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THE BATTLE OF THE CRATER, Hammering Fails for  
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THE BATTLE OF THE CRATER

Hammering Fails for the Last Time.

The Battle of the Crater was a picturesque incident in one of the most dramatic campaigns of the Civil War. Gettysburg and Vicksburg had of course decided many things, but they can scarcely be held to have set at rest the fundamental question of whether the Confederacy could still keep intact the borders of at least seven states, some of which had scarcely been touched by actual war. The writing on the wall may be clear enough to us after seven decades, but there were many contemporaries to whom Gettysburg was decisive only of a Confederate campaign on Northern soil in 1863. Unless 1864 brought more Federal successes, the war might still be lost to the Union. It would be difficult, at the November elections, to make a political campaign more successful than the military one.

That the grey tide had ebbed forever was shown in two great campaigns that year: Sherman against Johnston in Georgia, Grant and Lee in Virginia. The two were in many respects similar, and in Sherman's there were more desperate chances, more substantial victories than in Grant's: but the real death struggle took place in the area which had seen the successive defeats of five great thrusts at the heart of the Confederacy- or, if Richmond was not the heart, at least the emblem, the soul. The sixth contest

on Virginia soil would be between Lee, who had balked all but the first of these attempts, and Grant, who had found the key to the Confederate Gibraltar of the West and now directed an army commanded by the victor of Gettysburg. It was an imposing combination, especially when the army was the Army of the Potomac, pounded by many defeats into a durable aggregate capable of withstanding all the fiery spirit of the grey troops.

Meade's name as a brilliant commander was in eclipse as a result of the lackluster pursuit after Gettysburg, and the unimpressive sparring along the Rapidan in the fall and winter. There were few to take account of the fact that while the Army of Northern Virginia was still in existence and in possession of its old camp-grounds, the Union had suffered no great casualties since July. The same calendar months, one year before, had sufficed for Lee to shatter two attacks and withstand a third -- perhaps Meade is due some credit for his conservatism. Once, at Mine Run, when he intended to strike but at the last moment found the Confederate position too strong, he withdrew, ignoring the "public opinion" which would have urged him to the offensive ever since Gettysburg. Caution is a chilly word, but less chilly than the ground on which the wounded had lain all night in front of Marye's Heights twelve months before.

Spring came, and Lieutenant General Grant, the first commander to have actually at his disposal all the armies of the Union, crossed the Rapidan on May 4, 1864. Next day, as his infantry swung into position, two thirds of Lee's army fell upon them, in a great tract of tangled thickets where masses of artillery

were useless and only the most general control of the troops was possible for their commander. Two days of savage and indecisive contest, and Grant moved on, east and south, to repeat at Spotsylvania a battle of much the same character. At the end of the month he was still moving in the same direction, drawing closer to Richmond but driven to the east of it, until finally at Cold Harbor on June 3, attacking another hurriedly but effectively entrenched position, his army, which had survived the grimmest month of fighting even it had seen, was so quickly and thoroughly repulsed that the campaign seemed to be ending as had McClellan's two years before. The Confederates had inflicted losses approaching their own aggregate strength, and still Lee was able to detach troops to the Shenandoah. Butler, who was to have moved up the James toward Richmond, while Grant pressed down from the north, had accomplished little. The Army of the Potomac, with many of its best soldiers gone ( the loss of officers was particularly heavy ) was little more than the ghost of itself, and Grant's accomplishment seemed altogether unimpressive.

In the West Grant had failed on one side of a great river, and tried again on the other bank. McClellan, on this same ground in 1862, had retired to the James River, under more difficult circumstances than Grant faced now as he debated a similar movement. In 1864 the Confederate supremacy in cavalry had disappeared: Stuart was dead and there was no longer any great fear of raiders among the supply wagons. Grant's lines at Cold Harbor were intact, and

must be approached with care, which condition would give the Federals some hours start: and even then the withdrawal might be only an indication of new attack by the south bank of the Chickahominy.

The Federals moved with steady efficiency, and before the handful of Confederates (3,000) in Petersburg could be reenforced, one Army Corps was deploying for attack and another was south of the James, within a short days march. In sight of the goal, the fumbling began. Smith reconnoitered with painstaking care, then had to wait again while horses were watered. Hancock had to wait for rations, floundered, with the aid of inaccurate maps, along the deceptive country roads, the night came on, and though a portion of the prepared defense line was lost, the Confederacy held Petersburg by good fortune and hard fighting. Three days later, with blue uniforms lying thick before Beauregard's hasty entrenchments, it became clear that direct attack was over. An attempt at the old familiar left flank movement failed when the 2nd Corps was ordered into the woods, southeast of Petersburg, and found that Mahone's Confederates could move through the level thickets with remarkable sureness. This encircling movement, failing signally, was nevertheless the first of the series which finally resulted in capture of the city.

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The problems of the generals were possibly not of great interest to a regiment of Pennsylvanians from the coal-mining country, whose front line was perched on the edge of a hill to which it had been advanced in the first days of attack. <sup>1</sup> On top of the same hill, directly in front, was a Confederate battery, 135 yards from the picket line. That was the way to Petersburg, and there the 48th Pa., intended to go.

No men could live to reach that battery above ground: but it would be simple to tunnel under it.

The Colonel, Henry Pleasants, pursued the idea through proper military channels.<sup>1</sup> Some of his superiors favored it, some scoffed,<sup>2</sup> others were indifferent but admitted it could do no harm, would keep the men amused.<sup>3</sup> Colonel Pleasants gathered in what materials he could find as the digging progressed, using every possible makeshift<sup>4</sup> to obtain what he needed with or without official support.

The operation involved was, of course, not a new expedient in war: but the necessary unbroken length of tunnel was greater than had ever been attempted. Colonel Delafield of the Engineers had duly reported the digging of 1,251 running meters of gallery, some of it fifty feet under ground, by the French in the Crimea.<sup>5</sup> An Englishman visiting Confederate headquarters stated that at the siege of Delhi it had proved impossible to run a tunnel more than 400 feet.<sup>6</sup> At Vicksburg the year before there had been a Federal mine, but the tunnel was started from an approach trench which had already reached the defenders' ditch. Twelve hundred pounds of powder were used. Since the Confederates knew fairly well what was going on, although counter-mining failed, they lost few men in the explosion, and, having previously

1. War of the Rebellion, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, War Department 1881-1900 (Hereafter cited O.R.) ser. 81, p. 396, 417.
2. Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Battle of Petersburg, Washington, 1865, p. 113
3. O.R. ser. 80, p. 58
4. O.R. ser. 80, p. 556. Gould, Joseph, The Story of the Forty-eight, (1908) p. 212.
5. The Art of War in Europe, War Department, 1861, p. 58.
6. Alexander, E. P., Military Memoirs of a Confederate, London, 1908, p. 564-5.

constructed a second line, held the remainder of the fort without difficulty. Two Union regiments occupied the breach, losing about <sup>1</sup> thirty men.

There was, then, a recent precedent for Colonel Pleasants' project, a precedent of which Grant had full knowledge. The Petersburg mine, however, was on a much larger scale, and every effort was made to keep knowledge of it from the Confederates. So far as the exact location was concerned this was accomplished. The excavated earth was scattered along the parapets, or covered with brush before daylight. <sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the enemy heard rumors of a mining operations and began counter-digging, early in July, at several likely points -- including Pegram's battery, the objective of <sup>3</sup> Pleasants' tunnel.

<sup>4</sup> The Pennsylvanians were having their troubles. Army picks had to be reshaped for use under ground. Planking came from an old bridge, later from a saw-mill five miles away. The tunnel collapsed when it reached a wet spot, and had to be retimbered. A putty-line marl slowed the digging, which, as the tunnel lengthened, required the work of all 400 men in the regiment. It had been stated by various authorities that bad air would stop the work. To avoid this a ventilation system was improvised.

1. Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, (Century Co., N.Y., 1864) Vol. III p. 527, 539.
2. Gould, J. Story of the Forty-eight, p. 222: Battles and Leaders, Vol. IV, p. 546.
3. O.R. ser. 82, p. 771.
4. The digging had started June 25.



This consisted of a wooden tube or air-box leading from the entrance nearly to the end of the tunnel, and a shaft or chimney reaching the surface just behind the Union breast-works. At first fresh air came in along the tunnel itself, and the used air went out through the tube and chimney. Later, by the erection of a door near the entrance, fresh air was drawn in through the tube, and the stale air came back through the tunnel and up the chimney. Fire at the base of the chimney shaft circulated the air. To prevent the Confederates paying too much attention to the smoke, fires were kept burning at intervals along the line. It was necessary to keep check on the length and direction of the tunnel. For this purpose, using a crude transit (the only one he had been able to obtain), Pleasants made observations from the front line, within 130 yards of the Confederate sharpshooters. By this risky and hurried expedient he was able to place the mine exactly, as events proved.<sup>1</sup>

The Confederates had dug a shaft and horizontal listening gallery on each side of Pegram's Battery, where their tunneling reached a total length of 203 feet. These shafts were only ten feet under ground, while the Federals were twenty feet under, so that the Confederates could not, apparently, hear their enemy,<sup>2</sup> although their digging was audible to the Federals and caused a cessation of work for one day. Oddly enough, the Confederate miners at Colquitt's

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 556 (Pleasants) - see his testimony before the Joint Committee, cited above; and Gould, op. cit., p. 222.

2. O.R. ser. 82, pp. 807, 808, 813, 816, 819.



Salient, a mile distant, reported that they heard Federal digging<sup>1</sup> although none appears to have been in progress at that point.

Pleasants' men continued their work on July 18, digging a gallery seventy-five feet long across the end of the main tunnel, following the assumed course of the Confederate works. This was finished July 23, but the explosion was not placed immediately. Eight thousand pounds of powder were used for the charging, and<sup>2</sup> all was complete, down to the lighting of the fuse, July 28.

1. O.R. Ser. 82, p. 790.

2. "Duane had sent for the mining records before Sebastopol and got me to read them to learn the proper charge; for, what with malaria, and sunstroke, and quinine, whiskey, and arsenic, he can hardly see, but clings to duty to the last! Finding nothing there, he said the book was a humbug, and determined on 8000 lbs....." Lyman, T., Meade's Headquarters, Atlantic Monthly Press, Boston, 1922, p. 196.

Burnside (O.R. Ser. 80, p. 59) believed that a greater charge would produce a crater with less sloping sides, less of an obstacle to troops.

It would have been an achievement to blow up Pegram's Battery, but that result alone would scarcely justify the project. The explosion of the mine had, therefore, been delayed until preparations could be made for an attack. The white divisions of the IX Corps, with their best men shot away, were, perhaps, not altogether enthusiastic about long chances. The colored troops, a numerically strong division of 4,300 men under veteran white officers, employed thus far in the safe if wearisome labor of guarding wagons, were fresh and spirited, if not experienced. General Ferrero, in command, had been warmly commended by Grant on July 15.<sup>1</sup> General Burnside believed that the colored troops should lead, and they were given special drill for at least a week<sup>2</sup> before the actual explosion.

The last important action at Petersburg had been the unsuccessful advance of June 22. Grant next thought of an attempt on the line between Petersburg and Richmond.<sup>3</sup> Wilson's cavalry made a raid, not very successfully, late in June, against the railroads south and west of Petersburg. Grant continued to look for a chance at offensive movement by his infantry.<sup>4</sup> Meade, after consultation, said it could not be done from his line, except possibly on completion of the mine.<sup>5</sup> A Confederate threat toward Washington drew troops

1. O.R. ser. 82, p. 252 (Grant to Staunton).
2. Report of the Committee on the Conduct of the War, p. 106. Battles and Leaders, vol. IV, p. 563 (H.G. Thomas) Bernard, op. Cit., p. 182 (Col. Bates).
3. O.R. ser. 81, p. 477 - June 28.
4. Ibid., p. 599
5. Ibid., p. 619 - July 4.

from the Army, but it was still necessary to accomplish something at Petersburg. Meade suggested that it might be better to get possession of the line half a mile south before exploding the mine.<sup>1</sup> On July 14, attention shifted to a projected railroad raid by Sheridan.<sup>2</sup> By the 24th Meade was doubtful of the success of an attack at the mine, but said, "I do not consider it hopeless and am prepared to make the attempt. . ."<sup>3</sup> Next day Grant determined on "a demonstration on the north side of the James River, having for its real object the destruction of the (Virginia Central) railroad . . ." He hoped also, that this might draw off men from the Petersburg garrison.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, the Second Corps and two cavalry divisions moved on the evening of the 26th, and next morning attacked at Deep Bottom.<sup>5</sup> Lee had already sent Kershaw's Division to Chaffin's Bluff. On the afternoon of the 27th Heth's followed, and the next night additional cavalry and artillery. On the following day came Field's Division and more cavalry, but the Federal attack had been discontinued.<sup>6</sup> As a feint Hancock's expedition was thus highly successful, for only three Confederate divisions, about 18,000 men,<sup>7</sup> were left at Petersburg.

1. O.R. ser.82, p. 61

2. Ibid., p. 225.

3. Ibid., p. 425.

4. Ibid., p. 437.

5. O.R. ser. 80, p. 762 - July 23, and ser. 82, p. 794-6.

6. O.R. ser. 80, p. 311.

7. Freeman, D.S., R.E.Lee - vol. III, p. 467. Also note, end of this paper.

Against this force three Union Army Corps -- the Ninth, Fifth, and Eighteenth -- were already on the ground and the Second was returning; 55,000<sup>1</sup> Federal infantry were, or would shortly be, south of the Appomattox.. The cavalry could hardly expect a great share in the battle, but the artillery was ready with the recently arrived siege train as well as field guns, a total of 110 guns and 54 mortars.<sup>2</sup>

The Confederates had twelve Napoleons and as many mortars<sup>3</sup> bearing on the salient at short range, making that area a difficult one for infantry, if the guns could keep up their fire under the Federal bombardment. One of them, south of the mine, was protected somewhat by trees in front of the opposing Federal batteries, but it was expected that the first infantry charge would capture it.<sup>4</sup>

Grant and Meade decided that, because of their inexperience, the colored troops should not be used to lead, and Burnside was definitely

1. The return of July 20 - O.R. ser. 80, p. 177 - shows:
 

IX Corps (Burnside)	14,107
XVIII Corps (Ord), with Turner's division, X Corps.	15,321
V Corps (Warren)	14,707
II " (Hancock)	11,324
	55,459
2. O.R. ser. 80, p.280 (Hunt); p.658/(Abbott). The siege train consisted of eighteen 4½-inch siege guns, ten 30-pdr. Parrott guns, one 13-inch mortar, ten 10-inch mortars, twenty 8-inch mortars, and twenty-two Coehorn (light) mortars.
3. Wright's Battery - 550 yards north of the Crater- four, or possibly five, Napoleon guns. See O.R. ser. 80, p. 756 (Pendleton), p.789 (Johnson) and Wise, J.C., The Long Arm of Lee, Lynchburg, Va. 1915, Davidson's Battery- 400 yds. south of the Crater - one gun bore on the Crater - O.R. ser. 80, pp. 760, 789.  
Flanner's Battery - 550 yds. west - six Napoleons - Bernard,op.cit. pp. 210, 211.  
Lamkin's mortars - four on Plank Road, three in ravine, two near Wright's Battery.  
Langhorne's three mortars - intersection of Plank and Baxter Roads.
4. O.R. ser. 80, p. 281 (Hunt's Report).

so informed on the morning of the 29th,<sup>1</sup> the day before the attack. Thereupon, Burnside allowed the three commanders of his white divisions to draw straws -- Ledlie, of the First Division, was odd man.<sup>2</sup> The Second brigade of this division, said to be made up of "dis-<sup>3</sup>mounted cavalry and demoralized heavy artillery" was chosen for the first line of the advance. The orders of both Meade and Burnside emphasized a quick seizure of Cemetery Hill, a change from Burnside's first plan, under which the leading regiments would have turned and cleared the Confederate line to each side, while<sup>4</sup> the remainder made for the crest.

