



International Conference of Military History in USA 2002

The Anglo-Irish Battlefield Tour 16-18 August 2002

Orbat

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Being a memoir of the travels of selected members of the British and Irish delegations after the Conference 16-18 August 2002.

The Conference Organisers had arranged two post-conference trips, one with a “Colonial” theme, the other emphasising the Civil War but both were cancelled due to lack of support. With characteristic ingenuity the British delegation arranged its own tour which, needless to say, proved superior to what we would have seen. So the cancellation was perhaps a blessing in disguise.

A temperature of 35C, which hardly varied, and accompanied by shirt-soaking humidity was the first indication that this trip was going to be unlike a tour in Europe.

Prelude – Yorktown

Our first stand was courtesy of the Conference and a reminder of how big things are in America. Seven air-conditioned coaches, 200 people, a dozen or more guides. Congratulations to the organisers who got everyone to the right places, if not always at the right times, without the benefit of an RSM.

We were greeted by an 18th century band of around 20 boys and girls playing drums and fifes in 18th century style. Subsequent questioning revealed that this was the complement of a battalion – at two musicians per company. There would have been no problem hearing the music within the battalion area! So impressive was it that Simon Jones actually purchased a souvenir CD in the Gift Shop – a unique event



during the six days that he was in the United States and consequently much remarked upon.

Our time at Yorktown was limited and such as there was, largely occupied by an international ceremony at the memorial overlooking the stretch of water where, unprecedently we thought, the Royal Navy had failed to come to the rescue of the army. The only other event of this nature that we could think of was St Valery in 1940 but not only did the Navy get a significant number of men away from there but their further efforts were precluded by fog and enemy artillery rather than naval opposition.

Several of the redoubts and trenches have been preserved although they were modernised by the Confederate Army in 1862. Like the other battlesites we saw on our trip, the terrain is also more wooded now than it was then. Nevertheless, the key part of the Yorktown battlefield offered a good idea of the nature of the defences, the fields of fire and their distances and positions relative to each other. Unfortunately we did not have an opportunity to get into the town, or probably village, of Yorktown with its Georgian houses. The British contingent was also not at all put out when it transpired that the location of the so-called "Surrender Field" is pretty conjectural although that has not stopped the erection of the usual trails and markers.

Petersburg Battlefield Park

Petersburg is a critical railway (sorry railroad) junction about 20 miles south of Richmond. In June 1864 Grant, possibly for the first and only time, stole a march on Lee, outflanked the Army of Northern Virginia and drove on Petersburg. His aim was to encircle Richmond from the south. Petersburg was heavily fortified but only garrisoned by about 2,000 men under Beauregard. They were attacked by the whole of Smith's XVIII Corps of 15,000 with II Corps on the way. In theory Petersburg should have fallen to Grant on 16 June 1864. Richmond would then have been untenable and it is quite possible that the war would have ended nine months earlier than it did.

The reason it did not fall was that most Union soldiers had spent the previous three months attacking Confederate soldiers dug in behind field fortifications. Frontal attacks almost invariably failed and the 1864 campaign bears many similarities to the



Race to the Sea in 1914 as Grant conducted a series of outflanking manoeuvres to get Lee out of his positions. The last frontal attack had been at Cold Harbor (see below) only a fortnight before. Cold Harbor has gone down in Civil War history almost in the same way as 1st July 1916 in the Great War. Our tour revealed that it was not as disastrous militarily as the myth suggests but it had a great psychological impact because everyone thought the Confederates were whipped and would simply run away. When they did not, the sense of disillusion was all the greater.

Consequently, when Smith saw the imposing fortifications east of Petersburg (known as the Dimmock Line) he moved forward very cautiously indeed, entirely unaware of how thinly they were manned. Ironically, although Smith had been at Cold Harbor, the Colored Troops (USCT) who made the main attack had not, and so they went forward with *élan*. Several forts were taken on a front of about a mile and Petersburg lay open.



Reconstructed earthwork and *cheveux de frise*, 2002

At this point, and to the consternation of the troops on the ground, Smith halted for 24 hours to await II Corps and to reorganise his own men. By then the Confederates had reinforced and held off his next attack. From then, until the winter mud, a series of outflanking attacks were made around the Petersburg line but each time the Confederates managed to hold on.



It is this period which contains the closest parallels to the trench warfare of the Western Front 50 years later. Both campaigns were, of course, sieges and the ditches and log revetments of 1864 would have been familiar to Tommy and *poilu* although they no doubt found that barbed wire was much easier to manhandle and use than *abatis* and *cheveux de frise*. Machine guns did not exist in 1864, at least in any numbers, but Billy Yank and Johnny Reb did build their equivalents of the Schwaben Redoubt. These were earthworks of about 10 to 12 feet high, each mounting one or two batteries of artillery and sited to give mutual support – about 500 to 800 yards apart.

As was learnt in 1915-1918, attacks against fortified positions had to be carefully planned if heavy and pointless losses were not to be sustained. This was particularly well known in the United States where many commanders had a background in field engineering. Smith's failure to crack the Dimmock Line itself is evidence of such concern and his dilemma would be faced many times in the Great War. It was perhaps a fault of the narrative at the Park that Smith's position is not explained fully there; I came to discover it only by reading a number of articles once I returned to UK.

