

PETE-OSZ  
PONTOON BRIDGES OF THE CAMPAIGN IN EASTERN  
VIRGINIA, 1864-65.

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Pontoon Bridges of the Campaign in Eastern Virginia, 1864-65.

The most complete single report on this activity of the armies  
(1)  
is probably that of Lt. Col. Ira Spaulding, who covers the work of his  
regiment, the Fiftieth New York Engineers, in twelve pages which add  
up to form an interesting picture of a branch of army life not too well  
known.

As the spring of 1864 approached, the battalions of the regi-  
ment were camped near the Rapidan, at Stevensburg, Welford's Ford and  
Rappahannock Station. Equipment consisted of the entrenching tools  
of the Army and five pontoon trains, totalling forty wooden boats and  
twenty-four collapsible canvas ones. There were about 1,500 men in  
the regiment, and in the last days of April they must have been ex-  
tremely busy, like most of Grant's Army, with preparations for the  
coming movement. The canvas boats were of a type developed by Major  
J. C. Duane (Chief Engineer, Army of the Potomac), and never having  
been tried in active service, required labor up to the last minute,  
and were only finished May 2, three days before the battle of the  
Wilderness.

The first bridge building of the campaign took place on  
April 29, when Captain Folwell's detachment of the Reserve Battalion  
laid a bridge at Kelly's Ford. At one o'clock that afternoon the  
last plank was in place and Gregg's Cavalry Division moved over it.  
The hundred and eighty foot bridge stood the strain to the satisfac-  
tion of the engineers. At four next morning it was packed up and  
again moved on.

The engineers' big day came on May 4, when all five bridges were put down for the Army's crossing of the Rapidan, three of them by 6 a.M. There were many more streams to be crossed in May and June as the struggle neared Richmond: the Po, the North Anna, the Pamunkey, the Mattaponi and the Chickahominy. Across the last, at Cole's Ferry, the longest bridge up to that time was laid under Colonel Spaulding's supervision, June 14th.

The work of bridge building was not always peaceful. At Germanna Ford the bridges were laid to the accompaniment of cavalry skirmish fire. On the sixth the regiment reported as infantry and manned part of a newly formed line on the Federal right. On June 1, at Dunkirk on the Mattaponi, the pontoniers had to cross by boat and drive guerillas away before they could build the bridge. June 12, at Long Bridge, Major Ford crossed by boat with a squad of Chapman's cavalry, and "While crossing the second boatload of cavalry the enemy's pickets opened a brisk fire upon the troops and pontoniers." One engineer was mortally wounded.

Most of the difficulty, however, resulted from the intrinsic problem of the work, the movement of heavy wagons by poor half-known roads to destinations frequently hidden in darkness or bad weather.- Little of the cursing and shoving that must have gone on filters through into the reports, though at the last mentioned bridge the trouble of clearing away the tangled wreck of the old bridge is given as a reason for taking two and a half hours to complete the new one.

The story of the Chickahominy bridge at Cole's Ferry may be told as follows: At 8 a.m. June 14, Captain Personius arrived there

with his train, and built a wharf of boats on each side of the river and a large raft by which he crossed dispatch riders, some cavalry and wagons. He had sent a note which was received by Colonel Spaulding at Jones' Bridge two hours later, whereupon the Colonel ordered all his bridge-trains to Cole's. Major Beers arrived at 1 p.m., and Major Ford on the south bank at five. This brought all the "land" pontoons (as distinguished from those towed by water by way of Fort Monroe) of the army together, except for eight canvas boats with Sheridan's Cavalry.

Two hundred feet of raised corduroy was constructed at the north approach. After dark all the boats were in the water, but the bridge lacked thirty feet. It was therefore detached from the north bank, connected in the center, and additional cribbing added. The bridge, 1,240 feet long, with approaches of 450 feet, was completed by 3 a.m. Although the canvas boats were laid in unusually long spans, by the use of extra baulks, the bridge was strong enough to pass all the supply trains of the army, 2,800 cattle, and a division of infantry.

The longest bridge of all however was not built by this regiment but by the regular Engineer Battalion and detachments from other units. The work began on June 12, when Lieutenant Peter S. Michie was sent to examine the James River in the vicinity of Fort Powhatan. He reported on three possible crossings. Next day he directed the work of 150 axemen, who cut 1,200 feet of six-inch logs in 20-foot lengths, and brought down 3,000 feet of timber in rafts. At 3 p. m. a dispatch from Grant brought the information that the head of column would be at the bridge at 10 a.m. Quoting Brigadier General Godfrey Weitzel, Chief Engineer of the Army of the James:

"With the greatest exertion on the part of both officers and men the approaches on both sides of the river, with a pier 150 feet long over the soft marsh on the east bank, was completed at 9:45 a.m., a quarter of an hour before the time indicated by General Grant; and the bridge would have been built, ready for the passage of the troops, at or before 10 a.m. on the 14th if the pontoon train had arrived, as it should, at this time. Through inexcusable tardiness, and more than culpable neglect of duty, Captain \*\* did not appear in sight with his pontoons until after 12 o'clock at noon on the 14th, although he had but eighty miles to come from Fort Monroe, and received his orders to go as fast as he could at 2 p.m. on the 13th. So anxious was I that there should be no delay that I sent a dispatch boat to look for the pontoons down the river, with orders to go until they were found and hurry them up. Fifteen miles below Jamestown Island they were found at anchor, the captain being asleep. Owing to the strength of the current and tide, and depth of water, it was deemed necessary to moor three schooners each above and below to steady the bridge. These had been brought down the night before with a view to this disposition, were anchored by us, and used by General Benham for that purpose." (2)

Captain George H. Mendell, commanding the Engineer Battalion, reported: "The battalion was engaged in and did a great part of the work of throwing the bridge over the James, containing 101 wooden pontoons. In the channel the depth of water was twelve to fifteen fathoms, the tidal current strong, rising and falling about four feet.

\* \* The bridge was commenced from each end, and built by successive

pontoons and by rafts. It was commenced about 4 p.m. on the 15th of June; two companies at each end, under the direction of Major Duane, chief engineer. Later in the afternoon and after considerable progress had been made, General Benham took command. The bridge was completed except a passage-way of 100 feet left for vessels, and the raft constructed to fill this gap by 11 p.m. The greater part of the infantry and artillery, all the wagon trains, and droves of beef-cattle of the army passed this bridge safely and without interruption, except such as resulted from a vessel moored above slipping her anchor, thereby carrying away a part of the bridge, which, however, was promptly (3) restored."

As to who built the bridge, an unofficial point of view is expressed by C. A. Dana: "After Duane had nearly finished it Benham came up and took charge." (4)

Despite Mendell's statement about the cattle, and many others to the same effect, there is conflicting evidence as to just how they were crossed. On June 16, Benham advised Major-General H. G. Wright that the cattle should be made to swim, and that he had forbidden the bridge to them. (5) Wright stated in reply that he had arranged for the cattle to be ferried, but that arrangements were now up to Brigadier-General Ferrero. On the following night, General Meade ordered: " \* \* the pontoon bridge is under no circumstances to be used for the crossing of the cattle." (6)

The work of removing the bridge was completed by 3 a.m., June 18, and the pontoons, in three rafts, were towed to City Point. (7) An incident of its removal, the firing of Confederate artillery a

(8)  
mile away, is mentioned by Captain O. E. Hunt. These were the guns  
of W. H. F. Lee's Cavalry Division, McGregor's Horse Artillery,  
shelling "a wagon camp on the south side and some transports in the  
river." The advance of several gun-boats forced them back. The Con-  
federate force, advancing to Wyanoke Gate, had picked up some twenty  
prisoners. (9)

Two days later, June 20, Captain Timothy Luby of the 15th New  
York Engineers was sent from City Point to Bermuda Hundred and thence  
by wagon to Jones' Landing with thirty-six boats, with which he  
ferried 1,400 men two and a half miles down river to a point within  
400 yards of the Confederate pickets. There he completed a bridge  
across the James River by 4 a.m. on the twenty-first. This work was  
unostentatiously done, it seems, but it marked the creation of a road  
behind Grant's front which was to be of great importance in the cam-  
paign, (11) was in fact to be the essential means to four pairs of  
nearly simultaneous attacks north and south of the James. July 22,  
another bridge was laid near the same point, (12) and on the 26th one  
across the Appomattox at Broadway, in addition to that built by  
Butler's Army in May. (13)

Bridge-building on the Appomattox and the James was a consid-  
erable industry for some months. On September 19 another bridge was  
laid at Broadway, and on the twenty-seventh one at Aiken's Landing  
on the James. (14) In January, 1865, the pontoons here were replaced by  
a pile bridge, (15) a step made necessary by the freshets, ice and drift  
wood in the river. Pontoons were towed from City Point by the Fifteenth  
New York Engineers under Captain O'Keefe, and a bridge built at Rich-  
mond, April 5, 1865. (16) The last bridge built by the Army of the James



was in June, a structure replacing the burned Mayo's Bridge.

From June, 1864, to December, the Fiftieth New York had enjoyed a vacation from pontoons, the army being engaged in fortification of the Petersburg lines. On November 18 the pontoon trains were parked at Fort Stevenson, ground cleared and corrals built for 2,000 animals, and on December 1 the trains moved to their new quarters. (17) It was at this camp that the regiment built the log chapel and recreation hall photographed by Brady.