The Terrain, while it furnished an ideal place to start the mine, was not favorable to the attackers. Poore Creek, flowing northward to the Appomattox, between the Union artillery and the front lines, is joined 400 yards north of the Crater by a small tributary. This rivulet begins almost directly west of the Crater, flows parallel to the Confederate line, and then turns sharply east. Thus, Pegram's Battery was on an isolated hill-top, with the ground sloping away in every direction except southwest, where a level stretch joined it to the main ridge protecting Petersburg.

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 137  
3. Lyman, op. cit., p. 199

2. Ibid., p. 61  
4. O.R. ser. 82, pp. 476, 596, 611.

Two zig-zag "covered ways" or approach trenches connected the Federal artillery positions with the front line beyond Poore Creek.<sup>1</sup> On the early morning of July 30, these approaches and the hill-slope to which they led were well packed with men. Billy of the Ninth Corps duly partook of breakfast -- hardtack, salt pork, and cold coffee --<sup>2</sup> and waited for the next event. It was some time in coming. Pleasants lighted the fuse at 3:15; an hour later two men went into the tunnel and relighted it.<sup>3</sup> At a quarter of five, just after daylight, a mass of earth, dust and debris was heaved toward the sky.<sup>4</sup> Two hundred seventy-eight men were blown up.<sup>5</sup> The Confederates on each side headed for firmer ground,<sup>6</sup> and the Federals, also,<sup>7</sup> scrambled back, so that there was a delay of perhaps ten minutes before Marshall's brigade of the First Division started forward. After struggling over their own breastworks and abatis, the troops advanced across the narrow strip of No Man's Land and into the Crater. The Second Pennsylvania, a numerically strong regiment, swept straight through and a hundred yards beyond. Up to this time there had been almost no opposition by the Confederates. Now, however, they began a brisk fire from the lines on both sides. The Pennsylvanians, finding that no troops were advancing behind them, fell back, their retreat covered to some extent by the Maryland sharpshooters from a covered way north of the Crater.<sup>8</sup>

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 71

2. Battles and Leaders, vol. IV, p. 564

3. Lieutenant Douty and Sergeant Reese -- Gould, op. cit., p. 224.

4. O. R. ser. 80, p. 788 (Johnson's Report).

5. Bernard, op. cit., p. 193, (Col. McMaster).

6. O.R. ser. 80, pp. 63, 527 (Burnside); Battles and Leaders, Vol. IV, p. 561.

7. O.R. ser. 80, p. 128 - Finding of the Court of Inquiry.

8. O.R. ser. 80, pp. 527, 538, 539, 541, 789.

In the meantime the Fourteenth New York had diverged to the left and dug up two Confederate cannon covered with earth by the explosion.<sup>1</sup> The third line of the brigade had gone to the right and occupied pits and covered ways there, a movement in which they were followed by other troops who began to spread north along the network of pits, traverses and covered ways making up the Confederate line.<sup>2</sup>

The Union troops had already filled the Crater to such an extent that some regiments of even the First Division had to lie down outside under heavy Confederate fire for perhaps twenty minutes. Enfilade fire, both infantry and artillery, from both sides of the breach, could reach them there.<sup>3</sup> Wise's brigade, from a hill south of the Baxter road, found a good target in the columns, at a range of about three hundred and fifty yards.<sup>4</sup>

*Wise's  
regiment  
in Crater*

Before all of the First Division had reached the Confederate line, Brigadier General S. G. Griffin's Brigade, of Potter's (2nd) Division, advanced to cover Ledlie's right flank. Due to the dust and smoke and the Confederate fire, the head of his column struck the line closer to the First Division than intended, especially since that Division had worked to the right along the line. Griffin's regiments were confused with the other troops and halted.<sup>5</sup>

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 115
2. O.R. ser. 80, p. 527
3. O.R. ser. 80, p. 539
4. O.R. ser. 80, p. 789
5. O.R. ser. 80, p. 567 (Griffin); 547(Potter); 528(Burnside).



Brigadier General J. H. Hartranft (3rd Div., 1st Brig.) moved up correspondingly on the left, as did three regiments of Bliss' Brigade which had followed Griffin. Finally, however, both the supporting forces, Hartranft and Griffin, worked through the Crater in some shape and began to advance along the Confederate trenches, Griffin<sup>1</sup> to the north and Hartranft to the south. Griffin passed his troops through the First Division, an operation which broke and confused their ranks, and then found it impossible because of "the terrible fire of musketry from every direction, with grape and canister from the front", to form for farther advance.<sup>2</sup>

The Confederates were making a good defense. In spite of the Federal bombardment, which threw seventy-five tons of shell during the day,<sup>3</sup> the Confederate batteries opened. Wright, within half an hour of the explosion, poured shrapnel and canister into the right flank of the attackers, and used in the following nine hours between five and six hundred rounds.<sup>4</sup> The one gun of Davidson's battery which bore directly on the Crater fired a few rounds and then, apparently because of the misbehavior of an officer, was silent until others, including infantry from Wise's Brigade, took up the work.<sup>5</sup> Flanner's battery opened a withering fire whenever

1. O.R. 80, p. 574 (Willcox); 579(Hartranft); 564(Bucklin); 553 (Wright).

2. O.R. 80, p. 567 (Griffin).

3. O.R. 80, p. 659 (Abbott).

4. Bernard, G. War Talks of Confederate Veterans, pp. 194-5.

5. O. R.80, p. 760 (Pendleton), 789-91(Johnson); Bernard, op.cit. 203-4.

infantry offered a target, and the several mortar batteries dropped  
shells into the massed attackers.<sup>1</sup>

The brunt of the attack, of course, fell on the Confederate infantry. Brigadier General Stephen Elliott, after the explosion, had ordered the part of his troops nearest the Crater to withdraw and form in a ravine to the left and rear of the breach. The troops remaining in the line to the north were unable to form definite barricades in the trenches, but slowed down the Federal advance with rifle fire from behind angles of the trench, mounds of earth and traverses.<sup>2</sup> Along the line about eighty-eight yards south of the Crater a barricade was built and defended by fire from behind it and from covered ways running to the rear. All Hartranft's<sup>3</sup> efforts to break through here failed.

North of the Crater the Union attack was somewhat more successful. The three regiments of Colonel Z. R. Bliss' brigade (2nd Div.) on Griffin's right succeeded in forming for a charge which was directed up the hill and to the right. They were unsupported and had to fall back, but at about the same time, about eight o' clock, two more regiments of this brigade had charged from the Federal line and struck the Confederate works one on each side of a ravine a quarter of a mile north of the Crater. The regiment north of the ravine captured rifle-pits in front of the Confederate main line, and the other regiment a portion of the line, so that its left was some distance from the flank of the remainder of the

1. Bernard, op. cit., pp. 203-4; O.R. ser. 80, pp 789-91, also 110.
2. O.R. ser. 80, p. 788; Bernard, p. 196, (McMaster).
3. O.R. ser. 80, p. 795; (Whitner) 579 (Hartranft).

division and the three regiments which had fallen back.<sup>1</sup>

Let us now see what some other officers have to say about their commands at this time. Lt. Col. J. P. Robinson states that his brigade (2nd, 1st Division) had been directed to form in "the covered way nearest our work. This was accomplished with some difficulty, the Third Maryland holding the extreme right, and occupying the cross-traverse which enfiladed our line." The negroes "came into the pit, passed through the Crater, and proceeding to the right, passed through the covered way held by the First Division, one brigade of them forming on the right, at right angles to our line. The First Brigade was to have formed on the left of the First Division, but before it got into position the enemy made an attack, and all the black troops crushed back into the works occupied by this brigade, throwing it into inextricable confusion, and forcing it back upon the troops in the Crater. Our men then fell back to the Union line and were reorganized."<sup>2</sup> From Robinson's own testimony before the Court of Inquiry,<sup>3</sup> however, it appears that he was with his regiment (Third Maryland - about 56 sharpshooters) in the trench on the right near an angle held by the Confederates, and could not answer for what happened on the left. Major G. M. Randall says, "I saw the Fourteenth New York and the Second Pennsylvania Heavy

