

### The Charge That Ended The War: Union Infantry At Petersburg Surged On To Richmond

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## Review

### THE CHARGE THAT ENDED THE WAR

#### Union infantry at Petersburg surged on to Richmond

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**Greene, A. Wilson and Sommers, Richard J.** *The Final Battles of the Petersburg Campaign: Breaking the Backbone of the Rebellion*. Savas Publishing, 2000-04-01. ISBN 1882810481

Given the steady market for Civil War battle studies, the lack of a complete treatment of the individual engagements of the Petersburg campaign is puzzling. There were battle-scale combats during all but two of the months from June 1864 through April 1865, yet just six detailed studies of the 11 major battlefield engagements outside Petersburg have been produced. Most have been small press productions, varying greatly in quality, while the best, Richard Sommers's *Richmond Redeemed* (Doubleday, 1981) stands alone for its monumental depth, rigorous detail, and non-stop analysis. They are joined now by A. Wilson Greene's fine entry, **Breaking the Backbone of the Rebellion**, a contribution that lies decidedly on the Sommers end of the scale.

This book offers a detailed narrative of the final episodes of the Petersburg campaign, beginning with the March 25 Confederate assault on Union Fort Stedman, and ending with the Union Sixth Corps's penetration of the city's outer defenses on April 2, 1865. The latter is the true focus of this book, perhaps a natural center of attention for an author who presides over the privately operated battlefield park that preserves and interprets the breakthrough site.

The big question throughout the North as spring approached in 1865 was not *if* but *when* the final victory would come. Northern leaders feared that the Confederacy would drag its demise into a summer that would be filled with increasingly smaller-scaled actions as Rebel armies fragmented into guerrilla bands. This motivated Ulysses S. Grant to push hard at Petersburg, commencing offensive moves before conventional wisdom deemed the ground firm enough for operations.

The basic equation that had preserved the Confederacy there throughout the fall and winter of 1864 had not changed greatly. Lee's forces depended upon their large-scale earthworks to equalize the numbers game with their adversaries, a calculation that held true until the night of April 1. Bolstered by the news of Sheridan's success in defeating George Pickett at Five Forks, Grant ordered something he had refused to consider since the battle of the Crater in July: direct assaults on the enemy's fortified positions. Girded by the resilient optimism that had sustained him throughout 1864, Grant again believed that the enemy had been thinned and demoralized enough that a strong blow would finish the job. He was wrong about the latter, but quite correct regarding the former.

Just after dawn on April 2, Union forces surged against Lee's Petersburg lines in two places: on the east side along the Jerusalem Plank Road, and on the west side moving northwesterly from the "fishhook" in the Federal fortified lines. The eastern side mired down into bitter trench fighting, but the western wing achieved the great offensive breakthrough of the war.

**Breaking the Backbone of the Rebellion** meets every standard for a modern battle study. It draws from a full range of sources: published material, newspapers, and manuscripts of all kinds. Of course, such sources are of little value unless they are well applied, and Greene handles this mass of material with a sure hand. Nearly every key event has several accounts providing on-the-spot reportage along with those often poignant human interest vignettes that make battles so fascinating.

This is a narrative history with a popular bent, strong on story with little space spent providing analytical judgments. Principal officers are introduced with brief biographical sketches that emphasize their military record rather than personality traits. Tactical details are explained when necessary, but, more often than not, the descriptive passages fill that requirement. The book is extensively footnoted, with those annotations providing both source information and, frequently, relating additional commentary.

Although this detailed battle study includes maps, there appears to have been a miscommunication between cartographer and book designer, for many of the maps are presented in an obviously reduced size that often obscures the details they are meant to illuminate. It is an unfortunate blemish on an otherwise well-produced volume.

The April 2 assault of the Sixth Corps at Petersburg was the charge that ended the Civil War. It was the first falling domino that unerringly led to the last. In A. Wilson Greene, this militarily and historically significant operation has found a sympathetic and skillful chronicler.

*Noah Andre Trudeau is the author of four Civil War books, three concerning the campaigns of 1864-65 and one a combat history of black troops.*