History of the Confederate Medal of Honor and of Richard Brooke Garnett, Brigadier General, C.S.A., an Essex Native

by Col. Joseph B. Mitchell, USA (Ret.)*

President Wellford, Vice President Garnett, distinguished guests, members of the Essex County Historical Society, ladies and gentlemen, it is a distinct honor and privilege to be here with you today.

As most of you know I have been asked to talk on two subjects. The first is the history of the Confederate Medal of Honor; the second is on the man who is being awarded that medal posthumously, an honor he richly deserved for his bravery and valor.

Many people have asked me about the Confederate Medal of Honor and, from their questions, I have learned that they are surprised to find that such a medal exists, awarded by the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Since I am a military historian, and once wrote a book about the U.S. Medal of Honor, I find the idea of the Confederate Medal of Honor completely logical.

First, the history of the U.S. Medal of Honor is very simple to trace. Near the end of the American Revolution General George Washington awarded a medal called the Purple Heart to three soldiers for outstanding service. After that war its use was discontinued. It was not until the Civil War began that the idea of a medal was thought of again. In December 1861 a bill was passed by Congress establishing a Medal of Honor for Navy enlisted men. The Army medal was not authorized for enlisted men until July 1862. Then in March 1863 the law was amended to include Army officers also. Naval officers did not become eligible until just prior to World War I. Incidentally, many people call it the Congressional Medal of Honor, I suppose because it was originally established by Act of Congress, but its correct name is really simply Medal of Honor.

During the war the Confederate Congress had the same idea as the U.S. Congress. An Act of the Confederate Congress establishing such a medal was passed on October 13, 1862 and approved by President Jefferson Davis on the same date. The outcome of the war prevented it from ever being awarded. I might add that when I wrote that book about the U.S. Medal of Honor in the War Between the States, I very carefully included therein outstanding examples of Confederate officers and enlisted men who would have been awarded the Confederate Medal of Honor for their bravery and valor in battle.

During that war the North awarded a great number of Medals of Honor which would not be awarded today. The trouble was that it was the only medal. There were no medals at all provided for heroic acts of lesser degree or for other exemplary conduct deserving of recognition — no Distinguished Service Cross, no Silver Star or Bronze Star, no Purple Heart for being wounded as we have today. Much later, in 1916, the Army appointed a Board of Officers to review all these medals. They took away over 300 of them which had been awarded, some for just reenlisting, one which had been awarded “just for old times sake,” and some who were not qualified because the individuals had not been in the Army. One of these was Buffalo Bill. But they were not drastic about it, leaving on the rolls many who today would be awarded a lesser decoration. It was really not until World War I that General Pershing laid down strict rules concerning the medal of honor, making it what it is today, an award for action distinguished by gallantry at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty; and today a large percentage of the Medals of Honor are given posthumously, as General Garnett’s would have been.

When the General Executive Council of the Sons of Confederate Veterans voted, in 1976, to award the Confederate Medal of Honor for outstanding acts of bravery, the idea was to recognize and draw attention to Confederate soldiers and sailors who, simply because they fought on the losing side, had been neglected by history. As a member of that General Executive Council, when I was Chief of Staff of the SCV, I remember very well that we thought it was high time those individuals were brought to the attention of the public. They were just as courageous and dedicated as their counterparts in the North but no one had paid any attention to them.

I remember when Christine Reid, that nice lady reporter from the Richmond Times Dispatch, was asking me about it she was wondering what the Southern people of today would think about it. I had no hesitation in answering her. My reply was that I was positive that if eminent Southern historian, Douglas Southall Freeman, was alive today he would have been the very first to approve the idea.

*The following address was presented by Colonel Joseph B. Mitchell, USA (Ret.), of Alexandria, Virginia, before the Essex County Historical Society, at the courthouse, Tappahannock, Virginia, Sunday, October 20, 1983.
At the time we voted the award we were very careful to make it absolutely clear that the medal would be awarded under very tight restrictions comparable to the rules now in existence for the award of the U.S. Medal of Honor today—not the way it was done by the North in the beginning. As a result, in the years from 1976 to 1985 only 26 medals have been approved. General Garnett's is the 26th. We made it completely clear to the members of our SCV that not only must the individuals be deserving under very rigid standards but that proof positive must be submitted with each application. As a result, even though our members knew we were going to be very strict, at least as many applications have been turned down as have been approved.

