Our State

CIVIL WAR SERIES

Glory Bound

The captain of the Yadkin Stars is a fearless and loyal leader. But throughout his tenure and journey north as a prisoner of war, William H Asbury Speer remains haunted by a weary ambivalence toward the cause and this unwinnable war.
(Volume 1, Part 5)

by Philip Gerard

In the brilliant summer of 1861, when he marches off to war from his beloved home in the Yadkin Rive Valley, Capt. William Henry Asbury Speer does not expect to be captured.

He will fight, and, with the Lord's help, his side will prevail. Or he will die valiantly on the field of hono Either way, he believes he is bound for glory. In this sentiment, he is exactly like every other soldier on eithe side.

He is a reluctant soldier, an opponent of secession who loves his home place deeply enough to defend it. H descended from Ulster Scots who intermarried with pacifist Quakers, and the Yadkin is a Unionis stronghold, forced into war by the slave-holding plantation class, who control the state government, and th belligerent response of the Lincoln administration, urged on by fanatical elements in the North.

So he believes.

Of the secessionists, he writes to his father: "They are the 'cause' of the war. I do not believe God had any mor hand in bringing the war than the 'child unborn' did."

His family has farmed in the Yadkin for more than a century, and, like all Speers, he is deeply tied to the lan
The land and family are inseparable.

Born leader

A photograph of Speer in his Confederate uniform shows a ruggedly handsome man with thick hair an
beard, high forehead, eyes intently staring at the camera with a fixed expression at once proud and conflicte
He is tall, well regarded by the ladies, deeply religious.

He works as the superintendent of a tannery in Jonesville, where he lives. In 1856, he is elected for a two-ye
term in the North Carolina House of Commons. For 10 years before the outbreak of war, he serves as colon
of the Yadkin Valley Militia. Astride his powerful horse and outfitted in a tailored tunic with rows of gol
brocade and brass buttons, elaborate gold epaulets and shoulder boards, and a cocked hat, sword hanging
his side, he is the very incarnation of leadership.

So when the volunteers muster to oppose the Federals, Speer is the natural choice to be elected captain
Company I, 28th Regiment of North Carolina Troops.

They call themselves the Yadkin Stars, 90-odd soldiers, according to the Salem *People's Press*, which describe
them as "a fine company of able-bodied men."

From High Point, they entrain for Wilmington, then, in the spring of 1862, rush to the defense of New Ber
But they arrive too late to stop a Yankee victory and are forced to retreat to Kinston. At last, on May 27, 186
the Yadkin Stars are tested in battle at Hanover Court House, south of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Entrenched in muddy positions, backed up against the Chickahominy River, they weather a night of chillin
rain. Dawn brings an attack by an overwhelming force of Yankees. After a hot running fight that lasts mo
than three exhausting hours, Speer and 15 of his company are trapped against the river. They are desperat
outnumbered four to one, outgunned. He records the moment of truth in his diary: "I could have swam th
river but my men could not & they begged me to stay with them. With tears in their eyes, told me they ha
stuck by me all day & would have died around me to have saved my life. How could I leave such men?"

The unthinkable happens: They are captured together.

Journey north

Under guard, they march 16 miles to Whitehouse Landing through the carnage of battle — smashed wagon
broken artillery, dead horses, bodies of soldiers. They pass a field hospital shrill with the cries of the wounde
Speer gets a glimpse of the awful might of the Yankee war machine. He writes, "As we marched along the roa
we were continually meeting troops, Redgts., Brigades, etc. Artileory after artileory was hurrying on wit
numerous cavelry & every now and then we would pass long lines of Bagage wagons, emence tranes of the
drawn by the best horses and mules I ever Seen."

They also pass the grave details. In one place, 50 of their own dead are laid out for burial, and a band
Union Zouaves in red leggings is busy rifling through pockets for money and other valuables.

All along the route, they are flanked by crowds of Union soldiers who are seeing "dirty rebels" for the firs time. "We were gazed and Stared at as if we had been live Devels," Speer confides to his diary. "They seemed t be amazed to see that we were human beings as same as themselves." Some of the Yankees taunt them, whil others merely stare, transfixed.

They embark on the transport steamer *Star of the South*, bound for New York.

