

The Army Of The Potomac In The Overland And Petersburg Campaigns: Union Soldiers And Trench Warfare, 1864-1865

Charles R. Bowery

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Bowery, Charles R. (2018) "The Army Of The Potomac In The Overland And Petersburg Campaigns: Union Soldiers And Trench Warfare, 1864-1865," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.20.1.07

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss1/2>

Review

Bowery, Charles R.

Winter 2018

Sodergren, Steven E. *The Army of the Potomac in the Overland and Petersburg Campaigns: Union Soldiers and Trench Warfare, 1864-1865.* LSU Press, \$47.95
ISBN 9780807165560

After their Breaking Point: Petersburg and the Refuge of Trenchwarfare

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, and continuing into the Centennial period, the eastern campaigns in the Civil War's last year suffered from a dearth of serious scholarship. For a long time, authors and historians consigned the Overland and Richmond-Petersburg Campaigns to the province of legend and memory, with a few iconic moments—Robert E. Lee being led to the rear by his men; the mud and blood of the Mule Shoe; frontal assaults at Cold Harbor; the maelstrom of the Crater; the surrender at Appomattox—shaping our collective memory of the period from May 1864 to April 1865. The air of inevitability in which this period is often cast, especially moving into the late summer and fall of 1864, has worked against deep contextual analysis of these campaigns.

The two decades from 1997 to the present have seen a significant improvement to this historiographical imbalance. I can turn to my personal bookshelf now and see dozens of quality books and essay collections on various aspects of the 1864-1865 campaigns, many informed by viewing the battles, armies, and leaders through the analytical frameworks of race, gender, and the physical environment. It is in this vein that Steven Sodergren, an associate professor of history at Norwich University, offers his social history of the Army of the Potomac in the Overland and Petersburg campaigns. In its primary source base, structure, and argument, Sodergren's book resembles J. Tracy Power's *Lee's Miserables* (1998), which analyzes the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia during the same period.

Sodergren argues that the uninterrupted nature of the fighting during the Overland Campaign drove Union soldiers to the physical and psychological breaking point by the time they crossed the James River in June 1864, and

confronted General Robert E. Lee's Confederate forces around Petersburg. The shift to a more static mode of warfare over that summer, based on the extensive field fortifications employed by both sides, gave Union soldiers a physical refuge of sorts, and allowed them to adjust to their physical conditions. This process of adaptation regenerated the morale and combat effectiveness of the Union Army, creating the conditions for the successful campaign of March-April, 1865.

Two historiographical schools guide our understanding of Civil War combat motivation and unit effectiveness. The first, which may be labeled the "Patriotism School," looks to James M. McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades* (1997) in tracing soldier motivation to the causes for which they fought. The second, or "Coping School," looks to Gerald M. Linderman's *Embattled Courage* (1987) to find soldier service in more basic conditions of personal courage (or cowardice) in the face of the fear, chaos, and destruction of combat. A number of more recent studies add to the debate by introducing deep contextual factors that affect individual motivation. Mark Grimsley's *And Keep Moving On* (2002) places the Overland Campaign in a political, strategic, and social context. Earl Hess's work on field fortifications throughout the war help us to understand their impact on the soldier experience. His book on field fortifications in and around Petersburg, and his micro-tactical study of the Battle of the Crater, are on the short list of essential books about the last year of the war in the East. Other recent studies add nuance to the Patriotism School by examining soldier and Army political activity in 1864-65. Michael Barton's *Goodmen: The Character of Civil War Soldiers* (1981) is also important in establishing the inner world of these soldiers. Kathryn Shively Meier's excellent essay, "I Told Him to Go On: Enduring Cold Harbor," part of Gary W. Gallagher and Caroline E. Janney's 2015 collected essays on the end of the Overland Campaign, is a recent addition to the Coping School.

Sodergren's book clearly hews to the Coping School in its argument. Nine chapters take the reader from the Overland Campaign, with its grinding operational and tactical tempo, into the environs of Petersburg, where the armies establish themselves for a ten-month campaign that is unprecedented in American history for its scale and diversity. The losses Major General George Meade's Army of the Potomac incurred from May through June 1864 causes a decline in troop morale and unit effectiveness that stretched the army to the breaking point by mid-June. Both armies reacted to this destruction and loss of life by entrenching. The rest of the campaign would be conducted with these fortifications as a base of operations. Sodergren uses soldier letters and diaries,

as well as unit action reports, to trace the army's process of adaptation to its environment. The physical reprieve offered by fortifications, combined with the massive Federal logistics effort and the presence of northern charitable organizations and an influx of mail from the home front, allowed the Army of the Potomac to regenerate its combat effectiveness. By March 1865, this process was complete, and the army was ready, as the countryside dried following winter rains, for the campaign that led to the surrender of General Robert E. Lee and his Confederate army at Appomattox Court House.

My critiques of this book center around the author's framing of this campaign as a siege. In our guide to the campaign published in 2014, Professor Ethan Rafuse and I argue that the Richmond-Petersburg Campaign is more properly understood as a land campaign conducted across a vast landscape, comprising battles of maneuver and raids, with episodic siege operations. Professor Sodergren focuses his analysis of the campaign on the periods when the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac occupy their trenches; in reality, they conducted maneuver and battle during the entire ten-month campaign, even during the fall and winter months when field operations tended to stop. This focus may cause the book to miss some important dynamics at work in the Union Army's equation of combat effectiveness. The battles of July through September 1864 involved large numbers of conscript soldiers and recent immigrants, and the army's high command and unit leaders struggled to assimilate these soldiers into the ranks of veteran units in the midst of aggressive maneuvers around Petersburg and Richmond. The author's linkage to the trench fighting of World War I is also, in my mind, problematic. Civil War historians make these connections at their peril, as scholarship on the Great War has taken a much more nuanced turn in the last decade.

These very minor criticisms aside, *The Army of the Potomac in the Overland and Petersburg Campaigns* is a comprehensively researched, persuasively argued, and engagingly written study that advances significantly our understanding of this pivotal period in the Civil War. It will take its place among the small number of standard works on this campaign, and it offers a number of fruitful avenues for further study.

Colonel (Retired) Charles R. Bowery, Jr., is Executive Director of the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C., and is the author or co-author of three books on the American Civil War, including Richmond-Petersburg 1864-65, published by Praeger in 2014.

