

Balks And Stringers: A Look At The Technology And Terminology Of Floating Bridges

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Review

BALKS AND STRINGERS

A look at the technology and terminology of floating bridges

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Thienel, Phillip M. *Mr. Lincoln's Bridge Builders: The Right Hand of American Genius*. White Mane Publishing Company, 2000-07-01. ISBN 1572491981

The mission of combat engineers in today's army encompasses four tasks: mobility, counter-mobility, survivability, and general engineering. When undertaking offensive operations, engineers sustain mobility by ensuring that the force in the field can maneuver as its commander desires even in the face of restrictions imposed by terrain or enemy obstacles. Engineers performed the same role when this nation split and engaged in a bloody civil war.

In **Mr. Lincoln's Bridge Builders**, Phillip M. Thienel has done a very credible job describing how Union engineers provided their commanders the freedom needed to maneuver. The mobility engineering covered in the book involves a special art of the combat engineer, the float bridge. Well into the 1980s, the technology Thienel describes remained the basic process of bridge building used to support an attacking force. Though the materials of construction had changed, the bits and pieces making up the pontoon bridge of the 1860s would not be foreign to a soldier working on the M4T6 float bridge that, until quite recently, was the U.S. Army's front-line bridging. The soldiers of the 1970s could have talked to the soldiers of the Engineer Battalion of the Regular Army in terms of balks and stringers and each would have understood the other.

Not only has the bridging technology stayed the same, but the tactics of opposed river crossings have retained some of the basic tenets. Today army manuals speak of "clearing the crossing site of observed fire" before starting bridging operations. (That is making sure than the enemy force cannot fire on the bridge builders with rifles or machine guns, nor be allowed to observe and direct artillery fire on the bridge site.) Had the 50th New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment described in Thienel's book worked under such conditions, its bridging

efforts at Fredericksburg would have enjoyed a more successful ending.

Thienel's work also touches on that other role of modern battlefield engineering: general engineering tasks. These are the engineer missions that most closely match the work done in civilian fields, such as the building of infrastructure to allow free movement of foodstuffs and supplies - "the beans and bullets" aspect of combat.

Every reviewer has his quibbles, and here are mine. First, too many foreign phrases are used without a translation in close proximity. Second, the work would have been enhanced with more maps to illustrate the movements of units and the development of battles. But these are minor inconveniences and certainly in no way should discourage anyone interested in the role of battlefield engineers from reading **Mr. Lincoln's Bridge Builders**.

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