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THE BATTLE OF THE CRATER

By Alfred P. James*

ONE of the most dramatic events of the Civil War was the so-called Battle of the Crater in front of Petersburg, Virginia, on July 30, 1864. In a very real sense this battle was the climax of the campaign of 1864 in Virginia. A glance, therefore, at the campaign and the general situation leading up to this unique operation is necessary.

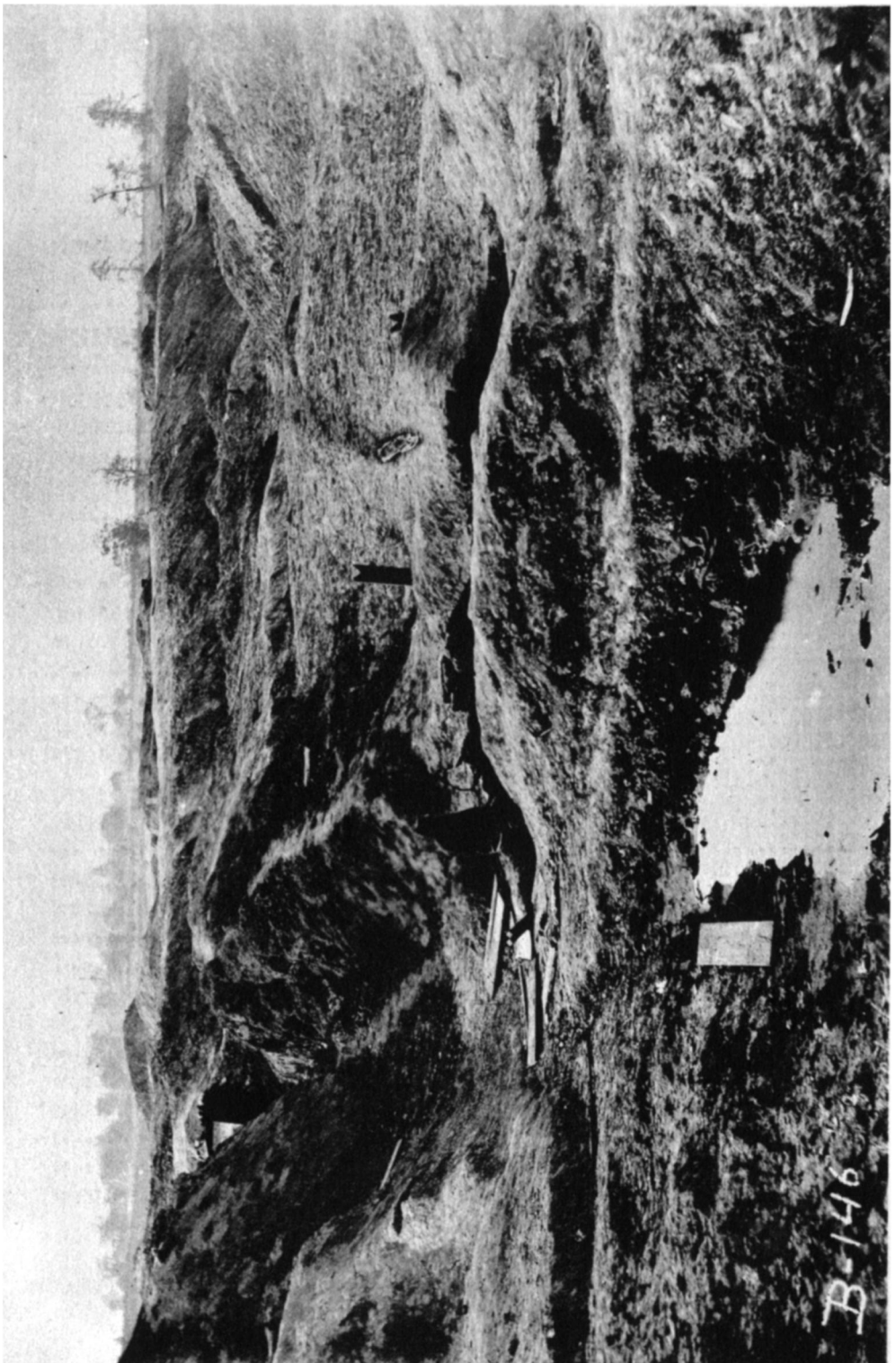
After the battle of Gettysburg, early in July 1863, General Robert E. Lee fell back across the Potomac River into northern Virginia and established himself in his old haunts south of the Rapidan River. Proceeding with great caution, Major General George G. Meade, Commander of the Union forces, advanced into the same general area. The autumn and winter were consumed in extremely cautious moves and counter moves in this great battle ground of the war.

In the meantime, Major General U. S. Grant had captured Vicksburg and in the late autumn driven the Confederate forces, under General Braxton Bragg, out of Tennessee into Northern Georgia. Reward for such service to the Union cause was natural. Congress in February, 1864, revived the rank of Lieutenant General in the United States Army, a rank hitherto bestowed only upon George Washington and Winfield Scott; and President Lincoln, as Congress had anticipated, gave Grant this rank and appointed him Commander-in-Chief of all the Union armies.

Lieutenant General Grant himself assumed control of operations in Virginia against the redoubtable forces of General Lee. On the fourth of May, the Army of the Potomac, still commanded by Major General Meade, but now under the general direction of Lieutenant General Grant, crossed the Rapidan and entered that forest-covered region famous in American history as the Wilderness. With a magnificent fighting force of 122,000 men well drilled and amply equipped, Grant had ventured into the domain of General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Two days of terrific fighting followed, with wavering fortune and great losses on both sides. The Union Commander-in-Chief is quoted by one writer as having stated on the morning of May 7, 1864, that "Joe Johnston would have retreated after two days of such punishment."¹ On the other hand such opposition in earlier campaigns in this same area had led to the retirement of McDowell, Pope, Burnside, and Hooker. But instead of retiring behind the Rapidan, Grant, unable to accomplish anything in the Wilderness, began the first of a series of oblique moves to the left, in the general direction of Richmond.

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¹ Atkinson, C. F., *Grant's Campaign of 1864 and 1865*, I, 205. Quoted in Edward Channing, *A History of the United States*, VI (New York, 1925), 567, footnote 1.



Photograph: Signal Corps

THE CRATER

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The Confederate Commander replied with a corresponding move on inside lines, and, in the neighborhood of Spottsylvania Court House, the forces again collided with heavy losses and equally indecisive results. Another move to the left brought the two armies face to face on the North Anna River, but the Union Commander-in-Chief declined battle and moved farther along in another oblique movement to the left. This move, again anticipated by General Lee in a similar operation, brought the two armies together at Cold Harbor, almost within sight of Richmond, on the battle ground of the campaign of midsummer two years earlier.

