

~~Officers blamed extended service in the trenches for the high number of votes cast for William Holden, the antiwar gubernatorial candidate in North Carolina. The Holden vote was stronger among infantrymen who served in the trenches than it was among artillerymen and cavalrymen who had less demanding stations. A "more tiresome and exhausting service cannot well be imagined," thought D. M. Carter, a Third Corps staff officer, "nor one better calculated to disgust a man with war. . . . The devil always whispers his evil suggestions in the ear of a man who is out of temper, morose and miserable."²⁹~~

~~Desertions began to increase in Lee's army in July because of the hard conditions. One evening, a Rebel waiting a newspaper began to cross no-man's-land on the Eighteenth Corps sector, but then he suddenly ran forward and jumped into the Union trench. He told the Yankees "it was better to exchange himself than newspapers." Some cases of self-inflicted wounds also began to appear. When a man in the 11th Georgia reported a gunshot wound in his hand, his comrades believed that "he did it a purpose." John A. Everett thought that "if he did[,] it out to of bin his head in stid of his hand."³⁰~~

~~Johnson worked out a system of relieving his men for short times. McAfee's brigade sent one company of each regiment to the rear every day to rest and clean up. When Gracie's brigade returned to the works on July 9 after a short rest to the rear, Lewellyn Shaver had difficulty adjusting to the confusing maze of trenches in the night. It "was, probably, as unpleasant as groping in the darkness of the midnight hour, among a chaos of chairs, cradles, and other domestic accoutrements, in search of the paragonic bottle, in response to the plaintive appeal of an aggrieved and weeping infant."³¹~~

SHARPSHOOTING

"There is not a day passes when at least one member of our number is not struck with a minnie ball," recorded George Bowen of the 12th New Jersey. "This picking us off one at a time gets on one's nerves." A Jersey artilleryman in the Second Corps wrote to a friend that if "you dare to show your head above the rifle pits you are a gone goose." Burnside reported losing 480 men in the Ninth Corps to sniping and artillery fire during a ten-day period.³²

Sharpshooting became a science by early July. The Ninth Corps organized details of its best marksmen, excused them from fatigue and picket duty, and told them to target Confederate sharpshooters first, artillerymen second, and then anyone who exposed himself. Eighteenth Corps snipers took position on July 19, making loopholes out of sandbags. They developed all sorts of stratagems, such as raising a hat on a ramrod to draw fire and then shooting at the powder smoke. Other snipers sighted their guns on exposed parts of the Rebel

lines during the day and erected forked sticks at the exact height to rest their trigger guards. This enabled them to fire blindly and with some degree of accuracy at night. Soldiers on the Ninth Corps sector learned never to step in front of a loophole in the morning, for the sun was then to their back and Rebel snipers fired every time the hole darkened.³³

Tired of taking punishment, Ellis Spear formed a detail of sharpshooters from the 20th Maine. He obtained telescopic sights for at least a few of his men and compelled the Confederates to arrange a truce after only one day of firing. Gracie's brigade detailed two men from each company who were told to fire every five minutes, amounting to forty rounds from each regiment every ten minutes, yet this failed to keep the Yankees from doing their best to kill the Alabamans.³⁴

On any given part of the line, sniping took a toll of both blue and gray casualties. Clarion Milmore of the 37th Wisconsin tried to pen a letter to his mother from the trenches. While he wrote, "three men were shot dead within the reach of my arm & another may sign, Seal, & direct this for me, from a similar cause." On the other side of no-man's-land, Joab Goodson of the 44th Alabama lost his brother Rufe to a Yankee sharpshooter. Rufe raised his head a bit to find some sugar in a haversack that hung on the trench wall when a bullet glanced against the top of the parapet and hit his head, killing him instantly. Joab grieved with all his heart. "I wept as I never wept before. I bent over the dear boy, and called him back, but in vain." He kept Rufe's body in the trench for the rest of the day, unable to remove him until dark.³⁵

