

# *The Dispatch*

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## **Raining Terror on the Union Army**

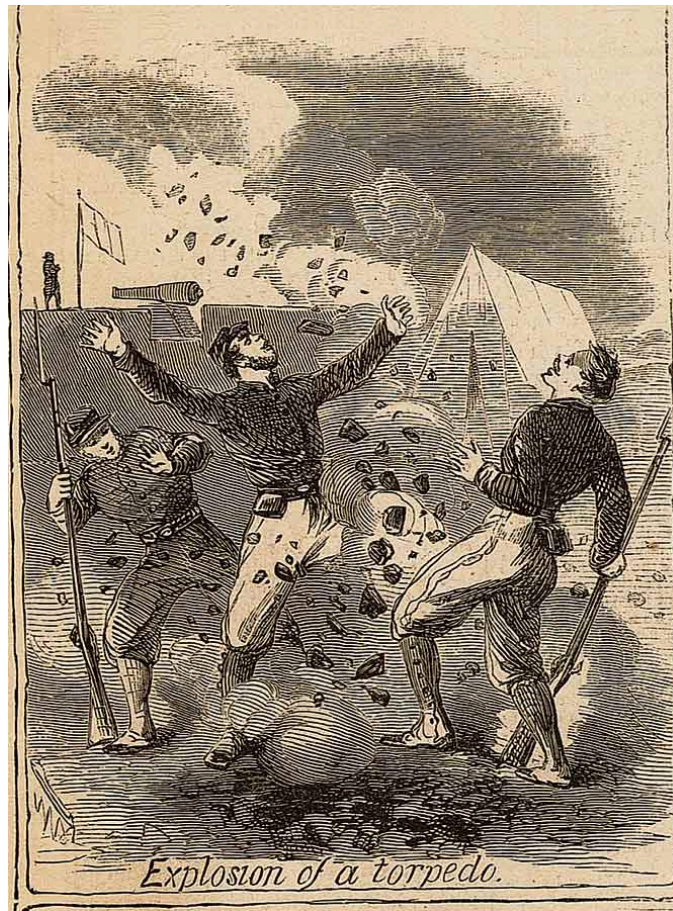


Image from a May, 1862 Harper's Weekly sketch portraying the maiming of a Union soldier at Yorktown by one of Rains' subterra shells.

<https://www.historynet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Yorktown-subterra-shells.jpg>

## **SEPTEMBER MEETING**

**Friday, September 13, 2024**

**AT THE WATERVLIT  
SENIOR CENTER**

**Phil Vitiello  
“The Rains Brothers:  
Raining Terror on the  
Union Army”**

Social Hour	6:00 p.m.
Business Meeting	7:00 p.m.
Presentation	7:00 – 8:00 p.m.

The Rains Brothers have been mostly overlooked by Civil War historians. They were outstanding munitions makers whose innovation did much to improve the art of administering violent death. The Power point presentation will take you through the amazing life and Civil War career of these two brothers and how their efforts almost won the war for the Confederacy.

Development of the first modern mechanically fused high explosive landmines was attributed to Gabriel James Rains. By the end of the Civil War, nearly 2,000 standard pattern "Rains mines" had been deployed. His efforts would help win the battle of the "Seven Days" helping to save the city of Richmond from capture and ending the war in its first year.

George Washington Rains, the younger brother of Gabriel, was a

United States Army officer and later Confederate States Army officer. A skilled engineer and inventor, he was instrumental in providing the Confederacy with much-needed gunpowder throughout the Civil War.

This presentation is about how the efforts of the two brothers influenced the tactics that extended the war into four long years.

Philip Vitiello Sr., historian and researcher, has been a lifelong resident of New Haven, CT. He attended the University of New Haven, majoring in law enforcement administration. He is semi-retired and employed for the last twenty-six years as the Director of Marketing for the food broker "Northeast Food Marketing" headquartered in Stamford, CT.

Vitiello is the current Vice President of the Civil War Round Table of South Central Connecticut. He is also a Charter member of "Friends of the Hunley". (The first submarine in world history to sink a ship in combat) and for over 25 years has been a member of the original Titanic Historical Society out of Indian Orchard, MA. Since 1998 he's also been a charter member of "TIGHAR" The International Group for Historical Aircraft Recovery, and has taught a history course at Norwalk Community College Lifetime Learners Institute.

## **UPCOMING EVENTS:**

**October 11: Derek Maxfield returns**

**November 8: to be announced**

## BOARD UPDATES

The Executive Board met via Zoom on June 24. The Operating Account balance was \$3,120.09. The Preservation Account balance was \$3,997.27. The June book sale was a success. The Board discussed going through our supply of books to cull those in bad shape or ones that have been offered for sale multiple times without takers.

We also discussed the results from the spring survey. Overall, respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with our meeting time (7 pm) and months (September through June). Likewise, respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with both the quality and variety of speakers and presentations.

