

Living History

By Philip Schreier

Getting it Right—The Jamestown Way



In my nearly 25 years of participating in reenactment and living history programs I have been asked on numerous occasions—why. “Why do you reenact wars?” My answers have matured as I have over the years from, “I like shooting Yankees” to “I do it to honor my ancestors” and now to “It’s so the youth of today can understand our rich military heritage.” Well for whatever reason I or anyone else reenacts, it all boils down to having fun. But if you are to take the last answer seriously, it is incumbent upon the reenactor to do it right. A poor or misinformed portrayal can be as damaging as revisionist history books and ivory-tower professors. A reenactor may be the only exposure to a specific period of time that the public

may have.

There is one event in Jamestown, Virginia, “Military Through the Ages”, that fosters a spirit of competition between reenactment units in an effort to find the most authentic portrayal of a particular military organization. This competition attracts hundreds of reenactors who have worked diligently to “get it right”.

Juried by curators and historians selected by the Jamestown State Park, the “Military through the Ages” event, held every March, is now in its nineteenth year. Scores of reenactors representing military units from Caesar’s Roman Legions through Desert Storm meet for a two-day encampment that draws crowds numbering in the tens of thousands. Each unit is given a section

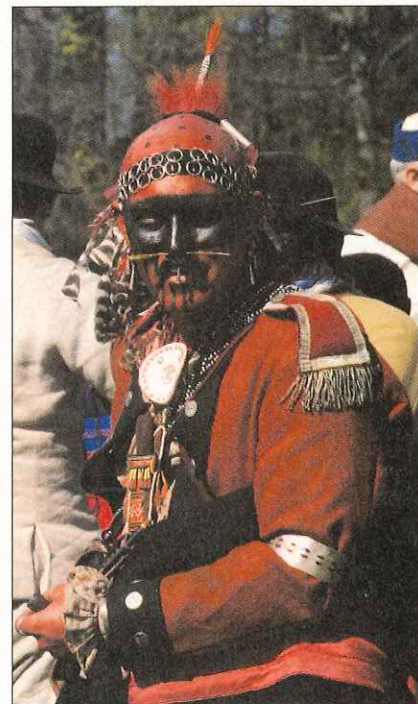


“Military Through the Ages”, held at Jamestown Virginia every March offers the ultimate in reenacting authenticity. It is open to the public and provides a hands-on history lesson to children and adults.

of the State Park along the James River to pitch camp, cook, drill and perform military maneuvers. Judges score each unit on their accuracy in portraying the period that they represent. Experts in the minutiae of daily life from different time periods judge in their areas of expertise.

It was Napoleon who said that an army travels on its stomach. At Jamestown each unit is encouraged to prepare a typical dish from their time period for the judges to examine and rate on the level of difficulty in preparation as well as the authenticity of raw materials used in the creation of a particular dish. One previous award winner chose to represent a US Navy vessel and was able to locate the lunch menu for an actual cruise in 1936 and re-created every course served. The group even went so far as to have a Filipino mess steward serve the meal to the judges! Others have chosen to dress chickens on site, as well as other quaint touches that leaves the visiting public with a new sense of how their ancestors managed to provide for themselves before the advent of refrigerators and processed food.

Camping provides the visitor with a chance to glimpse how a soldier lived when on campaign. During the American Civil War, a soldier spent 50 days in camp for every one day he spent in combat. Careful attention to



This Eastern Seneca from the “Leatherstocking Tales” period has spared no expense to get his impression “just right.”

detail is made to ensure that no factor is overlooked in camp portrayal. From the fire pits of the Revolutionary war soldier through the hand wrought iron used in a Civil War camp to the food packs and propane used in Southeast Asia, each period camp has its own particular style and attitude. In one Vietnam period camp, 10 oz. Coke bottles and vintage *Playboy* magazines littered the interior of a General Purpose Medium Tent that was set up to duplicate a communications center for an Engineer Battalion.

Military maneuvers and tactics play a large part in the judging process, as does the accuracy of the uniforms and equipment used in the portrayal. Each unit takes the field at a pre-scheduled time and provides a narrator to explain the formations and tactics used during their period. Marching by the numbers and drilling by the manual of arms helps the visitor understand the differences in military formations and battlefield movement. It becomes quite a history lesson as one watches the evolution of combat from short swords to M16s. Each period takes the state of the art in weaponry and shows how it worked and its advantages and disadvantages in close quarters. Large block-style unit formations give way to scattered sections seeking advantage from useable cover, as the advent of auto-



All time periods are open for the event, as witnessed by this formidable-looking Viking. The only thing missing from his kit is his longship.

matic weaponry quickly dissolved the notion of the old Napoleonic tactics. One interesting aspect is how the space between opposing forces has increased, and continues to increase, as weaponry becomes more impersonal.

