



PREFACE

Petersburg was the longest, the most complex, and perhaps the most important campaign of the Civil War. Gen. Robert E. Lee staked the fate of his Army of Northern Virginia on the outcome of this campaign, which lasted from June 15, 1864, to April 2, 1865. He had lost the strategic initiative to Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in the Overland campaign that preceded the confrontation at Petersburg and was fighting to save both his army and the Confederate capital. Even with the important triumphs achieved by Federal troops in the West, the Confederates were still holed up in what a recent historian has called their “last citadel,” the lines that defended Richmond and Petersburg. In fact, Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman’s grand march from Atlanta to the sea and through the Carolinas was primarily a movement to bring 60,000 western veterans to help Grant reduce that last Rebel stronghold.

Field fortifications played a pivotal role in the operations of both armies at Petersburg. In fact, no other campaign of the Civil War saw such heavy reliance on earthworks to promote the grand tactical goals of opposing field armies. After 292 days of continuous contact, the trenches stretched for some thirty-five miles from a point southeast of Richmond to the area west of Petersburg, crossing two rivers, two rail lines, and several major roads. At several points along those lines, engineers had designed defenses in depth, and all along the front of the trenches were extensive fields of obstructions to trip up and delay an attacker. The obstructions included a minefield that stretched 2,266 yards before a section of the Confederate works. Dams across creeks created water barriers, and exten-

sive countermines guarded against an underground approach by the enemy. Aboveground, thousands of soldiers manned the works, enduring months of broiling sunshine, drenching rain, snow, and wind. Union and Confederate soldiers spent many days in uncomfortable but usually safe underground shelters and learned how to endure hours on fortified picket lines, exposed to a sudden rush by the enemy.

The grim fighting of the Overland campaign preceded the confrontation at Petersburg. From May 4 to June 12, 1864, Grant tried to use the Army of the Potomac to smash the Army of Northern Virginia or to drive it to Richmond. Although Lee's Confederate army remained unbroken, the Federals succeeded in pushing it sixty miles in five weeks of heavy fighting, from the Rapidan River to a point only nine miles east of Richmond near Cold Harbor.

Along the way, both armies developed the habit of digging in whenever opportunity presented itself. Union and Confederate troops had used field fortifications from the start of the conflict in 1861; now, however, both armies remained within striking distance of each other for weeks on end. Lee's men quickly learned the value of fieldworks in repelling massed attacks and in offering protection against sharpshooters, harassing artillery fire, and skirmishing between assaults. The Federals were forced to dig in also, although Lee rarely sallied forth to strike at Grant. Northern commanders relied on fieldworks to hold their position within striking range of the enemy before launching another flanking maneuver. But at Cold Harbor, after the failure of the June 3 attack, the Unionists changed that pattern by digging in only a few yards from the Rebels and beginning parallels and a mine. Grant experimented with siege approaches for only a few days, however, before opting for a sweeping move that would take his forces across the James River. Until then, the Federals remained locked in complex trench systems opposite their equally well fortified enemy for nearly two weeks at Cold Harbor, where the tactical situation resembled what was soon to come at Petersburg.

DESPITE THE IMPORTANCE of what happened at Petersburg, there is no book that covers the use of field fortifications during the campaign, even though historians and readers alike are aware that fieldworks played a key role in it. This book is an attempt to fill the need for a detailed study of field fortifications, and engineering in general, during the Petersburg campaign. It is the third volume in my series of books on the use of fieldworks by the major armies of the East and follows through with the themes, research, and goals established for the series. While the first volume (*Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861–1864*) covered the eastern campaigns from the beginning of the war to April 1864, the second volume (*Trench Warfare*

under Grant and Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign) dealt with the Overland campaign. I consulted a wide variety of sources for this book on Petersburg, from published and unpublished personal accounts to official reports, unit histories, relevant secondary works, archaeological reports, tour guides, and historical photographs. The remnants of earthworks at Petersburg constituted some of the most important resources for this study. A number of other topics important to understanding the campaign, including logistics, intelligence gathering, and the life of the common soldier, are covered in this book because they are tied to the employment of field fortifications.