1. O. R. ser. 80, pp. 547-9, 549, 551, 553.

2. O. R. ser. 80, p. 541- Robinson, 2nd Brig., 1st Division, IX Corps.

3. O. R. ser. 80, p. 114.

Artillery pass through the crater and occupy traverses in rear of the fort. And there they remained." <sup>1</sup> General Potter says of the colored troops, "The right of this division nearly connected with the Fifty-first New York Volunteers near the ravine, and partly covered the troops of my division, who had charged up the hill and fallen back into the covered way or ditch." <sup>2</sup> Griffin says that his brigade was "pushing gradually but constantly ahead and to the right in the next work of pits and traverses, when the Fourth Division came up - - " The worst of the subsequent rout he says was on his right, his brigade "being principally to the left of the pits at this time - -" <sup>3</sup>

These positions, just before the advance of the Fourth Division (colored troops) marked about the greatest extent of Federal holding. Near a ravine about a quarter mile north of the Crater were the two regiments of Bliss's Brigade holding portions of the Confederate line. Then to the south, with some yards intervening, was the flank of the main Federal force, in an area described as follows by Burnside: "The lines of the enemy on either side were not single, but involuted and complex, filled with pits, traverses and bomb-proofs, forming a labyrinth as difficult of passage as the Crater itself." <sup>4</sup>

This description suggests a part of the difficulty of locating troops in this area. In addition to this it must be considered that very few instances if any can be shown of the massing of so many

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 115 - Randall, 140th N.Y., aide to Ledlie.
2. Ibid., p. 553.
3. " 567.
4. " 527.

men under fire in so small a place: and that these men were in such disorder that their own officers either did not know or could not state plainly where they were.

We can find, from the mass of confusing and contradictory evidence given by the reports, that some troops were, roughly speaking, within a certain more or less ill-defined area. Horton, Gregg, and Bucklin,<sup>1</sup> who commanded the three regiments of Bliss' brigade which had followed Griffin into the Crater, agree substantially to the effect that they were in the vicinity of the "rebel fort" after falling back from their attempted charge, Bucklin alone stating positively that he was in the covered way leading to Cemetery<sup>2</sup> Hill, a statement which is confirmed by Captain Raymond. Since Gregg says he went up to the Crater following Bucklin's regiment, and Bucklin speaks of making his charge with "no support except the Forty-fifth Pennsylvania and Fifty-eight Massachusetts", we may be justified in placing these regiments as part of the most advanced westerly Federal holding. Griffin's brigade (2nd Div.) which was "pushing gradually but constantly ahead and to the right in the next work of pits and traverses, when the Fourth Division came up"<sup>3</sup> may be placed next to these three regiments on the north, while parts of the First Division seem to have been strung out from

1. O.R. ser. 80, pp. 117, 551, 553, 564.

2. O.R. " " p. 124, (36th Mass. Brigade Inspector, 1st Brigade)

3. O.R. " " p. 567.

a point on the southern edge of the Crater across it and perhaps a hundred yards to the north. This would make it occupy a line behind Griffin's position but extending much farther north. It must not be forgotten that the Crater was the center, the point of attraction of this area. It offered shelter, and shelter is obviously the first thought of the soldier separated from his unit under such circumstances. It is clear from almost every report that at 8 o'clock it was crowded to overflowing, as it had been for nearly three hours, largely, it may be supposed, by men of the First Division who had originally occupied it and of whom we have very little subsequent account. However, Robinson, Griffin and the others who say their men were not in it, are obviously speaking of the remnants of their commands, so that numbers of their men also were probably among the mass in the Crater. Colonel J. K. Sigfried, commanding the First Brigade of the Fourth Division, which now advanced, speaks of it thus: "Great difficulty was experienced in passing through this crater, owing to its crowded condition . . . living, wounded, dead, and dying crowded so thickly that it was very difficult to make a passage way through."<sup>1</sup>

Sigfried states that his brigade made its way through however, and formed back of the Confederate trench beyond it, which was filled with "troops of the First, Second and Third Divisions." His 43rd Regiment "moved over the crest of the crater toward the right, charged the

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 596.

enemy's entrenchments and took them, capturing a number of prisoners  
1  
.. " Lieut. A. Shedd, Sigfried's aide-de-camp, states on the other  
hand that the only regiment to get beyond the Crater was the 30th  
2  
under Colonel Bates. From Colonel Bates' later account it is probable  
that his troops did not go far beyond the Crater. Captain W. D. Tripp  
of the 29th Massachusetts, whose regiment had taken "a position in  
the works on the left of the fort" says that this position was fill-  
ed by the negroes when they came in and probably refers to Sigfried's  
3  
Brigade.

Colonel H. G. Thomas' Brigade followed Sigfried's, going "at a  
double-quick into the exploded fort and into the rifle-pits on our  
right." There was a white division in these pits. "The instant I  
reached the First Brigade (Sigfried's) I attempted to charge, but the  
Thirty-first was disheartened . . A partially successful attempt was  
then made to separate the Twenty-eighth and Twenty-ninth Regiments  
U.S. Colored Troops from the white troops of one of the brigades of  
the First Division, Ninth Corps . . unless the enfilading fire on my  
right was stopped, no men could live to reach the crest." The 29th  
now charged, "closely followed by the Twenty-eighth and a few of the  
Twenty-third," in a final thrust that might have redeemed all the  
failures of the morning, but it met "a heavy charging column of the  
enemy" and was driven back over the rifle-pits.

One of Thomas' regiments, the 19th, had been unable to enter  
the trench. The body of the Brigade moved to a point "between 300  
and 400 yards to the right of the Crater, and in front of it." 4

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 596. 2. Ibid., p. 124. 3. Ibid., pp. 539-40..  
4. Ibid., pp. 598-9.



Col. C. S. Russell, of Thomas' Regiment, states that at "10 minutes after 8 part of my regiment, with two others, went over the outside of the enemy's line into what seemed to be a covered way beyond, to go to Cemetery Hill."<sup>1</sup> This officer agrees with Thomas as to the order of the regiments in the two charges, but says that he himself advanced only fifty yards toward Cemetery Hill before being driven back by the Confederate<sup>2</sup> charge. Meanwhile, Brigadier-General J. W. Turner (2nd Division, X Corps) had advanced two of his brigades, (Coan's and Bell's). Coan supported the two regiments which had attacked along the ravine north of the crater, and Bell entered the Confederate line south of this point, so<sup>3</sup> that his men were over-run by the retreat of the negroes. A part of Colonel William Humphrey's Brigade (3rd Division, IX Corps) also captured some of the line south of Hart-<sup>4</sup> ranft's holding at about the same time.

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 106.

2. O.R. ser. 80, p. 106.

3. O.R. ser. 80, p. 708 (Ord) ; 699 (Turner); 701 (Curtis); 702 (Coan)

4. O.R. ser. 80, p. 529, 704 (Bell); 113 (Barnes).  
(Burnside), 586 (Humphrey), 590 (Cutcheon) 587 (DeLand).

With the repulse of the Fourth Division, there ended in disaster the offensive which was the last effort to take by frontal attack the earthworks around Petersburg. Most of the troops north of the Crater, white and black, were swept by a panic which carried them en masse back to their own lines.<sup>1</sup> Many were thrown back into the Crater itself, filled as it already was with men. South of the Crater, Hartranft's Brigade, joined by parts of other commands,<sup>2</sup> and aided by the two captured Napoleon guns, held its ground.

