

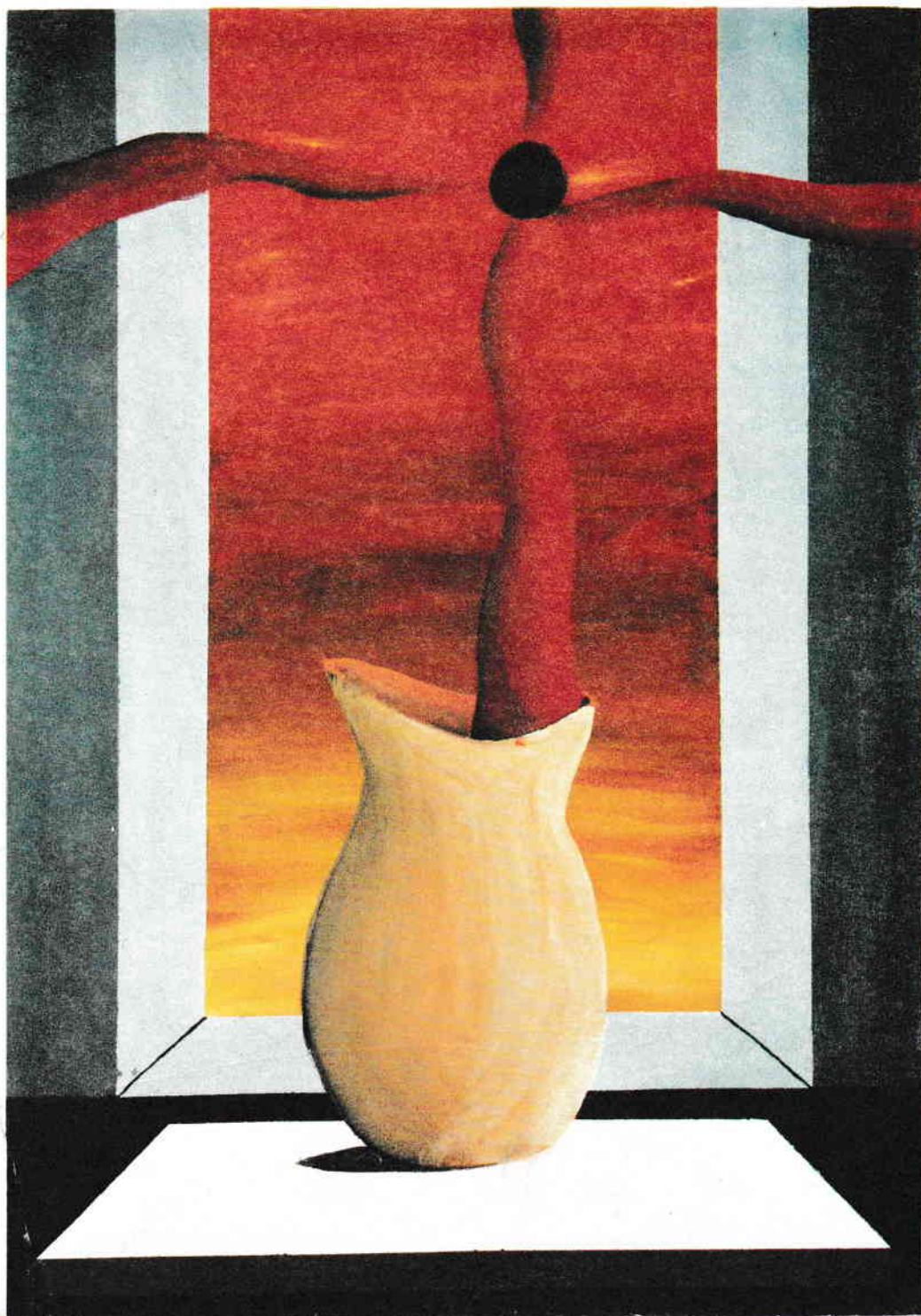
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# PALO ALTO REVIEW

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◆ TEACHERS ◆

FIVE DOLLARS



# The Civil War

## life-long fascination

by Mark Blickley

**R**ecently, I tuned into a re-broadcast of the first installment of the much heralded Civil War series on PBS. Thirty years ago I was quite a Civil War buff. As a third grader I could recite the dates and places of all the major, and many of the minor, skirmishes. I knew the North and South lineups as expertly as my friends knew the benches of the powerhouse New York Yankees and football Giants. And like those two great teams, I was also from the Bronx.

My fascination with the Civil War was most certainly fueled by a television series which was called *The Blue and the Gray*. It was about two brothers who fought on opposing sides in the War Between the States. The resulting paraphernalia from this hit show — swords, muskets, caps, trading cards, and the monumental Blue and Gray Battle set with hundreds of opposing plastic soldiers — certainly made it easier to slip into an awed enthusiasm for this turbulent period of our history.

