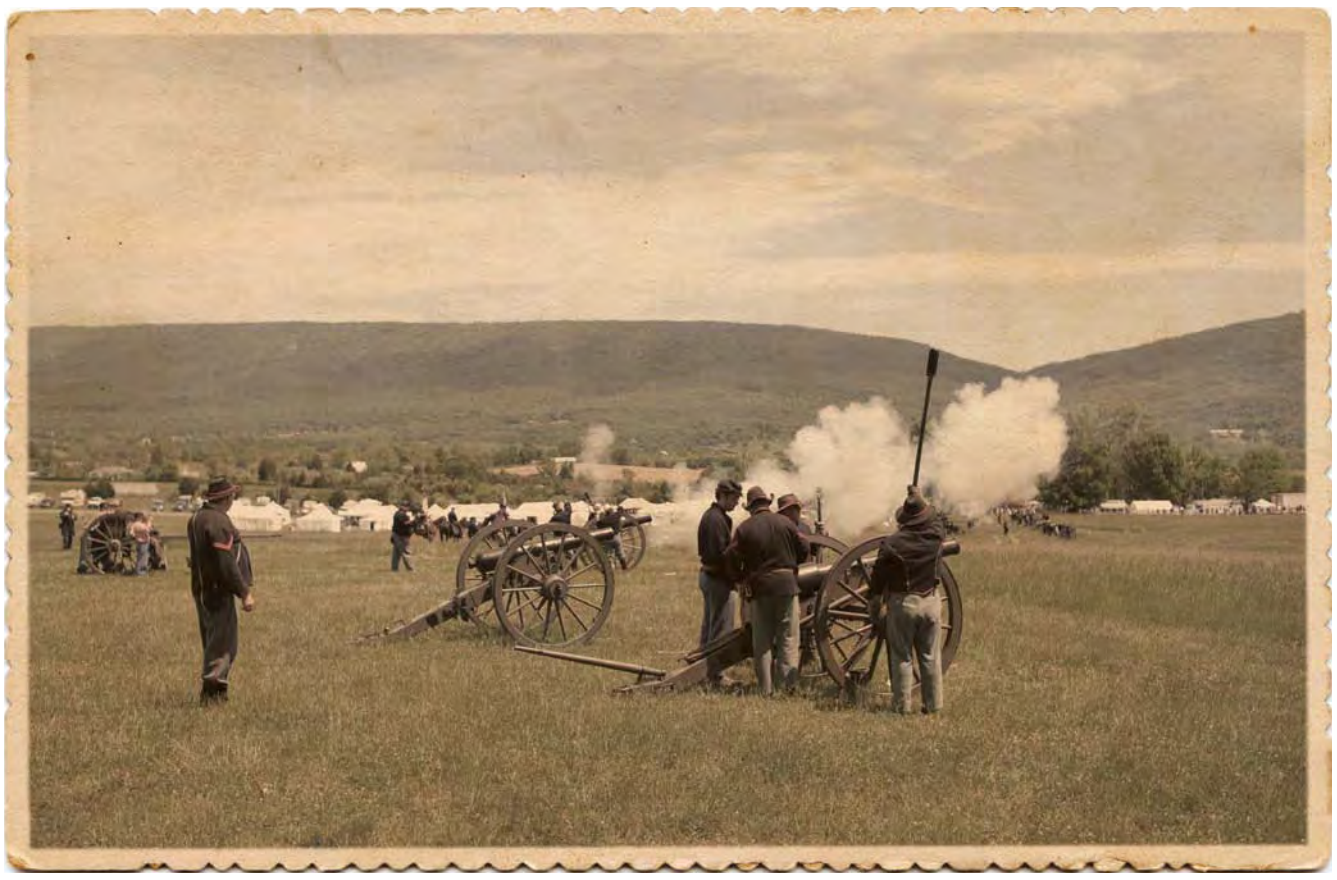
Top: VMI cadets prepare a meal of dried meat and biscuits. They'll sleep in bedrolls around the fire. Bottom: A reenactor takes a break.

Here: Confederate Major Marc Ramsey (left) and Col. James Carver stand for a formal portrait after the reenactment of the Battle of New Market, 146 years after the fact.

plus horses, are using the same water supply, you are never really sure what you are drinking. We lose men almost daily to flux, dysentery or some other disease.

