

Brilliant Scenes: Army Engineers in the Overland Campaign

By Mr. Donald J. McConnell and Mr. Gustav J. Person

The Overland Campaign of the Civil War began on 4 May 1864 and lasted 45 days. Stalemated at almost every turn, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant continually attempted to sidestep General Robert E. Lee's right flank as the forces moved south until the two armies came to rest and entrenched at Cold Harbor, Virginia. Grant changed his strategy thereafter by marching across the Chickahominy River, crossing the James River unopposed, and attempting to seize the Confederate transportation hub at Petersburg, Virginia, on the Appomattox River. This article examines the operations of Company A, U.S. Engineer Battalion, during the campaign, especially its actions on 14 June 1864 when the battalion assisted the Engineer Brigade of the Army of the Potomac erect a ponton bridge across the James River. The second part will examine the demographics of the unit, based on a study of the relevant muster rolls and the service and pension records of the officers and enlisted men assigned to the company at that time.

The Overland Campaign

Company A was originally formed as the Company of Sappers and Miners at the beginning of the Mexican War on 16 May 1846, with an authorized strength of

150 engineers. It was organized at West Point, New York, and ordered to Mexico. The unit rendered distinguished service in that conflict during the campaign to capture Mexico City. It engaged in reconnoitering and constructing fortifications and battery positions and served as infantry at the battles of Molina Del Rey and Chapultepec.^{1, 2}

In August 1861, the company was expanded into a battalion of four companies and the original unit was restyled Company A. Although the official name adopted was the Battalion of Sappers, Miners, and Pontoniers, it continued to be known as the U.S. Engineer Battalion in most orders and correspondence. Battalion strength was authorized at 600 officers and men. Company B was recruited in Portland, Maine, and Company C in Boston, Massachusetts. By 1 July 1862, however, the battalion only numbered 276 men on the rolls. That November, Company D (organized from drafts of the other three companies) joined the battalion, but all companies remained short of men until the War Department authorized Regular Army units to recruit from volunteer regiments in October 1862.³

In the closing stages of the Overland Campaign, the opposing armies were stalemated east of Richmond around Cold Harbor 1–12 June 1864. The regular engineers left



Photo courtesy Library of Congress

This photo of the James River ponton bridge, taken by Timothy O'Sullivan from the north bank, shows trestle work and anchoring schooners.

their camp on 12 June and crossed the Chickahominy River on a ponton bridge erected by the 50th New York Volunteer Engineers. They arrived at Wyanoke Point on the James River at about 1400 on 14 June. The regulars started work on a 150-foot-long trestlework through the muddy marshes and began assembling the ponton bridge with two companies on each bank. Concurrently, the infantry Soldiers from three Army corps began ferrying across the river farther upstream. Construction of the bridge began at about 1600 and took 7 hours to complete. The bridge stretched 2,170 feet and incorporated 101 ponton boats.^{4, 5, 6, 7}

The bridge was in operation until 17 June. All artillery, cavalry, wheeled vehicles, and trains of the Army of the Potomac—plus a herd of 3,000 cattle—crossed without incident or the loss of a single wagon or piece of artillery. It was, as *The New York Times* reported, “. . . one of the most brilliant scenes of the war.”⁸ Following its disassembly, the components were towed upriver to City Point, Virginia. Meanwhile, the assault on Petersburg on 15 June was successful, but an untimely halt in the operation allowed the Confederates to seal the breach. Three days later, the Army of the Potomac settled down to a siege of the Confederate defenses for the next 9 months.⁹

While the crossing proceeded, the Engineer Battalion moved out of the bridgehead on 16 June on an 18-mile march that took them closer to the new siege lines. In the following weeks, personnel reconnoitered and surveyed the enemy lines, built artillery batteries and fortifications, and conducted various mobility operations.