But it was my father who inspired me to supplement this play with serious reading material about the Civil War. The first words he gave me to read were from a letter he received as a boy from the War Department. In three paragraphs it gave a thumbnail sketch of my great-great-grandfather, one Charles Rheinfeldt, a German immigrant who enlisted in a New York infantry regiment in 1861 and served four years in the Union Army. He had fought

in both battles of Bull Run, was wounded four times, rose from the rank of private to captain, and died in 1866 as a civilian.

It was wonderfully convenient to have an actual name, an ancestor to emulate, when the guys on the block would organize our own Civil War battles. I was always Captain Rheinfeldt, shooting down the advancing Rebels from between the cover of parked cars, or sneaking up with my rubber bayonet on an unsuspecting Johnny Reb chewing Turkish taffy on a tenement stoop.

The thrill of battle was exquisite. Turning myself into Captain Rheinfeldt gave me an advantage. He was a real person who belonged just to me. But as soon as our war games ended I erased the memory of my ancestor as quickly as I could. I had to.

My father was fond of updating the War Department letter with the cause of my great-great grandfather's death. My Dad, a thirty-five year old World War II veteran, would shake his head and in a voice filled with disbelief tell me how Captain Charles Rheinfeldt, much wounded veteran of some of the bloodiest campaigns of the civil War, left the army in 1865, and in less than a year fell off a ladder and broke his neck while engaged in his profession as a house painter.

Sometimes a little smile would crease my father's lips after repeating this information to me. I never understood why.

Each time my father would mention how our ancestor died, the harder it became for me to glorify Captain Rheinfeldt. I wouldn't see my great-great grandfather in his Union uniform, dripping with medals, but in a painter's cap, stumbling on a ladder like the buffoon in some Laurel and Hardy short. I just wished the good Captain could have died in the war, or that my father would keep this obituary to himself.

We were pals, my father and me. Our common ground was the battlegrounds of the Civil War. We spent so much time discussing that war. I'd impress him with my knowledge and reading ability. He gave me a copy of Grant's memoirs, and though I couldn't comprehend most of the writing, I made a good enough show of pretending to understand that he soon began touting me as a Civil War expert. And I believed him.

A treasured outing with my father was the day he took me to visit Grant's tomb. On the subway over to the dead General's resting place, I asked him about Grandfather Rheinfeldt's remains. Surely he knew where our relative was buried. My father shook his head; I could tell he was upset.

He told me that we'd think about Captain Rheinfeldt while we visited his commander. Then my father smiled and said that the flags of every Union regiment surrounded the tomb and we could pick out Captain Rheinfeldt's unit flag.

Walking inside the tomb gave me quite a chill. Although the man interred there was also a President of the United States, the atmosphere was strictly Civil War. After reviewing the flags and other memorabilia, we peered down into the large circular opening in the middle of the room. There, on a level beneath us, were two elevated caskets. My father lifted me up so I could get a better view.

Each casket had simple gold lettering giving the name and dates of its occupant. I knew that Ulysses S. Grant's dates were 1822-1885. But I was shocked to see that his wife, Julia, had made it into the twentieth century. Her golden number sparked 1901, the year she died.

I asked my father to put me down. The tomb suddenly took on an incredible immediacy. General Grant's wife lived in my century. It didn't matter that this visit took place in 1961, a full sixty years after she was interred there.

All my history texts from school sliced up time into centuries. The Civil War was mounted within the same historical brackets as Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Abraham Lincoln. Julia Grant had slid past all that. Her presence at the tomb brought her husband and his war into sharper focus, at least for one eight-year-old boy holding his father's hand,

unable to articulate the excitement over his discovery—though he tried.

Our visit to Grant's tomb ended when my father took us to eat at a luncheonette in the neighborhood. That was a rare event. We never ate out; it was too expensive.

After looking at the menu taped to the window I wanted to leave. When my father asked me why I didn't want to go inside I told him there was no hamburger on the menu. He pointed to a line that stated in bold red letters STEAKBURGER, and said it was the same thing as a hamburger.

I didn't believe him. I knew he loved steak and thought he was trying to trick me. We stood outside that luncheonette window, my father using every means at his disposal (save a slap to the head) to argue his point. But I held my ground.

My father's anger suddenly turned to amusement. He put his hand on my shoulder and steered me down the street where we found another establishment with a less pretentious menu.

Despite my research and field trips, the truth was that I was much more interested in playing Civil War than in studying it. But I loved going through my father's vast library of history books crammed inside our fifth floor walk-up. My father's social life consisted of his wife, his four kids, and his books. By applying myself to his library I gained access to a special part of him denied my sisters.

My father enjoyed watching me peruse his books, and I enjoyed watching him watching me. I'd curl my lip as I studied the different titles. I loved lunging for books that were placed higher than my reach. I'd stretch and strain for a volume while patiently waiting for a long arm to creep up behind me and encircle my waist. I'd giggle and my father would then pull me upwards before launching me into a series of aerial acrobatics.