CONTRARY TO PREVAILING scholarly interpretation, the huge increase in the use of field fortifications in May 1864 did not come about through the widespread adoption of the rifle musket. Grant's insistence on continuous contact, keeping the Federals within striking distance of the Confederates for months on end, caused the deepening of reliance on extemporized field defense. It is not a coincidence that the heaviest use of fieldworks took place during the campaigns that witnessed the most intense employment of continuous contact, in both the East and the West. Petersburg saw the longest period of close contact of any campaign in the Civil War and produced the longest, most sophisticated system of field defense as well.

In fact, the armies seemed stuck in the trenches at Petersburg so long that some characteristics of a siege began to develop. Petersburg was one phase in a highly mobile campaign that took the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia from the Rapidan River in early May 1864 to Appomattox Court House, 160 miles away, by early April 1865. The Federals conducted several offensives to extricate themselves from the static position at Petersburg rather than rely on traditional siege approaches to capture the town. They eventually succeeded in extending the fortified line until Grant was able to simultaneously outflank the opposing line and break through its front, bringing the campaign to an end and restoring mobility to operations in Virginia.

Petersburg was less of a siege than it was a traditional field campaign with some limited aspects of siege warfare. While a number of contemporaries used the terminology of sieges when referring to operations at Petersburg, engineer Nathaniel Michler asserted that "no regular siege was intended." It was impossible for Grant to invest the town with the number of men available, and the strength of Confederate defenses prevented a successful frontal attack, at least until Grant's movements extended Lee's line to the breaking point. "The new era in field-works," continued Michler, "has so changed their character as in fact to render them almost as strong as permanent ones, and the facility with which new and successive lines of works can be constructed (so well proven

throughout the whole campaign just terminated) renders it almost useless to attempt a regular siege.”¹

The use of fieldworks was so intensive and extensive at Petersburg that they came to play an important role in determining the outcome of the campaign. Engineering design and a great deal of hard work by Union soldiers aided grand tactics in prying a stubborn enemy out of a seemingly impregnable position. Field fortifications helped to bring about final Confederate defeat in the Civil War.

UNTIL TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, there was only one book about the important campaign of Petersburg. Maj. Gen. Andrew Atkinson Humphreys, chief of staff of the Army of the Potomac for much of the campaign until he took control of the Second Corps, also covered the operations from the Wilderness to Cold Harbor in *The Virginia Campaign of '64 and '65*. As a topographical engineer, Humphreys paid a lot of attention to terrain as well as to grand tactics, but his book is thin and based on very little research. Published in 1883, it has long since been outdated and is more useful as a primary than a secondary source.

Nearly 100 years later, historian Richard J. Sommers published a book that still towers among Civil War campaign studies. It was the first detailed, tactical book about a battle or offensive within the Petersburg campaign. Exhaustively researched and told with a critical eye for detail, *Richmond Redeemed* definitively covers Grant's Fifth Offensive in late September and early October 1864. Sommers's book, which appeared in 1981, also set the pace for a number of other historians who began to write detailed battle and campaign studies of the Civil War, developing a new trend in operational histories. While not necessarily appreciated by all historians, this trend represents the highest mark of excellence in the genre of battle and campaign studies.

A. Wilson Greene published the only other detailed tactical study of a segment of the Petersburg campaign, *Breaking the Backbone of the Rebellion*, in 2000. It grew out of his job as executive director of Pamplin Historical Park and the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier. The park preserves a key bit of ground where the Sixth Corps broke through Lee's Petersburg line on the morning of April 2, 1865. In detailing the story of this breakthrough, Greene provides a great deal of coverage for all of Grant's efforts to extend beyond Lee's right from March 26 to April 2, but the most complete coverage is given to the Sixth Corps attack and the subsequent fight for Fort Gregg by the Twenty-Fourth Corps. Other aspects of the April 2 battle, such as the attack by the Ninth Corps along Jerusalem Plank Road, are not covered in similar detail, but Greene's discussion of Sixth Corps operations is definitive.

