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Michigan Regimental Round Table Newsletter—Page 1

July 2021

MEMBER RENEWAL

The MRRT celebrates its 61st year in 2021 – and now is a great time to show your support by renewing your membership! (Or become a new member!).

Membership is \$25 a year – or \$5 for students. Checks should be made out to

Treasurer **Jeanie Graham** (the bank does not like checks made out to the RoundTable) and can be mailed to her home at **29835 Northbrook, Farmington Hills, MI 48334-2326**.

The July 2021 meeting has been cancelled because of the pandemic. However, there is some GREAT NEWS. Jeanie said that the Farmington Library (the new rules as of June 17, 2021) will allow us (and other groups) to start making full-scale meeting room reservations for September and thereafter, beginning on August 2nd.

Unfortunately, we will NOT be able to go on this year's trip to Culpepper, Virginia. With our first meeting of the year tentatively scheduled for late September, the Trip Committee will not have the time to put together all of the logistics involved in planning a great trip. We look forward to visiting Culpepper, Virginia during 2022.

Please visit our website at <http://www.farmlib.org/mrirt>. Links to interesting Civil War programs are available.

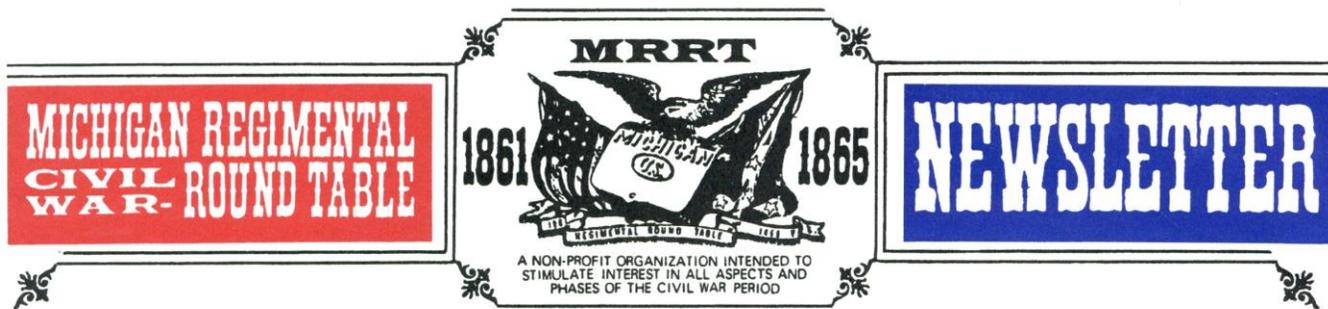
Civil War Essentials - Underwater Torpedoes in the Civil War

The routine employment of underwater explosive devices in naval warfare is generally considered to have begun during the US Civil War although there had been scattered uses before then. **The “torpedo” as it was called during the Civil War was really a stationary sea mine.** The self-propelled torpedo that proved so deadly in the World Wars of the 20th Century first appeared in its earliest experimental form soon after the end of the war. Civil War torpedoes were primarily a defensive weapon and thus appealed far more to the Confederates who desperately needed cheap weapons to offset the Union's naval superiority and protect their rivers and harbors.

It is thought these mines were called “torpedoes” because they reminded some naval officers of a type of ray called the Torpedo fish which gives off a powerful electric shock. Those torpedoes (and land mines) which were set off automatically by contact were referred to as “weapons that wait” and were the subject of moral soul searching during the war.



A type of torpedo called a “spar torpedo” was an explosive charge attached to the end of a long pole - the spar – which was mounted to the bow of either a boat or a submarine. The device was usually triggered by a crewman pulling a lanyard to activate a trigger when the torpedo was in contact with the enemy vessel. Ideally the spar was long enough so that the only the enemy ship was damaged by the explosion! An obvious drawback was that it required close contact with the target ship, so it was really strictly a night action weapon. **The Confederate submarine Hunley used one to sink the USS Housatonic but also sank, possibly as a result of the explosion.** The Union navy used a spar torpedo to sink the Confederate ironclad *CSS Albemarle* (see the August 2020 MRRT



Newsletter article about William Cushing). As with the *Hunley*, the steam launch used to deploy it was also lost.