He'd toss and spin and pummel me until I could feel the blood rush out of my head. When I was returned to earth, dizzy and contented, it was usually without a book in my hand. If my sisters were anywhere in the apartment my shrieks of joy would alert them to the human carnival ride that was my father. They'd line up as my father plucked them off the floor and hurled them into space. He'd juggle his kids until a pain in his stomach would force him to stop.

As swiftly as grandfather Rheinfeldt's demise after Appomattox, history repeated itself when inoperable cancer was discovered in my father's lower intestine. He spent the remaining year of his life shuffling between the Kingston V.A. Hospital and our living room couch.

Yet he still attempted to discuss the Civil War with me. I didn't know, or want to believe, he was dying,

although his existence was mostly the sucking of air between gnawed teeth, swallowing pain.

The last Christmas we spent together was in reality a race with time. Family tradition always dictated that we kids open our gifts Christmas morning. That year we were told we would be opening our gifts on Christmas Eve. My sisters and I screamed with pleasure upon hearing this, ignorant of the cause for this change. Life was seeping out of my father's body and he was afraid to delay the celebration eight hours.

My sisters and I spent Christmas Eve at our grandparents' apartment. When we were finally allowed to go upstairs to our apartment to open gifts, nothing seemed unusual. My father was in his familiar place, laying horizontal on the couch.

As my mother passed out presents I would peek over at my father. He seemed to be staring at me.

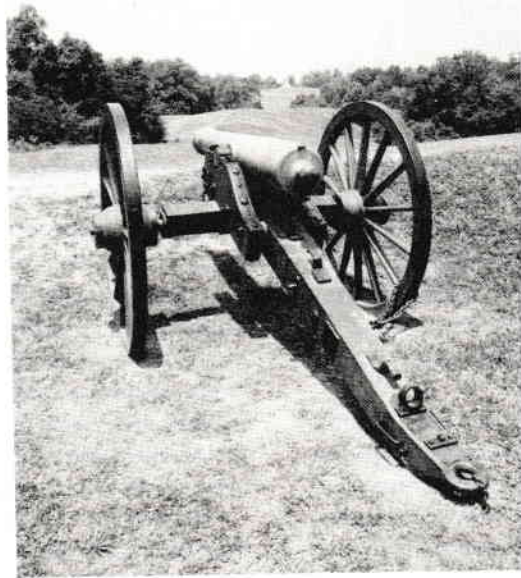
After all the smartly wrapped gifts were torn open I tried to hide my disappointment. We kissed our parents good night and returned to our rooms. I shared a room with my three-year-old sister. I walked her down the long hallway leading to our room and ushered her inside. That's when my mouth fell open.

Laid out on the bedroom floor were hundreds of plastic Civil War soldiers, a distinct battle line drawn between the blue and gray combatants. Sprinkled among these soldiers were small plastic cannons that really fired and mule trains ferrying supplies. When I turned to run back into the living room I bumped into my father, standing outside my bedroom door, supported by my mother.

She told me that he had spent hours setting up the battlefield, trying to make it as realistic as possible. I was amazed. I couldn't recall the last time I had seen him leave the couch. I hugged him and asked him to play with me, but he felt too weak and wanted to return to the living room.

The Civil War. The last conversation I remember having with my father was about the battle of Gettysburg. It was quite early in 1962 and my father, stretched out on the living room couch like a breathing skeleton, could still turn his head to follow my lips as we spoke.

We detailed that Pennsylvanian battle together.



Civil War battlefield cannon, Vicksburg, Mississippi

When I brought up Pickett's charge I called that southern officer Lieutenant Pickett. My father, upon hearing this, raised himself up and hollered at me, "Are you such a stupid little fool that you don't know he was a Lieutenant General, not a Lieutenant?" He flopped back on the couch, but a cacophony of abusive language insulting my intelligence revealed a vigor no one in the apartment had seen in months.

Frightened, I jumped up from the couch and ran into the kitchen. My mother grabbed me and told me that my father was in a lot of pain, and didn't mean what he was saying. I then heard for the first and only time in my life my father crying.

He called out to me. I didn't want to go to him. My mother led the scared nine-year-old into the living room. I kneeled by the couch as his bony fingers pressed into my crewcut. He tried to apologize, but no words would come out as he moved his mouth stupidly. That was the day I lost all interest in the Civil War.

It took me many years before I could understand my father's final anger towards me. His was a rage against a thirty-six-year-old body, not a nine-year-old boy. That outburst must've been his last agonized frustration that the disease which was turning him into a piece of living room furniture was no longer going to allow him to correct his kids when they needed it.

Looking back, sometimes I believe the faint smile on my father's lips whenever he described Captain Rheinfeldt's demise wasn't simply an acknowledgment of dark humor, but one of envy. My father endured such a long and painful struggle. The Captain was so lucky to have slipped so swiftly into death.

I snapped off the PBS Civil War series before it presented the 1863 battle of Gettysburg. I did not want to see any photographs of General George Pickett or some artist's rendition of his famous charge.

There was no need for me to watch the program chronicle the final two years of the war. As far as my father and I are concerned, Pickett's charge is when the Civil War ended.

—Hoboken, New Jersey