

In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications and Confederate Defeat.

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Review

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Hess, Earl J. *In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications and Confederate Defeat.*. The University of North Carolina Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780807832820

A Look at the Role of Field Fortifications in Confederate Defeat

In the Trenches at Petersburg concludes Earl Hess's trilogy on field fortifications in the Virginia theater, enhancing the reputation for thematic military history he built with *The Union Soldier in Battle* (2005) and *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat* (2008). Indeed, Hess is the most analytical of Civil War military historians writing today, and *In the Trenches at Petersburg* is full of insightful observations as well as tactical and operational detail.

Previous studies of the Petersburg campaign have been focused on specific engagements or phases, or have lacked scholarly rigor in research and analysis. Hess therefore sets out to provide the first scholarly general history of the campaign as a whole. Much like *Trench Warfare under Grant & Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign* (2007), he succeeds in combining clear tactical and operational narratives, as succinct as possible given the complexity of these battles and campaigns, with cogent assessments supported by a wide array of written and physical evidence. Each of these volumes contains extensive examinations of the fortifications, which Hess has walked over and over. Even more valuable for the purposes of analysis and generalization, he does not hesitate, or neglect, to quantify: troop density per mile of frontage as well as force ratios and casualties. (Similarly, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat* quantifies engagement ranges.) While this may appear the stuff of minutiae, aggregating force-space-time relationships from a broad sample is essential to truly analyzing combat, in place of the impressionism and repetition of old platitudes on which most historians rely.

Hess addresses three large issues, one tactical, one “grand tactical” (the contemporary term, for which military analysts today use “operational,” meaning at the level of the campaign, or the juncture between battles and their objectives), and one strategic. All three of his conclusions will be controversial, but they are logical, balanced, well-supported by evidence, and ultimately persuasive. Tactically, Hess repeats the argument of *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat* that the rifle was not the critical factor leading to field fortifications. It never produced consistent entrenchment in the west, nor did it do so shortly after the rifle became standard throughout the eastern armies early in 1863. Rather, the field fortifications of 1863 appeared after battles died down, or in their later stages during retreats (Hooker’s defensive position before withdrawing across the Rappahannock after Chancellorsville, or Lee’s bridgehead on the Potomac after he retreated from Gettysburg), or in momentarily quiet sectors (Culp’s Hill during the second day at Gettysburg).

The decisive factor inducing entrenchment in the east was an operational one, Grant’s conduct of “continuous operations” in 1864: remaining in close proximity to—within smoothbore musket range of—the Army of Northern Virginia for weeks, and ultimately months, at a time. It might be argued that this made fortifications attractive for protective cover, particularly against snipers during the siege of Petersburg, and Hess recognizes this, but views the rifle as “accentuating the trend toward digging in” under conditions of continuous contact (283). As in *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat*, Hess affirms that “sharpshooting, skirmishing, and harassing artillery fire were adjuncts to the operations of the battle line; they never substituted for major [tactical] movements. The Petersburg campaign would be decided by what the battle line did or failed to do, not by the actions of a handful of snipers.” The armies would have dug in “even if the battle lines [had been] armed only with smoothbores” (284).

Why, if not for protection? Hess’s answer is a logical one of scale: individual soldiers might take the initiative to dig in for cover against rifle fire or snipers, but for divisions and corps and the entire armies to do so, to the degree seen at Spotsylvania and Petersburg, depended on commanders’ recognition of grand tactical or operational-level advantages. Entrenchments allowed the Army of the Potomac to remain in close contact with the Army of Northern Virginia, to hold it in place with limited risk of defeat by Confederate counterattack. Lee’s strength had always been offensive maneuver; Grant refused to cede him that initiative. Thus, the Army of the Potomac could secure each new advance with

new earthworks, too costly for the Confederates to attack. At Petersburg, the Federals ultimately adopted a "bite-and-hold" campaign strategy, edging west with each new offensive, forcing the Confederates to stretch their lines to the breaking point.

