

## Sherman's Engineers

By D. Christopher Warren, M.A.

Greetings everyone. Thank you for allowing me to be here. Over the years, the ceremony honoring General William Tecumseh Sherman, has seen a variety of topics. Some of these have included his life, military career, family connections, his horse, and various aspects of this complex hero. However, I believe there has been one subject that has not been discussed – *Sherman's Engineers*. Before I begin, allow me to convey a little of the connection for General Sherman's admiration for his engineer troops.

Sherman attended West Point, mainly an engineering military academy in the early 1800s, and graduated 6<sup>th</sup> in the Class of 1840. This was fairly impressive – considering his accumulated demerits. His academic placement put him near the top of his class. The highest tier of a graduating class was given commissions in the engineers, ordnance, or artillery branches of the army. Unlike his fellow classmate, Paul Herbert who would join the Corps of Engineers, Sherman would be recommended to the artillery. Soon, he would also show promise in the field of engineering. While many of his colleagues would make names for themselves in the Mexican War, he would be regulated to California and more administrative duties in this newly acquired U.S. territory. While there, in June 1848, Sherman accompanied Military Governor, Richard B. Mason, to inspect the mines at Sutter's Fort. He was the officer assigned to draft the documents proving gold had been discovered in California, and may have inadvertently helped start the "gold rush". A short time later, Sherman was requested to assist with surveying the newly formed City of Sacramento and help lay out its street grid system. After he resigned from the army in 1853, he later becomes the Superintendent of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy where he also serves as a Professor of Engineering and Military Tactics. So engineering had a special place for Sherman, and he would utilize this affection for these specialized troops during his famous "March to the Sea."

If we advance forward towards the Civil War, we will see that with the firing upon Fort Sumter in April 1861, President Lincoln calls for 75,000 troops to subdue the rebellion. Sherman would soon take his place on the world stage. Known for being outspoken of his views that the war would be long and very costly, both in lives and destruction, he was viewed as "insane" and almost left the stage before he could make his mark on history. Fortunately, he did not happen and he went on to accomplish amazing things.

As for the engineers, according to the Articles of War – Article 63 states "The functions of the engineers being generally continued to the most elevated branch of military science, they are not to assume, nor are they subject to be ordered on any duty beyond the line of their immediate profession, except by special order of the President of the United States; but they are to receive every mark of respect to which their rank in the army entitles them respectively, and are liable to be transferred, at the discretion of the President, from one corps to another, regard being paid to rank."

With that being said it took an act of congress to establish an engineer unit, and their regimental commanders were only to report to the commanding general of an army. Mostly, the engineers would be on the staff of the general. Thus, why there were only a total of 12 Engineer Regiments raised for the entire Union Army during the Civil War. Two of those units would prove vital to "Uncle Billy" on his famous "march."

The 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan Engineers & Mechanics was organized in Marshall, Michigan, September 12, 1861 and mustered into service on October 29<sup>th</sup>. For most of 1861 through 1862, it would be attached to the Army of the Ohio. They participated in the battles of Mill Springs, KY; Farmington, MS; the Siege of Corinth, MS; Perryville, KY; La Vergne, TN; Chattanooga, TN; the Atlanta Campaign; and the March to the Sea and through the Carolinas.

On the other hand, Sherman had a smaller, yet equally important engineer unit from Missouri, the 1<sup>st</sup> Missouri Engineers. This unit had an interesting origin due to the fact it actually started off as two regiments - the 25<sup>th</sup> Missouri Infantry and Bissell's Engineer Regiment of the West. The latter unit had been organized in several locations throughout Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, and Michigan during the Summer & Fall of 1861. Since their companies were separated and attached to various commands throughout 1862-1863, it is hard to designate just all the unit accomplished. Some of the battle honors include: Battle of Island #10 (and the famous canal at New Madrid where they would develop a saw for cutting tress underwater); the Siege of Corinth, MS; Grant's Central Mississippi Campaign; and the Siege of Vicksburg; just to name a few.

