



Faculty Spotlight

Rick McCaslin

EIGHT QUESTIONS FOR DR. MCCASLIN:

1. How did you get interested in Military History?

Jerry Bledsoe, a writer, once wrote that I was “ambushed at birth by history.” My first eight years of life were spent in and around Atlanta, among older relatives who told me stories of the Civil War, which was also the subject of the annual school trip to Kennesaw Mountain. When I moved to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the focus again was on history. I settled in a town, Ocean Springs, founded by the French in 1699, and I went several times to Beauvoir, the last home of Jefferson Davis. Having had relatives in the Civil War, as well as almost every conflict since then, and being told their stories, I guess I was hooked.

2. What interests you most about being a professional military historian?

The chance to try to set the record straight by teaching students about our history. I want them to hear it as correctly as I can relate it, and to remember the contributions of so many men and women to our country.

3. What place does Military History have in academia?

I used to think everybody taught the survey courses, World and US, the same way, taking care to include important conflicts as well as other events. I have learned that I am wrong, so I make sure I include military conflicts in the historical narrative. Without that, many other events, and the rise of many leaders, make no sense at all.

4. How do you integrate Military History in your curriculum?

I include separate lectures on the major conflicts in the history of the US in the surveys I teach, carefully integrating them into the political and social context [Clausewitz!]. I also teach a separate graduate-level research seminar on the United States military in the nineteenth century, because I think it is essential to understand the transformation of the military as the country matured. And I always welcome graduate students to read books and write papers on military topics in my Texas reading and research classes for graduate students.

5. What are your current and future projects?

Currently I owe the U of Nebraska Press a history of the Civil War in the Trans-Mississippi (long overdue). But I am enjoying writing a biography of Pompeo Coppini, whose many public statues have defined the historical landscape in Texas (including monuments to Terry’s Texas Rangers, officially designated as the 8th Texas Cavalry CSA, and Hood’s Texas Brigade, which included the 1st, 4th, and 5th regiments of Texas infantry, CSA).

6. What was the hardest aspect of writing your most recent book?

Getting somebody to publish it! While it had material on two hundred years of history at a unique site in Texas, with a separate chapter on the Civil War (a company in Hood's Texas Brigade is prominently featured, several presses shied away before UNT Press published it.

7. Any advice to students aspiring to be military historians?

Diversify. Don't just focus on military events—learn all about the political, economic, and social milieu in which they occurred, and explore the connections. History is analytical, and you must continue to look for not just what happened, but why it happened.

8. If you could have any career in the world, what would it be and why?

Lead guitarist in a highly successful rock band! There is just something special when you can make a guitar actually convey the emotions you want to express. I am amazed at the guitarists that can do that, and I want to grow up to be just like them.