Historiographically, Hess has rejected Paddy Griffith's argument that fieldworks were primarily psychological rather than physical obstacles. The ever-more elaborate field fortifications of 1864 and 1865 usually included abatis (trees felled, with branches and ends sharpened), log palisades, and ramparts, as well as trenches: they were not quickly or easily crossed, particularly under fire, and they were increasingly backed by a second or reserve trench. Once the Federal troops were dug in, there was little the Confederates could do to reverse Union gains.

At the strategic (big-picture) level, then, Hess argues logically that "there is little doubt that the Federals gained more from the use of fortifications than the Confederates." This appears counterintuitive, but is not. Hess acknowledges that "Lee's use of fieldworks extended the life of his army," but entrenchments denied Lee the opportunity to outmaneuver, or to assault and drive back, the Army of the Potomac as he had done so often in the past (284). Perhaps, had McClellan had the time, or his army the experience, to build the fortifications he wanted, he might not have been driven back from Richmond in 1862. Two years later, Grant's earthworks ensured that the campaign would be one of attrition, essentially a siege, that Lee had already recognized he could not win.

At the operational level of the campaign, Hess reaffirms the mixed, but ultimately positive, assessment of Grant he laid out in *Trench Warfare under Grant & Lee*. Grant's great weakness was impatience, which led to inadequate reconnaissance, planning, and coordination and a failure to recognize the demoralization among his soldiers at the end of the Overland campaign. On the other hand, Hess lauds Grant's persistence and his flexibility as a grand tactician (or battle planner): Grant continued to maneuver, trying to envelop the Confederate flanks, east as well as west of Petersburg, in addition to attempting breakthroughs against the Confederate line. For example, Hess labels the Third Offensive (First Deep Bottom and the Crater) "a multilayered plan filled with options" for exploiting success (p. 79). In modern operational art, we refer to this as planning for "branches and sequels." Thus, Grant's conduct of continuous operations encouraged a level of planning new to American armies, a significant step in the development of the operational art (essentially, connecting military

actions to their larger, strategic, objectives). And Grant *learned*, however slowly, abandoning the traditional grand tactics of envelopment and penetration later that summer in favor of slowly turning Lee's lines by gradually extending his own. Grant became patient, patient enough to win the war.

Indeed, Hess points out that much if not most of the Petersburg campaign "was less of a siege than . . . a traditional field campaign" with fortifications (p. xv). Here, though accurate in regard to form, Hess's precision may obscure larger truths and confuse those not versed in the technical military terminology. The larger truth is that Grant's operations at Petersburg had the *effect* of a siege, in fixing the Army of Northern Virginia, denying Lee the initiative or freedom of action, and intensifying the attrition unfavorable to the Confederates. Thus Hess notes that desertion was far higher, proportionally as well as absolutely, among the Confederate veterans than in the Army of the Potomac, despite its infusion of draftees and bounty men in 1864. Between January 10 and March 28 Lee lost nearly 6,000 soldiers to desertion, leaving him with 31,000 troops to hold a line 27 miles long. In other words, in eleven weeks Lee lost approximately 16 percent of the soldiers who were not combat casualties to desertion. A thousand soldiers per mile means one every two, or with reserves every three or four, yards, a very thin line by nineteenth-century standards. When Sherman's arrival became imminent, Lee had to leave Petersburg. And, when he wanted to turn south to combine with Joseph Johnston's Confederates, U.S. fieldworks at Jetersville deterred him.

In five years, Earl Hess has published four outstanding works of military analysis. Few social or political historians will have the stomach to wade through the details of fortification construction and military maneuvers, but the breadth and depth of Hess's evidence and the logic and precision of his argument merit the highest praise, and every Civil War historian (indeed every historian of warfare), social or political as well as military, should understand his conclusions. Although overtly dedicated to fortifications and tactics (or grand tactics), the ultimate import of Hess's work is to redirect our understanding of Civil War military history to a truly operational level, away from the details of tactics and technology to their uses, from rifles and trenches to time-space and force density relationships and the pace of operations. Both sides had rifles and both sides had earthworks; Lee was a master of operational maneuver and so was Grant, but Grant could conduct, and had the vision to conduct, continuous operations. These, more than any technology, give the Civil War a claim to modernity in the history of warfare.

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