This early in the war, as an officer, Speer is treated with a modicum of dignity. Although he and his men sper 36 hours marching and sleeping in the rain without a meal, now he is given plenty to eat and a cabin in whic to sleep. Seasickness plagues the prisoners, many of whom have never been aboard a ship. Three days late the Star arrives off Governor's Island. "Now our steamer casts anchor and here comes the N.Y. Yankees to se the bloody Seceshes," he writes. "'Look, Pa,' says a very pretty little girl, 'they have got no horns and tails as can see.'"

The officers are separated from the men and taken to Fort Columbus — half an acre of parade groun surrounded by barracks and thick parapets mounting 1,600 cannons. Given his parole, like the othe Confederate officers, Speer is allowed the run of the fort and quartered in one of the comfortable barrack "We are very well treated by all officers, privates, men, women, children, even a dog called Sport," he record as he spends his days watching out over the busy harbor, an alert spectator to steamers and clipper ship ferry traffic and yacht races. From the top of the fort, he can see Manhattan, Brooklyn, Staten Island, an Long Island — even Hoboken and Jersey City in New Jersey. He writes copious letters home, passes the tim reading and making jewelry from scraps of fabric, metal, and gutta-percha.

But then comes the disconcerting news that he is to be moved farther north. He writes home of h disappointment at hearing the "grape" or rumor: "I did hope to be paroled & come home as I am tired of wa and its destruction."

He is moved to Johnson's Island on Lake Erie, 16½ acres enclosed by a 15-foot-high, nail-spiked palisade, an there he endures much harsher treatment. On August 8, 1862, he records in his diary the cold-bloode murder of a fellow prisoner: "The poor man told the Sintinel that he was going to his quarters but yet th murderous centinel firred and Killed him. He was a young man, very peaceable quiet fellow... It was one o the most horable things I ever Seen in life."

In late September, Speer is mustered for exchange and returns south to Vicksburg to rejoin the fight.

Honorable system

At the outset of the war, which everybody on both sides expects to last only a few weeks, no long-ter provisions have been made for holding prisoners of war. It's a complicated business: Prisoners have to b accounted for, transported, housed, fed, kept warm, supplied with fresh water and clothing, their wounds an sickness attended to.

Above all, they have to be guarded.

Virtually no one volunteers for guard duty — tedious, confining, lonely, lacking the chance for glor Especially in the South, being a prison guard is considered unmanly.

Initially, after a battle has been decided, commanders merely parole their prisoners. That is, the capture soldiers give their word of honor neither to attempt to escape, nor to rejoin the hostilities, and they are truste to remain available until an exchange can be worked out. Once they are exchanged, usually for a like numbe of men on the other side, they are free to rejoin their units.

These arrangements are informal, and the Union Army refuses to formalize them because that would mea in effect, recognizing the Confederacy as a sovereign nation. But as time goes on, a growing number prisoners on both sides becomes stranded in a limbo of confinement. Gen. Robert E. Lee, commander of th Army of Northern Virginia, and Gen. George B. McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac, press fo a more formal arrangement on both humanitarian and practical grounds: the Confederacy, in particular, ju does not have the resources to feed and house prisoners, and increasingly it cannot afford the manpower t guard them.

Thus is born the Dix-Hill Cartel, named for the two officers who negotiate it — Maj. Gen. John A. Dix, USA and Maj. Gen. D.H. Hill, CSA. The Cartel creates a uniform process whereby captured soldiers will b repatriated, spelling out equivalencies — that is, a brigadier general is worth 20 enlisted men, a captain six, sergeant three, and so on.

This system of parole and exchange dates back two millennia to the Carthaginian Wars, and was continue through the Crusades, the Napoleonic Wars, and the War of 1812. It has a whiff of nobility about it, the tru of armies reposed in words of honor.

In practice, however, it sometimes means that weary troops allow themselves to be captured by the enemy fo a period of rest and recuperation before being returned to the rigors of battle.

Captain Speer once again takes his place in the 28th Regiment, but his ambivalence about the war haun him. He fights fiercely and with great courage in battle, yet tirelessly schemes for a way to get out of the arm For him, service in a morally ambiguous cause has become its own kind of confinement.

He determines to resign his commission, but a new order from Richmond decrees that any officer who resign his commission may not go home but must be conscripted into the ranks as a private soldier. Even furlough denied him — as the toll of dead and wounded mounts, there just isn't another officer available to take h place.

Speer campaigns with equal vigor to keep his younger brother, James, out of the war, and in this he succeeds.