The immediate cause of this debacle was the charge of a single brigade, about eight hundred men, of Brigadier General William Mahone's Division. These troops had been posted on the Willcox farm, the right of the Confederate line, two miles from the Crater. It had been their task, and would be again, to move out of the breastworks and attack swiftly in case of any attempt at extension of the Federal line around that flank. Over a month before, on June 22, they had done this so effectively, taking about 2,000 prisoners, that no like attempt had since been made. It was after six o'clock,<sup>3</sup> July 30, that a staff officer arrived to procure their aid in another direction, to sustain the heavily assailed Confederate center.

The Fifth Corps, under Major General G.K. Warren, in the line opposite, was under orders to support Burnside's attack at the Crater. For this purpose the greater part of it was massed on the right of its line, while Brig. General Crawford's division held the

1. O.R. ser. 80, p.528-9. 2. Ibid. 579. 3. Bernard, op.cit.p.150.

left, which was also the left of the Army.<sup>1</sup> At 5 a.m. the Plank Road Signal Station reported that no troops were visible in the works, and at 6:20 a column, "At least a strong brigade", was observed moving north behind the Confederate line.<sup>2</sup> This information was sent to Major-General Humphreys, the Chief of Staff, and forwarded by him to Warren. At 6:30 Meade suggested that Warren attack near the Lead Works (a landmark near Mahone's headquarters), and he passed this on to Crawford. Warren himself was watching Burnside's attack. Crawford made a reconnoissance, and reported at eight that attack was impracticable with the force he could spare (a brigade and a half).<sup>3</sup>

In the interval Mahone's men had been busy. The two brigades ordered moved back from their line in small groups, concealing this as much as possible from the enemy, and leaving only a thin skirmish line, one man every twenty paces<sup>4</sup>, in the works. Forming some distance in the rear, they took up the march along the valley of Lieutenant Run, sheltered, as they believed, from enemy observation, and from all but stray shots of the artillery. It was a long time, measured by events, since Jackson's men had struck off into the woods road near Chancellorsville. This move was on a smaller scale, appropriate to the dwindling force of the Confederacy, and where Jackson had hoped to smash "the finest army on the planet" Mahone could only try to stave off another blow. The enemy saw his movement, but as on the other occasion, did not take advantage of that knowledge.

1. O.R. 80, p.448. 2. O.R. ser. 82, p.643. 3. O.R. ser. 80, p.451  
4. 33 Southern Historical Society Papers, p. 364.

The troops filed through a covered way crossing the Jerusalem Plank Road, and thence into a little ravine parallel to the captured line and two hundred yards from it. Weisiger's Virginia Brigade, in the lead, formed a line of battle about six hundred feet in length.<sup>1</sup> Above them, around the Crater, many Union flags were visible,<sup>2</sup> and presently the blue troops, with a shout, began to charge. Instantly the grey line started forward, and in a splendid attack<sup>3</sup> struck home, recapturing the works north of the Crater.<sup>4</sup>

This was about nine o'clock, and from then until about mid-day, the Crater must have offered one of the most horrible spectacles in the history of warfare. Confederate fire swept over it from three sides, mortars were moved up to within a stone's throw of its rim and dropped their shells into it, and the July sun beat down on the exhausted mass of men who had been fighting for four hours under the most disheartening conditions. The only water to be obtained was what could be brought from the Union lines across a field swept by rifle and artillery fire. Apathy descended on many, and they ceased

1. Bernard, op. cit., p. 155.
2. Ibid., pp. 188, 190.
3. O.R. ser. 80, p. 791: Bernard, op. cit., pp. 149-230.
4. Maj. Gen. Burnside reported, "The enemy regained a portion of his line on the right. This was about 8:45 a. m." Warren sent a dispatch to Humphreys, at 9:15; "The enemy drove his (Burnside's) troops out of the place and I think now hold it." Ord placed the stampede of the colored troops as early as "about eight o'clock." Col. Russell (28th U.S.C.T.) states that his regiment attempted a charge at 8:10 a.m. Brig. Gen. Carr (1st Div., XVIII Corps) says that it was after 8:30. Col. Venable, of Lee's staff, said in 1872: "I am confident this charge of the Virginians was made before 9 o'clock a.m." Col. McMaster, of Elliott's Brigade, remained equally confident that it was around ten o'clock. General Mahone declined to give the time as of his own knowledge, but inclined to believe it was before nine.

to make any effort. Wounded men were pinned down by the bodies of the dead. There were some, however, (negroes among them) who stayed at their posts around the rim of the Crater and kept up a fire hot enough to make Mahone's second brigade, Wright's Georgians, charging from the same ravine, slant off into a left oblique which carried it into the line already captured by the first. Thus the situation remained while the Confederates prepared for a final concerted thrust. Meanwhile, General Meade, after writing dispatches to Burnside all morning, asking for information, had finally at 9:15 ordered him to withdraw his troops. General Burnside, not unnaturally slow to relinquish an attack which had promised such success, finally sent this order to the Crater at 12:20. If it had ever been possible to execute the withdrawal successfully, it was then too late, and in the final Confederate attack, a concerted movement by Major-General Bushrod R. Johnson and Mahone, who had now brought up Saunder's Alabama Brigade, the troops remaining in the Crater were captured.<sup>1</sup>

The story of the attack at the Crater does not at a glance add to the prestige of the Federal arms. The troops who had paid the cost of Grant's heavy smashes at Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor had lost the elan necessary to this operation. They had learned endurance at the expense of instant striking-power. The courage that carried some of them through the long half-day of July 30, through

1. Bernard, op. cit., p. 216; O.R. ser. 80, pp. 528-9, 792; and O.R. ser. 82, pp. 657-662.

protracted waiting under the deadly fire of veterans fighting at the last ditch, through the hours of dust and heat and futility and the horror of the Crater, was a virtue, whatever its military value, which adds glory to humanity. If Johnson's and Mahone's Divisions showed themselves to be soldier's, Burnside's Corps as certainly proved themselves men.

It must be remembered that such an explosion as that of the mine was an astounding event to these men who saw it unexpectedly at close range, and they are not to be greatly blamed for the loss of time incident to their wonder and fear, although that time was perhaps decisive of the battle. It is also important that the First Division, which led the attack, was composed largely of troops recruited in the spring of 1864 (two of its regiments being "Heavy Artillery" used as infantry),<sup>1</sup> and that the Division commander was not on that day an efficient officer. These men of the First Division do not appear to have moved with the speed and steadiness necessary to their place in the charge.

However, when we total the long series of "ifs" which are so easy to add up after the event, most of the blame, as always, falls on the officers who planned and executed the attack. Yet it would seem that General Ord, commander of the Eighteenth Corps, made a good summary when he was asked at the Court of Inquiry: "Do you

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 525.

think the assault would have been successful there had the best dispositions been made that you are conversant with?" Ord replied, "From what I learned afterward of the behavior of the troops after the explosion, when the enemy was most alarmed, I think that the assault, if it had been made with no more vigor, would have failed no matter what the dispositions. If the troops had behaved properly elsewhere, I think the probability of success would have increased by having more openings, a simultaneous assault, and increased material; but if the troops would have behaved as improperly as they are reported to have done in front . . . not going forward when ordered, I think the assault would have failed no matter what the dispositions."<sup>1</sup>

This had been an attack in Major force, and not the shadow of an advantage was gained. Thereafter, although Confederate resistance continued strong and was remarkably effective, never again did it succeed in completely turning back a Federal advance. On the other hand, not until the final attack of April 2, 1865, did the Federals make another such movement against well-manned, heavy earthworks. The Crater had placed a final seal on the lesson apparent all through this campaign and especially at Cold Harbor and the first four days of battle before Petersburg -- that men could not move as fast as they could shoot from behind entrenchments.