During this segment of the event, the competing units have continually strived to out do each other from year to year. While the Greek Hoplites have failed to produce a replica Trojan Horse as of yet, similar Herculean efforts have not gone unrewarded by the judges over the years. Various

showstoppers have included a visit from FDR aboard his original yacht the USS Sequoia following the vessel's multi-million dollar restoration project. Complete with a full complement of U.S. Navy officers and men as well as Secret Service agents, the Sequoia hosted visitors who were delighted to step back in time to the pre WW II era and visit with an FDR look-alike as well as learn about a seldom seen aspect of Navy life in those pre-Pearl Harbor days. Such attention to detail

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as the cap tallies of the enlisted seamen to the proper facing direction of the eagles on the shoulder ratings all helped this crew win top honors.

A demonstration of a Vietnam patrol mission which took on an unseen Viet Cong element shocked visitors when a period Bell Huey helicopter, flown in from nearby Fortress Monroe, zeroed in on a smoke signal and evacuated wounded from the short fire fight. Again top honors!

Judges look closely at each man's impression and knowledge of his time period, to the point of literally counting stitches and checking for inspection marks as well as quartermaster issue tags. The Roman Legionaries have gone so far as to replicate an original tent from their time period out of real goatskin sewed in an appropriate fashion from the period.


This event also allows the reenactor to bring out items that might be too cumbersome or fragile to exhibit at a large-scale event. Original and unique items make rare appearances in an effort to impress the judges. Entire hospital setups from the WW II period have



Of course, it is not unusual to see reenactors learning about other time periods from their fellows. Here a World War I German infantryman compares notes with a Second World War British soldier of the Cameronians.

gone to such lengths as to make the set dressers of *M*A*S*H* jealous as to the authenticity of the surroundings. Different uniform impressions also get some exposure here as well. You won't usually see a WW I German Naval Zeppelin Commander or a contingent of sailors from the landing party of the USS Olympia at a typical re-enactment,

but this event brings out some fantastic impressions from well studied amateur (and some professional) historians.

The event is so popular now that it is by invitation only. For details on participating or visiting call (888) 593-4682 or (757) 253-4838. The event traditionally takes place on the third weekend of March every year. 

Combat Collectibles

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Values on Ike jackets are fairly low, unless they have some rare unit patch or other interesting badges, wings, etc.

CONFEDERATE CANTEEN?

Q: I recently picked up an interesting Civil War canteen. It is of tin and stamped with concentric circles.

There are three loops soldered on the sides and bottom and the stopper is missing. Scratched around the rim is, "STUART'S CAVALRY ARMY OF VA." Do I have a Confederate canteen? What's it worth?

—Martin McFail
Reno, NV

A: Sounds pretty much like you have a standard Model 1858 Yankee "bullseye" canteen that has been embellished sometime in its lifespan with a Rebel distinction. These water carriers originally had wool covers, though period Civil War photos often show them with covers missing. While it is possible the markings on your piece are period, it would be extremely difficult to prove. Of

course letter styling might give some indication of originality, as would the general condition. Does the patina of the writing match that of the rest of the piece? Unfortunately, there are people today who are quite skilled in duplicating a period look. At this point, I would value your piece as a straight Federal item. In the condition you describe, it's worth about \$125.

PRINCESS MARY TIN

I have a brass box that was handed down in the family. It

Q: has a fancy stamped border with "SERVIA, FRANCE, BELGIUM, IMPERIUM BRITANNICUM, JAPAN, RUSSIA, MONTENEGRO, and CHRISTMAS 1914" at various places. There is a woman's head in the center with two large script "Ms" on either side. My grandmother said her father, who was in the British army during World War I, said it was given to him at the front and he carried some of his gear in it during the war. What is it? Does it have any value?

—Frank Miller
Montreal, Canada



Princess Mary Christmas tobacco tins were given by the thousands to British troops. They contained a packet of cigarettes and a packet of loose tobacco. With the original contents, one of these boxes can bring \$150.

A: You have one of the boxes that were presented by Princess Mary to the BEF in 1914. It contained packets of tobacco and cigarettes, as well as a fetching photograph of the princess. These boxes, while not rare, are collectible. An average original (there are replicas around) will bring upwards of \$50, and if it still has its contents, you can just about triple that figure. 