

INTRODUCTION

James M. McPherson

When Edwin C. Bearss was growing up on a Montana ranch before World War II, he named cattle after Civil War battles and gave names of Civil War generals to the milk cows and their calves that roamed the ranch. His favorite milk cow was Antietam; one of her calves was Sharpsburg. Ed first encountered the Civil War when he was in sixth grade. He had earlier fallen in love with ancient history. And he seemed genetically programmed for a fascination with military history. A third cousin had received the Medal of Honor as a marine fighting against the Philippine insurrectionists. Ed's father, Omar Bearss, had been a Marine Corps officer in World War I. When Ed's parents rented a house in Billings so Ed could attend sixth grade there instead of in the one-room schoolhouse near the ranch, Ed found books about the Civil War in the house. He was forever hooked.

That was in 1934 and 1935. During the next several years, events in Europe and Asia built toward the conflicts that would erupt into World War II. Ed followed these events avidly. He acquired maps of Spain, China, and central Europe and moved flags across the maps to follow the advances and retreats of various armies. His knowledge of world geography and current events was extraordinary. In his junior year in high school he scored highest on a current events test in the entire state; the following year he did the same in U.S. history. His total recall of historical facts was even more impressive. Ed denies that he has a

photographic memory. "I can't scan a poem and quote it back to you." But he undoubtedly could do so if he was interested in poetry, for he admits that "anything I am interested in I never forget." Above all, he has never forgotten anything he has read about history or any feature of terrain he has seen on a map or walked over on the ground itself. It is these qualities of encyclopedic memory that make him a legendary tour guide of historical sites, especially battlefields.

I have been on many historical tours with Ed—not only of Civil War battlefields but also of Waterloo, the Somme, and World War II sites from the Normandy beaches to the Huertgen Forest and Remagen. I remember one occasion that illustrates his mastery of the detail of several wars. Ed and I were members of the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission created by Congress in 1991 to survey the threats to Civil War battlefields and the opportunities to forestall these threats by land acquisitions, easements, and other means. The commission traveled to many Civil War battlefields, where Ed gave his patented tours, and we held hearings in nearby cities. We made our final site visit in 1993. Ed not only brought alive the battle that took place there in January 1865 but also described the hurricane that washed away part of the fort in the 1920s and the building of an airstrip during World War II that destroyed part of the remainder in such vivid detail that we were sure he had been there on all three occasions. The following day, as our bus rolled out of Wilmington for a tour of the Bentonville battlefield, we passed the battleship U.S.S. *North Carolina* tied up in the Cape Fear River. For the next 20 minutes Ed described all the actions in which the ship had participated in World War II, the battle stars she had won, and what she had done after the war before arriving in Wilmington to become a ship museum. As he finished this dramatic account, we passed the Moore's Creek National Battlefield. Without missing a beat, Ed shifted from 1944 to 1776 and told us the story of that patriot victory over the Loyalists.

Ed has experienced war firsthand. Six months after he graduated from high school the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Ed enlisted in the Marine Corps and in July 1942 shipped out for the South Pacific. On January 2, 1944, his unit attacked Japanese pillboxes on New Britain Island, where Ed was hit by several machine-gun bullets. At the risk of

their own lives a couple of buddies pulled him out of range and got him to an aid station. Eventually evacuated to the United States, Ed spent the next 26 months recuperating in military hospitals—and reading about the Civil War.

Discharged in 1946, he went to Georgetown University on the GI Bill and graduated in 1949. For several years he worked as a geographer in the Naval Hydrographic Office in Washington and spent his spare time visiting Civil War battlefields. That avocation soon became his vocation. He went to Indiana University, where he earned an M.A. in history with a thesis on Confederate Gen. Patrick Cleburne. Ed had already learned that one cannot understand a Civil War battle without walking the ground. “I realized that at Gettysburg, when I visited the battlefield in the early 1950s,” he told me. “The ground over which Pickett’s Charge took place was not at all how I visualized it from my reading.” So before he wrote his thesis Ed decided to visit the battlefields where Cleburne fought. At Shiloh he had an epiphany of sorts. The park historian walked him over the field for six hours. “That six-hour ramble through the woods and fields of bloody Shiloh,” Ed recalled, “changed my understanding of events of that late afternoon 92 years before.” But even more significant were “the interpretive skills and electrifying personality” of the park historian, Charles Shedd. Then and there Ed decided that he wanted to pursue a similar career. He applied to the Park Service and in 1955 was hired as the historian at Vicksburg National Military Park.

From there Ed never looked back. He was promoted in 1958 to regional research historian for the National Park Service’s Southeast region, still working out of Vicksburg but visiting virtually every battlefield in the western theater of the Civil War, writing up reports for other park historians, giving tours himself, and developing his unique style, which blended on-the-spot descriptions of tactics and terrain, colorful anecdotes about Civil War personalities both great and obscure, and an appreciation of the larger strategic and political contexts of specific battles. During these years Ed met Margie Riddle, a schoolteacher with an interest in and knowledge of the Civil War that matched Ed’s own. They married in 1958. For the next eight years they lived in Vicksburg, where Margie began editing and proofreading Ed’s books and research reports. She also helped him with one of the great coups of his career—the

raising of the ironclad gunboat U.S.S. *Cairo* from its watery grave in the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg, where it had been sunk by Confederate "torpedoes" (mines) in December 1862. As Ed and colleagues reconstructed the gunboat for exhibit at the park—the *pièce de résistance* of Civil War artifacts—Margie spent some 3,000 hours cleaning, identifying, and researching 10,000 items that came up with the boat, ranging from silverware to frying pans to boat hardware—many of them on exhibit at the park's U.S.S. *Cairo* museum.

By the time of the Civil War Centennial in the 1960s, Ed had earned fame as the most knowledgeable Civil War historian in the National Park Service. In 1966 he moved to Washington as part of a new research team of Park Service historians. Here, too, his workaholic energy and encyclopedic knowledge produced superb reports and recommendations for improvement at national parks from Guam to the Klondike, from Fort Moultrie to Fort Donelson. In 1981 Ed became chief historian of the National Park Service, a position he held until a year before his retirement in 1995.

But for Ed, retirement meant more time than ever for his favorite activity—tours of every kind of historical site for organizations of all kinds—the Smithsonian Institution, the Civil War Preservation Trust, History America Tours, the Blue and Gray Education Society, Civil War roundtables, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps—and on and on. Ed's tours have reached tens of thousands of people, many of whom return again and again as self-described Bearss groupies. Although other tour guides have tried, none can match Ed's unique style, which personalizes the generals and politicians and sergeants and privates who populate his battlefield tours. His stentorian voice carries easily not only to those in his tours but also to the dozens of others who attach themselves to Ed as he walks the ground at Gettysburg and other fields.

The following transcripts of Ed's tours of the principal Civil War battlefields make it possible for those who have never been privileged to take an actual tour with him to take a virtual tour. And for those who have walked these fields with Ed, the transcripts bring back the details of terrain and tactics, personalities and command decisions that first opened their eyes to the reality of those battles—and of that war. To read the following pages is the next best thing to being there.