

Built to Last: The Trenches of Petersburg

A Walking Tour of Stop #3

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

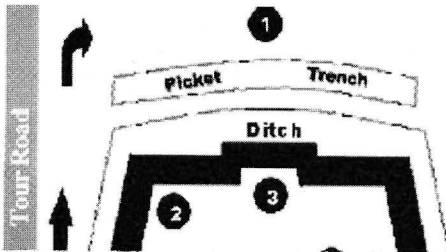
Petersburg National Battlefield



The area around Petersburg, VA was a battleground for nearly ten months of the Civil War. For more than 150,000 soldiers, this ordeal was the ultimate test of each man's commitment to his cause. After Union attempts to storm the city failed in mid-June 1864, trench lines sliced through the once lush woods and rolling farm fields, forever changing this land. The original trenches which stood here were lost when Camp Lee (now Fort Lee) trained soldiers for combat here during World War I. With this area now a part of the Petersburg National Battlefield, we invite you to walk through this reconstructed artillery battery to explore how the siege shaped this landscape and the men who fought here. Today, the remaining trenches are the enduring legacy of these soldiers' struggle to maintain their ideals of American freedom amidst the horrors of trench warfare.

- Start at the parking area and proceed back along the tour road, keeping the battery to your right. Turn right into the open field and face the battery.

Stop 1 The New Face of War



For soldiers in 1864 the view of a **picket trench** and **artillery redan** like the one in front of you was common; gone were the days of lining two opposing armies across an open field and conducting a “fair fight”. Armies now manipulated their environment to take any advantage they could, much to the chagrin of soldiers ordered to attack an entrenched position such as this.

Reaching this point in an attack was no easy task. After climbing out of his own entrench-

sharpened branches were stacked toward the oncoming soldiers). The main line was protected by a wall of wooden stakes called **fraise** or by staked logs called **cheveaux-de-frise** and fronted by a ditch of 6 to 10 feet. Once inside the ditch, a soldier faced a 10 to 15 foot earthen wall called a **parapet** while the enemy continued firing and dropping explosive shells on him. If the attacker survived the climb, he was subjected to vicious hand-to-hand combat using rifle butts and bayonets...but they rarely got that

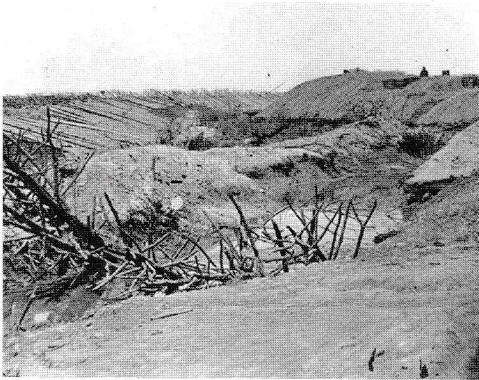


ments a soldier was exposed to zipping bullets and screaming shells from the enemy's trenches and batteries while he crossed a cleared field like the one behind you. Next, he would have been slowed by a tangled mess called **abatis** (treetops whose

far. The overwhelming advantage in combat was now with those who fought behind dirt and wood.

- *Walk back towards parking area turning left to enter redan from behind. Walk up the left side to the cannon display.*

Stop 2 A Killing Machine



Siege life was a new challenge for the men in the ranks. The vast majority of Civil War soldiers were volunteers who put their private lives on hold to decide the fate of the nation. The dreary prospect of fighting an indecisive trench war would have been a severe test for men who normally enjoyed the freedom of life without the rules and dangers of the army. By relying on each other, however, the soldiers could build a life in the trenches that would help them endure.

Batteries and forts were strong points on the trenchline that showcased the teamwork that armies used to defend themselves. Often using inadequate tools, soldiers exhausted

themselves building the batteries and connecting them to trenches to form the main defense line. An artillery battery of 100-150 men working 4-6 artillery pieces, like this 12-pounder howitzer, could produce a crossfire that devastated attackers.

"The very sight of a bank of fresh earth now brings them to a dead halt."

Once firmly established, a defensive position was rarely assaulted. Unless called upon to fight in another sector, troops settled into the routine of living and dying in the trenches.