Suddenly, an order is given to form up. A surge of energy moves through the ranks, and voices rise as equipment is gathered. The sergeants are barking orders. They are always barking orders, but there is no mistaking the heightened urgency in their voices. Some of the men respond with yells of bravado while others just stare grimly ahead. It is clear that there will be a real fight, and soon. My right leg begins to shake a little. It always does when I get really nervous.

The Yankees have their cannons trained on a certain area of the battlefield—a place where they expect our men will have to cross. I ask what I should do when we hit that spot. "Run like hell!" shouts Pvt. Yates.



Pvt. Williams and Pvt. Terry Yates of Culpeper help me with my cartridge belt. This is not their first battle, and they have been assigned by Major Ramsey to stand near me in line to make sure I keep up. There will be confusion when the battle begins, and new recruits, having never faced cannon or musket fire, sometimes act on the strong desire to head to the rear. The sight of one man slinking away may prompt others to do the same.

Pvt. Williams is close to my age but acts much older. When I tell him so, he laughs softly. "Near misses will age a man," he says. He is a man of few words, but resolute. Last night, he showed me how to load and fire my Springfield. With the bayonet attached, the rifle is more than six feet long and weighs about 10 pounds. It is difficult to maneuver. Both Williams and Yates made me go through the firing process until I got it right. I hope I still can.

There is an order to things in battle, at least in the beginning. We will stand shoulder to shoulder, and our unit must act as one when loading and firing. I complain aloud to Pvt. Williams how hard it is to load a gun with a bayonet while standing in close, with men in front, back and beside me. He tells me not to worry, that the Yankees will be doing their level best to give me some elbowroom. We both laugh, but there is no humor in it.

The sergeants and officers come by to inspect our ranks. At morning chow, there was good-natured conversation among officers and volunteers and conscripted men. But that is gone. Faces are stern, and orders are crisp. We stand at attention, and Col. Carver addresses the men. He appears both calm and firm. "Each of you men knows why you are here," he says. "If the valley falls, so does the South. I expect two things today. One is that we will be woefully outnumbered; and two, I expect every man to do his duty." The troops respond with a primal roar.

It is close to noon, and both temperature and humidity are rising. We new recruits are put through a number of drills that we should expect to use when we meet the enemy. Hot sweat begins to pour down my back. The wool shell jacket that kept me warm last night is now a hindrance. We are ordered to march away from the enemy position and behind our artillery. I think that maybe we will be a reserve unit and not have to fight today. That is not the case. The officers just want us in the shade. In a previous encounter, the men had to stand an hour in the hot sun before they went into the battle. So many men fainted from heat exhaustion, before even a shot was fired, that we did not carry the day.

Without warning, the cannons from both sides begin to open up. We hope our guns can find our targets before their guns find theirs. Pvt. Yates tells me that the Yankees will have some of their cannons trained on a certain area of the battlefield—a place where they expect our men will have to cross—and when we hit that area, they will open up on us. I ask what I should do when we hit that spot. "Run like hell!" he shouts. I briefly contemplate in which direction.

We are ordered forward. We begin our march toward the front and the Bushong house. When we reach the house, we can see the Yankees on a hill about 400 yards away. My mouth is dry and I try to take a sip from my canteen. It is empty. I have been unconsciously drinking too much. I'm told to toss the canteen, because I don't need the extra weight and if the fighting gets close the enemy will grab at anything to get the advantage. I would not be the first man to get strangled by his own canteen strap.

Union artillery fire is slowly finding the range and homing in on our lines. The ground explodes around us. Our colonel shouts orders. We try to focus on him and not the enemies' fire. We are given a command I do not understand, and I follow the man in front of

This page: Union troops firing cannons. Facing page, clockwise from top left: reloading a cannon, VMI cadet holding his rifle; girl playing a period-appropriate game; girls in period dresses; cartridge packs; female musicians on the porch of Bushong House; Dave Chirico, member of the 4th Va. (Company H) Blackhorse Cavalry.


10 Cartridges
Buck & Ball
Richmond,
Arsenal

VMI Cadet James Rivas (21) at attention, after the Battle of New Market reenactment, May 16, 2010.

