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Re-enactors bring depth, diversity to Revolutionary War commemoration

MICHAEL BUETTNER (STAFF WRITER)

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More than 100 re-enactors portraying American, British and German troops camped on the grounds of Battersea during the 20th annual Revolutionary War Re-enactment held at Battersea in Petersburg.

PETERSBURG — You can't fight a battle without an enemy, and you shouldn't try to fight one without having someone on hand to treat your casualties.

Fortunately for the organizers of the weekend's 20th annual re-enactment of the Revolutionary War Battle of Petersburg, the nation's growing community of historical re-enactors includes many who are willing to portray Redcoats, field surgeons and other non-heroes, and to share with the public what they've learned from researching 18th-century life.

Asked why he chose to wear the once-hated red uniform of a British soldier, Williamsburg resident and retired executive John Giere responded, "Someone has to play the good guys."

From the perspective of the British, Giere noted, "The so-called Patriots were in revolt. They were little more than traitors," while the "Lobsterbacks" of the British Army "were defending the lawful government."

Nearby, retired policeman Michael Williams of Graham, N.C., was manning his Detached Field Hospital, aided by Rick Randall of King George County and Chris Grimes of Roper, N.C.

Williams said he started doing Revolutionary War re-enactments in 1982 as a musket-carrying soldier but found that role unsatisfying. For one thing, he said, "I carried a handgun for 30 years at work. I didn't want to carry a gun off-duty."

But more importantly, he said, the re-enactments "were sort of one-dimensional." The participants would shoot their weapons, and some would fall down as if wounded or killed, but when it was over, "everybody would rise from the dead."

Now, Williams and crew are on hand to tend the fallen, and also to show off an extensive collection of painful-looking medical instruments and explain how 18th-century doctors trained and practiced.

Elsewhere on the lawn at Battersea, other re-enactors and living-history performers worked at various crafts while the American and British troops drilled and demonstrated their weapons, in addition to holding the Battle of Petersburg re-enactment once each day.

The event — held Saturday and Sunday at the historic Battersea mansion — commemorated the 230th anniversary of a fight that took place in 1781 amid a British campaign aimed at disrupting American troop movements and destroying supplies.

The British force was led by Maj. Gen. William Phillips, a highly regarded artillery commander who died in Petersburg of a fever about a month after the battle and is interred in an unmarked grave in the old burying ground at Blandford Church.

Advancing toward Petersburg on April 25, Phillips' troops met resistance from American soldiers under the command of Baron Friedrich von Steuben; the ensuing three-hour fight became known as the Battle of Petersburg.

The British ultimately prevailed, forcing the Continentals to evacuate the city. Upon entering Petersburg, the royal troops burned 4,000 hogsheads of tobacco before heading north into Chesterfield County, where they wrought further havoc in Chester, Osborn's Landing and Bermuda Hundred.

Although the badly outnumbered Colonials were forced to retreat from Petersburg, the action was credited with delaying the British long enough for American troops to reinforce the defenses of Richmond and prevent that city from being sacked.

The anniversary event, sponsored by the Petersburg Department of Tourism, also featured performances by the Petersburg Symphony's Battersea Ensemble and musician Stephen Rockenbach.

Battersea, a Palladian-style house built in 1768, was originally the home of Col. John Banister, the first mayor of Petersburg and a signer of the Articles of Confederation. The house sits on a more than 30-acre property, is owned by the city and is undergoing renovation by the Petersburg-based nonprofit Battersea Foundation.

• Michael Buettner may be reached at 722-5155 or mbuettner@progress-index.com.



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