

Quick Overview From VA Tech Civil War Conference

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James I. Robertson, Jr.

It has been a long time since I had an early morning class. However Saturday I was up before the sun to get to the campus of Virginia Tech by 8:30 am to listen to some of the best Civil War professors in the county discuss "Military Strategy in the American Civil War".

The event was the 2011 Signature Conference by the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission and I knew I was in the right place when I arrived because one of the first things I noticed in the parking lot was a Virginia Sesquicentennial car tag that read HQ ANV (Headquarters, Army of Northern Virginia). The next thing I noticed was the line at Cassell Coliseum. You would think the Hokies were playing.

I had many reasons I wanted to attend this conference but at the top of the list was the chance to hear James I. "Bud" Robertson, Jr. Robertson is retiring as Alumni Distinguished Professor from Tech in just a few days and his being chairman of this event is one of his last official acts at the university.

Many people know Robertson as a professor, his Civil War classes routinely have 300 students,

while others would know him for his appearances on Blue Ridge Public Television or for the many Civil War books he has written.

Robertson's book on Stonewall Jackson, one of my favorite books, won eight national awards and was used as the basis for the movie "Gods and Generals" in which he was chief historical consultant for the film. On the DVD you can select a track to listen to Robertson's comments during the movie.

While Robertson was the first, and last, to speak he was not the only speaker in an all-star line-up of historians. Second up was Dennis Frye, the chief historian at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, with some fascinating insights into the importance of Harpers Ferry and how close the first major battle of the war came to being fought there. Richard Sommers, a teacher at the U.S. Army War College, rounded out the first session.

The second morning session covered "Military Strategy in the Eastern Theater" and feature Gary W. Gallagher, Joseph Glatthaar and Sommers. I have Gallagher's classes from the University of Virginia on video and snacked on popcorn while watching them. Glatthaar is a distinguished professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a specialist in American Military History.

When lunch time came several folks, including myself, quickly grabbed bagged lunches provided and returned to our seats to hear the Stonewall Brigade Band perform. The band was formed in Staunton Virginia in 1855 as the "Mountain Saxhorn Band" but when war broke out they all volunteered for service and became the Stonewall Brigade Band. They are the nation's oldest continuous community band and even have, and play occasionally, period instruments.

The first afternoon session, "Military Strategy in the Western Theater", with Richard M. McMurry, Stephen Woodworth and William C. Davis went into what made up the western theater, the loss of Kentucky to the Union, the Mississippi River and how problems between Joseph E. Johnston and Jefferson Davis influenced Confederate plans in the west. Several of you might recognize William C. Davis from his many appearances of Blue Ridge Public Television.

The final session was "Forgotten Elements of the Civil War" and featured a surprise in that the first speaker of this session, John M. Bowen, was not a historian but a veterinarian and equine specialist. Bowen spoke on horses in the Civil War, the difficulties of caring for them and the large number of them that were killed.

Continuing in the somewhat unusual theme of the final session Davis detailed the influence of weather on the war and Robertson addressed the importance of water to the war effort and its effects on the troops.

This is just a quick and ragged overview of the conference at Virginia Tech. I have several hours worth of notes and photos to go through and I plan to post greater details on each of the sessions later. I do want to thank the kind folks at Virginia Tech and the folks with the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission. They all did a wonderful job and made the conference most enjoyable.

Now a prize for everyone who reads to the end of this posting. If you want to get in on next year's conference here are the details and what to do.

The 2012 Signature Conference by the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission will be on March 22 at Virginia Military Institute. Lieutenant General John W. Knapp will be the conference chair and the subject of the conference will be "Leadership and Generalship in the Civil War"