PICKET DUTY

Both sides established picket lines before their works to guard against sudden attack and to keep the enemy as far from the main line as possible. Where the main trenches were too close, pickets went out only under cover of darkness and sheltered in pits for the night, returning to the main line before dawn.³⁶

The pickets often engaged in struggles for possession of advantageous ground. In the Fifth Corps sector, Spear advanced his 20th Maine skirmishers into an unoccupied ravine to secure possession of a spring. Each man carried a spade and began to dig in. The Rebel pickets quickly approached to lodge a protest, but a Federal sergeant yelled, "Can't help it, we were ordered out here." The Confederates did not want to come to blows, so they threw a few dirt clods at the Yankees and left.³⁷

Although the infantry worked out agreements for peace on many parts of the line, artillerymen reserved the right to fire on any target that appeared. Confederate pickets apologized for this by explaining that the gunners "never

had to go on picket, and did not know the difficulty and the danger attendant upon that duty.”³⁸

ALARMS

With the opposing armies locked in place within sight of each other, rumors of impending attacks circulated freely among the troops. Independence Day seemed to be a perfect time for the Yankees to advance, but the holiday came and went quietly.³⁹

The Federals developed “Fire Balls” to light up the night in case of trouble. These devices were small frames made of tarred cording material, eight inches in diameter, and filled with “the most combustible materials science has been able to invent.” They had the capacity to burn “for some time with an intensely brilliant flame which lights up objects for a great distance around.” The Confederates apparently did not have them at Petersburg, although members of the Army of Tennessee used similar devices at Kennesaw Mountain in late June. For that matter, there is no recorded instance of their use by the Federals at Petersburg.⁴⁰

Troops on the main line often engaged in outbursts of nervous firing caused by unexplained noise in the enemy works. Some men fired their muskets behind the Ninth Corps line to empty old cartridges, and the Confederates thought it was the beginning of an attack. They opened fire, and the spirit of resistance spread to comrades right and left. Such incidents could last a few minutes or extend for hours, and they often prompted commanders to send puzzled dispatches to their superordinates inquiring about the cause of all the noise.⁴¹

ARTILLERY FIRE

Artillery fire was a constant part of life in the trenches because officers normally gave free rein to their gunners to fire at will. In the Eighteenth Corps, this discretion extended to battery commanders, although it was given with an admonition not to waste ammunition or unnecessarily expose their locations. Superior officers told their battery leaders to “have the elevations and directions fixed for night firing” as well.⁴²

Whether someone became a casualty of artillery fire often depended on chance. Seven men of the 8th Maine were sleeping in the trench when a solid shot happened to fall directly onto them, killing every one. On the Eighteenth Corps line, a New York man had the brawn and presence of mind to throw a lighted shell out of the works before it exploded, saving himself and many others. When a Confederate shell landed only four feet from a Union infantryman who was preparing his dinner, “he looked at it a second, very coolly picked

up the [skillet,] crawled into his hole, and as soon as the shell exploded came out and commenced his cooking.”⁴³

MORTARS

The extended stay at Petersburg allowed for the heavy deployment of mortars. The smallest was the Coehorn, a portable weapon carried by four men into the trenches. Developed by the Dutch engineer Baron Menno van Coehorn and first used by him in 1673, it had seen service during the colonial era of American history as well as during the Mexican War. There had been no opportunity to use it in the eastern campaigns until Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor. The Coehorn mortar could fire a seventeen-pound shell anywhere from 25 to 1,200 yards. Hunt began ordering them for use as early as June 17, and Meade’s army had forty Coehorns in service by the end of the campaign. Engineer troops usually constructed battery emplacements for the heavier mortars that were also deployed along the line. Until the ordnance became available, some field artists tried to simulate mortar fire by rigging their guns to fire at high angles.⁴⁴