Christine Reid asked me if a medal had been awarded to General Robert E. Lee. Of course I had to tell her that, although he would certainly have received the Distinguished Service Medal under today's standards, we could not award the Confederate Medal of Honor—although I could think of no instances when he might have qualified in the Mexican War as a young captain of engineers—but medals were not in existence at that time.

Because our requirements for proof are so strict it has been difficult to find enlisted men to award it to. Witnesses wrote a lot about officers but seldom about enlisted men. Yet we know that there must have been several. As a member of the Confederate Medal of Honor Committee, I surely hope we can get more.

Since everyone who has ever asked about the Confederate Medal always wants to know about some of those who have received it, I thought I might mention one of them today and what he did.

The one that comes to mind is Lieutenant Colonel John Pelham who commanded Jeb Stuart's Horse Artillery. He was awarded the medal for his heroic action at the Battle of Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862. With just two guns, Pelham, then a major, galloped forward in front of the Confederate lines and opened fire upon the startled Union forces who were then advancing. One of his guns was soon disabled but with the other he fought four Union batteries, 16 guns, and halted the entire attack for over half an hour, not returning to his lines until his ammunition was almost gone. His medal, Number 12, is on display at the Cavalry Museum in Culpeper.

General Richard Brooke Garnett's medal would also have been a low number except that when I was Commander-in-Chief of the SCV I did not want to make it look like I was exerting pressure for a Virginian. So I waited until this year when I became a member of the Committee to submit an application for him, although he had been at the top of my list for a long time.

This brings me to the second half of my talk for today, the Confederate general who is being awarded the Confederate Medal of Honor, Brigadier General Richard Brooke Garnett. During the last month I have been doing a great deal of study about him, although I already knew quite a bit beforehand. In addition to what I have learned, on my own, Carroll Garnett has been feeding me material too. One thing in particular he mentioned was that the Confederate monument outside the Court House has the names of Confederate veterans of Essex County carved on it. And, at the top of the list, set apart from the rest, are the names of Brigadier Generals Richard Brooke Garnett and Robert Selden Garnett. He wanted me to say a bit about both of them, which I am glad to do.

They were both graduated in the West Point class of 1841. There cannot be many cases at the U.S. Military Academy where two cousins were members of the same class. There were 52 graduates in that class, and 63 who did not graduate. Robert stood No. 27 and was commissioned in the artillery; Richard stood No. 29, just two files below, and was commissioned in the infantry.

I shall follow the career of Robert first. He served in the Mexican War with General Zachary Taylor; under Taylor's command he rendered conspicuous service in all four of Taylor's battles. After the first two, Palo Alto and Reseca de la Palma, he was promoted to first lieutenant. This was in 1846. As a result of the next two, Monterey and Buena Vista, he was awarded two brevet promotions to captain and major. After the war he went into the infantry, received his regular promotion to captain, and became commandant of cadets at West Point for two years. This was from 1852 to 1854 during the time when General Robert E. Lee was superintendent. Promoted to major the next year he served on the frontier against the Indians in what is now the state of Washington. On leave of absence in Europe when the War Between the States began, Robert resigned from the U.S. Army on 30 April 1861 and rendered his services to the Confederacy.

During the same years Richard began his career by serving in the Second Seminole War in Florida, then served in Missouri, Indian Territory and in Arkansas. But he missed the Mexican War, so was promoted to first lieutenant in 1847, the year following Robert's promotion. Thereafter he seems to have spent all his time out west, in Texas, in South Dakota where he was promoted to captain, in Kansas to control the disturbances there, and after that went on the famous Utah expedition of 1857 to '58 led by General Albert Sydney Johnston against the Mormons who were causing a great deal of trouble to California-bound wagon trains. After that successful expedition Richard went on to California. When war came, Richard, then in New Mexico, resigned from the U.S. Army effective 17 May 1861 and offered his services to the Confederacy.

Up to that point, if anyone had been inclined to guess which of the two would become the more famous, the choice would almost surely have been the first one, Robert, rather than Richard. The fact that he had served as commandant of cadets at West Point for two years would, by itself, have tipped the scales in his favor. Just being assigned to that post almost ensured a very successful army career.

The Confederate government seemed to agree. Robert was commissioned a lieutenant colonel and assigned as adjutant general to Robert E. Lee, then in command of the Virginia state troops. At the same time Richard was commissioned a major.