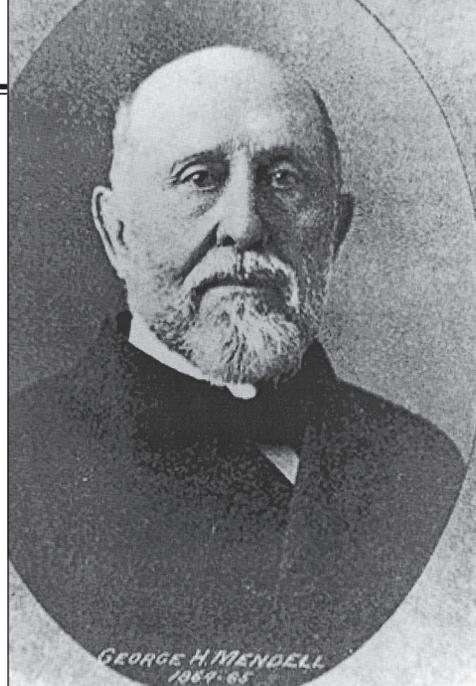


Photo courtesy Office of History, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Captain George H. Mendell

The Company

When Congress created the battalion in August 1861, it failed to allow for a command and staff element. Consequently, command of the battalion usually devolved on the senior officer; in June 1864, this was Captain George H. Mendell, who also commanded Company B. Captain Mendell graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1852. After the Overland Campaign, he was

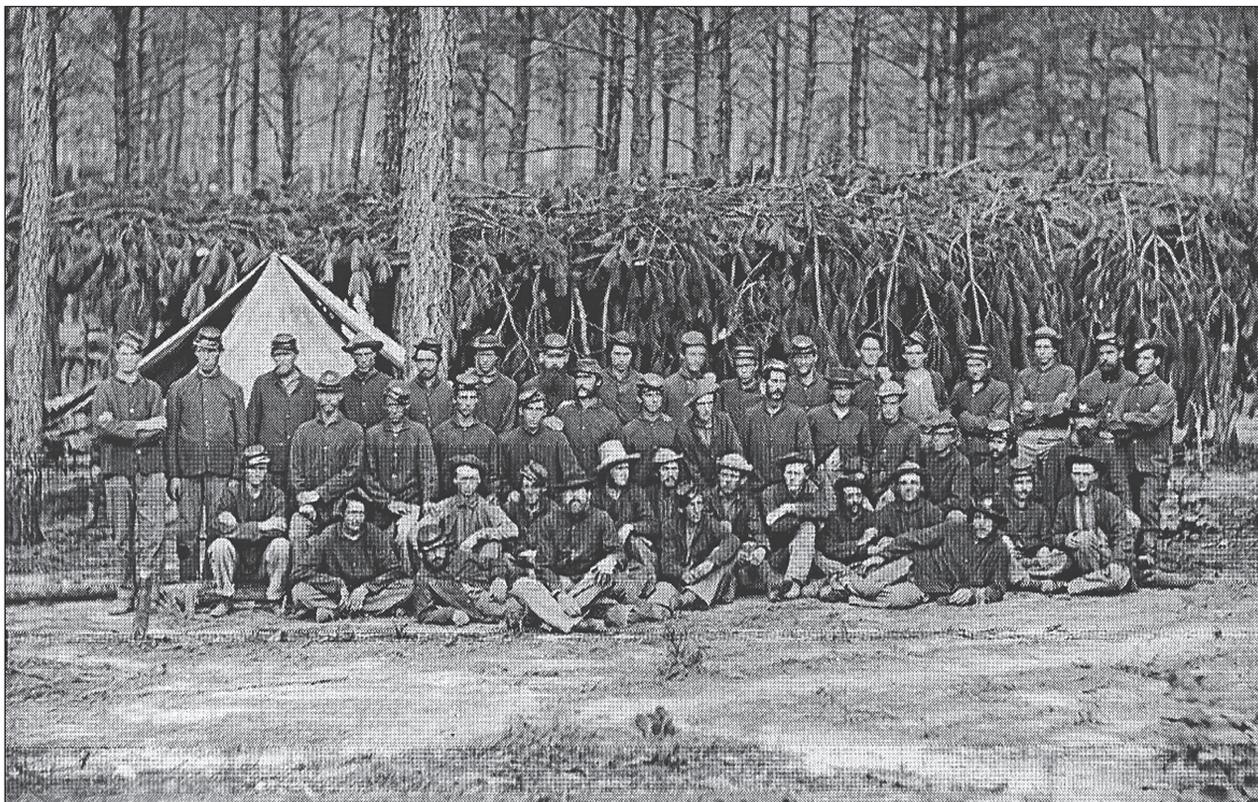


Photo courtesy Library of Congress

Company A Soldiers pose at Petersburg, Virginia, in August 1864.