Rise and fall

Captain Speer rises to the rank of major. He fights at Fredericksburg, is wounded at Chancellorsville an again at Gettysburg, where he charges Cemetery Hill with James Johnston Pettigrew's brigade under Ge George Pickett. He writes, "We charged the batteries 1½ miles over a plain. O such slaughter never was see We lost 2/3 of our Regt. O my God, where will this slaughter end?"

Nonetheless, in February 1864, his entire regiment signs a pledge to "never lay down our arms or abandon th struggle." Speer survives 10 more major battles, including the killing grounds of The Wilderness, Spotsylvani Court House, and Cold Harbor. A year after Gettysburg, he is promoted to colonel in command of th

regiment.

But the shortages of clothing, food, and arms remain a constant reminder that the Cause is now unwinnabl In May 1864, Speer writes a poem in eight stanzas for his family, ending: "I am dying, comrade, dying./ Te my heart's last fitful swell,/ Tell the cold dew gathering o'er me,/ Father, Mother, friends — Farewell."

Scarcely three months later, at the battle of Reams' Station near Petersburg, Virginia, the blast of shrapn from an artillery shell catches him in the head. He lingers four days and dies at the age of 38.

Friends cart his body home in a wagon across the Yadkin River and bury him among his ancestors.

Southern Patriot

Col. William Henry Asbury Speer wrote to his mother and father on March 13, 1863: "I will do all that I can t get out of the service as soon as I can."

Allen Speer, a storyteller and the colonel's great-great-nephew, discovered this letter among family pape dating to his ancestor Aaron Speer Sr., born in 1734. Moved by his family history, Allen wrote the *Voices fro Cemetery Hill* trilogy, dedicating the entire second volume to W. H. Asbury Speer's correspondence.

A compilation of vivid pictures and letters, *Voices from Cemetery Hill: The Civil War Diary, Reports, an Letters of Colonel William Henry Asbury Speer (1861-1864)* reveals the personal struggles of the Yadki County colonel throughout the war. "[Asbury] was opposed to secession and in favor of freeing slaves, bu proud to be a Southerner," Allen says.

A stanza from a poem Asbury wrote shortly before he died of battle wounds in 1864 voices a struggle tha many North Carolinians experienced: "Though I cannot, mid the battle,/Feel my heart's exulting thrill,/Yet, perish like a soldier,/Die a Southern patriot still."

The poem is published in full in the book's prologue, opposite pictures of the colonel's grave in Cemetry Hi near Boonville.

— Hannah Mitchell

Today's Stars

Exactly 145 years to the day since the men who became Company I of the 28th Regiment North Carolin Infantry organized themselves as the Yadkin Stars, Greg Cheek and several others met in a neighbor backyard to reactivate the affectionately nicknamed company.

Inspired by the captain who became a colonel, Cheek and fellow reenactor John Baucom lead today's Yadki Stars in honor of W. H. Asbury Speer. Since August 13, 2006, the company's membership has grown from s to more than 50. Not all enlisters are from Yadkin County, but most are North Carolina natives. Several hav ancestors who served under Colonel Speer. One member can trace at least 20.

"We feel almost a responsibility to keep the genealogy and the heritage alive so that the generations comin after can appreciate it and maybe even study it for themselves," says Cheek, who has served as lieutenan adjutant since the group's inception.

The Yadkin Stars stage historic battles across the South and demonstrate skirmishes for local audiences. I between, they keep busy with Civil War Trail marker dedications, living-history events, and programs fo schools.

This year marks not only the company's fifth anniversary, but also the 150th anniversary of Bull Ru (Manassas, Virginia), the first major battle of the war (July 21-24, 1861), generating even more interest in th reenactors and their events.

For more information about enlistment, upcoming events, and the history of the 28th Regiment, go t yadkinstars.org.

— Hannah Mitchell

Selected Sources

The author is indebted to the following sources: *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance, Volume I: 1843-186* edited by Frontis W. Johnston, and *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance, Volume II: 1863*, edited by Joe A Mobley, both from The Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resource 1963 and 1995; *Legal Aspects of Conscription and Exemption in North Carolina 1861-1865* by Memory Mitchell, UNC Press, 1965; *Zeb Vance*, by Gordon B. McKinney, UNC Press, 2004; *Silk Flags and Cold Ste* by William R. Trotter, John F. Blair, 1988; and *Zebulon B. Vance and "The Scattered Nation,"* edited b Maurice A. Weinstein, The Wildacres Press, 1995.

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