1. O.R. ser. 80, p. 85.



## NOTES

Losses: Burnside gave his loss as 4,500 (O.R. ser. 82, p. 705). Meade, a few days later, made practically the same statement: 458 killed, 1,982 wounded, 1,960 missing, total 4,400 (O.R. 80, p. 167). This included the entire loss for the day. Humphreys, A. A., The Virginia Campaign of 1864-65, p. 263, quotes the Tabular Statement of the Medical Corps, totalling 4,008, but gives 3,500 as his own estimate. Livermore, T.L., Numbers and Losses in the Civil War, uses the figure given in the Official Records (ser. 80, p. 249), which includes only the Ninth Corps and the Second Division of the Tenth Corps; 504 killed, 1,881 wounded, 1,413 missing; total 3,798.

The Confederate loss in Johnson's and Mahone's Divisions, which would approximate the total loss, was 1,520. -- O.R. 80, p. 793, and Bernard, G., War Talks of Confederate Veterans, p. 166.

Confederate force: From the return of July 10, 1864 (O.R. ser. 82, p. 761) and other information we arrive at the following figures for the infantry at Petersburg July 30:

Hoke' Division	5,054
Johnson's "	5,526 (One brigade absent. O.R. ser. 82, p. 819) 166)
Mahone's "	6,077 (About 3,000 fought at Crater. Bernard, <u>op. Cit.</u>
Wilcox's "	<u>2,410</u> (Probably two brigades. O.R. ser. 82, pp. 764, 772)
	19,067

This reckoning omits the artillery, but includes casualties from July 10 to 30, which in Johnson's Division amounted to over 300.  
-O.R. ser. 80, pp. 778-787.

## THE BATTLE OF THE CRATER

### Hammering Fails for the Last Time.

The Battle of the Crater was a picturesque incident in one of the most dramatic campaigns of the Civil War. Gettysburg and Vicksburg had of course decided many things, but they can scarcely be held to have set at rest the fundamental question of whether the Confederacy could still keep intact the borders of at least seven states, some of which had scarcely been touched by actual war. The writing on the wall may be clear enough to us after seven decades, but there were many contemporaries to whom Gettysburg was decisive only of a Confederate campaign on Northern soil in 1863. Unless 1864 brought more Federal successes, the war might still be lost to the Union. It would be difficult, at the November elections, to make a political campaign more successful than the military one.

That the grey tide had ebbed forever was shown in two great campaigns that year: Sherman against Johnston in Georgia, Grant and Lee in Virginia. The two were in many respects similar, and in Sherman's there were more desperate chances, more substantial victories than in Grant's: but the real death struggle took place in the area which had seen the successive defeats of five great thrusts at the heart of the Confederacy - or, if Richmond was not the heart, at least the emblem, the soul. The sixth contest with

Lee, who had balked all but the first of these attempts, was to be conducted by the man who had found the key to the Confederate Gibraltar, and with an army commanded by the victor of Gettysburg. It was an imposing combination, especially when the army was the Army of the Potomac, pounded by many defeats into a durable aggregate capable of withstanding all the fiery spirit of the grey troops.

Meade's name as a brilliant commander was in eclipse as a result of the lackluster pursuit after Gettysburg, and the unimpressive sparring along the Rapidan in the fall and winter. There were few to take account of the fact that while the Army of Northern Virginia was still in existence and in possession of its old camp-grounds, the Union had suffered no great casualties since July. The same calendar months, one year before, had sufficed for Lee to shatter two attacks and withstand a third -- perhaps Meade is due some credit for his conservatism. Once, at Mine Run, when he intended to strike but at the last moment found the Confederate position too strong, he withdrew, ignoring the "public opinion" which would have urged him to the offensive ever since Gettysburg. Caution is a chilly word, but less chilly than the ground on which the wounded had lain all night in front of Marye's Heights twelve months before.

Spring came, and Lieutenant General Grant, the first commander to have actually at his disposal all the armies of the Union, crossed the Rapidan on May 4, 1864. Next day, as his infantry wheeled

up to take position, two thirds of Lee's army fell upon them, in a great tract of tangled thickets where masses of artillery were useless and only the most general control of the troops was possible for their commander. Two days of savage and indecisive contest, and Grant moved on, east and south, to repeat at Spotsylvania a battle of much the same character. At the end of the month he was still moving in the same direction, drawing closer to Richmond but driven to the east of it, until finally at Cold Harbor on June 3, attacking another hurriedly but effectively entrenched position, his army, which had survived the grimmest month of fighting even it had seen, was so quickly and thoroughly repulsed that the campaign seemed to be ending as had McClellan's two years before. The Confederates had inflicted losses nearly approaching their own number, and still Lee was able to detach troops to the Shenandoah. Butler, who was to have moved up the James toward Richmond, while Grant pressed down from the north, had accomplished little. The Army of the Potomac, with many of its best soldier's gone (the loss of officers was particularly heavy) was little more than the ghost of itself, and Grant's accomplishment seemed altogether unimpressive.

In the West Grant had failed on one side of a great river, and tried again on the other bank. McClellan, on this same ground in 1862, had retired to the James River, under more difficult circumstances than Grant faced now as he debated a similar movement. In 1864 the Confederate supremacy in cavalry had disappeared: Stuart

was dead and there was no longer any great fear of raiders among the supply wagons. Grant's lines at Cold Harbor were intact, and must be approached with care, which would give the Federals some hours start: and even then the withdrawal might be only an indication of new attack by the south bank of the Chickahominy.

The Federals moved with great efficiency, and before the handful of Confederates in Petersburg could be reenforced, one Army Corps was deploying for attack and another was south of the James, within a short days march. In sight of the goal, the fumbling began. The army which had survived such a campaign was in no shape to strike heavily and the Confederacy held Petersburg by good fortune and hard fighting. Three days later, with blue uniforms lying thick before Beauregard's entrenchments, it became clear that direct attack was over. An attempt at the old familiar left flank movement failed when the Second Corps was ordered into the woods, southeast of Petersburg, and found Mahone's Confederates could move through the level thickets with remarkable sureness. This encircling movement, failing signally, was nevertheless the first of the series which finally resulted in the capture of the city.

The strategy involved was probably not of great interest to the <sup>Forty-eighth</sup> 48th Pennsylvania <sup>Regiment</sup>, recruited from the coal-mining country, whose front line was perched on the edge of a hill to which it had been advanced in the first days of attack. On top of the same hill,

directly in front, was a Confederate battery. That was the way to Petersburg, and there the Federals intended to go. No men could live to reach that battery above ground: but it would be simple to tunnel under it.

The Colonel, Henry Pleasants, pursued the idea through proper military channels. Some of his superiors favored it, some scoffed, others were indifferent but admitted it could do no harm, would keep the men amused. Colonel Pleasants gathered in what materials he could find as the digging progressed, using every possible makeshift to obtain what he needed with or without official support.

The operation involved was, of course, not a new expedient in war; but the necessary unbroken length of tunnel was greater than had ever been attempted. An Englishman visiting Confederate headquarters stated that at the siege of Delhi it had proved impossible to run a tunnel more than 400 feet. At Vicksburg the year before there had been a Federal mine with a very short tunnel and a load of 1,200 pounds of powder. The Confederates lost few men in the explosion, and, having previously constructed a second line, held the remainder of the fort without difficulty. Two Union regiments occupied the breach, losing about thirty men.

There was, then, a recent precedent for Colonel Pleasant's project, a precedent of which Grant had full knowledge. The Petersburg mine, however, was on a much larger scale, and every effort was made to keep knowledge of it from the Confederates. So far as the exact location was concerned this was accomplished. The excavated earth

was scattered along the parapets, or covered with brush before daylight. Nevertheless, the enemy heard rumors of a mining operation and began counter/<sup>mining</sup>early in July, at several likely points--including Pegram's battery, the objective of Pleasants' tunnel.

