

## Author Ralph Peters discovers drama in true stories of Civil War

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The Civil War is hardly an unfamiliar topic, especially in a place like Savannah, where the city's very survival is one of the most famous parts of the war's lore. But for Ralph Peters, the Civil War is still full of untapped potential for new stories.

The retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel comes to E. Shaver, Bookseller, on July 12 to meet readers and sign copies of "The Damned of Petersburg," his newest work of military fiction, and the fourth book in a cycle of five about the Civil War.

"There are all these forgotten battles and forgotten men," he explains. "One of the things I'm trying to do in my books is to get past the myths. So these novels are very historically accurate. In fact, I prefer to call them dramatized history. They're only fiction in the sense that I'm imagining what was in the characters' minds, why they made the decisions they did, how they felt. All the other details are accurate."

The three previous volumes in his Civil War cycle each won the W.Y. Boyd Award for Literary Excellence in Military Fiction, making Peters the award's only three-time winner. If anything, the new novel is an even more intense and unflinching look at the conflict.

"The reality is so different from the romantic movies," he says. "In the Civil War, more soldiers died from dysentery than died from bullets. In some respects, it's an incredibly gruesome and brutal war."

While he doesn't shy away from these realities, he's most interested in examining the motivations of the people fighting the battles and making the military decisions. There are countless stories of ordinary people thrust into extraordinary circumstances, including young men barely into their 20s who served as generals on both sides of the conflict.

Union General Nelson Miles, for example, features prominently in the book. In 1861 when the war started, he was a 20-year-old clerk in a crockery store. By 1864, he was a general leading a division.

As fascinating as the characters are, Peters also thinks the Civil War remains important in and of itself. The conflict defined the future of the nation and highlighted social and political issues that are still being addressed today.

“Though the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are the foundations of this country, the Civil War is the frame atop the foundation. Here we determined fundamental issues, everything from slavery to the overarching issue of state’s rights to the power of the federal government.”

But don’t let talk of politics make you think the story Peters tells is dry. He’s a master of taking raw facts and turning them into narrative. He molds the details of people’s lives into compelling characters.

“It almost writes itself,” he says. “If you really study and do your homework and research, it just comes to life. These characters want to talk to people today. They want to be alive on the page. But you have to honor them by being honest, and that’s what I try to do.”