

# The Picket Post

Volume 17 Number 4

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## *Pioneers of the Union Army*

**W**HEN THE CIVIL WAR began the Union had few Army Engineers. The Corps of Topographical Engineers had 45 officers but no NCOs or enlisted men. The Corps of Engineers had 48 officers and one company of 100 men. Soon, however, Congress increased the strength of the one company to 150 men. It then authorized three more 150 men companies in the Corps of Engineers and provided for one in the Corps of Topographical Engineers. Eventually, but not immediately, the Army did raise three additional 150 men companies and assigned them to the Corps of Engineers. The four Corps of Engineers companies, A-D, comprised the Regular Battalion of Engineers. Unfortunately, the Corps of Topographical Engineers never successfully raised a company.

A few volunteer engineer units such as the 1st New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment, the 1st Missouri Volunteer Engineer Regiment and the 1st Regiment of Michigan Engineers and Mechanics, and some companies from Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Missouri, did enter Federal service. The War Department also re-designated the 15th and 50th New York volunteer infantry regiments as engineer units "due to the unusual number of sailors and mechanics" in their ranks. The addition of these units helped but engineer duties required many more men.

Much more than any previous American conflict the Civil War required a great deal of military engineering. The crossing and re-crossing of the numerous rivers and streams, flowing east and west, required bridges and the men to construct and dismantle them. Civil War logistics which created large wagon trains following each army, required continual road clearing and making, especially through swamps and forests, to get the troops and supplies where they were needed. Field fortifications, including elementary

trenches, became an integral aspect of the war requiring engineers to plan and erect them. As the war proceeded demands for all this work increased.

The various Union armies, therefore, had to accomplish the military engineering tasks the best way they could. For hundreds of years, armies had had at least one recourse – the use of pioneers. The classic 11th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica defined pioneer as "a foot-soldier who with spade, axe, and other implements precedes an army or smaller military body and clears or makes a road, digs entrenchments, prepares a camping ground, &c." U.S. Army officer, Henry L. Scott, who published his Military Dictionary shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War defined pioneers as "Soldiers sometimes detailed from the different companies of a regiment and formed under a non-commissioned officer, furnished with saws, felling axes, spades, mattocks, pickaxes, and bill-hooks. Their services are very important, and no regiment is well fitted for service without pioneers completely equipped." The 1863 Army Regulations provided, "Pioneers or working-parties are attached to convoys to mend roads, remove obstacles, and erect defenses. The convoys should always be provided with spare wheels, poles, axes, &c."

Originally, pioneers were civilians, often the dregs of society, who lived in the immediate area of combat, that the contending armies forced to work, like slaves. These first pioneers provided unskilled labor, to say the least. Criminals and disciplined soldiers and officers also served as pioneers, providing needed manpower but not skills. As armies evolved and duties became more technical, pioneer work demanded more capable and

*continued on page 4*

*By Dale E. Floyd*

n o t e s


JOE SPIVEY will be our guest on April 21st and will present "Time to Go Home," about desertions in both the Union and Confederate Armies. He tells me it is not an exhaustive study, but vignettes of individuals. As far as I know, no one has looked at this subject before; we should find it fascinating.

I met our speaker on the board of the Stonewall Jackson Foundation in Lexington. Joe is now the president of that Board. He has also been president of the VMI Board of Visitors for eight years and is involved in several other community good works.

Joe grew up in North Carolina and went to VMI where he got a BS in civil engineering. He served in the U.S. Army on active duty and in the Reserves. He received an LL.B from Washington & Lee and was in a law firm in Richmond and a visiting professor at Washington & Lee Law School. He has been in solo practice since 2003. He is married and with wife Ann has three sons, all of whom went to VMI; I would wonder if that isn't some sort of record!

AND Joe is the great-grandson of a private in the 1st N.C. Volunteers ("the Bethel brigade"), one of seven brothers in the Confederate Army.