As developed by the Confederates, stationary torpedoes either floated on the surface of the water or were moored just below the surface. The sub-surface versions were “stealthier” but were also more exposed to failure due to corrosion or water intrusion. They could also result in losses to friendly vessels if their charted positions were wrong. **Both contact ignition and command ignition strategies were successfully employed by the Confederates during the war. Contact ignition occurred when the enemy ship struck one of the contact horns on the mine (see photo).** The *Singer* torpedo – so named because it was developed by a member of the Singer sewing machine family - was considered possibly the best contact detonated mine the Confederacy employed. **A contact mine detonation doomed the Union ironclad *USS Tecumseh* at the beginning of the 1864 Battle of Mobile Bay.** But the subsequent few minutes in that battle also showed the contact mine’s limitations. Admiral Farragut’s order to “damn the torpedoes” proved successful because the other contact mines in the area failed to explode when struck by other Union ships. Defective manufacturing or prolonged exposure to the elements had rendered them useless.

Command detonation mines mostly depended on the early crude form of electrical apparatus to work. A notable success achieved by a command detonated underwater torpedo happened in late 1862 when a Confederate hidden on the riverbank set off two subsurface torpedoes which sank the Union Eads ironclad *USS Cairo* in the Yazoo River. While reliability was also an issue with command detonated torpedoes, they did not raise the moral issue that contact detonated ones did because the ignition had to be a deliberate act against an observed enemy vessel, like the *Cairo*, while contact torpedoes could destroy any ship unlucky enough to bump into one.

Although the reported numbers vary, perhaps as many as 58 vessels were sunk by some form of torpedo during the war. “Ironclads are said to master the world, but torpedoes master the ironclads!” – General G. J. Rains, Chief of the Confederate Torpedo Service.

Quiz Questions: This month’s questions pertain to the Battle of Gettysburg:

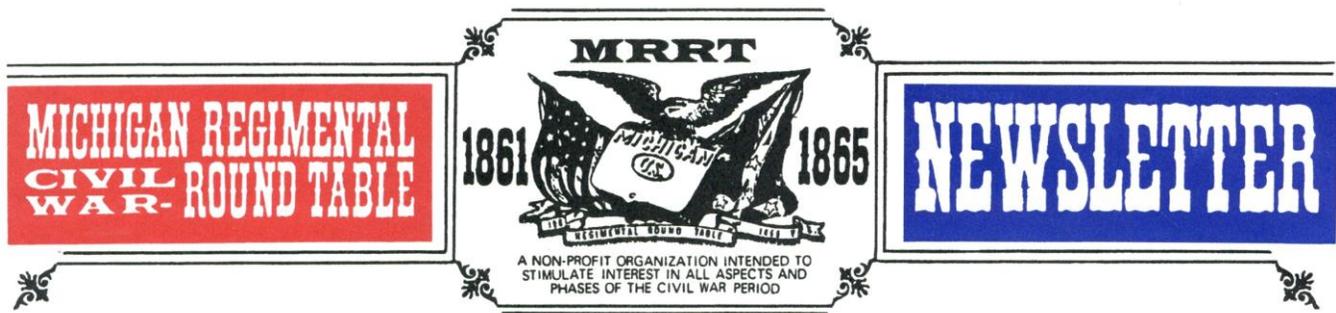
1. Which Federal general, the Chief Engineer of the Army of the Potomac, helped save the army from defeat at Little Round Top? Which Federal general surprisingly pulled his corps from Little Round Top to the Wheatfield area?
2. Who was the only civilian killed at the battle? Which Confederate soldier was killed on his family’s property?
3. A historic struggle took place on the first day between two regiments—one from Michigan and one from North Carolina. What were these regiments and who led them?
4. Which Governor of Pennsylvania commissioned a Gettysburg attorney to purchase land for a cemetery to intern the Federal dead? Who was the attorney that obtained the 17 acres for the cemetery?
5. Which stream was crossed as the Confederates pushed toward Gettysburg on July 1st? Up which ridge did these Rebels first face Federal forces?

Our thanks to “Old Sarge” for his help with these great questions.

Civil War Essentials – Elmira, NY Union Prison Camp

What eventually became Elmira Prison began the Civil War as a barracks for “Camp Rathbun” or “Camp Chemung”, a mustering and training ground for the Union Army from 1861–1864. The advantage of this 30-acre site was its closeness to the Erie and Northern Central Railroads, which crisscrossed in Elmira. Elmira is located close to the New York – Pennsylvania border in the middle of New York state.