The Pennsylvanians were having their troubles. Army picks had to be reshaped for use under ground. Planking came from an old bridge, later from a saw mill five miles away. The tunnel collapsed when it reached a wet spot, and had to be retimbered. A putty-like marl slowed the digging, which, as the tunnel lengthened, required the work of all 400 men in the regiment. It had been stated by various authorities that bad air would stop the work. To avoid this a ventilation system was improvised. This consisted of a wooden tube leading from the entrance to the end of the tunnel, and a chimney just behind the Union works, the fire in which caused a draft through the tunnel. As this smoke had to be concealed, fires were kept burning at intervals along the line. It was necessary to keep check on the length and direction of the tunnel. For this purpose, using a crude transit (the only one he had been able to obtain), Pleasants made observations from the front line, within 130 yards of the Confederate sharpshooters. By this risky and hurried expedient he was able to place the mine exactly, as events proved.

The Confederates had dug a shaft and horizontal listening gallery on each side of Pegram's Battery, where their tunneling reach-



ed a total length of 203 feet. These shafts were only ten feet underground, while the Federals were twenty feet under, so that the Confederates could not, apparently, hear their enemy, although their digging was audible to the Federals and caused a cessation of work for one day. At last, on July 28, eight thousand pounds of powder were placed, and all was complete, down to the lighting of the fuse.

It would have been an achievement to blow up Pegram's Battery, but that result alone would scarcely justify the project. The explosion of the mine had, therefore, been delayed until preparations could be made for an attack. The white divisions of Burnside's IX Corps, with their best men shot away, were, perhaps, not altogether enthusiastic about long chances. The colored troops, a numerically strong division of 4300 men under veteran white officers, employed thus far in the safe if wearisome labor of guarding wagons, were fresh and spirited, if not experienced. General Ferrero, in command, had been warmly commended by Grant on July 15. General Burnside believed that the colored troops should lead, and they were given special drill for at least a week before the actual explosion.

The last important action at Petersburg had been the unsuccessful advance of June 22. <sup>After this</sup> Many points and methods for attack were considered and rejected by the generals, before attack at the mine was decided on. Meade however, was doubtful of success there, though he said "I do not consider it hopeless and am prepared to make the

attempt, ...". Next day Grant determined on "a demonstration on the north side of the James River, having for its real object the destruction of the railroad, ...". He hoped, also, that this might draw Confederate man power from Petersburg and thus weaken its defenses. This succeeded: only three Confederate divisions, about 18,000 men, were left at Petersburg.

Against this force three Union Army Corps--the Ninth, Fifth, and Eighteenth--were already on the ground and the Second was returning; 55,000 Federal infantry were, or would shortly be, south of the Appomattox. The cavalry could hardly expect a great share in the battle, but the artillery were ready with 110 guns and 54 mortars.

The Confederates had twelve Napoleons and as many mortars bearing on the salient at short range, making that area a difficult one for infantry, if the guns could continue their fire under the Federal bombardment. One of them, south of the mine, was protected somewhat by trees in front of the opposing Federal batteries, but it was expected that the first infantry charge would capture it.

Grant and Meade decided that because of their inexperience the colored troops should not be used to lead, and Burnside was de-  
informed  
finitely so/on the day before the attack. Thereupon, Burnside allowed the three commanders of his white divisions to draw straws--Ledlie, of the First Division, was odd man. The second brigade of this division, said to be made up of "dismounted cavalry and demoralized heavy artillery" was chosen for the first line of the advance. The orders of both Meade and Burnside emphasized a quick seizure of

Cemetery Hill, a change from Burnside's first plan, under which the leading regiments would have turned and cleared the Confederate line to each side, while the remainder made for the crest.

The terrain, while it furnished an ideal place to start the mine, was not favorable to the attackers. Poore Creek, flowing northward to the Appomattox, between the Union artillery and the front lines, is joined 400 yards north of the Crater by a small tributary. This rivulet begins almost directly west of the Crater, flows parallel to the Confederate line, and then turns sharply east. Thus, Pegram's Battery was on an isolated hilltop, with the ground sloping away in every direction except southwest, where a level stretch joined it to the main ridge protecting Petersburg.

Two zig-zag "covered ways" or approach trenches connected the two Federal lines. On the early morning of July 30, these approaches and the hill-slope to which they led were well packed with men. Billy of the Ninth Corps duly partook of breakfast--hardtack, salt pork, and cold coffee--and waited for the next event. It was some time in coming. Pleasants lighted the fuse at 3:15, an hour later two men went into the tunnel and relighted it. At a quarter of five, just after daylight, a mass of earth, dust and debris was heaved toward the sky. Two hundred seventy eight men and two guns were blown up. The Confederates on each side headed for firmer ground, and the Federals, also, scrambled back, so that there was a delay of perhaps ten minutes before Marshall's brigade started forward. After struggling over their own breastworks and abatis, the troops advanced

over the narrow strip of No Man's Land and into the Crater. The Second Pennsylvania, a numerically strong regiment, swept straight through and a hundred yards beyond. Up to this time there had been almost no opposition by the Confederates. Now, however, they began a brisk fire from the lines on both sides. The Pennsylvanians, finding that no troops were advancing behind them, fell back, their retreat covered to some extent by the Maryland sharpshooters from a covered way north of the Crater. In the meantime the Fourteenth New York had diverged to the left and dug up two Confederate cannon covered with earth by the explosion. The third line of the brigade had gone to the right and occupied pits and covered ways there, a movement in which they were followed by other troops who began to spread north along the network of pits, traverses and covered ways making up the Confederate line. The Union troops had already filled the Crater to such an extent that some regiments of even the First Division had to lie down outside under heavy Confederate fire for perhaps twenty minutes. Enfilade fire, both infantry and artillery, from both sides of the breach could reach them there. Wise's Brigade, from a hill south of the Baxter road, found a good target in the columns, at a range of about three hundred and fifty yards.

Before all of the First Division had reached the Confederate line, Brig. Gen. S. G. Griffin's Brigade, of Brig. Gen. R. B. Potter's Division advanced to cover Ledlie's right flank. Due to the dust and smoke and the Confederate fire, the head of his column struck the line closer to the First Division than intended, especially

since that Division had worked to the right along the line. Griffin's regiments were confused with the other troops and halted.

Brig. Gen. J. H. Hartranft (3d Div., 1st Brig.) moved up correspondingly on the left, and three regiments of Bliss' Brigade

followed Griffin. Finally, however, both the supporting forces, Hartranft and Griffin, worked through the Crater in some shape and began to advance along the Confederate trenches, Griffin to the north and Hartranft to the south. Griffin passed his troops through the First Division, an operation which broke and confused their ranks, and then found it impossible because of the "terrible fire of musketry from every direction, with grape and canister from the front", to form for further advance.

The Confederates were making a good defense. In spite of the Federal bombardment, which threw seventy-five tons of shell during the day, the Confederate batteries opened. Wright, within half an hour of the explosion, poured shrapnel and canister into the right flank of the attackers, and used in the following nine hours between five and six hundred rounds. The one gun of Davidson's battery which bore directly on the Crater fired a few rounds and then, apparently because of the misbehavior of an officer, was silent until others, including infantry from Wise's Brigade, took up the work. Flanner's battery opened a withering fire whenever infantry offered a target, and the several mortar batteries dropped shells into the massed attackers.

The brunt of the attack of course fell on the Confederate

infantry. Brig. Gen. Stephen Elliott, after the explosion, had ordered the part of his troops nearest the Crater to withdraw and form in a ravine to the left and rear of the breach. The troops remaining in the line to the north were unable to form definite barricades in the trenches, but slowed down the Federal advance with rifle fire from behind angles of the trenches, mounds of earth and traverses. Along the line about eighty-eight yards south of the Crater a barricade was built and defended by fire from behind it and from covered ways running to the rear. All Hartranft's efforts to break through here failed.

North of the Crater the Union attack was somewhat more successful. The three regiments of Col. Z. R. Bliss' Brigade on Griffin's right succeeded in forming for a charge which was directed up the hill and to the right. They were unsupported and had to fall back, but at about the same time two more regiments of this brigade had charged from the Federal line and struck the Confederate works one on each side of a ravine a quarter of a mile north of the Crater. The regiment north of the ravine captured rifle-pits in front of the Confederate main line, and the other regiment a portion of the line, so that its left was some distance from the flank of the remainder of the division and the three regiments which had fallen back.