In a desperate attack on the intrenched Confederates, the Union forces received a severe check. It became evident that Lee's army could neither be destroyed nor dislodged and that Richmond could not be captured by direct attack from the north. In the face of losses amounting to nearly fifty thousand men, Grant, in a way historians have strangely ignored, abandoned his famous proposal "to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer." * The destruction of Lee's army as a direct objective was not within realization. Further attack on the Confederates north of the James River was resigned. Assaults on intrenched troops, as was amply demonstrated at Cold Harbor early in June, were altogether too costly. In fact, the use of intrenchments and fortifications in 1864, both in Virginia and Georgia, foreshadowed the trench warfare of the World War fifty years later. Experience in 1864 proved that one soldier behind adequate intrenchments was more than the equal of two opponents making direct attack across open fields. In the case of an attacking army, mobile, less than double in numbers, and with a territorial objective, flanking movements and oblique marches were the alternative and the natural result.

Just before the middle of June, therefore, after more than a week of hesitation, Grant pushed his forces across the Chickahominy and marched toward the James River, much as another Union commander in this region, Major General George B. McClellan, had done two years earlier. The student of the military history of the Civil War observes very easily the parallel between the position of McClellan in July 1862 and that of Grant in June 1864, a parallel which either adds to the credit usually given to McClellan or detracts from that given to Grant.

Danger to the Confederacy, by attack from the James River, appeared six weeks before Grant's appearance on its banks with the Army of the Potomac. On the day when Grant moved across the Rapidan, Major General Benjamin F. Butler moved up the James River with the Army of the James, about thirty thousand strong. On the following day he occupied City Point and Bermuda

* According to Grant's *Personal Memoirs*, II, p. 563, it was understood by Generals Butler and Meade before starting on this campaign that both their armies would be thrown south of the James River in case Grant failed to destroy Lee. (Editor's note.)

Hundred on the peninsula between the James and Appomattox Rivers. For ten days Richmond and Petersburg, its vital outpost to the south, were in grave danger. But scattered forces from the Carolinas were rushed up under the command of General P. G. T. Beauregard and the danger was overcome. A month of trench warfare followed, with the situation in the middle of June much that of a stalemate, but with the Confederate line south of the James River thinly manned, while south of the Appomattox River a line of intrenchments was even more weakly held.

Even after the engagement at Cold Harbor, Lee seems to have expected further assaults on Richmond from the northeast and in some way appears to have lost effective touch with the Union forces in the Army of Potomac. His opponent in the meantime adopted the old idea of McClellan that Petersburg was the key to Richmond and that Lee's army, north of the James, an invincible defense of the Confederate capital, could and must be ruined by cutting off the supplies it was receiving from the south.

Without interference of any importance, the Army of the Potomac began crossing the James River on June 14, 1864.² As rapidly as possible the troops on crossing were hurried forward and thrown against the defenses of Petersburg. But the thinly held intrenchments of the Confederates, who numbered less than three thousand, proved an insurmountable obstacle.³ Again the importance of intrenchments was demonstrated beyond question. It was a repetition of the attack and outcome at Cold Harbor two weeks earlier. After the arrival of General Lee's veterans in full force on the Petersburg front, further Union assault on the Confederate intrenchments was abandoned. Warfare on the Petersburg front settled down quickly into trench warfare destined to last for nine months and to end only with the exhaustion and internal collapse of the Confederacy.

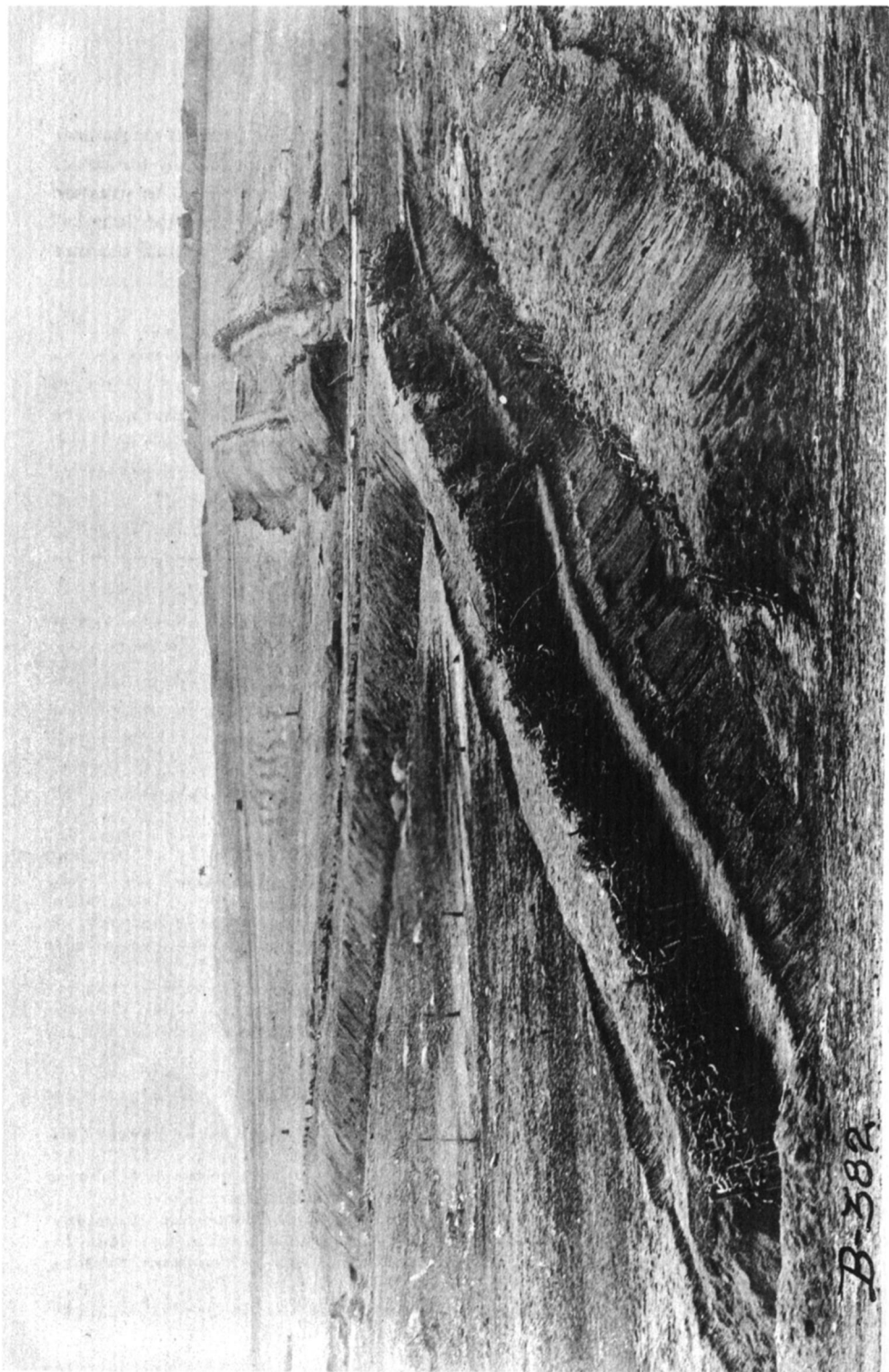
In this long drawn out trench warfare, which characterized the siege of Petersburg, the historic event was the explosion of the Union mine under the Confederate fortifications at daybreak on the thirtieth of July.