But then the fortunes of war intervened. Robert was appointed a brigadier general on 6 June 1861 and sent to command Confederate forces in western Virginia, now the state of West Virginia. From the very start the campaign had no chance of success whatever; the enemy vastly outnumbered him. On 13 July, while supervising the retreat of his men from the Battle of Carrick's Ford, Robert Selden Garnett was shot and died almost instantly, the first Confederate general to be killed in the war. There was no question of his being recognized. Among the first of the Union officers to arrive on the scene was Major John Love who had been his roommate at West Point for four years. The enemy commander, Major General George B. McClellan, who had been a friend of his, made special arrangements for conveying his body through the lines under a flag of truce.

Exactly four months later Richard Garnett was appointed a brigadier general and assigned to command the famous Stonewall Brigade. On 23 March 1862 the first of
I have long suspected, and I am sure many of you have also, what happened but I never dreamed that I would ever read that my suspicions would be confirmed. This year for the first time I read a copy of the eyewitness account of R. H. Irvine, a mounted courier of the 19th Virginia regiment who accompanied Garnett in Pickett's Charge.

After his personal description, from which the citation for the Medal of Honor has been largely taken, which I shall read, Irvine relates what happened years later. He says he met an ex-Union soldier who said he was a sharpshooter and had shot General Garnett. Then as soon as the Confederates retreated, he had taken the insignia from the General's collar and also taken his sword. This completely explains why the General was not recognized.

Now I shall read the citation. I believe it clearly explains why, of the three brigadiers in Pickett's Division, Garnett who was killed, Armistead who also was killed, and Kemper who was badly wounded—only Garnett was awarded the Confederate Medal of Honor.

"For conspicuous gallantry and bravery above and beyond the call of duty on July 3, 1863. When General Pickett was ordered to charge the center of the Union position on the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg, Brigadier General Richard Brooke Garnett insisted on accompanying his brigade into battle to encourage his men, despite his physical condition and the advice of friends, knowing there was little chance to survive. He had been sick for several days, was suffering from chills and fever and had to wear an overcoat, too weak to walk and barely able to ride a horse. Throughout the charge he supervised the action of his brigade until within fifteen to twenty yards of the enemy line where he was shot and instantly killed. His action reflects the highest standard of unselfish heroism."

President Wellford, it gives me great pleasure to present to you for the Essex County Historical Society, the Medal of Honor and the Citation for General Garnett from the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

MINUTES OF THE SOCIETY

The Essex County Historical Society met at 3:00 p.m. July 21, 1985 in the Court House, Tappahannock, Va., with our president, Mr. Hill B. Wellford, presiding. Mr. Wellford welcomed a large number of members and guests and asked new members Dr. and Mrs. Robert Armour and Mr. and Mrs. Joseph S. Aaron to stand. Mr. Wellford announced that since our secretary, Mrs. Wright, was absent, that the reading of the minutes would be dispensed with. He also announced that since our last meeting when many members had volunteered to help clean up the Brockenhroug Cemetery on Water Lane, Dr. Austin Chinn had offered to take over this project and has already had it cleaned, the shrubs and vines all cut back. It looks so nice now.

The treasurer, Mr. Smither, gave his report stating a balance of $682.11 in the checking account with disbursements to our April speaker $25, $65 to a writer for the article on Virginia Governors which was published in the bulletin you have just received, $290.16 for printing the bulletin, and $44.87 for postage and notices of meetings; totaling $425.03, leaving a balance of $257.08 in checking and $1,245.45 in savings, so we can withdraw some interest from these life memberships, $100 each if necessary. We would like to thank Mrs. Margaret B. Wheat for being the latest to join our life membership group.
Mr. Wellford thanked the hostesses for our social hour which follows the program, next on our agenda; Mrs. Nancy Ball, Chairman, Mrs. Mary Evans, Mrs. Betty Blair, Mrs. Louise Shepherd, Mrs. Margaret S. Haile, and Mrs. Nan Page Carlton. Mr. Wellford then turned the meeting over to our vice president, Mr. Carroll B. Garnett, who introduced our guest speaker, Mr. John Careatti. Mr. Garnett said we were indeed fortunate to have someone of Mr. Careatti's interesting profession living in Essex. He now resides near Kino. Mr. Careatti is a native of Pennsylvania and graduated from Carnegie Tech. While a student at Carnegie Tech he became particularly interested in working with metals in the laboratory and this became his first choice in his future career. He has been designing and constructing metal works and showing his products at a number of craft shows for years. Until recently he actively showed horses in Essex and surrounding counties with his mobil forge. He also teaches evening classes at the South Campus of Rappahannock Community College and other classes for corporations in the area.

Mr. Careatti started his most interesting and enlightening address by giving us a short history of smithing, stating that iron is the most abundant and available metal of all because the very core of the earth is iron.