These positions, just before the advance of the Fourth Division (colored troops) marked about the greatest extent of Federal holding. Near a ravine about a quarter-mile north of the Crater were the two regiments of Bliss' brigade holding portions of the Confederate line. Then to the south, with some considerable distance intervening, was the flank of the main Federal force, in an area described as follows by Burnside: "The lines of the enemy on either side were not single, but involuted and complex, filled with pits, traverses and bomb-proofs, forming a labyrinth as difficult of passage as the Crater itself."

This description suggests a part of the difficulty of locating troops in this area. In addition it must be considered that very few instances if any can be shown of the massing of so many men under fire in so small a place: and that these men were in such disorder that their own officers either did not know or could not state plainly where they were.

The Crater was the center, the point of attraction. It offered shelter, which is obviously the first thought of the soldier separated from his unit under such circumstances. It is clear from almost every report that it was now crowded to overflowing, largely, it may be supposed, by men of the First Division who had originally occupied it and of whom we have very little subsequent account. However, Robinson, Griffin and the others who say their men were not in it, are obviously speaking of the remnants of their commands, so that numbers of

their men also were probably among the masses in the Crater. Colonel J. K. Sigfried, commanding the First Brigade of the Fourth Division, which now advanced, speaks of it thus: "Great difficulty was experienced in passing through this crater, owing to its crowded condition . . . living, wounded, dead, and dying crowded so thickly that it was very difficult to make a passage way through."

Sigfried states that his brigade made its way through however, and formed back of the Confederate trench beyond it, which was filled with "troops of the First, Second and Third Divisions." His 43d Regiment "moved over the crest of the crater toward the right, charged the enemy's intrenchments and took them, capturing a number of prisoners . . ." Lieut. A. A. Shedd, Sigfried's aide-de-camp, states on the other hand that the only regiments to get beyond the Crater was the 30th under Colonel Bates. From Colonel Bates' later account it is probable that his troops did not go <sup>far</sup> beyond the Crater. Captain W. D. Tripp of the 29th Mass., whose regiment had taken "a position in the works on the left of the fort" says that this position was filled by the negroes when they came in and probably refers to Sigfried's Brigade.

Col. H. G. Thomas' <sup>d</sup> Brigade followed Sigfried's, going "at double quick into the explode/fort and into the rifle-pits on our right." There was a white division in these pits. "The instant I reached the First Brigade I attempted to charge, but the Thirty-first was disheartened . . . A partially successful attempt was then made to separate the Twenty-eighth and Twenty-ninth Regiments U. S. Colored



Troops from the white troops of one of the brigades of the First Division, Ninth Corps . . . unless the enfilading fire on my right was stopped . . . no men could live to reach the crest." The 29th now charged, "closely followed by the Twenty-eighth and a few of the Twenty-third," when it met "a heavy charging column of the enemy" and was driven back over the rifle pits. One of Thomas' regiments, the 19th, had been unable to enter the trench. The body of the Brigade moved to a point "between 300 and 400 yards to the right of the crater, and in front of it." Col. C. S. Russell, of Thomas' 28th Regiment, states that at "10 minutes after 8 part of my regiment, with two others, went over the outside of the enemy's line into what seemed to be a covered way beyond, to go to Cemetery Hill." This officer agrees with Thomas as to the order of the regiments in the two charges, but says that he himself advanced only fifty yards toward Cemetery Hill before being driven back by the Confederate charge. Meanwhile, Two brigades of the X Corps, advanced along the ravine north of the Crater, and another brigade of the IX Corps made a charge on the south.

With the repulse of the Fourth Division, there ended in disaster the offensive which was the last effort to take by frontal assault the earthworks around Petersburg. Most of the troops north of the Crater, white and black, were swept by a panic which carried them en masse back to their own lines. Many were thrown back into the Crater itself, filled as it already was with men. South of the Crater, Hartranft's brigade, joined by parts of other commands, and aided by the two captured Napoleon guns, held its ground. The immediate cause of this

debaacle was the charge of a single brigade, which had stealthily withdrawn from its position two miles away on the Confederate right flank, formed in a ravine which ran parallel to the main line two hundred yards from it, and thrown against that line in a splendid charge at the moment when the Fourth Division was reforming for an advance.

This was about nine o'clock, and from then until about midday, the Crater must have offered one of the most horrible spectacles in the history of warfare. Confederate fire swept over it from three sides, mortars were moved up to within a stone's toss of its rim and dropped their shells into it, and the July sun beat down on the exhausted mass of men who had been fighting for four hours under the most disheartening conditions. The only water to be obtained was what could be brought from the Union lines across a field swept by rifle and artillery fire. Apathy descended on many, and they ceased to make any effort. Wounded men were pinned down by the bodies of the dead. There were some, however, (negroes among them) who stayed at their posts around the rim of the Crater, <sup>and</sup> kept up a fire hot enough to make Mahone's second brigade, charging from the same ravine, slant off into a left oblique which carried it into the line already captured by the first. Thus the situation remained while the Confederates prepared for a final concerted thrust. Meanwhile, General Meade, after writing dispatches to Burnside all morning, asking for information, had finally at 9:15 ordered him to withdraw his troops. General Burnside, not unnaturally slow to

relinquish an attack which had promised such success, finally sent this order to the Crater at 12:20. If it had ever been possible to carry this out successfully, it was then too late, and in the final Confederate attack the troops remaining in the Crater were captured.

The story of the attack at the Crater does not at a glance add to the prestige of the Federal arms. The troops who had paid the cost of Grant's heavy smashes at Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor had lost the elan so necessary to this operation. They had learned endurance at the expense of instant striking-power. The courage that carried some of them through the long half-day of July 30, through protracted waiting under the deadly fire of veterans fighting at the last ditch, through the hours of dust and heat and futility and the horror of the Crater, was a virtue, whatever its military value, which adds glory to humanity. If Johnson's and Mahone's Divisions showed themselves to be soldiers, Burnside's Corps as certainly proved themselves men.

It must be remembered that such an explosion as that of the mine was an astounding event to these men who saw it unexpectedly at close range, and they are not to be greatly blamed for the loss of time incident to their wonder and fear, although that time was perhaps decisive of the battle. It is also important that the First Division, which led the attack, was composed largely of troops recruited in the spring of 1864, (two of its regiments

being "Heavy Artillery" used as infantry) and that the Division commander was not on that day an efficient officer. These men of the First Division do not appear to have moved with the speed and steadiness necessary to their place in the charge.

However, when we total the long series of "ifs" which are so easy to add up after the event, most of the blame, as always, falls on the officers who planned and executed the attack. Yet it would seem that General Ord, commander of the Eighteenth Corps, made a good summary when he was asked at the Court of Inquiry: "Do you think the assault would have been successful there had the best dispositions been made that you are conversant with?" Ord replied, "From what I learned afterward of the behavior of the troops after the explosion, when the enemy was most alarmed, I think that the assault, if it had been made with no more vigor, would have failed no matter what the dispositions. If the troops had behaved properly elsewhere I think the probability of success would have been increased by having more openings, a simultaneous assault, and increased material; but if the troops would have behaved as improperly as they are reported to have done in front . . . not going forward when ordered . . . I think the assault would have failed no matter what the disposition."

This had been an attack in Major force, and not the shadow of an advantage was gained. Thereafter, although Confederate resistance continued strong and was remarkably effective, never again did it succeed in completely turning back a Federal advance. On the other

hand, not until the final attack of April 2, 1865, did the Federals make another such movement against effectively manned prepared earthworks. The Crater had placed a final seal on the lesson apparent all through this campaign and especially at Cold Harbor and the first four days of battle before Petersburg -- that men could not move as fast as they could shoot from behind entrenchments.

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