The Dictator, the most famous mortar at Petersburg, was a monster 13-inch weapon mounted on a railroad car. It was the only mortar of its size in use during the campaign, although a few had been deployed at Yorktown in 1862. Members of the 1st Connecticut Heavy Artillery fired only five rounds before the platform broke. After repairs, they resumed firing two weeks later. All told, the gunners chalked up 218 rounds before removing the Dictator to City Point for storage.⁴⁵

It was possible to deploy the Dictator because the Federals rebuilt the City Point branch of the South Side Railroad to supply Meade’s army. Charles L. McAlpine and a civilian crew began work on June 18, repairing more than two miles of disrupted track and re-laying undisturbed track to allow narrow-gauge Northern engines to use it. McAlpine also replaced the outdated U-trail of the prewar South with the improved T-trail. The crews finished the track and all bridges for seven miles out of City Point and established four stations along the route. It was officially designated the City Point and Army Line, and 24 locomotives and 275 cars shuttled supplies out to the troops and brought back the wounded.⁴⁶

The Confederates also deployed mortars along the line. Alexander received his first shipment of twelve mortars on June 24 and placed them to fire on the Federals opposite Pegram’s Salient. Hagood experimented with a field piece deployed as a mortar and found it worked well with small charges. Confederate artists soon placed eight Coehorn mortars near his line.⁴⁷

Mortar rounds "were a continual torment to us for we could never tell where they would drop and we could not tell when or where they would burst," recalled a Union infantryman. They made "a swishing noise" as they flew through the air, caused by the burning fuse as the ball lazily rolled in flight. "The boys said they were whispering and talking to themselves, saying, 'Which one? Which one?'" Because of this effect, the Confederates called them "Demoralizers."⁴⁸

If the gunners cut the fuse improperly, the projectile could bury itself before exploding, creating a huge hole. A mortar shell burrowed into the earth only six feet from Edward King Wightman, splattering mud all around but hurting no one. John Malachi Bowden of the 2nd Georgia calculated correctly that a mortar shell heading his way would overshoot the trench, but he remembered that the fuse might have been cut too short. The round exploded only fifteen feet above his head. "The concussion was awful, and as I was in the act of lying down, it drove me against the bottom of the ditch with tremendous force. A piece of the shell as large as a man's fist brushed my ear and went twelve or fifteen miles into the ground."⁴⁹

SHELLING PETERSBURG

The residents of Petersburg shared the dangers of artillery fire. The first Federal rounds sailed into the town on June 16 when gunners of the 10th Massachusetts Battery opened fire from a point near the Hare House. Lee wanted to move 3,000 sick and wounded soldiers in the town's hospitals westward along the South Side Railroad, but Surgeon John Herbert Claiborne argued that the logistical difficulties and the danger to the more severely wounded were too great. Lee's staff officers investigated and recommended that Claiborne be allowed to decide the best course of action. Two wounded men had already died in transit, and many others preferred to take their chances with the shells. Claiborne shifted patients to less exposed sections of town and closed some hospitals.⁵⁰

The shelling continued sporadically for several weeks, at first causing some level of panic among citizens who fled the town. It set fire to a number of buildings and killed people now and then. At least three civilians died due to Federal shelling during June. The bombardment intensified in early July, leading to another wave of evacuation, until one resident estimated that two out of three Petersburg residents had abandoned their homes. Then the shelling eased off in late July. As historian Will Greene has put it, the Federal shelling of Petersburg, unlike the Union shelling of Atlanta, "would never reach the level of a formal tactical operation" but was "a form of terror and a source of disruption."⁵¹

Petersburg's residents reacted in different ways to the shelling. While some panicked and fled, others dug bombproofs in their backyards and covered them

with timber and earth similar to how soldiers constructed their shelters. Some civilians also used basements as bombproofs, while sandbags and cotton bales proved to be effective in shielding the facades of houses. Some residents set up tents on the western outskirts of Petersburg, where they intended to wait until the campaign ended. Even though some parts of town were "almost knocked to pieces," those residents who stayed adjusted to the shelling and carried on with their lives. The most exposed streets were hit hard, but only a block away, life appeared normal to visiting soldiers.⁵²