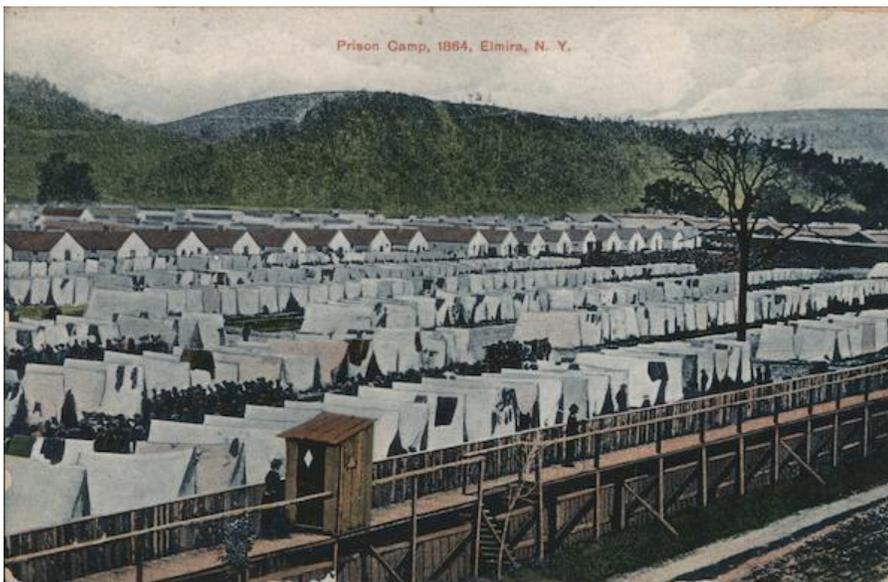
The Camp fell into disuse for training soldiers in 1864. It was converted into a military prison during the summer of 1864. The prison camp nicknamed “**Hellmira**” was in use for almost exactly one year, from July 6, 1864, until July 11, 1865 (the date of the last arrival). **During the 12 months 2,970 of the 12,100 prisoners, 24.5% died from**



malnutrition, exposure to winter weather, and disease from poor sanitary conditions, and limited medical care. For comparison purposes, Andersonville Prison had a death rate of 29% and Salisbury, North Carolina's (the largest Confederate prison) death rate was 34%.

Creation of Elmira Prison 1864-1865

The collapse of the prisoner exchange system by April 1864 quickly resulted in overcrowding in the existing prisons. Confederate refusal to exchange captured African American soldiers led to the collapse of prisoner exchanges. The commander of the Elmira Barracks, Lieutenant Seth Eastman, was ordered to “*set apart the barracks on the Chemung River at Elmira as a depot for prisoners of war*”. Eastman was told that the prison might be needed within 10 days and there maybe 8,000 to 10,000 prisoners moving there! Eastman calculated that the property could only hold 50% of the intended number of prisoners. The facility could only feed 5,000 a day with a limit of 1,500 men at one time. There were no hospital facilities in the camp as the soldiers training there relied on the town of Elmira.



Commandant of the camp was Major Henry V. Colt (brother of the famous pistol maker Samuel Colt) of the 104th New York Volunteers. Major Colt was given command of the prison because an injury limited his ability to serve in the field. Major Colt was unusual because both Confederate prisoners and Union soldiers liked him.

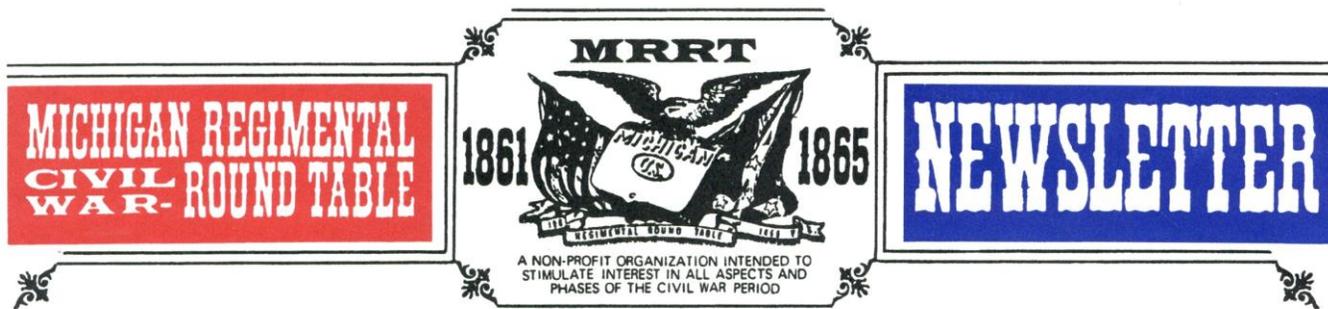
The first 2,000 prisoners were transferred from Point Lookout, Maryland to Elmira at the end of June 1864. The prisoners endured a very uncomfortable two-day sea voyage up to New Jersey in the overcrowded and filthy holds of the ships. After reaching New Jersey, the men were loaded on

trains for a 17–20-hour trip to Elmira. Upon arrival in Elmira, eyewitnesses described the prisoners as dirty and ragged, but happy to be moved from Point Lookout.