promoted to major and received a brevet promotion to lieutenant colonel for distinguished service during the recent campaign on 15 August 1864.¹⁰

Throughout most of June 1864, only five officers were assigned to the battalion; and because these officers were often employed on detached engineer duties, the four companies were usually operationally commanded by noncommissioned officers.^{11, 12, 13, 14}

During the latter part of the campaign, First Lieutenant William H.H. Benyaurd, commander of Company A since 10 June, also served as battalion adjutant. First Lieutenant Benyaurd, a native of Pennsylvania, graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1863. He received a brevet promotion to captain on 1 August 1864 for meritorious service during the Overland Campaign. In 1897, he was awarded the Medal of Honor for gallantry at the battle of Five Forks, Virginia, on 1 April 1865.¹⁵

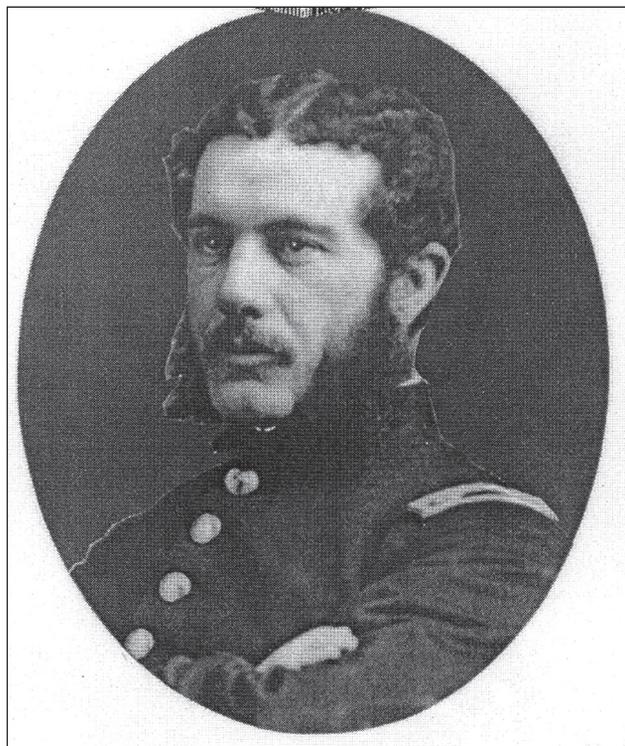


Photo courtesy Office of History, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

