“Let Us Stand or Fall Together”: Hood’s Texas Brigade: An interview with Dr. Susannah Ural

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“Let Us Stand or Fall Together”: Hood’s Texas Brigade: An interview with Dr. Susannah Ural

Abstract
Over the course of this year, we’ll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming 2018 CWI conference about their talks. Today we are speaking with Dr. Susannah Ural, Professor of History and Co-Director of the Dale Center for the Study of War & Society at the University of Southern Mississippi. A military historian and scholar of war and society, Ural’s work focuses on the experiences of soldiers and families in the U.S. Civil War era. She is the author of several books, including Don’t Hurry Me Down to Hades: The Civil War in the Words of Those Who Lives It (Osprey Publishing, 2013) and most recently, Hood’s Texas Brigade: The Soldiers and Families of the Confederacy’s Most Celebrated Unit (LSU Press, November, 2017). Ural serves as President of the Mississippi Historical Society and as chair of the editorial board of The Journal of Military History. She and her students are currently completing a study of Beauvoir, Mississippi’s Confederate Home for veterans, wives, and widows. Ural’s next project will focus on Mississippi in the Civil War era. [excerpt]

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By Ashley Whitehead Luskey

Over the course of this year, we’ll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming 2018 CWI conference about their talks. Today we are speaking with Dr. Susannah Ural, Professor of History and Co-Director of the Dale Center for the Study of War & Society at the University of Southern Mississippi. A military historian and scholar of war and society, Ural’s work focuses on the experiences of soldiers and families in the U.S. Civil War era. She is the author of several books, including Don’t Hurry Me Down to Hades: The Civil War in the Words of Those Who Lives It (Osprey Publishing, 2013) and most recently, Hood’s Texas Brigade: The Soldiers and Families of the Confederacy’s Most Celebrated Unit (LSU Press, November, 2017). Ural serves as President of the Mississippi Historical Society and as chair of the editorial board of The Journal of Military History. She and her students are currently completing a study of Beauvoir, Mississippi’s Confederate Home for veterans, wives, and widows. Ural’s next project will focus on Mississippi in the Civil War era.

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CWI: Describe what makes Hood’s Texas Brigade so fascinating. What makes these Texans so unique—and yet in other ways, so iconic of the Confederate military and social fabric? Who were these men, why did they fight, and what was responsible for their particularly strong sense of unit cohesion and pride? Why do they hold such a “romantic” place within historical memory?

Ural: You’re right — Hood’s Texans are, in some ways, an exceptional case in studies of Civil War soldiers, and yet they offer useful insights into our understanding of soldiers’ military service, as well as their families’ dedication to the war effort. Three key factors made this unit one of the best on either side of the war: Their strong self-identity as Confederates, the mutual respect shared between the brigade’s junior officers and their men, and a constant desire to maintain their reputation not just as Texans, but also as the best soldiers in Robert E. Lee’s army and all the Confederacy. It is important to remember that the men in this unit volunteered to serve over 1,000 miles from their homes when they could have fought just as honorably much closer to their families. That caused a self-selecting factor that scholars need to consider when studying issues like Civil War soldier ideology. These were highly motivated men who came from highly motivated families and, for the vast majority of them — officers, enlisted men, and their families at home — that determination sustained them through four long, brutal years of fighting. As for their romantic place in memory, that is influenced by how many nineteenth-century American ideals were embodied by this unit. At different times, the Texas Brigade included regiments from Arkansas and Georgia, as well as eight companies of South Carolinians, but it was their image as Texans that embodied romantic notions of cowboys, frontiersmen, and self-made men. The men sometimes complained that living up to their reputation was going to get them all killed, but, more often than not, they celebrated that image.
**CWI:** What does a focused study of a unit such as the Texas Brigade contribute to our understanding of the big questions and themes surrounding the Civil War era?

**Ural:** My work looks at the men in the brigade as well as their families and communities at home. This study offers insights into questions of soldier motivation, volunteerism and desertion, home front morale, Confederate nationalism, and the postwar adjustment of both veterans and their families.

Modern scholars are taking a new approach to traditional unit histories. This lets us test the conclusions of broader works like James McPherson’s *For Cause and Comrades* and Ken Noe’s *Reluctant Rebels* and reveal how specific unit dynamics can override factors such as geography, age, and wealth that we have, to this point, accepted as central to understanding soldier motivation and behavior. In a unit like the Texas Brigade, for instance, those oft-cited factors were not as important as the unusually high level of devotion to the war effort shown by these volunteers and their families, as well as the superb relationship between junior officers and enlisted men within the brigade itself. These Texans’ dedication to the Confederate cause and the unique power dynamics between the ranks strongly shaped men’s decisions to seek service in this specific unit, to reject opportunities to desert, and to return to the brigade after they were exchanged far more than did their class ties, age, or where they lived in their home state. The opposite could be true for a unit with weak commanders, insufficient training, and poor unit cohesion. These unit-specific dynamics could override those broader factors that we have previously accepted as strong sustaining influences.

**CWI:** The Texas Brigade was involved in some of the bloodiest engagements in the Civil War. What impacts did their high casualty rate have on the post-war communities from which they came?

**Ural:** Most students of the Civil War know that far more soldiers died of disease than in combat. The opposite, however, is true of Hood’s Texas Brigade. They played decisive roles at famous battles like Gaines’s Mill, Antietam, Gettysburg, and the Wilderness, and their skills as soldiers were celebrated and utilized by top Confederate commanders. That reputation, however, came at a tremendous cost, including the 1st Texas’s unfortunate fame as the regiment that suffered the highest casualties in a battle, on either side, in the entire war. It has long been estimated that they endured 82% losses at the Battle of Antietam, but their commander argued after the war that they actually lost 86% of the men he led into Miller’s Cornfield.
Their tremendous pride in their reputation and the cost it required led the men to maintain strong ties in the postwar period. They tried to organize as veterans in 1866 to provide for the wounded soldiers and the impoverished widows of the Texas Brigade, though that effort was rejected by occupying Union forces. This did not stop them, though, from maintaining ties informally, promoting and frequenting each other’s businesses, and highlighting each other’s successes. Hood’s Texans waged the peace of Reconstruction as a unit, just as they had waged the war, and a close study of their postwar wealth indicates that this continued unit cohesion helped the men and families of the brigade enjoy more financial success during Reconstruction than their neighbors.