



# Leading the Charge

Many people would follow Ed Bearss anywhere to hear his stories. And they do.

**FROM THE MOMENT** we meet, Ed Bearss has a tale to tell. “My house has a checkered past,” he proclaims, in the booming roar that has made him a beloved battlefield tour guide for more than six decades. We are neighbors, you see, living two blocks away from each other in Aurora Highlands near Pentagon City Mall. He has come over to talk about his life and work.

We start with the home he has owned

for nearly 50 years—a charming blue foursquare with a front porch, the history of which he has pieced together from newspaper accounts and neighbors’ foggy recollections. In the 1930s, a drunken man murdered his wife and her lover in front of the house, before blowing off his own jaw in an attempted suicide. “You should not discuss marital problems while you’re drinking,” he says with a wry smile.

Bearss (whose unusual name is pronounced *BARS*) has always been a natural raconteur. He grew up on a ranch in Montana and served in the Marines in World War II (he was wounded in the Pacific at Cape Gloucester, New Britain, suffering an injury that limits mobility in his left hand). After the war, he earned a bachelor’s degree in foreign service studies from Georgetown University, followed by a master’s in history from Indiana University. He eventually joined the National Park Service as a historian at Vicksburg National Military Park in Mississippi, where his encyclopedic knowledge of the Civil War was quickly noticed.

Bearss dates his interest in the Blue and the Gray back to the seventh grade, when his father read him a book about

## ■ familiar faces

the dashing cavalryman Confederate Gen. J.E.B. Stuart. For a time, Stuart was his favorite Civil War figure. That is, until Bearss himself fought in World War II as an infantryman—a “ground pounder,” he says. After that, his heart was always with the infantry.

It was at Vicksburg that Bearss met his wife, the late Margie Riddle Bearss, who passed away in 2006. (They had three children together: two girls and a boy.) There, he began leading battlefield tours and honing a performance style that was inspired, in part, by his former Georgetown University professor Carroll Quigley, a noted lecturer. “He would put on a show,” Bearss says. “I never forgot it.”

To this day, the nonagenarian never talks from notes. He likes to tell human-interest stories that appeal to people’s emotions. “It helps that I have a loud voice,” he says, recounting how the poet Julia Ward Howe witnessed a review of troops near Bailey’s Crossroads from

the area around Upton Hill in November 1861. Upon her return to Washington’s Willard Hotel that night, she had trouble sleeping, awoke in the darkness, and scribbled down the words for what would become one of the most famous songs in American history: “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” (As an aside, Bearss dispraises Julia’s abolitionist husband, Samuel Gridley Howe, as an unrepentant chauvinist.)

After a stint working in the Park Service’s Southeast Regional Office, Bearss transferred to the agency’s Washington, D.C., headquarters in 1966, and settled in Aurora Highlands. He still remembers playing softball with a neighborhood team in a large park that is now covered over by development. “Fast-pitch softball,” he clarifies. “Not this sissy slow-pitch stuff you see today.”

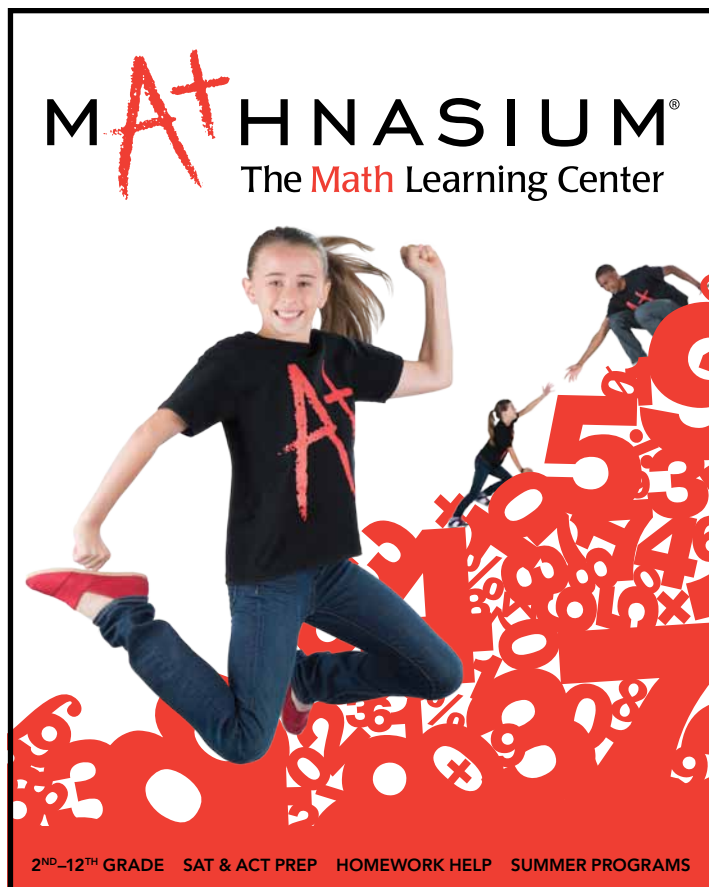
Once in Washington, he began giving battlefield tours for the Smithsonian Institution, various Civil War roundta-

bles, and other organizations. He estimates that he’s given thousands of tours in the United States, as well as a handful of World War II tours in Europe.

He has numerous regulars—one could almost call them groupies—who have followed him around for three decades.

One of those devotees is Gwen Wyttenbach, an Annandale resident who was raised in Arlington. “He is like a field general directing his troops with his ever-present ‘swagger stick’ [his wooden baton] showing the way or emphasizing a point,” she says. “Walking a battlefield with Ed brings the battle and its military commanders to life and fosters a great understanding of the events that transpired there on the field.”

Bearss became the national parks’ chief historian in 1981 (he is now its historian emeritus), and has authored several books, including *Fields of Honor: Pivotal Battles of the Civil War* (National Geographic, 2006). He was a featured



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historian in Ken Burns' landmark documentary on the Civil War, and is the subject of a forthcoming documentary (*American Journey: The Life and Times of Ed Bearss*) made by Nashville-based CinemaSouth and due out sometime in December.

Close to home, he continues to lead regular tours of the "Circle Forts" that once defended the nation's capital—including Fort Marcy in McLean and Forts C.F. Smith and Ethan Allen in Arlington—as well as landmarks such as Arlington House and Arlington National Cemetery. He cites from memory the exact price paid for the Arlington estate—the former plantation home of Robert E. Lee and Mary Custis Lee—when the federally occupied property went up for auction during the Civil War in 1864: \$26,820. (There was only one bidder: the U.S. government.)

Last year, he spoke about Arlington's role in the Civil War to a packed house at an Arlington Historical Society (AHS) event, where he was presented with the society's lifetime achievement award. "Bearss' deep knowledge of the events and the topography of the conflict made for a fascinating evening," says AHS President John Richardson.

As our conversation concludes, I ask Bearss if I can walk him home. Along the way, he tells me stories about the former residents of the houses we pass, offering a personal tour of the neighborhood. I wonder whether, at 90 years old, he's ready to slow down a bit.

"Nope," he says emphatically. "Not yet." The next day, he was getting on an airplane and heading to another battlefield. ■

*Kim O'Connell has been writing about the Civil War for nearly 20 years and is the co-author of the National Register nomination for Arlington's Fort Ethan Allen. She once crashed an Ed Bearss tour in Lynchburg, Va., in the early '90s—and was grateful that he didn't remember that fact when they talked for this piece.*



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