On December 6 a detachment of 300 men under Major Van Brocklin was sent to General Warren, to accompany his expedition to Hick's Ford. Pontoon bridges were laid at the Nottoway and at Three Creeks. The first, at Freeman's Bridge, was the scene of some trouble when the supply train crossed during the night; two wagons went into the river (says Major Van Brocklin) " -- one through gross carelessness of the driver, the other I attributed to the awkwardness of the team and the darkness." The bridge received but little damage, although in one case the team fell into the end of one of the boats. A few broken balks and chesses and a hole through the canvas were the only damages. (18) This march was made in severe winter weather.

The spring campaign opened for the pontoniers on March 29, when Van Brocklin's detachment bridged Hatcher's Run and Gravelly Run, streams southwest of Petersburg which had helped to obstruct Grant's campaign. During the pursuit to Appomattox, however, "the pontoons of the Army of the James arrived at Farnville in time to cross the trains and artillery of the Second and Sixth Corps, Army of the Potomac, although the pontoon trains of that army were better



equipped, lighter loaded, and possessed other advantages over the pontoon trains of our army." General Michie recommended Captain James W. Lyon of the Fourth Rhode Island to be brevetted Lieutenant-Colonel for this achievement. The weight of the wagons was 4,446 pounds for a team of eight mules.

The trains of the Fiftieth New York reached Farnville April 8 at 9:30 a.m., and Major Van Brocklin bridged the river at once, permitting the pontoons of the Twenty-fourth Corps to go on. This was apparently the last pontoon operation before the surrender.

In the campaign of 1864-65 the Fiftieth New York built 58 pontoon bridges, with a total length of 9,760 feet - very nearly two miles. Colonel Spaulding seems to have been well justified in his remark that these were "more perfectly arranged than any bridge trains before organized in America." He also states that "from the crossing of the Rapidan in the spring of 1864 to the close of the war no bridge material was ever lost, destroyed or abandoned to the enemy; nor were any troops ever kept waiting for the construction of these bridges.

The Confederacy organized two regiments of engineer troops in time to take part in the 1864 campaign. Previous to this, engineer work had been done by details from divisions. The First Regiment and two companies of the Second served in Virginia. Pontoon bridges were built in Richmond in accordance with the plans made by Captain George Br. McClellan before the war. Shortly before the troops needed it,

a bridge was laid at Chaffin's Bluff, and a company sent with a  
(23)  
pontoon train to Petersburg. On May 31, 1864, Captain Isaac W.  
Smith wrote to Colonel T. M. R. Talcott (commanding Engineer Troops,  
A. N. Va.): "I am directed by Colonel Rives to suggest to you the  
propriety of ordering a company of pontoneers to the James River to  
take charge of the boats now being collected near Drewry's Bluff.  
I have already a bridge across the river at Drewry's Bluff, and will  
have within two days over forty boats in the river.

"General Ransom is anxious that sufficient boats should be in  
readiness to bridge the James at any point should the necessity  
arise. In such a case the only troops available for such duty are  
about 30 men, under Lieutenant Sully. This, of course, will be too  
small a command to handle fifty boats. A telegram was sent you at  
headquarters asking that your pontoon train be ordered to Richmond.

\* \* Eight boats are expected tonight, but the reserve is still at  
Gordonsville, and Lieutenant Smith writes that he has no transpor-  
tation \* \* We will have with the eight boats from Coochland Court-  
house forty-two boats in hand, and will be able to make two boats per  
day. If you could get the ten from Gordonsville we would have suffi-  
cient to throw a bridge across at almost any point. We had to pile  
about half the bridge at Drewry's Bluff. \* "(24)

Colonel Talcott, in the article cited, wrote: "During the  
investment of Richmond and Petersburg, two pontoon bridges were main-  
tained across the Appomattox River, and one across the James at  
Chaffin's Bluff; and additional pontoon trains were provided in case

they should be needed. \* \* General Lee, during the winter of 1864-65, required the engineer troops to rebuild Bevill's Bridge over the Appomattox \* \* and to send a pontoon bridge to the Staunton River in Charlotte County. \* \* The pontoons for Genito, which were ordered from Richmond two days before, failed to arrive" (in time for the use of the army).

This is a survey of a single specialized branch of engineering activity for one twelve-month of war. It should be remembered that fortification and road-building were the major tasks, and also that many streams were crossed by bridges of other types, or existing structures repaired. The engineer had his work out out, in 1864 as at other times.

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4. O. R. 80, p. 21.
5. O. R. 81, p. 89.
6. O. R. 81, p. 121, p. 55.
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10. O.R. 80, pp. 210, 677 ; 81, p. 435.
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13. O. R. 68, p. 104.
14. O. R. 87, p. 661.
15. O. R. 126, p. 191; Atlas, 76.
16. O.R. 95, p. 642.
17. O. R. 87, p. 182.
18. O.R. 87, p. 184.
19. O. R. 95, p. 1166.
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21. O. R. 95, p. 643.
22. O.R. 95, p. 650.
23. Miller, op. cit., V, 260.
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