

Reenacting With The Corps of Engineers

by Philip Katcher

The best field commanders at reenactments make a great deal of use of members of the Corps of Engineers. They find that Engineers give them an edge, especially in tactical maneuvers. Field commanders with more average skills are apt to simply have Engineers around like potted palms under the flies of their headquarters tent-decorations rather than assistants.

This should be expected. After all, field commanders on both sides had to learn how to best use their Engineers, with little by way of training material to see how to. Most field commanders came up from the combat arms, usually infantry, and never were involved with trained Engineers in the field. It takes some working with Engineers to know what they should and can do, and how they can benefit an event.

Since the overall goal of most reenactors is to recreate history, it's best to turn to original sources to see what Engineers did originally to see what they can do now.

According to Confederate *Army Hegulations*, which are virtually the same on both sides, "The duties of these corps usually relate to the construction of permanent and field fortifications; works for the attack and defence of places; for the passage of rivers; for the movements and operations of the armies in the field; and such reconnaissances and surveys as may be required for these objects, or for any other duty which may be assigned to them."

In other words, Engineers survey a field before its use, map it, report on it to the overall field commander, and suggest how the terrain can be best used. They also may scout the enemy before the



Building Breastworks by Edwin Forbes. Army Sketch Book, 1890.

battle to determine numbers, positions, and works. Then, if a field commander decides that field fortifications should be built, Engineers design them and oversee their building. Then, during the battle, they are involved in overseeing the movement of the various units to where the field commander wants them placed, since they know the field best.

There are two distinct areas in which Engineers serve: in reconnaissance and mapmaking, and in building items such as fortifications. Originally, the U.S. Army had two distinct types of Engineers to do these things, the Corps of Topographical Engineers and the Corps of Engineers. The latter included enlisted men in an Engineer Battalion, while the former was made up only of officers. As it happened, this was an awkward arrangement, and the two Corps were soon merged into a single Corps of Engineers. At the same time, various northern states raised

volunteer Engineer units, among which were the 1st, 15th and 50th New York, the 1st Michigan, and units from Missouri and Pennsylvania. For the most part these were full regiments, including both officers and enlisted men, who could do a wide variety of engineering activities.

The Confederates originally planned for only a small company of enlisted Engineers, with the bulk of the Corps made up of officers who would do both scouting and map-making and oversee building. The actual building was to be done by enlisted men of other branches detailed into a Pioneer Corps under their own officers and non-commissioned officers. Impressed or hired slaves also did a great deal of this type of work.

Eventually, Confederate commanders realized that many of the men in the Pioneer Corps were less than inspired, since what they did was a great deal of manual labor that they didn't have to do in their

own units. In 1863 the Confederate Congress authorized four Regiments of Engineer Troops formed from skilled men already in the ranks. These men would be both trained and equipped as infantry and able to do any variety of engineering work needed. Companies of these troops were scattered throughout the south. The 1st, which today includes several recreated companies, served as a single unit in the Army of Northern Virginia. The 2d, represented by a single company in South Carolina, served throughout the deep south. The 3d served as individual companies in the Army of Tennessee. The 4th only existed as several companies in Louisiana.

In the 1980s, as reenactors began to age and no longer enjoy serving in combat arm ranks and the hobby grew large enough to have support units used on the field, some individuals and units both became interested in recreating the role of the Engineer.

Union reenactors were first, to do Engineer impressions. They went the traditional way both of the original Union army and of reenactment units generally -- they recreated units. In the south, a number of individuals recreated the 1st New York Volunteer Engineers, while in New York another group began the 15th New York Volunteer Engineers. Interestingly, they approached their impression from different directions, the 1st emphasizing the combat role of Engineers acting as trained infantry, while the 15th emphasized the construction work that Engineers did. Other units which combine both roles include a company of the Engineer Battalion in Connecticut, the Acting Company Independent Engineers in the Delaware Valley, and the 1st Michigan Mechanics and Engineers in the mid-west. As well, a handful of individuals created impressions of Corps of Engineers officers from time to time.

Because of the organizational, rather than individual, structure of Federal Engineer reenactors, there is no overall Union Engineer umbrella organization. Indeed, to a certain extent such an organization is unnecessary since the recreated units are in such wide-spread areas that there is little overlapping. It must be admitted, too, that politics — something familiar to all reenactors — has played a role in the lack of a Union Engineer umbrella organization.