The intrenchments and fortifications of the opposing forces, on the east of Petersburg, ran almost due north and south, in an irregular line, across hills and ravines.⁴ Virtually all of the defensive measures used in trench warfare during

² *War of the Rebellion, A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), Series I, Volume XI, Part I, p. 12, Grant to Halleck, July 14, 1864. This publication will hereinafter be referred to as *Official Records* and unless otherwise indicated it will be understood that the references are to Series I.

³ *Ibid.*, 27. Union casualties amounted to 9,500.

⁴ See "Map No. I, Siege of Petersburg, Va." in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (The Century Co., New York, 1884), IV, 538. See also the *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861-1865*, Part I, Plates LXIV, Nos. 1, 2 and 3; LXXVII, No. 2; LXXVIII, No. 5; and Part II Plate C, No. 12.



Photograph: Signal Corps

FEDERAL TRENCHES, 1864

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the World War, were worked out in front of Petersburg, Virginia, in the summer of 1864. To all intents and purposes the struggle on this front had, by the last of June, reached a stalemate so far as direct attacks were concerned. The situation was much like that along the river Aisne in France after both sides had "dug in" in September, 1914. As in the latter case, so in the former, the eventual outcome depended upon final superiority in men and other resources.

Among the Union troops in front of Petersburg in June, 1864, was the 48th Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers, composed mainly of miners from the anthracite coal region of the upper Schuylkill Valley and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants, an experienced mining engineer.⁵ To some non-commissioned officers and privates⁶ of this regiment, the topography of the region suggested the possibility of running a mine under the portion of the Confederate work on their immediate front. Pleasants welcomed the suggestion. He possessed the training necessary to superintend the proposed operations and, in the men of his regiment, he possessed exactly the kind of skilled workmen necessary for its execution.⁷ He carried the proposal direct to Brigadier General Robert B. Potter, commanding the Second Division of the Ninth Army Corps.⁸ Potter presented the matter in writing to Major General Ambrose E. Burnside, commanding the Ninth Army Corps. Potter's letter of June 24, 1864, is not only very interesting, but probably the earliest written statement about the project. Its importance justifies citation in full, as follows:

General: Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants, of the Forty-eighth Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers, commanding First Brigade, has called upon me to express his opinion of the feasibility of mining the enemy's work in my front. Colonel Pleasants is a mining engineer and has charge of some of the principal mining works of Schuylkill County, Pa. He has in his command upward of eighty-five enlisted men and fourteen non-commissioned officers, who are professional miners, besides four officers. The distance from inside of our work, where the mine would have to be started, to inside of enemy's work, does not exceed 100 yards. He is of the opinion that they could run a mine forward at the rate of from twenty-five to fifty feet per day including supports, ventilation, and so on. It would be a double mine, for as we cannot ventilate by shafts from the top, we would have to run parallel tunnels and connect them every short distance by lateral ones, to secure a circulation of air, absolutely essential here, as these soils are full of mephitic vapors. A few miners' picks, which I am informed could be made by any blacksmith from the ordinary ones; a few handbarrows, easily constructed; one or two mathematical instruments, which could be supplied by the engineer department, and our ordinary intrenching tools, are all that are required. The

⁵ *Official Records*, Vol. XL, Part I, 45, 58, 526, 544; Part II, 396, 397. See Joseph Gould, *The Story of the Forty-eighth, A Record of the Campaigns of the Forty-eighth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry*; published by authority of the Regimental Association, Chapter XIV and XV of which are valuable on the battle of the crater.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Part I, 523. In his testimony before the Congressional Committee on the conduct of the war, January 13, 1865, Colonel Pleasants claimed to have originated the idea. *The Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. Battle of Petersburg* (Washington, D. C., 1865) p. 112

⁷ *Ibid.*, Part I, 58, 523; and Part II, 397.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Part I, 58, 523, 527; Part II, 396.

men themselves have been talking about it for some days, and are quite desirous, seemingly, of trying it. If there is a prospect of our remaining here a few days longer, I would like to undertake it. If you desire to see Colonel Pleasants, I will ride over with him or send him to you. I think, perhaps, we might do something, and in no event could we lose more men than we do every time we feel the enemy.⁹

In response to this letter, Burnside sent word, probably not in writing, that he would be glad to take the matter into consideration.¹⁰ Accordingly Potter and Pleasants went to Burnside's headquarters and laid the plan before him.¹¹ In the language of the testimony of Burnside given under oath before a court of inquiry: "The matter was fully discussed, and I authorized General Potter to commence the work, making the remark, if I remember right, that it could certainly do no harm to commence it, and it was probably better that the men should be occupied in that way, and I would lay the matter before General Meade at my earliest opportunity. We parted with that understanding, and the work was commenced." This conference must have taken place within twenty-four hours after the writing of the first letter, for at noon on June 25, 1864, work on the mine was begun.¹² At 2:45 P. M. Burnside informed Meade of the plan. "We have commenced a mine," he stated, "that will reach the batteries of the enemy in our front by a reach of 115 yards. I have given orders for all the necessary changes of the line to make the work ordinarily secure. We want about 7,000 sand-bags, or more. I think we can break the line of the enemy in due time if we can have the necessary facilities. We want heavy guns very much. Can we have the sand-bags?"¹³ Within fifteen minutes, General Meade received the written request and by letter replied: "I have directed Duane to send you an engineer officer and a company of sappers, and Hunt to send you sand-bags and siege guns. I am delighted to hear you can do anything against the enemy's line, and will furnish you everything you want, and earnest wishes for your success besides. I would have been over to see you today, but certain movements of the enemy on the left have kept me here."¹⁴

That Meade meant what he said is proved by the immediate dispatch with which he acted. Messages trying to locate the necessary sand-bags for the advancement of Burnside's line of fortifications were sent hither and thither to various depots. No less than ten of them are recorded during the afternoon and evening of June 25, 1864.¹⁵ Late in the night, evidently after 10 P. M.,¹⁶ Brigadier General Godfrey Weitzel, chief engineer with the Army of the James, sent Burnside the message: "I have just ordered 8,000 sand-bags to be sent to you from my depot at Bermuda Hundred with all possible haste. I imagine they will reach you about 1 o'clock."¹⁷

⁹ *Ibid.*, Part II, 396.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Part I, 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 526, 527.