In addition, the 25<sup>th</sup> Missouri Infantry was a unique regiment in that it had originally been formed from the 13<sup>th</sup> Missouri Infantry in 1861 and part of these troops were at the Battle of Lexington, MO in September. Between June 1861 – March 1862 this unit stayed in Missouri doing various duties, but then were sent into Tennessee in March, and that's where it takes an interesting turn. Under the command of Everett Peabody, it would be the 25<sup>th</sup> that would be the first Union troops engaged in Fraley's Field at the Battle of Shiloh, TN. After this, they assisted with the siege of Corinth, as they were being utilized as engineer troops, but were ordered to return to Missouri in September. By October, they found themselves building fortifications in Southeastern Missouri – at least 3 of these “forts” still exist to this very day: Fort Barnesville, Ellington, MO; Fort Benton, Patterson, MO; and Fort Davidson, Pilot Knob, MO. It was during their time in the Arcadia Valley that two of my Civil War ancestors joined this unit – William S. Reed and his younger brother, Samuel Brown Reed (both enlisting in Arcadia, MO on October 7, 1862 in Company K). They would also go on to repair and build fortifications around New Madrid, MO. Then, in January 1864 the 25<sup>th</sup> Missouri Infantry was consolidated in with Bissell's Engineer Regiment of the West and a new unit was born – the 1<sup>st</sup> Missouri Engineers. About a month later, the unit was reconsolidated and on February 17, 1864 the final unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Missouri Engineers was established. When Sherman was planning on moving his 65,000 man army through Georgia, he knew what specialty troops he would need, and he sent for 2 regiments of engineers.

On Sherman's famous “March to the Sea” his armies encountered many areas of swamps, rivers, and places where no roads existed. It was up to “Shermans Engineers” to move the army. Between his three wings, and the army moving sometimes a mere 10 miles a day, the engineers were making it 12-30 miles a day by corduroying roads, making bridges, and regulating the flow of movement for Sherman's vast armies. In fact, one specialty of these engineer troops was the “pontoon bridge.” While many think of pontoon boats as being a solid, wooden boat – Sherman's engineers were far more capable than that. For a lot of the march, they utilized a wooden framed boat with a canvas cover. These were morticed and tenoned together (no need for nails) and were quickly unloaded, laid, and had troops moving quickly across them. As a matter of fact, these boats

and engineering technology were so advanced that each boat, with planks laid for bridging, could hold almost 4 tons of weight between each set. This made the almost mile wide rivers quickly maneuverable and troops got across safely and in no time at all. Another specialty of these troops was the destruction of the railroads, and making the infamous “Sherman’s Bowties” or “Sherman’s Hairpins.” The engineers were given their freedom to accomplish their tasks, and also given command to regulate a lot of the armies’ movements. Not reporting to anyone else other than their own regimental commanders and the army corps generals, these amazing men were able to accomplish so much without all the military bureaucracy. Sherman’s 37-day and 285 miles from Atlanta to Savannah was a success, and a lot of this was due to his engineers’ expertise. While many will think that these men were simply skilled laborers, and non-combatant soldiers, this is not true. Along the march to Savannah and then into the Carolinas, these troops would be faced with combat on a few occasions which included the Battle of Bentonville, NC. In fact, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston paid tribute to the 1<sup>st</sup> Missouri Engineers by saying, "When I learned that Sherman’s army was marching through the Salk swamps, making its own corduroy roads at the rate of a dozen miles a day, I made up my mind that there had been no such army in existence since the days of Julius Caesar." In fact, there are at least 8 monuments to the 1<sup>st</sup> Missouri Engineers throughout the State of Georgia. After Sherman’s successful venture, and the closing of the war, a proud “Uncle Billy” would be in the viewing stand on May 24, 1865 with Gen. Grant, President Johnson, and other dignitaries, as his western troops passed by in grand review. His 65,000-man armies marching triumphantly as he looked on, and in all of the men passing on this day, a mere two engineer regiments – the 1<sup>st</sup> Missouri Engineers and the 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan Engineers and Mechanics.

In closing, it was Sherman’s deep devotion to his engineering skills and his allowance of his engineer troops to have the liberty to “do their jobs” that his famous “March to the Sea” was successful. It is because Sherman had the foresight to utilize his specialized “engineers” in which his famous “March to the Sea” brought the war to a halt, granted a sure victory for the Union, and made our country whole once again. It is because of a man, utilizing the skills he was taught at an “engineering military academy” that brought us here today. Thank you.

D. Christopher Warren has been a Civil War reenactor for the past 29+ years. He and his family (wife Twyla, and daughter Abbie) have presented a wide array of topics on the Civil War to various groups, organizations, schools, libraries, State & National Historic sites, and museums throughout Missouri. His education includes a Master of Arts in Civil War Military History (American Public University) and a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education & Social Studies (Central Methodist University). He can be reached via his family’s website “Warren Family Historical Programs” <https://warren-family-historical-programs.weebly.com> or via email at [the\\_civilwar\\_guy@yahoo.com](mailto:the_civilwar_guy@yahoo.com)