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 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
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 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.

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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?

**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 pattern 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 has a fancy stamped border with "SERVIA, FRANCE, BELGIUM, IMPERIUM BRITANNICUM, JAPAN, RUSSIA, MONTENE-GRO, and CHRISTMAS 1914" at various places. There is a woman's head in the center with two large script "Ms" on either side. My grandfather 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?

**Q:**

**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.