¹² *Ibid.*, 556.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Part II, 417.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* See also, Part I, 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Part II, 406, 417, 418, 422, 423.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 423.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 418.

At or near the time specified the sand-bags must have arrived, for at 11:30 A. M., June 26, 1864, Burnside informed Meade: "We succeeded in moving our main advanced line out of the skirmish line beyond the railroad cut and within 100 yards of the battery to which we are running the mine, so that the mining party is now pretty well protected."¹⁸ In the meantime, at 9 A. M. on the same day, Meade had informed Grant in the statement: "General Burnside having expressed the opinion he could successfully advance against the enemy by opening trenches, I have directed him to be furnished with engineer officers and troops and the necessary ordnance and materials from the siege train. . . ."¹⁹ In a reply at 10:30 A. M. from his headquarters at City Point, General Grant said: "I have ordered out all the guns and other articles called for by General Hunt."²⁰

Thus in a few days an idea originating almost at the bottom of an army was pushed upward until it had the sanction of the highest command. While it was the particular interest of the Forty-eighth Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers and of Lieutenant Colonel Pleasants, Brigadier General Potter and Major General Burnside, it was approved by Major General Meade and accepted by Lieutenant General Grant. The project, it is true, proved a failure, and, after the event, in the court of inquiry, several people qualified their earlier sanction. But it is beyond doubt that the whole affair was a concerted effort of the entire Union forces and was recognized as such.

Work on the main gallery of the mine, begun at noon on June 25, 1864, was pushed forward as rapidly as circumstances permitted. On June 28, 1864, before 10:55 A. M., Burnside was able to report: "The mining operations are progressing well—140 feet of gallery has been made."²¹ At 8 P. M., on the same day, Potter stated, "The gallery was run fifty feet the first day and forty feet each day since, which rate of progression Colonel Pleasants thinks he will be able to maintain."²² As early as the last day of June, "Five tons of blasting powder and 1,000 yards safety fuse" were ordered for Burnside.²³ At the end of the first week of mining, July 2, 1864, at 10:15 A. M., Burnside was able to report: "The gallery is now 250 feet in length." But he added: "We experienced some difficulty yesterday from running into quicksand; the props gave way and a considerable portion of the top fell in. A more complicated system of propping will have to be resorted to, but we hope to overcome the difficulty today."²⁴

On the third of July, Grant, becoming impatient with siege operations, inquired of Meade if he thought it possible, "by a bold and decisive attack to break through the enemy's center."²⁵ Meade replied that he would consult Generals Warren and Burnside.²⁶ Warren advised against the attempt, but Burnside was of the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 497. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 431. ²⁰ *Ibid.* ²¹ *Ibid.*, 482. ²² *Ibid.*, 484. ²³ *Ibid.*, 528.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 590. See *ibid.*, Part I, 31, Dana to Stanton July 3, 1864—9 A. M.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Part II, 599. ²⁶ *Ibid.*

opinion that with the completion and explosion of the mine, "an assault could be made to advantage."²⁷ To the proposals of Burnside, Meade replied: "I agree with you in opinion the assault should be deferred till the mine is completed, provided that can be done in a reasonable short period—say a week."²⁸ In answer to a questionnaire submitted to him on July 3, 1864, by Brigadier General John G. Barnard, chief engineer with the Union forces, Pleasants stated in a partial reply on July 7, 1864: "The mining has been carried on without interruption since it was begun. There are 210 men employed every twenty-four hours, but only two can mine at a time at the extremes of the work. The tunnel will reach the enemy's work in about seven or eight days."²⁹ This was written three days after Burnside in a message to General Meade had said: "With ordinary good fortune we can pretty safely promise to finish the mine in a week—I hope in less time."³⁰

