Reliving History

Propelled by his boyhood passion for the Civil War, Eric Powell relives the experiences, hardships and triumphs of a Confederate soldier.

by Nicholas Addison Thomas
As a five-year-old, Eric Powell spent hours playing with his best friend, a kid whose father happened to be a relic hunter and huge Civil War fan. Like other boys their age, Powell and his friend would play a realistic version of army, only they adopted the identities of Confederate and Union soldiers.

Eric built forts, used a toy musket he got for his birthday and wore a Confederate uniform his grandmother made for him. He did everything he could to personify a Civil War-era soldier. Little did he know that, decades later, he’d still be role-playing.

History has always played a big part in Eric’s life. In 1990 Eric began teaching at Stafford Senior High School. He led AP US History classes, sponsored the History Club and even coached the debate team. After 18 years in the classroom, Eric became the K-12 Social Studies Coordinator for Stafford County Public Schools, a role he thoroughly enjoys.

Though he still works with history, it’s his connection to the Civil War re-enacting scene that really brings it to life. It all started when a student, Nathan Shoemake, offered to speak to Eric’s class about re-enacting. Over the course of two years, Nathan gave presentations about the hobby and encouraged other students to get involved. On one occasion, he offered Eric a chance to see a re-enactment at Pratt Park. When Eric got there, the re-enactors loaned him some gear and ran him through a quick class on soldiering.

“A couple of hours later, I was on the field. I was given a good look at what it’s like to re-enact, and I was hooked,” said Eric, who went on to use his experience in class. “Re-enacting allowed me to bring a unique element into my classes, and it helped me to have students visualize and empathize with people in history.”

Re-enacting is a type of role-playing in which participants recreate some aspect of a historical event or period. This can include something as narrow as a small street fight in downtown Fredericksburg or as broad as the Battle of Gettysburg. In a dynamic sense of the word, re-enacting is living history; an entertaining and educational attempt to bring history to life for those involved and for the general public. It’s a popular hobby, and one that punctuates the region’s historic past.

According to Eric, there are generally two types of re-enacting. The first is the immersion approach, which is called “progressive” or “hardcore” re-enacting. In this approach, people try to live exactly as someone from the period lived. And then there’s the exhibition approach, also called...
Union cavalry re-enact the June 1863 Battle of Brandy Station.
“mainstream” re-enacting. This approach is more focused on educating its audience about the period.

“Most people in this region only participate in a handful of events each year. If people really wanted to, they could find a re-enactment once a week on the east coast,” said Eric, who has been involved in the hobby since 1993. “In our unit, we have about twelve to fifteen active members, and we usually do about one event a month. It’s a great way to bring local history to life.”

A mainstay on the battlefield, Eric is part of the 47th Virginia Infantry-Company I, known also as the “Stafford Guard.” The regiment is a non-profit, non-political, family-oriented unit devoted to preserving the history and memories of the brave soldiers who fought in the Civil War for Southern independence. Established in 1981 by experienced re-enactors, the unit currently supports 30-40 members who live everywhere from Northern Virginia to Newport News. The 47th Infantry is one of only a few units in the area, and it is the largest.

“We have a lot of guys who are very active in the events, as well as others who participate periodically,” said Eric, whose unit is involved in both progressive and mainstream re-enactments. “It’s a lot of fun for the soldiers, and it’s a great chance to honor the original 47th.”

For seven years, Eric served as a Lieutenant of the 47th Virginia Infantry before returning to the role of private. He also serves as Chief of Staff for the First Battalion of Longstreet’s Corps. Alongside him are several commanders who play an integral part in the unit: Captain Bill Russell, whose ancestors were in the original 47th unit; Lieutenant Rick Miller, who owns the Grey Ghost Gallery on Caroline Street; and First Sergeant Paul Pessagno, the unit’s drill sergeant of sorts, among others. Together, these men work to ensure the safety and accuracy of their re-enactments, and to keep the memories of the original infantry alive.