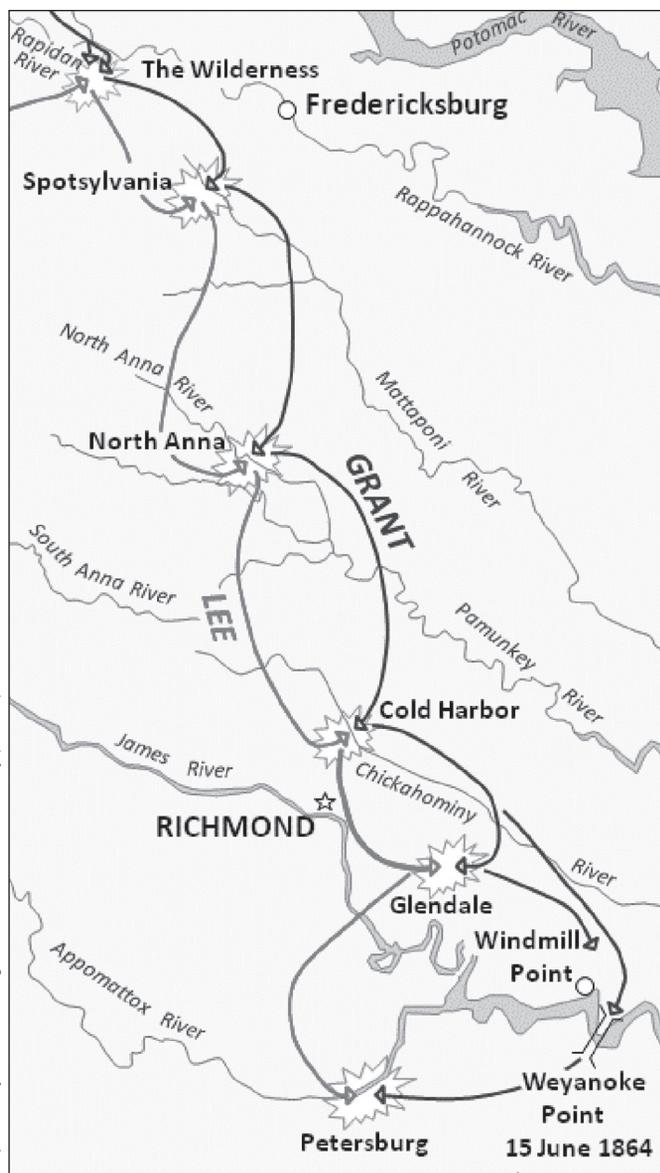
First Lieutenant William H.H. Benyaurd

During the war, Company A experienced three large strength changes. In July 1862, the company lost 22 men on transfer to the other companies in the battalion. In late October 1862, the company received a total of 61 Soldiers who transferred from various state volunteer regiments. Finally, 30 Soldiers reenlisted en masse at the winter camp at Brandy Station, Virginia, in February 1864.¹⁶

By the end of May 1864, Company A was at half strength. The aggregate strength was 106 enlisted men and one officer, but only 84 were present for duty. Duty in the field and sick men being treated locally further cut the available company strength to just 78.¹⁷

The histories of three Soldiers help describe the varied backgrounds of Company A Soldiers. The first was Edwin Austin, a 22-year-old clerk from New York City. Austin was a combat veteran who enlisted in November 1860 and was shot through the right lung while crossing the Chickahominy River in June 1862. He was discharged for disability that October; but by February 1864, he had recovered sufficiently to reenlist in his old unit. Private Austin would survive the war, eventually marrying and settling in Washington, D.C.¹⁸

Although on detached duty at Portland, Maine, since 1863, Frederick Gerber, a German immigrant and Mexican War veteran, was carried on the wartime muster rolls as the assigned company first sergeant. He served at Portland on recruiting duty after suffering from "Chickahominy fever" (malaria) and scurvy. In November 1871, Gerber was awarded the Medal of Honor for 32 years of gallant and distinguished service. He was the first engineer Soldier to be so honored.¹⁹



Map courtesy of Master Sergeant Paul Jenkins, U.S. Army (Retired)

The Overland Campaign, May–June 1864

The service record of Corporal William Collins does not reflect the qualities he demonstrated to earn his promotion, but he obviously overcame serious problems. A New York native, Collins enlisted in the company in December 1853 at the age of 22 and reenlisted in December 1858. In March 1861, Collins went over the hill and was not caught until 3 years later. Returned to the company on 22 March 1864, he was tried by court-martial, sentenced to make good the time lost to desertion, and demoted to private. Clearly, Collins must have made a choice to live up to his responsibilities. He was promoted to artificer²⁰ on 1 May and to corporal on 10 June. Collins would become a sergeant before leaving the service in January 1865, although he does not appear to have served out the remainder of the time lost to desertion.²¹

At the beginning of the Civil War, the Regular Army was largely filled with immigrants. The Irish, followed by the Germans, were the predominant immigrant groups. The preenlistment occupations for these Soldiers ran the gamut of most trades in the mid-19th century. Farmers headed the list, followed by laborers. Most occupations in the company were not engineer-specific. There were only six blacksmiths, four boatmen (a skill desirable for engineers doing ponton boat work), 11 carpenters, and four masons/stone cutters. The three shoemakers and one tailor undoubtedly assisted in keeping uniforms and leather equipment in serviceable condition.²² The company muster rolls for the period, certified by Captain Mendell, noted that the discipline, instruction, military appearance, arms, accoutrements, and equipment were all rated as “good.” At least four men of the original company group were commissioned during and after the war.²³

Desertion posed a constant problem for the Regular Army during the 19th century. Company A, however, was notably cohesive. Despite the hardships of the campaign, not a single Soldier deserted in May or June 1864. Fortunately, the company experienced no combat-related casualties during the campaign. This fact, however, should not detract from the sterling work and devotion to duty rendered by this outstanding engineer unit.