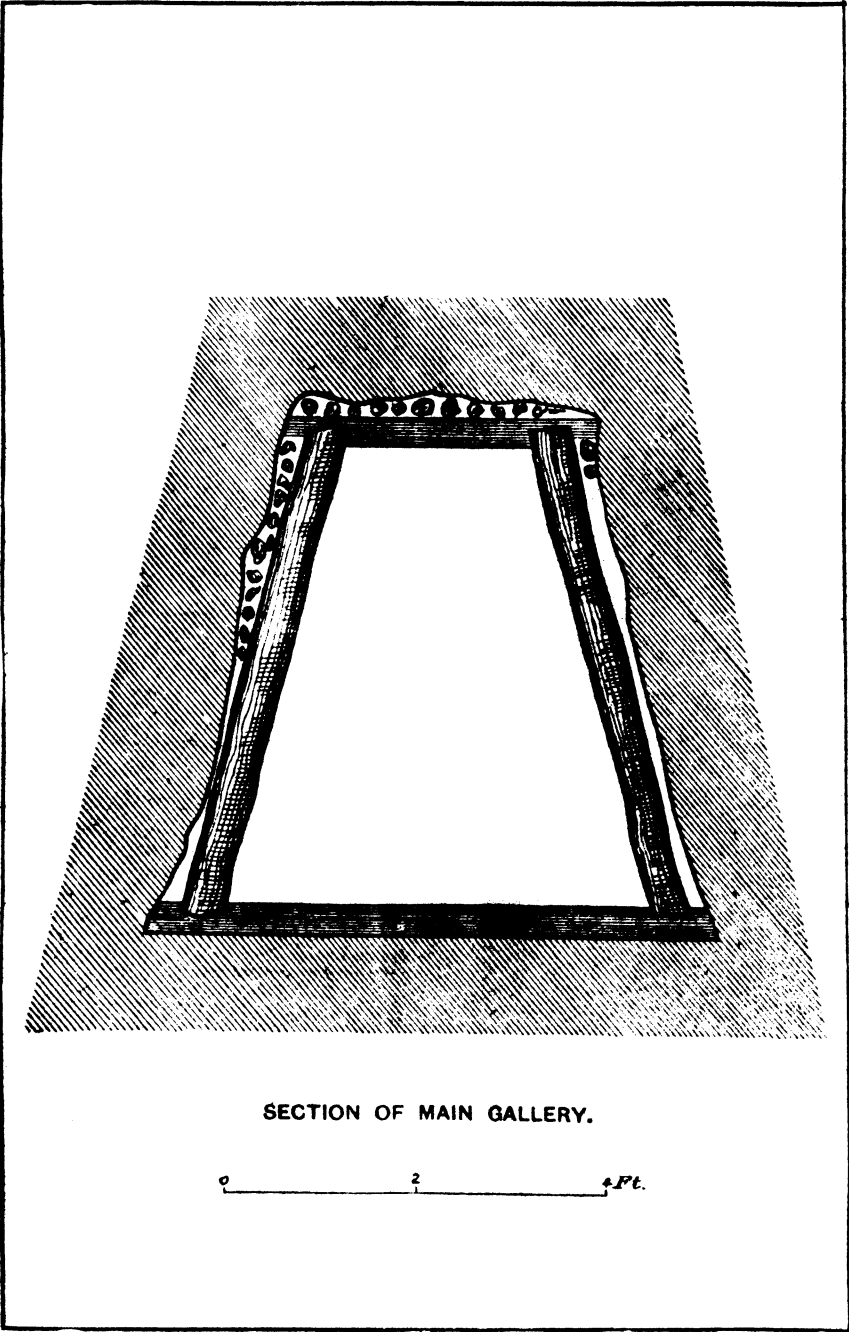
But the general attention of the Union commanders was at this point distracted from the mining operations. Both the authorities at Washington and Grant became greatly disturbed by the Confederate campaign under Early in the Shenandoah Valley and against the Union capital. From July 5 to July 15, the movement of troops from Virginia to Maryland by water was extensive and almost continuous.³¹ The Sixth Corps of the Army of the Potomac was sent off, to be followed by parts of the Eighteenth Corps, which at this time was being drawn back to Virginia from an expedition against the sea-coasts of the lower South. Even if the mine had been completed and ready for use, nothing could have been done in the second week of July. It was not until the night of the fourteenth of July that the mine again became a subject of correspondence, when Burnside reported: "We are making the usual progress with the mine."³² According to the official report of Pleasants, "On the 17th of July, the main gallery was completed, being 510.8 feet in length."³³

Thus in a little more than three weeks, Pleasants and his coal miners had run a deadly threat to a point immediately under the Confederate lines. The work had not been easy. The requisite tools, lumber and other materials were lacking.³⁴ The material excavated was carried to the rear at night in handbarrows made out of cracker boxes. The gallery, about five feet high by four feet six inches wide, was "supported by props along its whole course at a distance from each other ranging from three to thirty feet, according to the nature of the roof." In addition, the excavators ran into "a stratum of marl, whose consistency was like putty," which retarded the progress of excavation and caused additional loss of time.³⁵

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 600, 603, 604, 608. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 609. See, also, *ibid.*, Part I, 31. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, Part II, 610-611.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 630-631. ³¹ *Ibid.*, Part III, 3-275, *passim*. ³² *Ibid.*, 239. ³³ *Ibid.*, Part I, 557.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 556. In his testimony before the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War, *loc. cit.*, Colonel Pleasants complained that the plan received inadequate support from those above General Burnside. ³⁵ *Ibid.* See, also, *ibid.*, 31.



SECTION OF MAIN GALLERY.

0 2 4 Ft.

DETAIL OF THE TUNNEL CONSTRUCTION
(Official Records, Vol. XL, Part I)

Meanwhile, the Confederates had become suspicious.³⁶ As early as July 11, 1864, Major General B. R. Johnson, advised a listening gallery "to ascertain if the enemy were mining."³⁷ This gallery was begun on the following day.³⁸ Shaft No. 1, of the Confederates, at Pegram's salient, the exact location threatened, was completed by July 13, 1864, several days before the main gallery of the Union mine reached the salient at a lower level. On the following day, another shaft, at the same salient was completed.³⁹ From these two shafts and a third at Colquitt's salient nearer the Appomattox River, galleries were extended laterally.⁴⁰ In turn the Union authorities became aware of the Confederate counter-mining, getting the information from deserters.⁴¹ Pleasants says in his official report: "The enemy having obtained some knowledge of the mine, and having commenced searching for it, I was ordered to stop mining, which was, however, resumed on the 18th of July by starting the left lateral gallery."⁴² Of this final development of the mine, only a careful drawing would surpass in definiteness the report of Pleasants as follows: "At 6 P. M., July 18 commenced the right lateral gallery; but as the enemy could be heard very plainly working in the fort over us, I caused this gallery to be excavated a little beyond and in rear of their work, and gave to it a curved line of direction. The left gallery, being thirty-seven feet long, was stopped at midnight on Friday, July 22; the right gallery, being thirty-eight feet long, was stopped at 6 P. M., July 23."⁴³ He continues his report with information: "The mine could have been charged and exploded at this time. I employed the men, from that time, in draining, timbering, and placing in position eight magazines, four in each lateral gallery." In this last stage of actual mining, the Union miners heard Confederate countermining, and at the same time the Confederates could hear the picking of the Union workmen, although they were not sure of this.⁴⁴

About July 25, 1864, when danger along the Potomac appeared no longer serious, and while the last touches were being applied to the excavation of the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 38, Dana to Stanton, July 6, 1864. Deserters from the Union Fifth Army Corps probably gave the information. See *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, loc. cit. E. P. Alexander in his *Military Memoirs of a Confederate* (New York, 1907) p. 563 claims he suspected the mine as early as June the thirtieth.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Part III, 765.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 771, 772.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 774.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 765 f. Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 565 asserts that the Confederates failed to strike the Union mine, because, in addition to its depth, it ran under the center of the salient, whereas the Confederate countershafts were at the sides.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 301, Burnside to Williams, July 17, 1864.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Part I, 557.

