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Ed Malles, ed. *Bridge Building in Wartime: Colonel Wesley Brainerd's Memoir of the 50th New York Volunteer Engineers.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997. xxii + 415 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-977-7.

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There is certainly no shortage of personal memoirs available to students of the American Civil War. The accounts of soldiers of almost every rank and branch now crowd the shelves of bookstores and fill the catalogs of major presses, and more offerings in this genre seem to be published daily. Every so often, however, a memoir appears that is so candid, so well written, and so packed with unique information that it unquestionably merits the attention of all who seek a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of Civil War campaigning. Wesley Brainerd's *Bridge Building in Wartime*, as edited by Ed Malles, is just such a memoir.

Brainerd's narrative is singular in a number of respects, the most notable of which is that it is much more personal than the usual Civil War memoir. Although drawn from the author's wartime diary, it was not written for publication. It is, rather, an intimate missive from a veteran to his son, who was but a small child in 1870 when the account was begun. As such, the memoir is written in a very conversational tone, full of casual asides and replete with advice and instruction from a father to his child. Because Brainerd never intended the document to become public, his observations on the operations and personalities of the army in which he served are refreshingly candid and, more often than not, uncompromisingly pointed.

Brainerd was born in Rome, New York, in 1832 and graduated from the local academy at fifteen. He hoped for an appointment to West Point, but his father quashed the notion and steered him instead toward work as a mechanic and draughtsman in the locomotive industry. Following marriage, Brainerd and his wife settled in Rome. There he became an officer in the local militia company, an organization which he admits to his son was in truth no more than "a fancy dress Company of holiday Soldiers comprised chiefly of young men fond of show and with much leisure time on their hands" (p. 7).

Although Brainerd was very conscientious about his militia service, he did not join the rush to arms that followed the firing on Fort Sumter. Both he and his wife knew, however, that he would eventually volunteer, a prospect that filled them both with dread. "Our feelings," he recalled to his son, "ran too deep to allow much conversation upon the subject." Following the Union defeat at Bull Run in 1861, Brainerd and his wife knew that his "time was come" (p. 14). In return for recruiting a company of soldiers, he was granted a captain's commission in the 50th New York Volunteer Engineers, a regiment then forming at the training depot at Elmira, New York.

Brainerd's strikingly straightforward assessments of his fellow officers in the 50th New York offer the reader a unique insight into the uneven quality of leadership in the volunteer regiments that were being hurriedly mustered into service in 1861. The regimental commander was tactically and technically incompetent, the executive officer was a drunken martinet, the quartermaster officer was cashiered in 1862 for failing to "account for his receipts," the surgeon suffered a similar fate in the same year due to "his love of whiskey," and the lazy and uncaring regimental chaplain was so roundly despised by the soldiers that he eventually "left the service in disgust." One company commander was soon discharged because of "mental instability," while another, whom the author characterized as "cowardly and…a striking example of total depravity," was forced to resign in 1863 (pp. 23-26).

It was with this rather mixed group, then, that the 50th New York was transported to Washington, D.C., in September 1861 to join the engineer brigade of the Army of the Potomac. Here the regiment fell under the strict training regimen imposed by the army commander, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan. The men received instruction not only in engineering skills such as the construction of pontoon bridges and field fortifications, but in basic infantry tactics as well. The training sites were frequently visited by the commanding general, and Brainerd unabashedly admits that he was swiftly and completely smitten by the legendary charisma of the man. Like many of the soldiers of that army, Wesley Brainerd would re-

main a "McClellan man" until the day he died.

In March 1862, the regiment was shipped to Virginia to participate in the Peninsula campaign. Here the 50th New York saw its first combat, and Brainerd's account of that action is as candid as it is detailed. The reader learns not only of the monumental difficulties associated with conducting bridging operations in the treacherous swamps of the Chickahominy, but of the leadership challenges Brainerd faced as an inexperienced officer leading men in their first battles. Frightened and fatigued soldiers under his command were slow to respond to his instructions, and in some cases they refused to follow orders at all. Once Confederate commander Gen. Robert E. Lee launched his vicious counter-attacks, confusion reigned supreme in the dismal swamp, and the contradictory orders issued from McClellan's head-quarters often resulted in bridges being dismantled or even abandoned as soon as they were built. Although Brainerd concedes that McClellan's retreat was so confused and precipitous that thousands of wounded comrades were left behind, he absolves the general of all blame. The army's undisciplined withdrawal, he insists, resulted from the fears of "terrified authorities" in Washington who ordered McClellan to abandon the Peninsula and return to defend the capital (p. 81).

Brainerd's next important action came in the Fredericksburg campaign, and he opens his discussion of this action with a detailed explanation of the disastrous delay in moving the pontoon boats to the Rappahannock crossing sites. He contends that although the orders alerting the engineer brigade to prepare for movement were issued from Washington on November 6, they were not received at the engineer base camp in Berlin, Maryland, until a week later. A "McClellan man" always, Brainerd maintains that this fatal delay resulted from the confusion which attended Abraham Lincoln's relief of "Little Mac" just as the general was commencing a "brilliant movement" on Richmond (p.122). Had McClellan been retained in command, Brainerd insists, the debacle of the Fredericksburg campaign would never have occurred.

