

Trench Warfare Under Grant and Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign

B. Franklin Cooling

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Review

Cooling, B. Franklin

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Hess, Earl J. *Trench Warfare under Grant and Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 9780807831540

Tactics in the Overland Campaign

As we move closer to the Civil War Sesquicentennial, military historians will be tempted to rehash the battles and leaders anew while the more adventuresome will hopefully explore the old adage about new wine in old bottles. The literature of the period woefully lacks scholarly works on logistics, the technical or combat support services like ordnance, engineers, quarter-master, commissary or even administration (although the medical services and acquisition/procurement have received more attention in recent years). Field engineering appears to be the niche Lincoln University professor Earl J. Hess is carving out for himself with a trilogy examining the impact of field fortifications on operations in the eastern theater. He commenced his quest with *Field Armies and Field Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns 1861-1864* (2005) followed by *Trench Warfare under Grant & Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign* (2007), both volumes in Gary Gallagher's series *Civil War America*. The third piece in the set will conclude with the Petersburg/Richmond experience ending the war.

Hess addresses the role of Union and Confederate engineers (although not nearly enough the bureaucracy), but mainly concentrates on the intricacies of the works themselves and how the average Billy Yank and Johnny Reb learned by mid-war (if not before) how advantageous it could be going to ground in the hail of shot and shell that pervaded Napoleonic-style combat of the time. Suitably equipped with ample historic photographs and new detailed maps of the trench remnants (for Hess's books also argue for historic preservation of such cultural resources by National Park Service and other stewards), his narrative occasionally reaches somewhat arguable conclusions. His suggestion that hastily

dug earthworks from Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna, Cold Harbor, and Bermuda Hundred were as strong as those constructed to defend major cities like Richmond and Washington is questionable. A little less so, however, is Hess's assertion that the Overland Campaign represented a historic shift in the use of fieldworks in Western military history. Presuming he is indicating some prelude to the famous western front works of World War I and Hess seems to be countering the scholarship of Paddy Griffith to some extent.

Similarly, Hess may make too fine a point when he argues that the shift occurred because of Grant's relentless attacks on Lee in this campaign as opposed to the widespread use of rifle muskets. How the two can be separated or detached from the natural survival instinct of humans under fire—veteran troops in many cases, raw recruits in others—requires more exploration in the psyche of commanders and men. In this sense, the author may have asked too much of the record — but his work does inspire not just armchair re-reading from a different perspective and through different lens. Better understanding of why the remains of earthwork systems on today's battlefield parks may be important, but also why on-site re-visitation seems most advisable with this book in hand, flows from realization of how close to one another those trenches often were and how donkey generals of World War I sending their men over the top to slaughter had some awfully good forebears in Grant, Lee, and their subordinate commanders a half-century before. Hess illumines and educates with his prose and illustrations. Just how field fortifications morphed into siege fortifications awaits us in his third volume. It should be a good one and amply complement what he has provided a new generation of Civil War students to date.

B. Franklin Cooling is Professor of National Security Studies at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, Washington D.C. Author of numerous works on the Civil War, his latest, Counter Thrust; From the Peninsula to the Antietam was recently published in the University of Nebraska Press series Campaigns of the Civil War. He is currently finishing a trilogy on Civil War Operations, Stabilization, and Reconstruction in Tennessee and Kentucky.