⁴³ *Ibid.* See, also, *ibid.*, Part III, 336, 337, 351, 354, 369. This part of the mine has been opened up to the public in recent years. An extraordinary feature is revealed which is not noted in contemporary documents of the time of the campaign. To escape detection by the Confederates, the mine shaft was given a downward incline to the left at an angle of forty-five degrees and carried forward the desired distance. Then a shaft was dug upwards and work begun again on a higher level. The ladder used in reaching the higher level on which the galleries were located was found recently and is preserved in the local museum.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Part III, 790. Curiously the Confederates thought they heard picking at Colquitt's salient over a mile distant from Pegram's or Elliott's salient.

mine, Grant began a series of attacks on the Confederates; first south of Petersburg, towards the Weldon railroad; and then, slightly later, north of the Appomattox River and even north of the James River in the neighborhood of Malvern Hill. Under the circumstances, and from the records, it is fairly evident that these movements were feints intended to draw the main body of the Confederate forces away from their threatened intrenchments immediately in front of Petersburg.⁴⁵

The last week in June and the first three weeks in July 1864 were accompanied by the raids and other alarms which accompany warfare. But to Lee, in command of the Confederate operations against Grant, the month following the first disastrous assaults of the Army of the Potomac upon Petersburg must have been a time of relief, a period of reaction from the severe fighting of the previous six weeks. The sharp repulse and heavy losses of the Union forces in the early assaults when faced by only a few thousand defenders of the city, gave Lee sufficient confidence to dispatch a part of his forces against Washington, D. C., which had been largely stripped of its protective forces. On the defensive in front of Richmond and Petersburg, Lee took the offensive in the Shenandoah Valley and along the Potomac. The disturbance which this movement caused in Union circles has already been noted. If the move accomplished nothing more, it served to demoralize the plans of Union attack in central Virginia. Lee, in the light of results, was satisfied that behind his intrenchments, he could, even with greatly reduced forces, face attack by superior forces without much danger. In fact he hoped for further Union assaults and regretted that they were not made.⁴⁶

When, therefore, in the fourth week of July, Grant moved the bulk of his forces north of the Appomattox River, and much of them north of the James River, Lee countered the movement by pushing north the larger part of his veterans, leaving behind in the trenches of the Petersburg sector only three divisions.⁴⁷ Of these the division of General William Mahone of the Third Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia occupied the Confederate right to the south, while the center and left of the line respectively were held by the divisions of Major Generals Bushrod R. Johnson and Robert F. Hoke, two divisions from the department of North Carolina and Southern Virginia which had been hurriedly brought up in May to meet the threat of the Union Army of the James.

Upon these three divisions, numbering probably about twenty-one thousand troops,⁴⁸ rested the defense of the Confederate line south of the Appomattox River. In addition they had to be on guard against the threatened mine explosion, a danger already apprehended by Confederate commanders, whose efforts to frustrate the plan of the Union mine failed only because the Confederate counter-mining was not deep enough at the point threatened.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 437, 438, 439, 461.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 762.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Part I, 57, 82, 791.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Part II, 707.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Part III, 765 f.

Pegram's salient, or, as it was sometimes designated, Elliott's salient, was, in military terminology, a re-entrant salient lying almost due east of Petersburg.⁵⁰ It could be defended by enfilade or cross-fire from the trenches of the other parts of the Confederate line to the right and left.⁵¹ To further strengthen this salient, a second line, or trench cavalier, had been thrown up from 150 to 200 yards in its rear, commanding both the Confederate advance intrenchments and the enemy's works at a distance.⁵² This trench cavalier was begun as early as the fourth of July.⁵³ On July 6, 1864, C. A. Dana in a message to E. M. Stanton, reported: "Some prominent officers say that the enemy is aware of the mine and has constructed a new line within that he (Burnside) means to blow up."⁵⁴ B. R. Johnson reported July 10, 1864, the partial completion of a third line of intrenchments in the rear of Pegram's battery.⁵⁵ Writing many years afterward Judge Thomas R. Roulhac of the 49th North Carolina Infantry, C. S. A., stated: "Most fortunately for our army we had completed but a day or two before [the mine explosion] a cavalier line in the rear of the salient where the explosion occurred; the two lines salient and cavalier forming a diamond shaped fortification."⁵⁶ As an additional defense, a concealed battery was planted in a well-protected spot on the north of Pegram's salient from which the area around the threatened point could be swept with grape and canister.⁵⁷

In the light of these Confederate preparations, not unobserved by the Union forces, Meade requested on July 24, 1864, "a little more time" than was given by Grant in a letter of suggestions on that day, a view in which Grant acquiesced.⁵⁸

Under the circumstances Grant on July 25, 1864, decided upon the use of the mine for an attack, but only after the manoeuvres and *ruses de guerre* already mentioned. His message to Meade stated:

You may direct the loading of the mine in front of the Ninth Corps. I would set no time when it should be exploded, but leave it subject to orders. The expedition ordered may cause such a weakening of the enemy at Petersburg as to make an attack there possible, in which case you would want to spring Burnside's mine. It cannot be kept a great while after the powder is put in. I would say, therefore, if it is not found necessary to blow it up earlier, I would have it off during the afternoon of Wednesday.⁵⁹

On July 26, 1864, orders went out for 8,000 pounds of blasting powder and 3,000 feet of fuse.⁶⁰ In response to a request from Meade, a preliminary plan for

⁵⁰ See map, *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 538, and maps in *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records*, etc., as indicated in footnote 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Official Records*, Vol. XL, Part I, 788.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 775, Foote to Brent, July 4, 1864.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 778.

