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History 1700/Halford

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Chosen from among the National Archives photographic record of the Civil War was the photograph entitled “Constructing telegraph lines, April 1864” by Timothy H. O’Sullivan. Aesthetically, this is a well-structured photo, pleasing to the eye because of the division of the image into thirds and the well-preserved black and white contrast. But it is the implications of the photo, the story behind the image, which is captivating. Captured in the still is a flurry of action: men scaling bare poles to quickly set up telegraph lines, men working together to string out the wires, station and camp being brought in by wagon. O’Sullivan has captured motion in the photograph and the urgency with which the telegraph lines were strung. The image was chosen for analysis because it begs the question “why?” Why was this scene, this point in the war, deemed important enough to capture it on the expensive and delicate glass negatives of the 1860s? The underlying implications of this photograph communicate the importance the armies placed on the telegraph. O’Sullivan’s photo gracefully captures one of the most important efforts in the war, providing a window into the communications battle waged between the Union and the Confederacy during the Civil War.

The photograph does not capture infantry, weaponry or readily-apparent war-time activity. Nor does it capture any classically-militant depictions of Generals, marching soldiers, army camps or battle grounds. If the image were not categorized in the Civil War records in the National Archive, its connection to the Civil War could be overlooked. It is the omission of such

war-time details that make this image interesting and important. By rendering the scene photographically, the construction of telegraph lines becomes as important as battle fields. It can be inferred through the subject matter alone what kind of reliance Generals Grant and Lee had on the telegraph. If there was no reliance on the telegraph, photographers would not have bothered to capture its progress. If it was not an important part of the war effort, photographers would not have chosen it over a body-strewn battle field. What's more is that the scene seems to be routine; the men in the photo seem to know exactly where and how and when the lines should be placed. It appears that the set-up is a practiced and repeated occurrence. This apparent ease with which the men set up the lines implies that this scene has happened again and again as troops move and the telegraph lines are extended. To capture the scene while the lines are still going up, rather than completed, indicates the progressive thought that was needed to maintain the Signal Corps throughout the war and how precious the commodity of information was. The activity surrounding the uncompleted lines becomes an allegory to similar scenes undoubtedly taking place in other parts of the Union and Confederacy. By simply choosing the telegraph lines as being worthy of photography speaks volumes on the concerted and maintained effort to keep communication up and running with troop movements and the war.

Ulysses S. Grant remarked in his memoirs that "in a few minutes...telegraphic communication would be effected between all the headquarters of the army" and that "no orders ever had to be given to establish the telegraph" (Grant 1885-1886, 312). This account by Grant implies that the importance of the telegraph was common knowledge among the troops and especially the dedicated Signal Corps, which provides context to the activity in the photograph where no Commander, Major or General appears to be directing construction. The portions of Grant's memoir which recall the telegraph attest that he "took full advantage of the telegraph to

track troop movements, stringing new lines as he advanced” (Davidson, et al. 2011, 416). This image, viewed with the knowledge of Grant’s war-time communication, is a delightful portrayal of a specific war strategy: moving telegraph wires right along with the General. Indeed, Grant reported that “the signal service was used on the march. [Telegraphers] would go in advance, or on the flanks, and seize upon high points of ground giving a commanding view of the country...[they] would denote, by signals, the positions of different parts of our own army, and often the movements of the enemy” (Grant, 1885-1886, 312). Found within the database Academic Search Premier, through the Salt Lake Community College library, is an article from The Civil War Times regarding these telegraphers, often just called ‘operators.’ The reliance on the operators was so great that:

a year into the war, each side was doing its best to take advantage of the new technology, stringing thousands of miles of copper wire between military departments...and temporary lines between army corps on the battlefield. The rush to extend the networks made guarding them difficult, and left openings for telegraph men...to intercept information and send misleading intelligence...[Telegraph men would] take down the [enemy’s] telegraph line and connect [it] to portable telegraph gear for the purpose of taking off all dispatches as they passed through (Ethier 2007, online).

The telegraph lines would physically move as communications figuratively moved; the battles were not only waged between infantry men, but also telegraph men. Union and Confederate soldiers would wreak havoc on each other’s wires, as the telegraph from Confederate Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan to Union Brigadier General J.T. Boyle at Louisville, KY demonstrates: “Good morning Jerry! This telegraph is a great institution. You should destroy it, as it keeps me too well posted. My friend Elsworth has all of your dispatches since July 10 on file. Do you wish copies?” (Ethier 2007, online).

This battle behind the battle colors the daily tasks in the Civil War and adds humanity to a historical event. The photograph and the context from the the supporting sources add to the understanding of how the Civil War was waged and what kind of weaponry was used off the battle field. The *Experience History* textbook provides an account of the Civil War which, while

a good primer, is nowhere near long enough to convey the scope of the four year war. The textbook's account is battle-heavy, detailing field tactics and army movement strategy. But intuitively one should know that wars are not won through battles and deaths alone. This photograph is evidence of that. It depicts, both clearly and subtly, what the men outside of the frontlines were doing for the war. The *Experience History* textbook does touch briefly on the use of the telegraph, saying that "some of [the] Union telegraphers were so adept that they could receive messages...by touching the end of the wire to their tongues to pick up Morse code" (Davidson et al. 2011, 416). This excerpt from the text was influential in choosing an image to analyze; how ingenious and cunning a way to hack into enemy communications. The excerpt, combined with the photograph, illustrates the flexibility, responsiveness and touch of spontaneity that was required to run the Signal Corps.

Timothy H. O'Sullivan's photograph "Constructing telegraph lines, April 1864" enriches the understanding of the Civil War. It beautifully freezes an oft-forgotten part of enemy encounters: telegraph construction and interception. The sheer existence of O'Sullivan's photograph comments on the importance of the operators: had there not been heavy dependence on the new technology, then O'Sullivan would not have bothered to capture the efforts of the men, balancing at the top of poles. The content of O'Sullivan's photo is conspicuous in its lack of evident war-like content, which is as much a comment on the war efforts as is gun smoke: the war was waged as carefully behind the trenches as it was on the front-lines. Yet, O'Sullivan's photo reminds us that it was often the telegraph lines that were in front of the troops.

Bibliography

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