H. E. Howard, formerly of Lynchburg and currently of Appomattox Court House, has spent nearly twenty years publishing short books on the Civil War history of Virginia. Included in that list are four books on various aspects of the Petersburg campaign. Thomas J. Howe authored a volume on the failed Union attacks of June 15–18 (*Wasted Valor: June 15–18, 1864*); Michael A. Cavanaugh and William Marvel wrote another volume on the Crater (*The Battle of the Crater: "The Horrid Pit"*); John Horn wrote a book on the three battles (First Deep Bottom, Globe Tavern, and Reams's Station) associated with the Fourth Offensive (*The Destruction of the Weldon Railroad*); and Ed Bearss and Chris Calkins covered Five Forks in another volume (*Battle of Five Forks*). All of the Howard books have something valuable to say about their subjects, but their impact on the historiography is limited by the length of each book in the series. Nevertheless, the Howard studies offer a first step for anyone interested in learning about four of the major events within the campaign.

Besides Humphreys, there are yet only two general studies of Petersburg. Noah Andre Trudeau wrote *The Last Citadel* in 1991. Based on good but not exhaustive research, Trudeau's book also fails to clarify some important aspects, such as the sequence of attacks on June 16–18. With caution, it will serve as an introduction for the novice. John Horn's *The Petersburg Campaign*, published initially in 1993, is a short overview of the subject. It later appeared as part of the Great Campaigns Series issued by Combined Publishing. The book covers all major military movements of the campaign, although it is based on limited research and takes up less than 300 pages. It can profitably be combined with Trudeau's book to allow for a wider understanding of the campaign.

To date, there is no general history of Petersburg that combines all desirable qualities—thorough research, full and detailed coverage of grand tactics as well as strategy, and new interpretations of the events associated with the campaign. This study is an attempt to fill that gap, even though the difficulties of covering a long, complex campaign such as Petersburg in one volume are enormous.

Finally, a road map to make sense of the campaign around Petersburg seems necessary. Inspired by an idea proposed by Richard Sommers, I have divided the operations around Petersburg into nine Union offensives, two cavalry or infantry raids to tear up rail lines into the city, and three Confederate offensives.

First Union Offensive: June 15–18, 1864, the first round of fighting at Petersburg, in which elements of the Eighteenth Corps achieved limited gains by capturing a section of the Confederate Dimmock Line. Subsequent attacks on June 16–18 by units of the Army of the Potomac also failed to win important success.

Second Union Offensive: June 22–23, 1864, in which Grant sent the Second

Corps and Sixth Corps into a poorly prepared strike west of Jerusalem Plank Road, the farthest extent of the Union line at that time. Troubled by unknown terrain and losing connection with each other, the two corps floundered until a smartly planned counterattack by William Mahone's division sent the Second Corps reeling in retreat and left the Sixth Corps alone and vulnerable. It reached the Weldon and Petersburg Railroad but was driven back.

Wilson-Kautz Raid: June 22–29, 1864, in which two divisions of Union cavalry tore up sections of the South Side Railroad and the Richmond and Danville Railroad west and southwest of Petersburg. Energetic movements and hard fighting by Confederate cavalry prevented the Federals from doing irreparable damage and resulted in several pitched battles. The Union horsemen were nearly trapped and captured, but many managed to fight their way back to Meade's army.

First Confederate Offensive: June 24, 1864, in which the Confederates launched a poorly coordinated effort to turn and roll up the right flank of the Union line just south of the Appomattox River. The Federals easily repulsed them.

