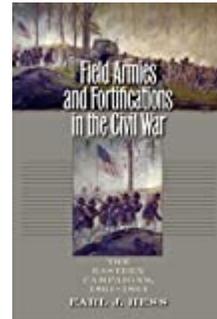




Earl J. Hess. *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861-1864.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xix + 415 pp. \$46.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2931-8.



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Field Fortifications in Campaign Warfare

With the large number of titles in U.S. Civil War history released each year, it is increasingly difficult for a scholar of the war to break new ground. However, Earl J. Hess has done so in *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861-1864*. The first in several planned volumes on field fortifications, this book covers the Eastern campaigns from Big Bethel in June 1861 to the capture of Plymouth in April 1864. Hess looks at the use of field fortifications in various campaigns in the Eastern theater, focusing on how they were used by the armies and how they affected the outcome of a campaign.

Until now, most operational studies of the war have dismissed the impact of fortifications on the conduct of the war in the East prior to the Overland campaign of 1864, with the possible exception of the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862. Hess challenges that interpretation, examining numerous examples of significant field fortifications in campaigns and battles, such as the delay of the Army of the Potomac in advancing up the Tidewater Peninsula in 1862; the extensive fortifications erected by Hooker in his defense of the fords at the end of

the Battle of Chancellorsville; and the successful defense at the Rapidan by Lee in the Mine Run campaign. Hess also challenges the widespread assumption that the army commanders' belated realization of the effect of the rifled musket on the battlefield was the primary factor that led to the development of field fortifications later in the war. Hess successfully challenges this cause-and-effect assertion about the rifled musket by detailing the many significant uses of fortifications during the early years of the war—if the fortifications seen in the Overland and Petersburg campaigns were truly the consequence of the widespread replacement of older smoothbore muskets by 1864, then we would not expect to see the widespread use of fortifications earlier in the conflict.

The aforementioned assumption that fortifications were rare and largely unimportant in the East before 1864 has some basis in fact, of course. Confederate Generals Lee and Jackson both emphasized the importance of the sustained offense, and thus were often disdainful of fortifications. Many Union commanders (e.g., Pope at Second Manassas) likewise believed that digging in would sap the offensive spirit of the soldiers. After discussing

each campaign or major battle, Hess takes care to discuss the lessons learned by the commanders and their troops. In some cases, soldiers and commanders learned the effectiveness of field fortifications first-hand; in others, the lesson appeared to emphasize the unimportance of such fortifications.

Another argument advanced by Hess is the fact that in many cases it was the regimental or brigade commanders who emphasized hasty fortifications rather than the army commander. Hess made hundreds of visits to examine the remnants of fortifications across the United States as well as throughout Europe; substantial differences between the degree and quality of entrenchment across a single brigade or regimental front supports the argument that the use of fortifications was often more “bottom up” than “top down,” and it also indicates that the desire for fortification differed between various lower-level commanders.

The title of the book is unfortunately somewhat ambiguous; it is not clear that the adjective “Field” is modifying both “Armies” and “Fortifications” (i.e., it should be understood that Hess is looking at the use of “Field Fortifications” by “Field Armies”). This is an important distinction. There is well-established scholarship on the development and use of permanent fortifications during the war—for example, the extensive defenses of the District of Columbia. Similarly, there is extensive scholarship on the activities of the major field armies during the war. However, there is a gap in the literature on the use of fortifications by the armies as a part of their campaigns before 1864. Although field fortifications may be mentioned in the discussion of campaigns and battles, particularly where tactically significant (the stone wall at Fredericksburg is a classic example), the impact on the campaign is generally dismissed as unimportant. Hess provides a useful survey of virtually every type of field fortification created by field armies, from the rifle pit hastily dug by an individual soldier under fire, to the extensive entrenchments with parapets and headlogs created by the Army of Northern Virginia in just a few days at Mine Run. He also discusses the impact of semi-permanent fortifications on the outcome of campaigns. Examples of the latter are the fortifications created by the Confederates on the Tidewater Peninsula in 1861 and 1862 and the

Union defenses of captured North Carolina cities such as New Bern and Plymouth.

The book is well organized. Each chapter provides a narrative of a campaign within a geographic region—for example, the West Virginia campaigns in 1861 and 1862 and the Atlantic coastal campaigns by the Union in the Carolinas. Within each chapter, a narrative captures in detail the creation and use of fortifications. Hess manages to shed new light on otherwise familiar battles such as Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville by showing how armies enhanced military aspects of the terrain by fortification, through both well-designed and poorly designed works. Hess also provides a detailed example of a well-designed classic siege conducted by Union forces to capture Battery Wagner, part of the defenses of Charleston. The book also discusses the creation and use of engineers and engineering units in support of field armies, or in support of fortifications encountered by field armies in a campaign, starting with the prewar engineering training of officers at West Point. The only drawback in the book is the fact that Hess feels compelled to discuss the details of every field fortification that can be documented through field study, pictures, and/or other primary sources, even when the fortification had little influence and did not contain any novel design or advancement in engineering. This makes the book somewhat dry in places, although overall it is well written and quite readable.

Earl Hess’s *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861-1864* provides a significant contribution to the literature on the U.S. Civil War through its examination of an understudied aspect of the war—the influence of field fortifications on the conduct of battles and campaigns in the Eastern theater during the first three years of the war. Hess provides substantial and convincing evidence in support of his hypotheses about the extent of fortification and its effect on the conduct of various campaigns across the Eastern theater. The book is lavishly illustrated with many contemporary pictures as well as extensive drawings and maps showing the layout and location of field fortifications. It has a place on the bookshelf of every serious student of the U.S. Civil War.

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