The Egyptian priests were the first to use meteoric iron by making two particular tools out of it; one was the furnace tool used to move the crucibles around inside of a smelting oven to assay gold and silver. The other tool was known as a mouth tool, used to open the door of a furnace to get the crucibles of melted ore out.

The next stage of metal working was bronze, based on digging copper and working with it in Bulgaria. The next period of development came with the Crusades. They found steel woots produced by Indian Monks, who had been the first to put carbon with iron to make their steel woots, which would be the forerunner of our alloys of metals used today.

The Romans were first to shoe horses—farrier is from Latin—meaning working in iron or bronzed used to shoe horses. Nails were found in archaeological digs in Italy. The first nails in this country were about 1650. King George County had an iron furnace. In 1750 England passed a law against the colonies manufacturing iron products, and the colonists were only to produce pig iron. However, many of the furnace owners produced cannon balls, etc. at night. One furnace owner in Williamsburg had seven forges. Mr. Careatti told about shoeing horses and types of anvils used, the Tredegar Iron Works on the James in Richmond, and the different kinds of hinges found in different homes.

The Society met in the Court House at 3:00 p.m. on October 20, 1985, with our president, Mr. Hill B. Wellford, presiding. Mr. Wellford welcomed the many members and guests to this meeting. He introduced Mrs. John C. Williams, Sr. of Norfolk, the president general of the national UDC, with headquarters in Richmond. Mrs. Williams was elected in 1984 and will serve until 1986. She had held many offices in the state and national UDC. Accompanying Mrs. Williams were Mrs. Geraldine Budd and Mrs. Mary Ann Frazier, members of her Chapter, Pickett-Buchanan of Norfolk.

Mrs. Wright, secretary, read the minutes of the July meeting. Mr. Willford stated that we have had much publicity about this meeting and asked Mr. Chris Rose of the Rappahannock Times and any other reporters present to stand. Mr. Smither, treasurer, stated that we now have a balance of $316.89 in checking and $1,587.02 in savings accounts.

Our guest speaker today, introduced by vice president Carroll Garnett, is Colonel Joseph B. Mitchell. He has received so many honors since he retired that I will be able to mention only a few. He also asked me to address him as Joe instead of using any official title. He was a graduate of West Point in 1937, however he had lived at West Point from the age of 7 until he was 14 because his father, Brigadier General William A. Mitchell, was a professor at West Point. His father graduated No. 1 in his class in 1903.

Joe's ancestors were in Virginia early in the 1600's and moved later to Georgia and Alabama. His grandfather was in the Civil War. Joe served with distinction in the European Theatre in World War II. He is the author of six books: three on the Civil War, two on the American Revolution, and one on World Military History which has been printed in German, French and Flemish. Joe has served as president of many historical organizations, he is a former Commander-in-Chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. He owned a home near Mt. Holly in Westmoreland County for 10 years. His wife, Vivian, couldn't be with him today because of a conflict of meetings. Joe's topic for today will be "The History of the Confederate Medal of Honor and Brigadier General Richard Brooke Barnett, an Essex Native."

Following Col. Mitchell's address, he presented the Confederate Medal of Honor and the Citation honoring Gen. Garnett to the Essex Historical Society. Mr. Wellford accepted these gifts and said they would be appropriately framed and hung in a place of honor in the Court House. He moved that we reimburse Mr. Carroll Garnett for expenses involved in framing these gifts. Mr. Wellford also asked that all the Garnett relatives in attendance stand, and he thanked young Madelyn Garnett for distributing the small confederate flags to everyone.

After thanking Col. Mitchell again for his most interesting talk, Mr. Wellford thanked the many hostesses, with Mrs. Patricia Haile, Chairman, Mrs. Nancy Ball, Mrs. Lib Smither, Mrs. Kitty DeShazo, Mrs. Juliette Parker, Mrs. Teddy Acree, Miss Betty Walters, Mrs. Betsy Ware, Mrs. Anne Wright, Mrs. Lelia Canada, Mrs. Connie Garnett, Mrs. Mary Mann, Mrs. Madelyn Townsend, and Mrs. Lucille Andrews for their delicious refreshments for our social hour in the Woman's Club House. The meeting adjourned.

Anne T. Wright, Secretary

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Meetings are held quarterly in the Essex Court House, or in an historic home or church of the County. Dues are $5.00 per year. For copies of publications send $2.00 to Mrs. J. M. Evans, Box 8, Tappahannock, Virginia 22560.