

Moving Mountains: Serving In 10 States, An Engineer's Final Project Is Battery Wagner

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Review

MOVING MOUNTAINS

Serving in 10 states, an engineer's final project is Battery Wagner

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Kundahl, George G. *Confederate Engineer: Training and Campaigning with John Morris Wampler.* University of Tennessee Press, 2000-04-01. ISBN 1572330732

For several centuries, combat engineers have played a crucial role in battle operations. Yet the typical battles and leaders approach to the Civil War usually pays little attention to this important work. George G. Kundahl attempts to fill the void with **Confederate Engineer: Training and Campaigning with John Morris Wampler**. Though Wampler had no spectacular achievements during the War, the book serves as a good introduction to what daily life must have been like for a Civil War engineer.

Raised in Northern Virginia and given a liberal arts education, at age 17 Wampler obtained a position with the U.S. Coast Survey, one of the nation's most ambitious antebellum scientific enterprises. His experience there gave him cartographic expertise and allowed him to travel throughout the country, especially in the South.

When war broke out, Wampler was working as a civil engineer in Baltimore. He cast his lot with his home state, and his engineering background made him a hot commodity in the agrarian Confederacy. Early in the War he made a series of maps for General P.G.T. Beauregard and must have made a good impression on the general. In 1862, Wampler was transferred to Beauregard's command at Corinth, Mississippi.

His service there under Beauregard and Beauregard's successor, Braxton Bragg, shows the wide variety of duties expected of a Civil War engineer and the gradual transition of a civilian engineer to a combat engineer. Wampler and his fellow engineers were expected to make maps; reconnoiter; repair and build

fortifications, roads, bridges, and railroads; remove and construct impediments to attack; and be prepared to serve as reserves in battle.

In the summer of 1863, Beauregard summoned him once more, this time to help repair and design fortifications at Charleston. It was there on August 17, 1863, that Wampler was killed instantly by a Federal shell.

Confederate Engineer is more a biography than an edited document. While we sometimes hear Wampler's voice, we more often hear Kundahl's interpretation of that voice. Despite this, the book serves as a Confederate companion to New York Colonel Wesley Brainerd's memoir *Bridge Building in Wartime*.

That Kundahl is Wampler's great-great-grandson might initially concern some readers, who may fear a fawning treatment or too much trivial information of interest only to family members. But Kundahl handles Wampler in a mostly unbiased way, noting his failures and even allowing the possibility of an extramarital liaison.

An unusual aspect of the book is a chapter describing the tribulations of Wampler's wife Kate, stuck with their five children in the dangerous Loudoun County area of Northern Virginia. Irregular units from both sides, sometimes dressed in uniforms of the enemy, traversed the county looking for hidden soldiers or goods worth taking. At one point Mrs. Wampler resorted to hiding her cow in the kitchen to protect her children's milk supply. While this chapter is one of the most interesting parts of the book, its inclusion in the middle of John Morris Wampler's story may be disconcerting to some readers. It might have been better placed as an appendix.

Kundahl is a competent writer and the editing is very good. I found only two factual errors: one a simple mathematical error, and the other an assertion that a balloonist seen was "undoubtedly Prof. Thaddeus S.C. Lowe." During the time frame in which Wampler saw the balloon, Lowe's rival John LaMountain was also ascending in the area.

Readers looking for more concrete information on Confederate combat engineering might do well to search out *First Regiment, Engineer Troops, P.A.C.S.* by Harry L. Jackson. And those looking for battlefield action may be a bit disappointed by the lack of actual combat description.

But **Confederate Engineer** will be enjoyed by those who relish reading about the human side of the Civil War. Kundahl does an excellent job of bringing his ancestor back to life and when Wampler is suddenly killed at Morris Island it is hard not to share a sense of loss.

Charles D. Ross, associate professor of physics at Longwood College in Farmville, Virginia, is author of Trial by Fire: Science, Technology and the Civil War (2000). His second book, dealing with the effects of unusual acoustics on Civil War battles, is due out in spring 2001.