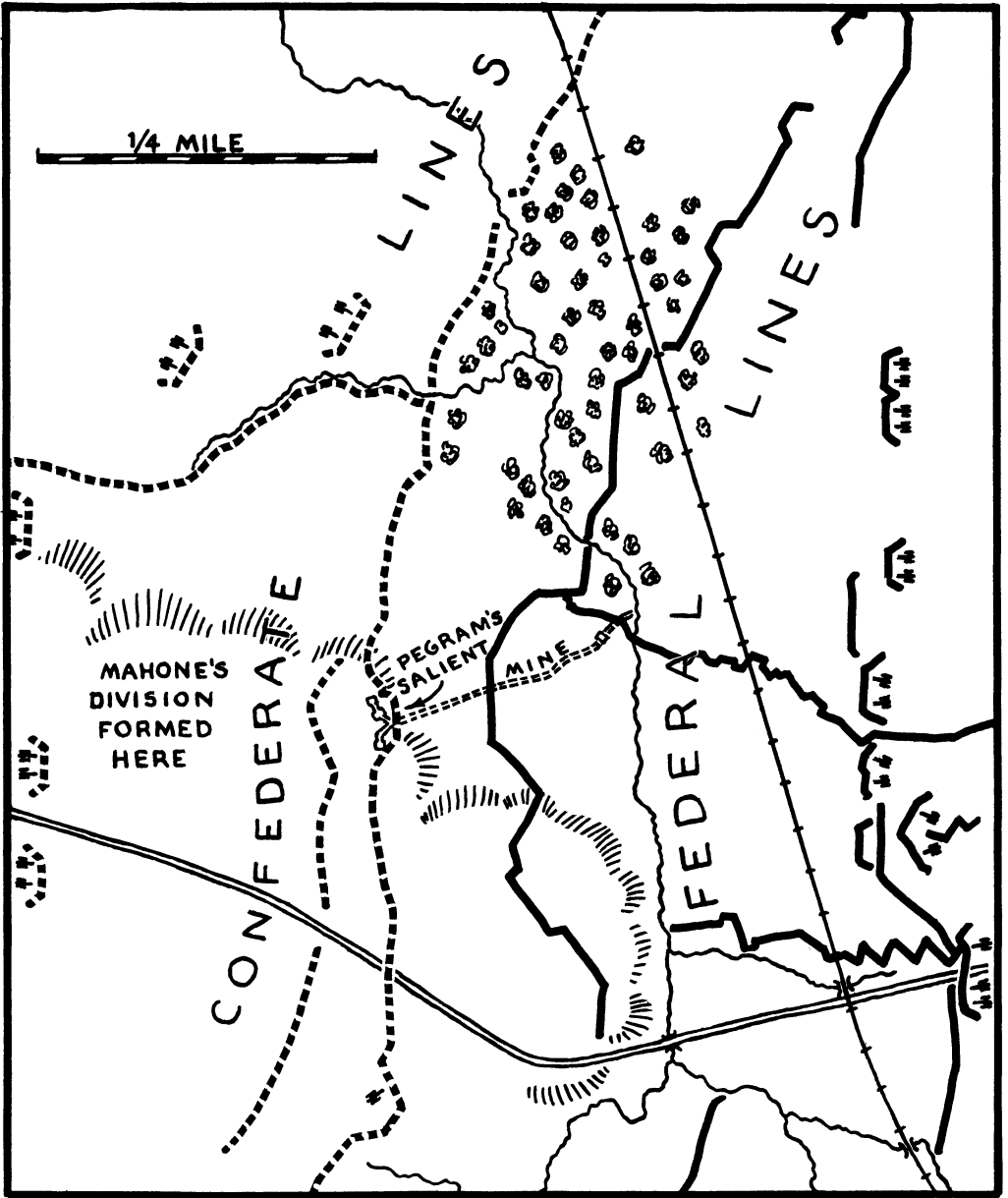
⁵⁶ *Southern Historical Society Papers*, XXXII (1895), 72. See also, *Official Records*, Vol. XL, Part III, 372, 387, 414, 425, 440, 441, 458, 477-478.

⁵⁷ *Official Records*, Vol. XL, Part I, 759, 789.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Part III, 425-426.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 438.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 463.



POSITION IN THE VICINITY OF THE CRATER

Based on Contemporary Map and Sketches

the mine explosion and the accompanying attack was submitted by Burnside on this date.⁶¹

It was at 7:45 P. M. on July 26, 1864, that General Burnside received the message from Meade's Chief of Staff: "The commanding general directs that you prepare your mine at once for explosion, but that you await further orders before springing it."⁶² The powder for charging the magazines of the mine was evidently ready at 10 A. M. on Wednesday, July 27, 1864.⁶³ At 4 P. M., the work of carrying the powder into the mine was begun,⁶⁴ and at 9 P. M. Burnside notified Meade that Colonel Pleasants had reported that the right lateral gallery was charged and that the left lateral gallery would be charged by 11 o'clock and the tamping completed by 4 A. M. Actually the loading was completed an hour early at 10 P. M., but the tamping took fourteen hours longer, not being completed until 6 P. M. on Thursday, July 28, 1864.⁶⁵

The mine was ready, therefore, to be fired. Burnside at 9 P. M. sent Meade the message: "The mine is completed and ready for springing."⁶⁶ But military preparations for the attack which was to accompany the explosion of the mine were yet incomplete. A large part of the Union forces were still north of the James River. It was Grant's plan to get his entire army of 65,000 troops in place for a general assault all along the Petersburg front, in case a break through the Confederate intrenchments should result from the explosion of the mine.⁶⁷ This return of the Union forces was under way on Friday, July 29, 1864, but the movements were not completed until late in the night.⁶⁸

In the Union plan of operations, responsibility for the assault following the mine explosion was placed upon the Ninth Army Corps under Major General Burnside. Support was to be furnished by the Fifth Army Corps on the left, under Major General G. K. Warren, and the Eighteenth Army Corps, on the right, under Major General E. O. C. Ord. Burnside originally planned to use, as the vanguard of the attack, his Fourth Division, a body of negro troops commanded by Brigadier General Edward Ferrero.⁶⁹ His reason for this was that the white troops of his other three divisions had suffered considerable losses in the past six weeks, were trench-weary and had lost the spirit of attack.⁷⁰ Special drill was given to the Fourth Division for the unique role it was expected to play.⁷¹ But Burnside's plan to use negro troops in launching the attack was over-ruled. Meade

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 476.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Part I, 557.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 591-635.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, See, especially, statement of Hancock, *ibid.*, 648.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 473, 476.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* See also, testimony of General Ferrero, December 20, 1864, before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *loc. cit.*, 106, where he says he had drilled his troops "for over three weeks."

⁶² *Ibid.*, 479.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 526.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Part III, 566.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Part I, 58, 524.

disapproved of calling upon negro troops to do such important work.⁷² This disapproval Burnside protested in a conference on Thursday, July 28, 1864,⁷³ and the matter was submitted to Grant.⁷⁴ On Friday, Burnside was notified that Grant likewise disapproved. This information was probably given orally. It was also furnished in writing in the following letter of 10:15 A. M., from Meade's Headquarters: "I am instructed to say that the major-general commanding submitted to the lieutenant-general commanding the armies your proposition to form the leading columns of assault of the black troops, and that he, as well as the major-general commanding, does not approve the proposition, but directs that those columns be formed of the white troops."⁷⁵

It was necessary, therefore, on the afternoon of the last day before the attack, to reorganize the plan, so that the Fourth Division would be in reserve instead of in advance. According to the testimony of Burnside before the later court of inquiry, he called into consultation the commanders of his three divisions of white troops, Brigadier General Orlando B. Willcox of the Third Division, Brigadier General Robert B. Potter of the Second Division, and Brigadier General James H. Ledlie of the First Division.⁷⁶ Decision of the order of attack was, after some discussion, determined by lot and Ledlie and the First Division drew the advance.⁷⁷