- *Walk down to mortar display to your right.*

Stop 3 Random Death

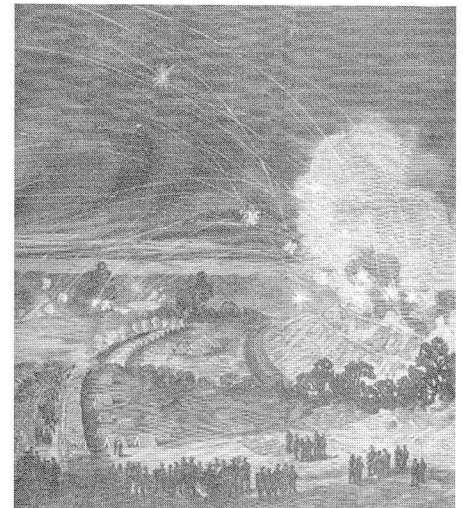
Ironically while trenches provided security for the men living inside them, the difficulty in assaulting trenches gave prominence to a weapon which caused constant physical and

"The air was full of shells flying both ways and blinking like a host of monstrous fireflies."

psychological stress for soldiers at Petersburg: the mortar. This 8-inch siege mortar fired exploding shells at a trajectory high enough to land them inside the trenches where the flatter trajectory of a field cannon could do little damage.

Mortars quickly became both the most hated and the most awe inspiring weapons of the siege. Day and night, mortars rained down unceasing and apparently random death. Nowhere was safe; civilians in the city were not immune to having mortar shells drop in as unwelcome guests. Yet, one soldier recalled that the night sky was so beautifully lit by shells that, "men would frequently leave the bombproffs even at the risk of their lives to watch the display of fireworks." The shells kept falling and men were forced to cope with the unrelenting danger.

- *Facing rear, walk around the dirt mound to your left, stopping at the wood-framed entrance.*



Stop 4 Routine Life

Over time the soldiers became used to the shelling. By judging the sound of incoming rounds, men continued about their routine until a shell came directly at them, when they would instantly scatter like ants into bomb-

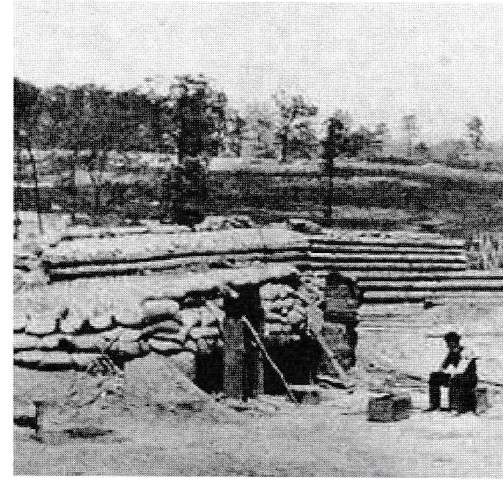
"I occupy a hole in the ground just long enough for one to lie down in and high enough to sit up in."

proof shelters like this one. **Bombproofs** varied in size from elaborate multi-roomed structures, complete with beds and a fireplace, to as one soldier described, "the size of a common grave though not half so well furnished." The armies transformed this

landscape with a honeycomb of trenches, bombproofs and tunnels, allowing men to move about for miles without exposing themselves to the enemy.

By adapting to their environment, soldiers were able to combat the stress of the shelling, the boredom of trench warfare and the physical dangers of enemy fire. The relative safety of a bombproof allowed soldiers peace of mind to write loved ones or keep up with news from home. With the constant pressure forcing a man to the breaking point, even one moment of relief might help him to persevere. However, not all the dangers at Petersburg were manmade.

- *Facing the rear, walk to the winter hut with the brick chimney to your left front.*



Stop 5 All Weather Soldiers



Soldiers at Petersburg were exposed to whatever Mother Nature had in store for them. Wherever possible, men built **winter huts** to provide greater protection from the elements. By obtaining increasingly scarce wood, 2 to 4 soldiers could work together to make a comfortable living area. Contrasting with their experiences on the front where death lurked everywhere, decorating the hut allowed soldiers to exercise control over their surroundings. Many had stoves, beds, chairs and a table for eating or writing. By making the camps as much like home as possible, many soldiers found the strength to keep fighting.