Train Wreck

The transfer of prisoners was quiet until July 15th when a train carrying 833 Confederate prisoners and 128 Union guards bound for Elmira collided with a coal train traveling the opposite direction. There were 49 prisoners and 17 guards killed with many more seriously wounded. The wreckage was cleaned up the next day and another train took the survivors to Elmira.

Amputations for the most seriously wounded were performed first, followed by treatment for those less seriously wounded. Despite the best efforts of medical personnel, some men were untreated for several days.



Prison Conditions

Surgeon Charles Alexander inspected the camp five days after it opened for prisoners. A major problem that he found was the camp's sanitary conditions. The sinks contained stagnant water and the Surgeon believed that this would be a source of disease. He recommended the construction of new sinks. This suggestion was ignored. By the middle of August 9,200 prisoners were in the camp and disease broke out, resulting in 121 deaths during August compared with 11 in July. Work finally began on the drainage system on October 27th with the project completed on January 1, 1865. During this time period the prisoners were subjected to stagnant and unclean water, resulting in widespread sickness.

The surgeon reported that the hospitals were the other major problem. Medical services were provided by a local doctor, William Wey. The hospital tent was replaced by three pavilion wards.

Only 10 men were able to successfully escape from the camp. Several members of the Jefferson Davis Artillery Company, led by Washington B. Traweek, successfully escaped from the camp. Their first plan involved digging a tunnel from a neighboring tent underneath the fence and then into Elmira. That plan was dropped, and another tunnel was started because other prisoners had similar tunnel digging ideas. Unfortunately, the new tunnel was discovered by the guards. Mr. Traweek and his associates then went back to work on the first tunnel because it had not been discovered. Major Colt called Traweek before him and asked him where the first tunnel was. Traweek refused to talk and was put into a sweatbox. Major Colt finally released him when he would not talk. Eventually, Traweek and his companions escaped. **The winter of 1864-1865 was bitterly cold. Temperatures dropped to 18 below zero twice and a February storm dropped over two feet of snow. This was a major shock to Southerners who had never experienced such a winter. By March 1865, hundreds of prisoners had frozen to death or died from disease.** The spring thaw led to the flooding of the camp. Prisoners were finally paroled after General Lee surrendered.

John Surratt

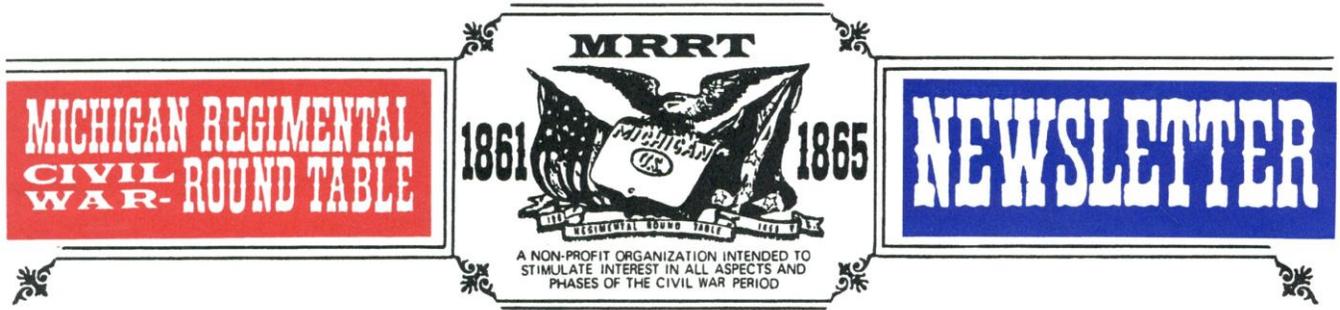
One of the Lincoln Assassination conspirators, John Surratt, claimed to have been in Elmira on a mission to gather information about the prison. When he heard about President Lincoln being shot, he fled to Montreal, Quebec. His mother, Mary Surratt, was hanged for her role in the assassination plot.

After the War

After the war, the camp was closed, demolished, and converted to farmland. Elmira's residents wanted to forget about the misery associated with the camp. Confederates who died in the camp were buried in what is now Woodlawn National Cemetery in Elmira. **The prison site is now residential, but work is underway to reconstruct the camp. The prisoner's miserable conditions were depicted in the 1983 miniseries *The Blue and the Gray*.**

Quiz Answers:

1. Generals Gouverneur Warren and Dan Sickles
2. Jennie Wade and Wesley Culp
3. 24th Michigan under Colonel Henry A. Morrow (born in Warrenton, VA) and the 26th North Carolina under 21-year-old Colonel Henry K. Burgwyn
4. Andrew G. Curtin – Governor of Pennsylvania and David Wills
5. Willoughby Run and McPherson's Ridge.



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