Third Union Offensive: July 26–30, 1864, a complex operation involving a double approach. Winfield S. Hancock's Second Corps crossed the James River and tried to advance beyond Bailey's Creek near Deep Bottom, supporting Philip Sheridan's cavalry, which was supposed to raid the Virginia Central Railroad north of Richmond. Hancock had orders to advance into Richmond if opportunity presented. Both efforts failed due to stiff Confederate resistance. The other punch was the digging of a mine gallery toward a shallow angle in the Confederate line south of the Appomattox River and blowing up eight tons of powder. The hole blasted in the Confederate line was an open door that the Ninth Corps could not exploit due to a mix-up of orders by the lead division commander, the physical obstruction offered by the jumble of Confederate earthworks in the salient, and stiff Confederate resistance. The resulting catastrophe represented a sad and bloody day for the Army of the Potomac.

Fourth Union Offensive: August 14–25, 1864, in which Grant tried to operate at both flanks simultaneously. Hancock and the cavalry again failed to break through at Deep Bottom, even though they tried with more troops and for a longer time, but Gouverneur Warren's Fifth Corps grabbed a section of the Weldon and Petersburg Railroad west of Jerusalem Plank Road and held it against three days of Confederate counterattacks in what was termed the battle of Globe Tavern. Hancock tried to extend Union control of the railroad farther south but was severely defeated in the battle of Reams's Station. Yet Warren's success pointed the way to future, effective efforts to force Lee out of his entrenchments.

Fifth Union Offensive: September 29–October 2, 1864, in which Grant again tried to work at both flanks and made significant progress. The Army of the James attacked with maximum force and captured New Market Heights and a section of the Confederate Outer Line defending Richmond (most significantly the area around Fort Harrison), greatly enlarging the area under Union control north of the James River. The Federals also repelled a Confederate counter-attack on September 30 that was designed to retake Fort Harrison. The Fifth and Ninth Corps succeeded in advancing the Union left to the area of Peebles's Farm, even though a Confederate counterattack on September 30 prevented them from extending even farther. A feeble Rebel counterattack the next day on the right of Warren's corps was easily repelled, and a large but poorly led effort to extend the Union flank on October 2 was easily stopped by Confederate defensive measures.

Second Confederate Offensive: October 7, 1864, in which the Rebels tried to roll up the right flank of the Army of the James north of the James River. After some initial success, they were stopped before achieving that goal. The Federals launched a reconnaissance in force on October 13, 1864, based on reports that the Rebels were building a new line of works near the Union right flank, but were easily repulsed.

Sixth Union Offensive: October 27, 1864, in which Hancock's Second Corps was sent to gain Boydton Plank Road and then to push on to cut the South Side Railroad leading into Petersburg from the west. Hancock made it to Boydton Plank Road, but supporting troops could not connect with him; the Confederates mounted a counterattack that was repulsed, but Hancock withdrew anyway, in what came to be known as the battle of Burgess's Mill. To support Hancock's move, the Army of the James tried to find and go around the Confederate left flank north of the James River, but it failed.

Warren's Raid on the Weldon and Petersburg Railroad: December 7–12, 1864, more popularly known as the Applejack Raid because of Union foraging efforts along the way. It was not a serious effort to grab and hold territory, but an attempt to tear up miles of track. The Confederates had been using the line from Weldon, North Carolina, unloading supplies at Stony Creek Station and transporting them by wagons along Boydton Plank Road. Warren tore up the rail line down to the crossing of Meherrin River and then returned before the Confederates could maneuver units to trap him.

Seventh Union Offensive: February 5–7, 1865, in which Grant initially attempted a massive raid on the Weldon and Petersburg Railroad but changed his objective when the Second Corps succeeded in seizing and holding a crossing of Hatcher's Run at Armstrong's Mill on February 5. This convinced Grant to redirect his forces to seize the Vaughan Road crossing of the Run, intending

to use both crossings to support a push west, around the southern end of the Confederate fortifications along Boydton Plank Road, and to reach the South Side Railroad. Efforts by the Fifth Corps to do so were stalled in fierce fighting near Dabney's Saw Mill on February 6 and 7, but the Federals still held both crossings of Hatcher's Run and retained the opportunity to use them to bypass the Confederate works in the future.