Other evidence of this planning is to be seen prior to the famous Crater battle of 30 July. The idea of mining came from a Regimental Colonel and the Corps Commander, Burnside, was content to allow him to dig. For his part, Burnside, put his chosen assault force, a Division of the USCT, through special training. The first two waves would take the flanks of the crater – only then would the third wave take the hole itself. Unfortunately, further personal, political and operational considerations intervened. The Army Commander refused to allow the Colored Troops to take part for fear that serious casualties would have unfortunate repercussions. But he did want an attack. Fresh troops were selected at random, were stationed too close to the mine and so dazed by the blast that they were disrupted. They then attacked the hole direct rather than securing the flanks first and were massacred. It would be interesting to compare the tactics prescribed for this



type of operation in 18th and 19th century manuals and those which evolved on the Western Front.

The line was not broken until 1 / 2 April 1865 and, as we know, Lee was obliged to surrender at Appomattox only a week later. Another interesting feature of these battles was the use by the Union of converted heavy artillery regiments as infantry. These units were large, well-drilled and composed of technically educated, well-motivated soldiers. But they were green to combat. Several of them suffered enormous casualties, sometimes well over 50% whilst more battlewise regiments hugged the dirt. I have not read of similar converted gunner units in the 1944 British Army displaying similar *esprit* – just as well, perhaps.

The Petersburg battlefield is therefore very large and the Battlefield Park only covers part of it. The Visitor Center is located very close to Fort No.5 which the US Colored Troops of XVIII Corps took on 15 June 1864 and the famous Crater battle of 30 July is nearby. All I will say of the Crater is that before you visit you will find it helpful to dismiss images of the Hawthorn Redoubt from your mind.

Traces are still to be found of the fortifications constructed in the later battles but we did not have time to visit them.

What of the battlefields now? Before the trip, I had thought that the Battlefield Parks preserved the terrain in the state that it was at the time. Perhaps they do at Antietam and Gettysburg but certainly not at Richmond and Petersburg. In 1864 the terrain was much more agricultural than it is today where trees have been allowed to grow back over much larger areas than in 1864. The earthen banks of the forts are often to be seen but with all the tree cover a good deal of work is necessary to imagine what they looked like to the Union troops and to work out where they are located in relation to each other. I felt some reconstructed works with *abatis*, *cheveux de frise*, bombproofs etc would have been helpful and more use could have been made of contemporary photographs and particularly the sketches by people like A R Waud and Edwin Forbes.



Richmond

Leaving Petersburg we advanced on Richmond from the south. The following day we attended the Visitor Center at the former Tredegar Ironworks on the banks of the James River. This was a world class armaments facility in the 1860's and although it never operated at full capacity due to shortages of materials it was a critical part of the Confederate war economy. From the large windows it was possible to look out and compare today's views with contemporary photographs. The exhibition gave not only a good idea of the ingenuity needed to keep the war effort going in the South but also an overview of the 1862 and 1864 campaigns.

Cold Harbor

We left Richmond via Mechanicsville, Beaver Dam Creek, Gaines' Mill and other 1862 sites for Cold Harbor where we had heard there was a tour. Indeed there was, and it was delivered by a highly professional and knowledgeable Ranger. Certainly, when the Americans do something well, there are none better. I have indicated earlier that Cold Harbor was a more complex business than the First Day on the Somme style slaughter that forms the popular view. We heard of the background to the 1864 campaign, the impact of the upcoming presidential election, the relationship between Grant and Meade, the reasons behind Grant's decision to attack at Cold Harbor, why it failed and the impact it had. Certainly, by this stage in the war, the veteran Union troops simply refused to advance against works. The reason for this was revealed when green troops did. For the psychological impact, imagine if 8th August 1918 had turned out like 1st July 1916.

There were certainly many parallels between 1864/65 and 1914/18 but it is hard to imagine anyone at the time imagining that a European War would develop in that way, particularly after the short, decisive wars in 1866, 1870 and 1904/5.

Malvern Hill

Malvern Hill is an interesting example of how today's terrain can fool you. An artillery battery of six guns is deployed at correct intervals towards the top of the slope and facing into woods about 500-800 metres away. The battery is flanked by woods. It



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Page 7 / 8

looks like the ideal artillery killing ground that Malvern Hill was. But – you are only seeing half the battlefield! The woods in front were there in 1862 but those to the flanks were not, particularly on the left. The flanks of the original position were anchored on steep ravines, not full of underbrush and trees. The Confederates managed to charge up these in places but imagination is needed to work out what was going on. Nevertheless, you get enough to grasp the strength of the position.



Malvern Hill

Richmond – Museum of Confederacy, Confederate White House

We rounded off our trip with visits to the Confederate White House, the Museum of the Confederacy and the Hollywood Cemetery. I was impressed with the museum. Each major battle or incident was illustrated, typically, with a map and background information, items of uniform or equipment, and “human interest” quotations. So far, so humdrum, you may feel but there you have – Stonewall Jackson’s boots and bible, Jeb Stuart’s hat and bloodied sash, the uniform Lee wore at Appomattox, original battleflags, a Confederate infantryman’s butternut jacket and equipment. Most evocative for me was a pocketbook of exquisite sketches gouged through by a Minié bullet. It belonged to the engineer officer who was killed with Jackson.

I felt that the tour fully lived up to the traditions of the BCMH and created a link between the British and Irish Commissions that will, we hope, bear fruit in the future.



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Page 8 / 8

In closing I would like to thank John Peaty for his navigation and both passengers for putting up with my attempts to drive an automatic.

Andy Grainger