For both armies, however, terrible conditions wore on even the hardest soldiers. Poor hygiene and sanitation, inadequate nutrition and disease decimated the ranks. By 1865 the desertion rate rose, especially among Confederates. As shortages grew more acute bombproof or trench. As the siege length-

and federal armies penetrated deep into the Southern heartland, a soldier might hear of his family facing starvation and military occupation. This put him to a test beyond description: Home or Country? Could one exist without the other? Despite a growing feeling that the war was nearly done and that

"To say homesick is no word for it. I'm heartsick, homesick, disgusted & tired of the rambling, roving & dangerous life of a soldier."

one's service no longer mattered, most soldiers in both armies stayed. In the process, veterans of Petersburg shared a grim camaraderie with each other which few people back home would ever understand.

- *Walk across to the sutler's store.*

keeping their soldiers battle ready. They knew

Stop 6

Commanding the Troops

The headquarters of an army were its nerve centers. Found in bomb proofs and buildings like this, it was orders from here that sent troops in motion and influenced the fate of many soldiers.

Here the corps commander's staff sent and received messages, reports, and orders. Since headquarters never closed, there was always a staff member present. The modern telegraph was used when possible to transmit orders, but usually below corps level they were carried on horseback by staff officers and couriers, and nearer to the fighting, soldiers were used as runners.

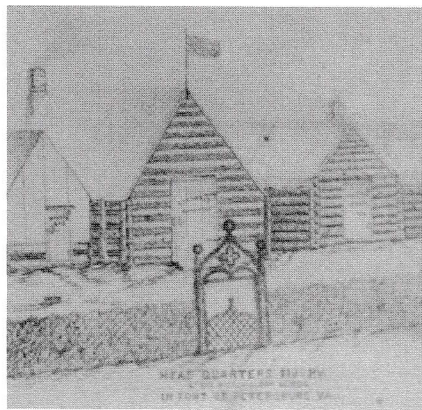
Headquarters that were closer to the front and within artillery range, much less rifle fire, might be found in the relative safety of a

headquarters structures became more elaborate and secure. Everyone from the generals to the privates understood that the more earth piled around and above them, the safer they were from musket, mortar, and cannon fire.

Part of the complex around a headquarters could include a field hospital, with its temporary cemetery, and sutler stores, where the soldiers could buy anything from candy to body armor.

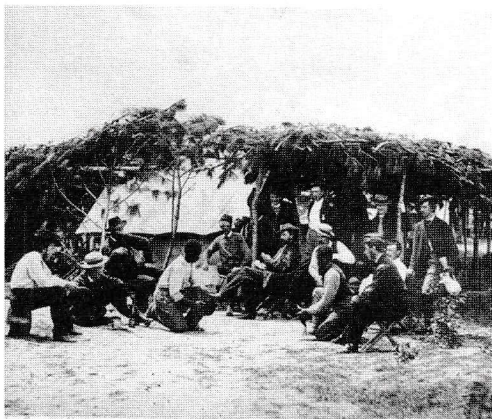
Headquarters were beehives of activity with staff officers and couriers galloping about. Guards were posted for security, and the provost marshal guard or military police, quartermaster, signal, ordnance, and other staff officers busied themselves at the duties

quarters might have to be moved to another location and they would start all over again.



- *Walk to the adjacent pine covered shade.*

Stop 7 Life Goes On



As soldiers struggled to endure the hardships of war they continued to practice some of the important parts of their civilian lives.

Pine bough shelters like this, constructed during the summer of 1864, became gathering places where chaplains conducted religious services and men met to discuss politics, trade news and gossip. The freedom to engage in these activities is what defined these men as Americans.

The year 1864 ended with the first free presidential election ever held during wartime. It was a referendum on the war. Lincoln received great support from the very troops whom he sent into harm's way. His triumph over a possible peace settlement was a severe blow to Southern morale and proved the Northern will for victory. When the end came, both armies could claim that they fought for what they believed was right.

For those who struggled at Petersburg, life had to go on. These were America's citizen soldiers. Like their comrades in all of our nation's wars, they brought with them into

"You might wonder why I volunteered to undertake a work of such danger...I thought of the mighty interests at stake...and I concluded that the great results which it promised were worth the sacrifice."

the army their own unique thoughts about American freedom. They shaped the armies, the war and this nation by their commitment to those ideals. That they did not return to inundate this battlefield with stone memorials leaves us with the trenches of Petersburg as their monument to the belief that *America* was worth the sacrifice.