Third Confederate Offensive: March 25, 1865, in which Lee attacked Fort Stedman, ostensibly to disrupt the Federals so they could not respond to his planned evacuation of the Richmond-Petersburg lines. The carefully organized attack by the Confederate Second Corps quickly captured this earthwork and contiguous entrenchments, but the offensive foundered in the face of a layered Union defensive plan that prevented the Confederates from exploiting their success.

Eighth Union Offensive: March 29–April 1, 1865, a major Union effort to exploit the advantages won in the Seventh Offensive by pushing four divisions of cavalry under Philip Sheridan, supported by the Fifth Corps, in a wide flanking movement around Lee's right. This resulted in a small fight at Lewis's Farm between elements of the Fifth Corps and Confederate infantry on March 29, and a major attack by the Rebels against the Fifth Corps called the battle of the White Oak Road on March 31. On the same day, other Confederate troops attacked Sheridan's cavalry in the Battle of Dinwiddie Court House. Both Federal forces were driven back some distance but counterattacked and recovered lost ground. On April 1, the combined Union forces attacked an outnumbered Rebel force at Five Forks and decisively whipped it, finally outflanking Lee's fortified line many miles west of Petersburg.

Ninth Union Offensive: April 2, 1865, which ended the Petersburg campaign with a bloody drama. The Ninth Corps attacked along Jerusalem Plank Road and achieved a hard-won lodgment in the layered Confederate defenses after costly fighting. The Sixth Corps achieved a decisive breakthrough that collapsed Confederate defensive arrangements west of the city, even though last-ditch efforts to defend Fort Gregg exacted a heavy cost in Union casualties. Union Second Corps operations resulted in the battle of Sutherland Station, which delayed Federal efforts to exploit their success. Lee evacuated both Petersburg and Richmond that night.

This division of the component military moves during the Petersburg campaign varies from that proposed by Sommers, who considers the Confederate attack north of the James on October 7 as the First Battle of the Darbytown Road and the Union strike on October 13 as the Second Battle of the Darbytown Road. He places both actions as part of the Fifth Offensive. John Horn followed Sommers's outline in his study of the Petersburg campaign and called the entire

series of moves from March 29 to April 2, 1865, the Ninth Offensive. I prefer to divide that series into two offensives, for the operations from March 29 to April 1, culminating in the battle of Five Forks, were designed to outflank the Confederate line. The assaults of April 2 were mostly launched against Lee's front. Although set up by the successful effort to flank Lee, the April 2 attacks were a separate set of moves designed to punish the Confederates before they evacuated the line.²

The very fact that historians disagree on such a basic thing as designating the order of events indicates that the Petersburg campaign is not only complex but understudied. To a degree, this book necessarily has to be a general history of the campaign to set the proper context for understanding fortifications and engineering operations.

I WISH TO THANK Harry L. Jackson for his eagerness to help in fleshing out my knowledge of Confederate countermining operations at Petersburg. I especially appreciate his diligence in finding a rare sketch map of the Confederate countermine complex at Jerusalem Plank Road that was essential to my understanding of that project.

Chris Calkins, historian at Petersburg National Battlefield, also was very helpful in sharing information in his files and from his personal knowledge about the fieldworks and the mining operations at Petersburg.

Kevin M. Levin helped in gathering material for this book, and Laura Willoughby and Michael Cavanaugh provided copies of material as well, for which I am grateful.

I also wish to heartily thank A. Wilson Greene, David Lowe, and Richard Sommers for their careful reading of this manuscript and their willingness to offer advice that greatly improved it. No one knows more detail about the operations around Petersburg than Richard, and his expertise especially helped me to avoid many errors. I wish to thank the two reviewers who read the manuscript for the University of North Carolina Press as well, and to Gary Gallagher and David Perry, I offer my thanks for their support of this project.

Most of all, my love and gratitude to my wife, Pratibha, for all she does for me.