The engineers fully comprehended the urgent requirement for bridging on the Rappahannock, and Brainerd details their frantic efforts as they worked "night and day" to fit out the two pontoon trains required to support the crossing (p. 94). Still, they were not able to begin their move south until November 19. Horrible weather and bad roads slowed their march to an agonizing crawl, and Brainerd's train did not reach the Rappahannock until November 25. By that time, of course, Lee had been granted ample opportunity to prepare his defenses.

There are but few accounts of the battle of Fredericksburg told from an engineer's point of view, and none are more compelling than that offered by Brainerd. Twice he crossed the river to the Confederate side, dodging enemy pickets and mounting patrols to reconnoiter possible bridging sites. Based on his reconnaissance, he recommended that the army cross at Skinker's Neck, about twelve miles downstream from Fredericksburg. This recommendation was rejected by Union commander Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside, however, and on December 9, Brainerd was stunned to learn that he and his men were to construct their pontoon bridge directly opposite the town. The decision, he recalled to his son, "seemed like madness," and he was so certain that he would be killed in the attempt that he spent the evening prior to the attack writing letters of good-bye to his family (p. 108).

Brainerd, of course, was not killed, but he dramatically documents the slaughter of dozens of his comrades who did die as they attempted to carry out Burnside's calamitous plan. Once the bridging operation began, Brainerd repeatedly led squads of men out onto the planking in the river, and repeatedly they were shot down from Confederate positions only 400 feet distant. On one attempt, Brainerd led ten soldiers onto the bridge in a desperate bid to secure the structure's supports. Five of the men were hit almost immediately, and the other five were either killed or wounded seconds later. Brainerd continued on alone until a ball tore into his left arm, severing an artery.

Throughout the book, Brainerd is careful to remind his son that the trials faced by soldiers in the field rapidly pale when compared to the hardships borne by wives left behind. Even as he lay wounded in the hospital at Fredericksburg, for example, his infant daughter was desperately ill at home. In spite of all his wife could do, the baby died, and four days later, as she was preparing the infant for burial, word arrived that her husband had been wounded so severely that he might not recover. "My sorrows and distress," Brainerd writes poignantly of the grief and anxiety his wife was forced to bear alone, "seemed as nothing in comparison" (p. 126).

During the Chancellorsville campaign, Brainerd's regiment was once more in combat on the banks of the Rappahannock, and again his narrative provides readers with a unique and fascinating description of the intricacies and importance of bridging operations. While the story of Hooker's successful withdrawal across the Rappahannock at the end of the campaign is usually addressed as an after- thought, Brainerd's account makes plain that in fact it was a near-run thing. Torrential rains

that began to fall soon after the bridges to support the retreat were in place transformed the languid stream into a raging flood, and the level of the river rose by almost six feet. Throughout the night the engineers labored like men possessed, cannibalizing one bridge and using its materials to extend and shore up the other two. As Brainerd recounts, "A single false move would have lost us the bridges," and morning would have found Hooker's army stranded on the enemy side of the unfordable river (p. 145).

The remainder of 1863 passed in relative quiet for the 50th New York, and in the spring of 1864, the engineer brigade was completely reorganized. Brainerd, now a major, received command of his own battalion, and the unit was attached to Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps for the Overland campaign. Brainerd's discussion of the reorganization is quite comprehensive, and supplies readers with an explanation of how it incorporated both the tactical lessons learned during the first two years of the war and recent technical advancements, such as light-weight pontoon boats.

Brainerd's battalion remained in support of Hancock's corps from the opening of the campaign in May until July, when the separate battalions were again consolidated into a single brigade during the siege of Petersburg. As always, the author carefully chronicles the role of engineer troops during each of the battles of this period, but he offers much more as well. Throughout his memoir Brainerd remains closely attuned to the human costs of the war, and his discussions of the physical and emotional toll this grueling campaign exacted on the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac are both frank and riveting. He describes in detail, for example, the wild panic that gripped the Union right flank following Confederate General John B. Gordon's afternoon attack of 6 May, and he candidly admits his own fears when his battalion was hurriedly ordered into the line to halt the rebel onslaught. He offers a ghastly picture of the horrors faced by the wounded in the fires of the Wilderness ("they could only lay, and moan, and roast and die"), and a grisly description of exhausted surgeons performing scores of amputations with assembly-line precision following the battle of Spotsylvania (p. 208).

Finally, he supplies a chilling account of the bloody assault at Cold Harbor. "It was," he recorded for his son, "an awful sacrifice without any result," and he concedes that "for the first time since he had assumed command, confidence in General Grant was shaken." Had the general followed through with his plan to renew the attack the following morning, Brainerd was "certain" that "not an Officer, not a soldier in the Army of the Potomac would have moved. The whole Army would have stood still, not in mutiny, but in blank amazement" (pp. 234-235).

In sum, this is a truly remarkable memoir, and editor Ed Malles is to be commended for his masterful job in bringing it to life. The text is liberally supplemented with explanatory notes, and although Brainerd's narrative ends abruptly just as the siege of Petersburg commences, Malles supplies an epilogue that details the engineer's service in that campaign and his successful postwar career. The only significant flaw in the volume is its lack of maps, but this shortcoming pales when compared to the singular contributions the work offers. In his introduction, Malles writes that his goal was to present Brainerd's memoir in a form that would remain "as close as possible to the author's 'voice' and would be valuable to scholars of all persuasions" (p. xx). In this, he has clearly succeeded.

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