



## *The Army of the Potomac in the Overland and Petersburg Campaigns: Union Soldiers and Trench Warfare, 1864–1865* by Steven E Sodergren.

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The grueling Overland Campaign of 1864—from the Wilderness to the start of the siege of Petersburg—witnessed dramatically changed tactics by the Federal Army of the Potomac (or “Army”), specifically, costly assaults on strong defensive positions. In his new (first) book, historian Steven Sodergren (Norwich Univ.) investigates the severe effects of that change on the morale of the Army in the last year of the Civil War. Only through a concerted effort to rebuild its support mechanisms did it recover its morale and capacity for effective offensive operations.

The Overland and Petersburg campaigns are often slighted in the historiography of the Civil War, which has stressed earlier operations and battles in the Eastern Theater. Myriad studies have been devoted to the Seven Days, Antietam, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. This is true in part because of the sudden shift from discrete, sporadic battles to the constant high-intensity combat during the Overland Campaign; there were fewer of the clean breaks in the fighting that typically define the beginning and end of a given battle. The Overland Campaign extended through a much longer time-frame and wider operational area than was previously the rule.

Although Gordon Rhea covers all of the battles leading up to the Siege of Petersburg in his five-volume series<sup>1</sup> and Noah Andre Trudeau<sup>2</sup> has focused on the siege itself, Sodergren points out that “despite the changing circumstances of the war, authors rarely mention how a variation in *the actual methods of warfighting* may have had corresponding effects on the men charged with the prosecution of such warfare” (7; my emphasis).

Sodergren frames his work specifically as a social history of the Army in his target period. In this regard, his book is a fine counterpart to J. Tracy Power’s *Lee’s Miserables*,<sup>3</sup> which describes the slow disintegration of Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia down to the hard core of men who hung on until Appomattox. Sodergren concentrates on the personal experiences of enlisted men and regimental officers rather than operational or tactical matters. His succinct battle descriptions are included to convey their impact on the troops and the (decreasing) efficacy of the Army. His easy prose style and emphasis on the human condition of the soldiers will appeal to a broad audience.

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1. *The Battle of the Wilderness, May 5–6, 1864* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 1994), *The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern, May 7–12, 1864* (1997), *To the North Anna River: Grant and Lee, May 13–25, 1864* (2000), *Cold Harbor: Grant and Lee, May 26–June 3, 1864* (2002), *On to Petersburg: Grant and Lee, June 4–15, 1864* (2017).

2. *The Last Citadel: Petersburg, June 1864–April 1865* (1991; rev. ed. Eldorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2014).

3. Subtitle: *Life in the Army of Northern Virginia from the Wilderness to Appomattox* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 1998).

Sodergren begins by discussing the relative enthusiasm of the mostly veteran soldiers as the war entered its fourth year. He proceeds chronologically through the campaign to demonstrate the growing disillusionment of the men with the commanders who ordered them to make repeated attacks against fixed Confederate positions. The fruitless battles of May–June 1864 left the Army a shell of its former self:

While Grant's soldiers increasingly transformed into fatalistic automatons who kept moving on out of habit and the faint hope that tomorrow would bring some sort of finish to the endless marches and horrific combat, they began to turn on those above them whom they held responsible for their suffering. Both the ability and desire of Union soldiers to continue the fight was [sic] waning rapidly, as evidenced by the lackluster assaults in the opening days of the Petersburg operations and the growing talk of units and men refusing orders from their commanders. Together with the examples of individual insubordination and the growing desertion problem within the army, these developments revealed the Army of the Potomac itself to be a truly damaged organization by the summer of 1864. (87)

The author writes that only when the Army entered into the trench warfare of the Petersburg siege could it reflect on the grim realities of the past campaign and begin to repair itself. At Petersburg, the Army enjoyed the stability and protection it had lacked in the Overland Campaign as well as the robust support structure the North had at its disposal. Regular mail, plentiful supplies, and the cessation of suicidal assaults on nearly impregnable positions went far to restore its spirits. Sodergren argues that the troops realized the siege was a means to the end of the war. They could strangle the Army of Northern Virginia from the comparative safety of their trenches. The men that emerged from those trenches in 1865 had been tempered by the previous year's combat and imbued with the will to see their job through to the end.

Sodergren draws on a diverse set of pertinent primary sources, including the testimony of some 170 men in the Army itself. Indeed, a great strength of his book is its consistent privileging of the voices of the men themselves, ensuring a sense of authenticity. But the volume's strictly ground-level social perspective comes at the expense of identifying other factors that affected the Army in 1864–65. For example, the turnover of officers of all ranks in the period eliminated less aggressive officers who had wasted many of opportunities during the Overland Campaign and the early stages of the Siege of Petersburg.<sup>4</sup> Sodergren also ignores the effect on the Army of the departure of many veteran units in 1864 and of the heavy artillery and newly-raised infantrymen that replaced them. Wholesale organizational changes in summer and fall 1864 saw the consolidation or elimination of some of the Army's oldest brigades and divisions.

The book has other flaws. There are distracting discrepancies and errors throughout in the designation of ranks of individual soldiers, even on the same page. More seriously, the frequent use of sources from the Army of the James to support his argument is problematic as well. While elements of that army fought alongside the Army of the Potomac at Cold Harbor and elsewhere for the remainder of the war, Sodergren uses many of the sources for those armies indiscriminately, taking too little account of their different experiences during the Overland Campaign.

Steven Sodergren vividly evokes the experiences of the average soldier confronting the visceral horrors of a new manner of combat. His discerning examination of the logistics network that un-

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4. See, further, William Bergen, "Grant *Finally* Takes Command: How the Race to Appomattox Was Won," in *Petersburg to Appomattox: The End of the War in Virginia*, ed. Caroline E. Janney (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2018) 22–28.

derlay the rally in morale in fall 1864 goes beyond the purview of traditional “battle piece” histories. While it could have benefited from a broader perspective on its subject, the book will engage and enlighten readers interested in the forces that molded the Army of the Potomac into the force that finally ended war in Virginia in 1865.