Do come to join us on the 21<sup>st</sup> for cookies and coffee at 7 and the meeting at 7:30 (at the LAW SCHOOL again). See you at the Millmont Grill at 5:30!

  
*Barbara Wright*  
Program Chairman

### **April Meeting**

**Tuesday, April 21**

**Law School Building**

7 PM cookies & coffee

7:30 PM meeting begins

*continued from page 1*

skillful individuals. Pioneer units became elite organizations because their members were chosen for their brawn and/or mechanical, technical, or other abilities.

American forces had organized pioneer units before. Since the Continental Congress did not authorize engineer troops until late in the war, unofficial pioneer units served for years during the American Revolution. Winfield Scott, in the War of 1812, provided for the organization of pioneer units during the Niagara campaign. Robert Anderson, who surrendered Fort Sumter at the beginning of the Civil War, commanded a "pioneer corps" in the Second Seminole War, 1835-42. The continuing use of pioneers prompted the War Department, in 1851, to prescribe a pioneer badge, or two crossed hatchets of cloth, the same color and material as the collar of the coat, to be worn on each arm. During the Civil War, the hatchets were the color of the division to which the pioneers belonged. Some Civil War pioneer officers obtained enameled crossed hatchets which they wore on top of their headgear.

Most Civil War enthusiasts have some understanding of the term pioneer, but numerous misconceptions exist. Many commanders during the war solved their military engineering problems by creating "pioneer units" but did not necessarily call them that. Some just ordered combat units to do pioneer work. Others organized "engineer," not pioneer, brigades composed of details or whole combat units to do such work. Army Engineer Orlando M. Poe, in reporting on the 1865 campaign in the Carolinas, wrote, "Pioneers were not organized with any system, as frequently an entire army corps was simply a body of pioneers." Contemporary, as well as more recent, Civil War authors sometimes used the terms, pioneer, pontoonier, engineer, and sapper or miner, interchangeably for literary purposes or due to a lack of understanding. Civil War commander, William S. Rosecrans, attempted to differentiate between two of the terms, when he wrote that pioneers "move with the advance of the army" while engineers are "chiefly employed on the lines of communication." Anyone, however, using the term pioneer, must be aware of the inherent ambiguities.

Regardless of official name, though, most Union armies created pioneer corps, composed of men detailed or detached from infantry units. In some instances, pioneer corps included mounted units and even artillery. These pioneer corps existed for varying periods of time and under differing circumstances. Many know of the famous Army of the Cumberland's Pioneer Brigade and others have read about the arduous pioneer work of Sherman's army in 1864-65. Few, though, know much about pioneers in other armies.

The Union began using pioneers almost immediately. Some volunteer regiments, such as the 148th Pennsylvania, had a separately designated pioneer corps when they entered Federal service. During the Summer of 1861, a pioneer unit composed of men from the Garibaldi Guard (39th New York Volunteer Infantry) of Louis Blenker's brigade, among others, performed valuable services, including at 1st Bull Run under the command of Engineer officer Barton S. Alexander.

Men became pioneers in various ways. In 1862 a soldier in the 5th New Jersey Infantry Regiment became a pioneer, for only an afternoon, to march in front of his regiment, shouldering tools, not a rifle, during a review by President Abraham Lincoln and various generals. Another soldier, Eli Lake Starr of the 4th Michigan Infantry reported that when his unit was about to enter enemy territory his colonel ordered that ten picked men from each company serve as pioneers. Starr got to select the ten from his company and became a first sergeant of pioneers with 50 men serving under him.

For various reasons, some justified and some not, pioneers functioned at various levels of command from company to army. Thus, the command issuing orders organizing pioneer corps may be hard to discern but most, if not all armies, had them. One volunteer engineer officer, Andrew Hickenlooper, who served in the West, wrote, "The basis of these organizations was ordinarily the 'Brigade Pioneer Corps'."