The 47th Virginia Infantry has a long and illustrious history in the region. Its origins began in Stafford County, where it was organized on June 11, 1861. Throughout its existence, the regiment consisted of roughly 1,414 men, many of whom were recruited from Spotsylvania, Stafford, Fredericksburg and Caroline County. After being recognized by the Confederate States of America, the unit was moved to the Peninsula Campaign as part of General A.P. Hill’s famed “Light Division.” Known for their commitment to the South, the 47th Virginia Infantry fought in numerous battles. In May 1861, they helped man four batteries of cannon at Aquia Creek Landing, and in December 1862, they fought in the Battle of Fredericksburg.
Scenes from the 145th Anniversary of the Battle of Chancellorsville.
The 47th re-enacting unit commemorates these and other battles throughout the year: “As a unit, we participate in a lot of local and national re-enactments. One of my favorite scenes is the Battle of Fredericksburg,” said Eric, who helps coordinate the event. “It’s a small event in December with a few hundred guys, and it’s a lot of fun. Our next big event is the Battle of Fredericksburg’s 150th anniversary in 2012.”

Civil War re-enactments serve as poetic nods to history’s heroes, but it’s not as easy as it looks. A lot of hard work and preparation goes into a single event, which can be comprised of a few hundred people, at the very least. As a long-time leader and recruiting officer of his unit, Eric is in charge of organizing his fellow re-enactors and training them for their time on the field. It’s an arduous task, but one that results in a successful— and safe— re-enactment.

What sets his infantry apart from other units is its commitment to training and high standards for authenticity. Before boots hit the battlefield, innumerable checks and balances are put into effect. One of Eric’s responsibilities as a unit leader is to ensure his men are properly drilled for safety. He also enforces the necessary regulations. For example, muskets must be checked and re-checked several times to avoid carriage of live ammunition, and the men must continually hydrate themselves, often for days leading up to the event.

“Re-enactors are used to the rigors of these events, and they hydrate properly, whereas a lot of the spectators want a front row seat, so they wait in the sun for hours,” said Eric, who adds that bags of ice are usually hidden on the battlefields. “The health of our soldiers and fans is paramount to everything we do.”

For 16 years, Eric has been an active member of the local re-enacting scene. How he got there was through happenstance, but that isn’t the case for most participants. Many of the people involved in the 47th Infantry come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are lawyers, teachers, students, military personnel and business owners, and they range in age. Still, they all have one thing in common: They enjoy the networking associated with re-enacting and the ability to learn through experience.

“For most people, it starts with a curiosity. Once you get out on the battlefield, you’ll know if it’s for you or not,” said Eric. “It’s really not that hard to get involved in. All you have to do is go online, find re-enactment units in your area and then contact them. Most units will have some sort of program to help new people get started.”

To be a part of the 47th Infantry, for example, prospective members should ideally be in good physical shape. Many of the events occur during the summer months, and they involve long marches, wearing the heavy outfits for hours, and of course, the lengthy battle scenes. From a cost perspective, it’s fairly reasonable. Unit dues are minimal (about $35 a year for membership), and they cover monthly meetings costs, family-oriented events and the actual re-enactments. The only part that’s a little pricey is the individual gear.

For walk-ons or first-timers, most units will start them off with gear they have lying around. Others, like the 47th Infantry, have a “New Recruit Box” that includes unused coats, muskets and other items for beginners. The unit also raises funds to purchase equipment. Eventually, serious re-enactors should purchase gear of their own. The equipment and uniform can run about $1,500, depending on how authentic you want to be.

For many participants, re-enacting is more than just a weekend hobby— it’s a lifestyle. In many respects, this form of role-playing affords them the opportunity to perform what they’ve so often researched and read. The extensive battles, the texture of the uniforms— it’s a tangible approach to engaging history. For Eric, however, it’s a fun, safe and cost-effective hobby that’s also a family affair.

Eric, Wendi and their two children—Harley and Annalisa—can often be found on the battlefield, each of them playing an important part in a historic battle. In fact, Harley is learning how to play the fife so he can become a field musician. And though they’re too young to handle any firearms, Eric still encourages his children to appreciate local history from an experiential perspective. After all, that’s how he got his start.

“I really enjoy being out there, spending time with my family and friends and giving the viewers a memorable experience. There’s so much history here, and I’m able to honor that through these events,” said Eric. “My kids are already following in my footsteps. Maybe down the line they’ll fill my role and bring excitement and awareness to a new generation.”

If you’re interested in joining the 47th Virginia Infantry-Company I, or you’d like to learn more about what it takes to re-enact, visit www.47thvirginia.com.