Endnotes:

¹Clayton R. Newell and Charles R. Shrader, *Of Duty Well and Faithfully Done: A History of the Regular Army in the Civil War*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2011, p. 286.

²Thomas Turtle, *History of the Engineer Battalion, Read Before the Essayons Club of the Corps of Engineers, DEC 21st 1868*, Battalion Press, Willets Point, New York, 1868, No. VIII, Printed Papers, pp. 1–2.

³Newell and Shrader, pp. 287–289.

⁴Turtle, p. 8.

⁵Lieutenant General U.S. Grant, “Dispatches, 14 June 1864,” *The New York Times*, 16 June 1864.

⁶Gilbert Thompson, *The Engineer Battalion in the Civil War*, Press of the Engineer School, Washington Barracks, D.C., 1910, pp. 68–70.

⁷Captain George Mendell’s Report, 5 August 1864, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1891, Series 1, Vol. XL, Part 1, pp. 300–301.

⁸Special Correspondent, *The New York Times*, 17 June 1864.

⁹Thompson, p. 70.

¹⁰Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, From Its Organization, September 29, 1789 to March 2, 1903*, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1903, p. 702.

¹¹Newell and Shrader, p. 290.

¹²*U.S. Returns from Regular Army Infantry Regiments, 1821–1916 (database on line) Provo, Utah: <www.Ancestry.com> (hereinafter *Regimental Returns*).*

¹³National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Microfilm Publication M665, Rolls I-244, pp. 297–300.

¹⁴Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780s–1917, Record Groups (RG) 94 and 391.



Photo courtesy Library of Congress

The 1864 winter camp of the U.S. Engineer Battalion at Brandy Station, Virginia.

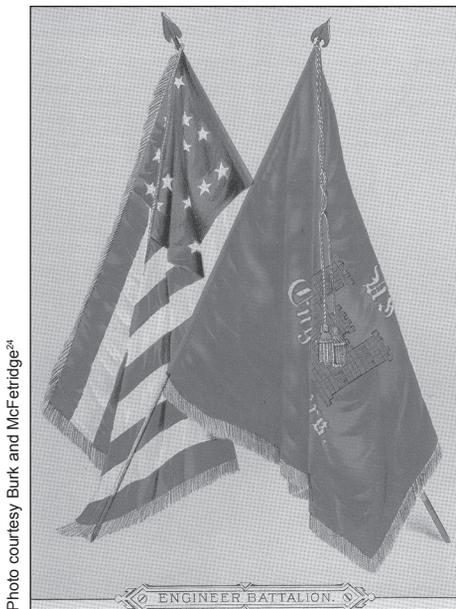


Photo courtesy Burk and McFetridge²⁴

The U.S. Engineer Battalion stand of colors was issued in 1866.

¹⁵Heitman, p. 213.

¹⁶*Register of Graduates*, Association of Graduates, West Point, New York, 2000, pp. 4–42.

¹⁷Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s–1917, *Muster Rolls of the Regular Army Organizations, 1784–October 31, 1912*, NARA.

¹⁸*Regimental Returns*.

¹⁹Soldier's Certificate No. 128014, NARA, *Civil War Pension Index: General Index to Pension Files, 1861–1934*, (database on line) Provo, Utah: <www.Ancestry.com>.

²⁰Eugene V. McAndrews, "Sergeant Major Frederick Gerber, Engineer Legend," *The Military Engineer*, No. 414, July–August 1971, pp. 240–41.

²¹An artificer was an enlisted Soldier with special technical skills. Artificers earned \$4 more than the \$13 earned by ordinary privates.

²²*U.S. Army Register of Enlistment, 1798–1914*, Provo, Utah: <www.Ancestry.com>, Register of Enlistment in the U.S. Army, 1798–1914, NARA, Microfilm Publication M233, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s–1917, RG 94.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Flags of the Army of the United States Carried During the War of Rebellion, 1861–1865*, Burk and McFetridge, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1888.

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