Apparently, the first army to officially create pioneers was the Army of the Cumberland (14th Army Corps), commanded by former engineer officer William S. Rosecrans. On November 3, 1862, his order provided for each company of every infantry

regiment to detail two men as pioneers. The Army of the Potomac, in 1864, stipulated that each infantry regiment would detail 10 of its men as pioneers. The 1865 Expeditionary Force to Wilmington, North Carolina, required each division to organize a pioneer corps of 100 privates and NCOs. A Pioneer corps of 150 men and 300 contraband was the Department of the Tennessee's requirement for each division. In 1864, The Military Division of Mississippi ordered each corps to organize a pioneer battalion "composed if possible of Negroes."

"The pioneers will move invariably in advance of infantry" and "The Pioneers of the division will precede the division by one hour and make the road passable for the artillery and trains" were common ingredients of Civil War orders. Uniformly, this mission was the most common pioneer duty, at least, during active campaigning. Bridge building and field fortification construction were the next most often performed duties but pioneers accomplished numerous other tasks. Every soldier, of course, including the pioneers, had one duty in common – to fight. Thus, at the battle of Murfreesboro, the commander of the Army of the Cumberland's Pioneer Brigade marched his men onto the field to fight. Captain Greenberry Wiles led his pioneers into battle at Raymond, Mississippi, May 12, 1863, and after the battle, they buried the dead. Often, fighting broke out while pioneers were engaged in their duties, requiring them to pick up rifles. Other duties included preparing campsites; clearing enemy obstructions just before attack; and constructing or destroying railroads, including twisting track. Generally, a pioneer's day might have entailed breaking camp early, clearing roads and building bridges along the route of march, preparing the night's campsite, and constructing fortifications to protect it.

*To be continued ...*

## Dues

Dues are still due for nine people.  
We would be grateful for payment of  
\$25 Individual or \$30 Family  
We'd hate to lose you!!!!!!!

# The Picket Post

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## *Pioneers of the Union Army*

[part 2]

By Dale E. Floyd

DURING QUIETER TIMES some pioneers returned to their original units. Others, however, constructed structures including more sophisticated field fortifications; blockhouses and stockades; plus magazines; warehouses; administration buildings; and, in some instances, winter quarters for officers. Some prepared siege material such as faggots, chevaux-de-frise, fascines, sap-rollers, gabions, and scaling-ladders.

Usually, while men were pioneers, they did not have to perform many of the monotonous camp tasks such as guard duty, however, they rarely were idle. At one time, the Army of the Cumberland's Pioneer Brigade engaged in daily pontoon drill which included laying a bridge across Stone's River and taking it up. At Port Hudson, before the pioneers undertook their task of "opening the way for artillery into the enemy's works," they received instruction in their duties. In one pioneer unit, orders required the company commanders to march the men to attend worship services.

Pioneers did have some fun. In March 1863, the Army of the Cumberland's famed Pioneer Brigade had been issued shelter tents, small to say the least. The brigade came to intensely dislike these tents, calling them dog tents and dog pens. Derisive names often appeared on the tents including "Dog-hole No. 1," and "Sons of Bitches Within." One day, General Rosecrans and his staff rode through camp and heard a crescendo of bowwows. The men were on their hands and knees, stretching their heads out of the end flaps, barking noisily. The general promised to rectify the situation. In performing these acts, though, the Pioneer Brigade had a hand in naming the "pup tent."

To accomplish their varied duties the pioneers needed a variety of skills. Therefore,

the Army of the Cumberland admonished that pioneers should "be selected with great care" to be "half laborers and half mechanics" and later reported that the Pioneer Brigade included men of "sufficient proportions" from the following trades "military engineers, civil engineers, railroad engineers, surveyors, architects, draftsmen, printers, bridge-builders, carpenters, machinists, millwrights, wheelwrights, coopers, blacksmiths, saddlers, sawyers," and "woodmen." The Army of the Potomac required "efficient men." "Men who are good mechanics" were needed by the Department of the Tennessee. The Military Division of West Mississippi wanted men "selected for fitness or aptitude for pioneer duties."