People expressed less satisfaction with our meeting location; suggestions included rotating meeting locations or finding a meeting place in Albany. Board members agreed that rotating locations could cause confusion for presenters and members. Other suggestions included having more local speakers, and presentations on topics other than battles, such as the U.S. Colored Troops, politics or economics of the war, and the War in the West.

Respondents also suggested having a recruitment committee or membership drive. We definitely need to grow the membership base to ensure the longevity of the Round Table. If you would like to help with this, please talk with one

of the Board members.

### excerpts from "THE CONFEDERACY'S BOMB BROTHERS"

by Peggy Robbins, published in *Civil War Times*, 1997

"George Rains and his older brother Gabriel created explosive solutions to the Confederacy's problems during the war. George created the gunpowder, and Gabriel used it to create landmines lethal to Federal soldiers. ...George and Gabriel Rains had a knack for blowing things up during the American Civil War. They were the Confederacy's "Bomb Brothers." ...

"Gabriel James Rains, whose munitions experiments were known throughout the South, ...was only part of the Confederacy's success at developing and using explosive devices. Gabriel's younger brother, George Washington Rains, undoubtedly provided the powder that filled the bomb. The younger Rains was instrumental in creating much of the struggling South's gunpowder. ...

"Gabriel and George Rains were brothers, but fourteen years separated their births, and they had few strong ties to one another. There is no evidence that their professional lives intersected before, during, or after the war, nor do they seem to have had a close personal relationship. What is likely, however, is that they were rivals.

**“There was fierce competition and jealousy between branches of the Confederate Ordnance Department, and the Rains brothers labored in different divisions—Gabriel leading the Torpedo Bureau and George, the Niter and Mining Bureau. Sons of a North Carolina cabinetmaker, the "Bomb Brothers" were born in Craven County, North Carolina, Gabriel in 1803 and George in 1817. ...**

**“Both brothers were enthusiastic about their munitions work. Gabriel, however, began the war unsuccessfully as a brigade commander. His failure to attack Federal troops of Major General George McClellan during the May 31 June 1, 1862, Battle of Seven Pines, Virginia, drew criticism from Confederate Major General Daniel H. Hill. Rains would hold no further field command in the war. But Jefferson Davis had something bigger and louder in mind for him.**

**“At the war’s outset, the South’s harbors were largely defenseless against the threat of Union attack. The old brick forts with their old, rusty cannon were nearly useless in preventing Union ships from steaming up Southern rivers. Officials of the Confederate War and Navy departments discussed the use of "torpedoes"—exploding mines. The technology was not yet developed, and there were controversial ethical issues to resolve, but the experimenting began.**

**“The South’s first torpedoes were simple, powder-filled tin cans with trigger attachments. These offered little promise. But then Gabriel**

**developed what came to be known as the "Rains Patent," a mine that could be used both on land and in water. ...**

**“His brother George, sometimes called the "chief chemist of the Confederacy," was just as busy as his brother during the war. When he joined the Ordnance Bureau, Colonel Josiah Gorgas, chief of ordnance told him to get busy making gunpowder. It was up to George to determine where and how.**

**“His task would not be an easy one. For half a century before the Civil War, there had been virtually no ammunition made in the South except during the Mexican War. A few days after the April 14, 1861, capture of Fort Sumter, the Confederate War Department reported that there was only 491,111 pounds of powder for rifles, muskets and cannons within Confederate territory. ...**

**“The Rains brothers had lived separately, worked separately, and died separately. But in the South and North alike, their explosive legacy was remembered. To history, they would always be the 'Bomb Brothers'.”**

*The full article can be found at <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2704&context=cis-r-journal>*

## **Buford’s View by Matt George**

**On July 27 I attended the Civil War Round Table Sustainability Conference held at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia. It**

was well attended and informative. Topics included Market Recruitment, New Member experiences, and Local Partnerships Opportunities. Some suggestions were to give new members a free book and/or some free raffle tickets and to include a picture (if possible) and a short bio of them (including their Civil War interest) in the next newsletter. Partnering with other history groups and organizations like local libraries was suggested. I do try to maintain contact and promote our cooperative relationship with both Grant Cottage and the Underground Railroad History Center. I attend some of their events and encourage them to attend some of ours. It was suggested I hand out copies of our newsletter, which I already do. Much of what was suggested requires participation and

support by the members (even a Round Table as small as ours). However, this does not occur anywhere often enough.

While there I met a speaker who seemed interested in speaking to us on Lincoln. However, his preferred method of travel was by airplane. This we can't afford, so, sadly I had to turn him down. The trip there was normal: I-88 has very little traffic; I-81 is "anything goes" for 16-wheeler trucks. However, driving in suburban Virginia is enough to drive a sane person crazy.

Hopefully everyone had a good summer, and I'll see you in September.

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*Created in 1984, the Capital District Civil War Round Table is an incorporated non-profit educational organization. Meetings are held monthly in various locations in the Capital District. This newsletter is published eleven times per year. Annual dues are \$35. The purpose of the organization is to promote, educate, and further stimulate interest in, and discussion of, all aspects of the Civil War period.*

Contact the Capital District Civil War Round Table through  
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#### THE OFFICERS

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