"Could I Do It?"

Civil War reenactments have long been popular in the South, and they may grow more so as we approach the 150th anniversary of the conflict. **BY CLARKE C. JONES**

What might a new Confederate soldier have faced at New Market, Virginia, on May 15, 1864, when roughly 6,300 Union soldiers and 4,500 Confederate troops engaged in a fierce battle? My account of a young soldier's first combat experience is not solely a product of my imagination; it was based on my participation in a *reenactment* of the actual Battle of New Market, in which the Confederates defeated the Union army and, in doing so, dealt a blow to the North's strategy of taking control of the Shenandoah Valley.

At New Market, both Confederate Gen. John C. Breckinridge and Union Gen. Franz Sigel aimed to occupy the high ground. Outnumbered, Breckinridge expected to be attacked at his position on Shirley's Hill. When that didn't happen, Breckinridge, rather than wait for Sigel to be reinforced, attacked Sigel by rushing north to the area were the Union line had formed in the middle of Sarah and Jacob Bushong's farm. "We can attack and whip them here, and we will do it," Breckinridge bellowed at one point prior to the engagement, according to the book *The Battle of New Market, by Joseph W. A. Whitehorne.*

The battle was marked by lots of artillery fire and heavy rain. At one point, according to historical accounts, a Union shell blew a hole in the center of the Confederate line. Roughly 250 VMI cadets, most between ages 17 and 21, rushed in to fill the gap. They helped to repulse a Union charge, then swept forward with the other Confederate troops in a counter attack. The Union army retreated along the old Valley Turnpike to Mount Jackson. The cadets later named the muddy battlefield the Field of Lost Shoes, because so many boots were sucked off their feet in the muck. Union casualties (dead and wounded) were estimated to total 840 compared to 540 for the Confederacy.

The New Market reenactment, one of dozens of Civil War-related events held in the U.S. every year (including at least a half dozen in Virginia), took place this year on May 15. According to Scott Harris, who runs the New Market Battlefield Museum, 1,150 people took part, playing roles as Confederate and Union soldiers and officers, and nearly 3,000 spectators watched.

Why do people take part in reenactments? Most of the participants have a serious interest in the Civil War and say that taking part in a battle re-creation helps to put a flesh-and-bones perspective on events otherwise relegated to history books. "One of my favorite hobbies is reading, especially historical books," says Marc Ramsey, owner of Owens and Ramsey Booksellers in Richmond and a reenactor for 14 years. "Reenacting allows me, in a manner of speaking, to go back to that time I read about. When I read about a Union regiment trying to outflank a Confederate regiment, I know what it actually looks like. When I read about artillery fire, I have a better idea what it sounded like." Beyond that, he enjoys the camaraderie of the people—"sleeping under the stars with a crackling fire nearby. So many people with diverse backgrounds, all enjoying the same experience."

Ramsey expects the war's 150th anniversary, beginning next year, to spike interest in reenactments. "I'm seeing younger people joining this hobby this year," he says. "And we're getting a number of ex-military people who've come from Iraq and Afghanistan and want to be a part of this, as well."

Ramsey explains that there are three types of reenactors and events. The first, "mainstream," is by far the most popular. Its participants live in tents, set up their camps and strive to create an authentic Civil War scene. Though some of the "soldiers" might bring along coolers and cell phones, they are vigilant about keeping them out of view. "Some will have their children participate so it can be a real family thing," he adds. New Market was a mainstream reenactment.

The second category is "campaigners," individuals who take the Civil War experience one step further. They arrive with everything they will use that weekend in a knapsack and haversack, including all food, bedroll and blanket, a drinking cup and extra clothing. They do not go back to the car for shelter in a storm or for a clean shirt. They sleep in the open, not in a tent. Campaigners are all about getting close to the true life of a Civil War soldier. Some events even have no spectators. Campaigners might hike five or 10 miles to reach the event site. It is all about living the ancestral experience.

The third group is described, appropriately, as "hardcore." These are people who try to *become* 19th-century people and soldiers. They will only eat what was available to the soldiers in the Civil War—meaning that they will make hardtack, on-site, and then eat it. They wear clothing that is an exactly replica of the clothes worn in, say, the 1860s, even matching the stitch count.