Commanders stipulated that pioneer NCOs and officers should have backgrounds in engineering, mechanics, and related fields so that they could supervise the men. The officers, however, generally served at low rank with little chance of promotion. Thus, their names are mostly unfamiliar. A few were Regular Army engineer officers or had formerly served in that capacity. Some were volunteer engineer officers, but most were detailed officers from infantry regiments with some experience warranting their command over pioneers.

The pioneers required a variety of tools to complete their many assigned tasks. In the Army of the Potomac, each ten man pioneer detail was to have 5 axes, 3 shovels, and 2 picks. The Department of the Tennessee pioneer corps carried axes, spades, picks, and shovels. Each Military Division of West Mississippi pioneer company had 80 spades and shovels, 80 felling and 4 hand axes, 30 picks, 2 crosscut saws, and 1

*continued on page 4*

### notes

Join us at the JAG SCHOOL Tuesday, May 19th, to see that grand example of womanhood at our podium, Carolyn (or Carrie) Janney.

Carrie was a graduate student of Gary Gallagher and received her Ph.D. in history at UVA in 2005.

She then went forth to be an assistant professor of history at Purdue University. She teaches courses there on the Civil War, Civil War memory, and women's history. Carrie's first book was *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause*, published in 2008, explores the role of white southern women as the creators and purveyors of Confederate tradition in the immediate post-Civil War South. Her second book, a volume in the *Littlefield History of the Civil War Era* (University of North Carolina Press) will examine how the Civil War has been remembered between 1865 and the 1930's. She is particularly interested in how race, gender, and combat experience shaped the ways in which America thought about the war and its legacy.

Please join us to hear what Caroline Janney has to share about LaSalle Corbell Pickett: *The First Woman Who Welded Blue and Gray Together*.

As always, cookies and coffee at 7 and the talk will begin at 7:30. Dinner is at 5:30.



Barbara Wright  
Program Chairman

### May Meeting

Tuesday, May 19

JAG SCHOOL

7 PM cookies & coffee

7:30 PM meeting begins

chest of carpenter's tools. The tools for each 25 Army of the Cumberland pioneers were 6 felling axes, 6 hatchets, 2 crosscut saws, 2 cross cut files, 2 hand saws, 2 hand saw files, 6 spades, 2 shovels, 3 picks, 6 hammers, 2 half-inch augurs, 2 one-inch augers, 2 two-inch augers, 20 lbs. assorted nails, 40 lbs. assorted spikes, 1 coil of rope, and one wagon and four horses or mules. Each pioneer company in the Army of the Tennessee constantly kept on hand 100 shovels, 50 picks, 100 axes, and 1 set carpenters tools.

Observers reported that pioneers accomplished some rather amazing feats. One author graphically described pioneers' actions, "There is a halt in the column. The officer in charge of the pioneer corps, which follows the advance guard, has discovered an ugly place in the road, which must be 'corduroyed' at once, before the wagons can pass. The pioneers quickly tear down the fence near by and bridge over the treacherous place, perhaps at the rate of a quarter of a mile in fifteen minutes. If rails are not near, pine saplings and split logs supply their place." During the January 1863 "Mud March" near Fredericksburg, Virginia, a soldier reported: "To proceed, the Pioneers aided by our troops corduroyed the road. This was done by cutting the pines growing along the road and laying them across close together. This made a very rough uneven footing, but the wagons and artillery could move slowly over it." During the campaign from Atlanta to Savannah, November 12 to December 21, 1864, a commander bragged that his pioneer corps constructed 7 miles and 300 feet of corduroy road, built 600 feet of bridging, made 150 fascines, built one fort for guns at Oconee River, cut six miles of wagon roads, and removed fallen timber and obstructions from 600 yards of road." John A. Logan remarked, "The roads generally were very bad and streams high. All obstacles were promptly overcome by the pioneers and men of Harrow's division, under the general supervision of Captain [Herman] Klostermann, Acting Chief Engineer officer of the corps."