Confederate Engineer impressions came about later and rather differently. Since the Confederate Corps of Engineers was originally formed as all officers, save for the one company which may not have even actually existed, it's somehow appropriate that the first Confederate Engineers were all single individuals who showed up at events and served on commanders' staffs as possible. Many of these did first person impressions of famed Confederate Engineer officers, especially Jed Hotchkiss. Eventually, some of these individuals met with other reenactors and formed units, especially

several companies of the 3d Regiment of Engineer Troops which were formed in the west.

Eventually, at the 130th Anniversary of Gettysburg, held in 1993, a number of both individuals who were doing Confederate Engineer officer impressions and representatives of the 3d Regiment met and formed the Engineer Bureau. The original Engineer Bureau oversaw the activities of the Corps of Engineers, Today's Engineer Bureau, headquartered in Richmond as was the original, acts as a general umbrella organization, handling requests for membership and information about Confederate Engineers and passing them on to nearby units and individuals, collecting maps of event areas for commanders to use, transmitting information about research and sources of supply, and working with field commanders to make sure they have trained engineers available.

As well, the Confederate Engineer Bureau, whose members live as far apart as Germany and San Diego, CA, has set up a Topographical Department for those involved in map-making and reconnaissance, and a Pioneer Corps for those involved in field works construction. It also has representatives from the first three Regiments of Engineer Troops, who are located in the traditional service areas of the regiments they represent.

Today, among both Confederates and Federals, there are some 1,000 individuals who do impressions of the Corps of Engineers. As with other recreated branches of the service, most of these reenactors belong to some sort of organization which governs, at least in a general way, uniforms, equipment, and duties in the field. There are still, however, individuals and the odd unit which doesn't seem to get along with others which is still an independent organization. As such they don't have to worry about the authenticity of their impressions.

So, field commanders of both

Union and Confederate forces have access to Engineers in virtually every area of the country. The question, is how best should they use them?

First, registration forms from Engineers should be placed together with other support organizations such as Signal Corps and Medical Department units or individuals. Then the field commander or his adjutant should get in touch with the senior Engineer well before the event and let him know where the event will be held. He should ask the senior Engineer to visit the area beforehand and survey the ground to produce a sketch map of the area from which to plan the event. He should find out if his subordinate unit commanders have Engineers on their staffs, either from the subordinate commanders or his Chief Engineer where the Chief Engineer represents an umbrella organization of Engineers. If not, he should try to get Engineers assigned to his subordinates staff who can work with his Chief Engineer and his subordinate unit commanders, who will do the work for his subordinate commanders as his Chief Engineer does for him.

Where possible, the event organizer should tap the resources of registered Engineers to lay out the camp grounds, place sanitary facilities and similar areas.

In some recent events such as the Wilderness and North Anna 130th Anniversary reenactments, fairly elaborate trench systems were required. In such cases, the overall commander should depend on his Chief Engineer and his subordinates to design these systems and oversee their building.

Once the event has begun, the commander should make sure his Chief Engineer, at least, is present at every unit officers' meeting to advise about the field, fortifications, etc. But before that Engineers on hand should go out to the field before the event to scout the area to see about changes in the area (has a recent storm blown down-trees

across paths?) and report back with this information. Moreover, Engineers can survey the opposite side's camp, especially when its units are drilling, to count numbers. Of course, such Engineers need to know details of the uniforms, insignia, and colors used by the other side so they can accurately report such intelligence.

Then, when the opposing side march onto the field, Engineers should be in the forefront, leading units into position. Once units are in position, Engineers should **return** to the field commander's field headquarters to transmit his messages for changes of position, etc., to subordinate units. It may seem a bit glamorous to wear an officer's uniform and stand around the commander's flag on the field, but Engineers soon find they run three times the distance in the average event as does an infantry private!

Some field commanders like reports, often including sketch maps, of events **after** they are over. In such cases, the Chief Engineer handles this job.

Of course, a field commander may chose not to use his Engineers at all. In that case, he has to depend on his own legs and eyes to **find** out about the battlefield and enemy forces, the host organization to provide a camp layout, and whom-ever he can find around to pass his movement orders on to subordinate **units**. Now you figure it out, which commander will have the better-run battle, the one who uses Engineers or the one who doesn't? ♣

About the author:

Involved in reenacting since 1960, Philip **Katcher** is also the author of a number of books on military subjects, especially for the Osprey **Men-At-Arms** series. His most **recent** book is the **Civil War Source Book**. He presently serves as the assistant chief of the **Confederate** Engineer Bureau, galvanizing from time to time with the Independent Company Acting Engineers, a **Union** unit.