Although most reenactment groups welcome new "recruits," don't arrive in a uniform rented from a costume store. That is akin to wearing wingtips and black socks to a pool party. Novice reenactors are allowed a certain amount of "farbishness" (inauthenticity) but not for long.

Becoming a reenactor is not cheap. You must buy a gun, uniform, bayonet, hats and all the accoutrements, including canteen and cartridge belt. Ramsey says it took him five years to get a full kit. Buying all new *authentic* clothing could cost $1,200, not including gun and camp accessories. There are a sizeable number of businesses throughout the United States, usually called sutlers, that supply clothes and accessories to period reenactors. Many go to Civil War events to sell gear and paraphernalia to both reenactors and spectators.

As a rookie reenactor, I was able to borrow gear from other New Market participants. My Confederate military garb consisted of a wool kepi (hat), a wool shell jacket, wool pants (held up by suspenders), a rubber poncho that would also act as my ground matt for sleeping, and a haversack, which contained a few ditty bags and some string. I was also given a pair of typical Civil War boots, with only a leather or *wooden* sole and a steel heel plate. For troops who often traveled 20 miles a day on foot, those boots must have been sheer torture.

Scott Williams, a geographic information systems analyst and a reenactor for nine years, helped to turn me into an adequate Confederate soldier. He showed me how to operate the Springfield rifle and rehearsed me on the drills we performed on the day of the battle, including Shoulder Arms and Fix Bayonet. On event weekends, Williams is a private in the 15th Virginia Volunteers—a group he chose because he had ancestors who were members of the 15th during the 1860s, and also because "they are very dedicated to doing an accurate portrayal of a Confederate soldier."

Williams, like Ramsey, is a campaigner who believes that role playing heightens one's knowledge of the war. "I can visualize a lot better what these soldiers may have gone through," he says. "I can smell the fires, feel how hot or cold they must have been, and to some degree know a little of their hunger and discomfort. You know that each soldier knew this might be his last day on earth, and for a great many it was." He adds, "When you visit historical battlefields and look at the open ground [the] men on both sides had to cross under heavy fire, you ask yourself, 'Could or would I do it?'"

CWReenactors.com; VMI.edu/Newmarket

me. Yates pulls me back to where I am supposed to be, in the rear of a long column of twos with one man in front of another. We have to maneuver over a fence and then across an open field of about 150 to 200 yards.

We hear the command to load. I take the paper powder cartridge from my cartridge bag, rip the end of the bag with my teeth, and pour the powder and ball down the end of the barrel. I quickly throw the ramrod down the barrel of the gun, pull it out and slide it back in place. I put my gun in the half-cocked position and place the firing cap on the cone of my gun. We march forward. Just as we get to the fence, 50 bluecoats spring up from the tall grass 60 yards in front of us and fire, spraying the air with shot. Miraculously, no one around me is hit. We are ordered to return fire. I place my shaking gun over and above the right shoulder of the man in front of me, and I fire. The smoke from the black powder of our guns is so thick, I cannot tell if I hit anything or not. The noise is deafening.

We are ordered to reload. I start hearing strange "Psst! Psst!" sounds, like a large mosquito, buzzing around my ears. It is Death whispering to me, trying to get my attention. I am told when it does find you, you never hear the whisper.

A large column of Yankees has reformed to support the skirmishers we first encountered. We fire point-blank at each other. This time, I see some of our men go down, their bodies suddenly jerking and contorting, their arms flailing. Some scream in terror; others groan.

I look to my left, and Pvt. Williams is feverishly loading his Enfield. I hear a "Whoosh!" to my right, and Pvt. Yates and four other men have suddenly vanished. We are commanded to move forward, then commanded to halt and fire another volley. The smoke is so thick I can hardly see our colors, but I can hear our Col. Carver desperately screaming at us to move forward! My eyes burn from the sweat, smoke and dust. I am not sure where forward is, and not sure my legs will take me there.

There is another explosion, and a huge hole is opened in our ranks. I am dazed and staggering. Suddenly, that gaping hole is filled with the boy-men from VMI. They charge forward. I am 146 years too late for the battle of New Market, but I follow them into the smoke. ●