

Sir Henry Augustus Smyth (1825-1906) was a major in the British Royal Artillery when he visited the Army of the Potomac as a military observer in late 1864. Theodore Lyman noted his appearance at headquarters, writing: "There arrived Major Smythe, Royal Artil. and Mr. Lunn from Montreal, the former a gentlemanly, bald, florid Britton." Lyman later described Smyth as "of sound sense, though poco a poco," meaning evidently that he thought the man a bit slow. Smyth accompanied the army on the Appomattox campaign, messed with General Meade, and was with him at the time of Lee's surrender. Smyth recorded his observations of the campaign soon after for the *Minutes of Proceedings of the Royal Artillery Institution* (4, 1865: 364-365) and what follows is a brief excerpt of that article, entitled "Account of the Final Attack and Capture of Richmond by the Federal American Army." Smyth had many chances to observe Federal veterans rapidly entrenching and was intrigued enough to describe the activity in detail.



Afterwards, General Smyth was Military Secretary in South Africa during the First Boer War (1880-1881) and later Governor of the colony of Malta. His brother-in-law, Baden Powell, founded the Boy Scouts. —D. Lowe

Smyth on Rapid Entrenching, 1865

“It may be desirable here to call attention to the method followed by the troops in taking position on this occasion, as on almost all others that I was witness to. As soon as a brigade was halted in its place, without other word than perhaps company command, the arms were piled and the men broke themselves immediately into working parties to entrench. Of each little squad of 12 or 15 men, a proportion betook themselves to felling trees, a second proportion to arranging them in the line of intended parapet, a third to carrying them, (or other wood, especially fence-rails where procurable), up to the disposal of the second, and a fourth to throwing up earth to the front of the logs with their picket shovels. These latter work with all their might till out of breath, when other men relieve them at the shoveling, and so on, so that each man gets one or more turns at it before the completion of the work. And, in the very light soil of Virginia, a constant stream of earth is kept flying into the required place. In this manner I saw a breastwork, perfectly efficient against musketry fire, thrown up along the entire front of a brigade, in forty minutes; much emulation going on all the time amongst the various squads and regiments. If time allowed, the men next proceeded to “slash” the woods in front of the position, then to assist advanced sentries and picquets in forming rifle pits, and only then to prepare their meals. No doubt the line which I saw thus occupied would have become a formidable fortification by night, but the General told me that he expected to move them some distance forward before dark, and that neither he nor they would grudge the work in the mean time.

The trace of these works is not generally laid down by authority farther than the actual disposition of the troops in line goes, but the men themselves have a keen eye for such principles of advantage as command and flanking fire; in fact, only too much so, as a small show of flanking fire opposed to them, render them, I was told, altogether unwilling to advance.

The proportion of intrenching tools regularly supplied does not appear to exceed one of each kind to every ten men, independent of the regular pioneers of regiments; but this number is indefinitely increased by the enterprise of the individuals. Besides the pioneers of the regiments, there is with each corps, for general works, a corps of pioneers, and another of engineers.”