Although one contemporary wrote that the pioneers were "tough, rough fellows of vast brawn but little brain or need of it," most commanders heaped great praise on these

men and their commanders. General Grenville M. Dodge, whom U. S. Grant ordered to organize a pioneer corps for railroad work and other duties remarked, "My pioneer corps now was very effective. It was about 1,500 strong and was organized into squads with a civil or mechanical engineer at the head of every squad." William S. Rosecrans observed, "Suppose this army lose one day for want of such men (meaning pioneers), it costs the U. S. Government \$200,000." After the battle of Chancellorsville, Corps Commander and former engineer officer G.K. Warren remarked, "I cannot speak in too high terms of the energy and good-will displayed by the pioneer parties and the officers over them, with but few exceptions." A brigade [Third Brigade, Second Division, Fifth Army Corps] commander wrote this glowing recommendation for his pioneer officer, he "is deserving of great praise for the energy displayed in rapidly bridging streams and swamps, thereby rendering very valuable services in enabling the command to form line of battle to meet the enemy. He exhibited conspicuous bravery in the battle near White Oak Road, Virginia, on the 31st of March, 1865, in assisting to reform the liners, and on the 1st April, 1865, at the Battle of Five Forks, Virginia, he was consistently at the front, greatly encouraging the men by his example." Noted historian Bell Wiley, while discussing elite units, wrote the following, "Another elite organization was the Pioneer Corps which served in the Army of the Cumberland. In his report of Stone's River, Rosecrans paid high tribute to the Pioneer Corps stating that "the efficiency and esprit du corps suddenly developed in this command, its gallant behavior in action, and the eminent services it is continually rendering the army entitle both officers and men to special public notice and thanks."

This unit, the Army of the Cumberland's Pioneer Brigade, was perhaps the most thoroughly organized and permanent pioneer organization created during the Civil War. Generally comprising 2-3,000 men broken up into 3 battalions, plus a mounted squadron and some artillery, it served the Army of the Cumberland valiantly. Its first commander, James St. Clair Morton, and engineer officer, did an admirable job in organizing and training the unit to generally perform all the duties that the Regular Army

Engineer Battalion and the Volunteer Engineer Brigade accomplished for the Army of the Potomac. In addition, it erected some sophisticated fortifications at places such as Nashville, Knoxville, and Chattanooga; laid track for railroads in the area, and built saw-mills and waterworks that served as models after the war ceased. The pioneer brigade had its own flag which, along with its insignia, helped to create its esprit.

In 1864, Congress created the 1st United States Veteran Volunteer Engineer Regiment and allowed any Pioneer Brigade members to join. The disbandment of the Pioneer Brigade followed soon afterwards. Establishment of the 1st United States Veteran Volunteer Engineer Regiment provided the stability and permanency that many of the officers had longed for.

Immediately following the War, the Union staged a multi-day Grand Review as the various armies marched through Washington, DC, to cheers from the assembled multitudes. As they had during the war, some of the pioneers took the advance. The 15th Army Corps pioneers of each division marched with the same front and formation as the infantry column, with axes and spades carried at right-shoulder shift. Soon after the review, armies began issuing orders with passages like the following, "The interests of the service no longer requiring the continuation of the organizations, Pioneer Corps of Divisions will be disbanded."

After the Civil War, the army continued to organize pioneers when needed. In addition, some state militia created pioneer units. However, with new uniform regulations, issued in 1899, the army no longer issued pioneer insignia. But, when World War I came along, the War Department organized a number of pioneer infantry regiments and then promptly disbanded them following the armistice. Since then, the combat engineers have, generally, been responsible for all pioneer duties, although infantry troops and others have continually been called upon to perform them. Today the term "pioneer" is still used in the army, especially when referring to specific duties and to certain tools.