In accordance with the measures thus far determined upon, Burnside, late in the afternoon of Friday, July 29, 1864, put out a circular of instructions.⁷⁸ The attack was to be made immediately after the explosion of the mine. General Ledlie of the First Division was instructed to rush his troops through the breach in the Confederate defenses made by the mine explosion and advance them at once to the crest of the hill beyond. General Willcox of the Third Division was ordered to follow as soon as possible and move to the left beyond the Confederate line and endeavor to advance to the southwest. General Potter of the Second Division was directed to follow the Third Division as soon as possible and move to the right beyond the Confederate front line and endeavor to advance to the northwest. General Ferrero, of the Fourth Division, composed of negro troops, was instructed to hold himself in readiness to advance to the assistance of the First Division and pass on into the city. It was the plan of Burnside to throw virtually the entire Ninth Army Corps of nearly fifteen thousand men upon the weakened and disorganized Confederates, after the explosion of the mine. In addition, General Warren in command of the Fifth Corps was expected to advance on the Union left and General Ord of the Eighteenth Corps upon Burnside's right,

⁷² *Ibid.*, 46, 60, 165, 524. Note the very significant testimony of General Grant before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *loc. cit.*, III, that General Meade feared public disapproval of putting negro troops in so dangerous a position.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 137, and *ibid.*, Part III, 608.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Part I, 61.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 136; and *ibid.*, Part III, 611.

while even General Hancock, with the Second Corps, south of the Appomattox, and General Sheridan, with the Cavalry Corps far to the south, were expected to press upon the harrassed enemy.⁷⁹

In his testimony before the court of inquiry, Burnside claimed that Meade modified this plan by ordering all the troops to rush for the crest,⁸⁰ and to some extent Meade's testimony bears this out.⁸¹ But when, in his official report three days later, August 13, 1864, Burnside renewed the allegation,⁸² Meade in his own official report denied the validity of Burnside's statement.⁸³

The expectations of the Union commanders were probably mixed. Certainly they varied. At the Court of Inquiry on the Mine Explosion, held in the Union Army shortly afterward, Meade said that from the first he never considered that the location of Burnside's mine was a proper one.⁸⁴ In fact Meade had lost his enthusiasm for the matter very early. On July 8, 1864, C. A. Dana sent the message to E. M. Stanton: "General Meade reports that Burnside's mine will prove of no value."⁸⁵ Warren, in his testimony, said he never saw sufficient good reasons why the attack should succeed, that he never had confidence in its success.⁸⁶ Major J. C. Duane of the Engineer Corps said he did not think there was any reasonable chance of success by such an attack. And from the records, it is clear that the four division commanders and their troops were none too optimistic.

The time set for the explosion of the mine was 3:30 A. M.,⁸⁷ just before day-break Saturday, July 30. Three fuse lines ran from the entrance of the mine to the point where tamping began. There they connected with powder troughs which were depended upon to convey the flash to the eight magazines. The fuse had been furnished in short lengths and much splicing had been necessary.⁸⁸ According to his official report, Colonel Pleasants lit the fuse at 3:15 A. M.⁸⁹ For an hour, officers and men awaited the expected explosion.⁹⁰ Requests for information concerning the delay brought none, for the simple reason that there was none available.⁹¹ At 4:15 A. M., Lieutenant Jacob Douty, of Company K, and Sergeant Henry Rees, of Company F, 48th Pennsylvania, volunteered to go into the main gallery to ascertain the cause of the failure to explode.⁹² Finding that

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Part I, 134-135; and *ibid.*, Part III, 596.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Part I, 62.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 527.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 45. In his testimony on January 13, 1865, before the *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, *loc. cit.*, 113, Colonel Pleasants said, "I know this: that General Burnside told me that General Meade and Major Duane, chief engineer of the Army of the Potomac said the thing could not be done; that it was all claptrap and nonsense; that such a length of mine had never been excavated in military operations."

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Part III, 553, 581, 596, 611.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Part I, 557. See the testimony before the *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, *loc. cit.*, especially the testimony of Colonel Pleasants, *ibid.*, 114.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 44-163, *passim*; and *ibid.*, Part III, 636-690, *passim* but especially 656-657.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Part I, 62.

the fuses had burned out some distance from the entrance, owing to dampness and poor splicing, they relighted them about 4:30 A. M., and at 4:44 A. M. the mine finally exploded.⁹³

The spectacle in the hazy dawn of the hot summer morning was awe-inspiring to all so situated as to see it. A Union officer writing at a later date described it as follows: "It was a magnificent spectacle, and as the mass of earth went up into the air, carrying with it men, guns, carriages, and timbers, and spread out like an immense cloud as it reached its altitude, so close were the Union lines that the mass appeared as if it would descend immediately upon the troops waiting to make the charge. This caused them to break and scatter to the rear, and about ten minutes were consumed in reforming for the attack."⁹⁴

If to the Union troops who knew of the plans and had been under arms for nearly two hours, the explosion was terrifying, it is easy to picture the confusion in the already weakened Confederate lines. Four companies of the 18th South Carolina Infantry which held Pegram's salient, were shattered by the explosion and partly buried in the debris.⁹⁵ Many descriptions, most of them of a later date, have been made of the sight which greeted Union soldiers on their arrival at the crater. One of them saw "men buried in various ways—some with only their feet and legs protruding from the earth."⁹⁶ He said: "One of these near me was pulled out, and proved to be a second lieutenant of the battery which had been blown up. The fresh air revived him, and he was soon able to walk and talk. He was very grateful and said that he was asleep when the explosion took place, and only awoke to find himself wriggling up in the air; then a few seconds afterward he felt himself descending, and soon lost consciousness."⁹⁷

In the trenches to the right and left of the place of explosion there was great

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 63, 557; *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Battle of Petersburg*, 7, 115; *Harper's Pictorial History of the Great Rebellion* (New York, 1868), II, 696; Adam Badeau, *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York, 1881), II, 478, says "Lieutenant Doughty." Portraits of Doughty and Rees can be found in Gould, *op. cit.*, 216 and 272. Somewhat strangely Lieutenant Doughty is not mentioned in Volume XL of the *Official Records*, but he is indicated by the phrase "an officer," *ibid.*, Part I, 557.

⁹⁴ William H. Powell, Major, U. S. A., "The Battle of the Petersburg Crater," *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 551. For two additional graphic descriptions, see (a) *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, Volume V. *Petersburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg* (Boston, 1906), 205, a statement of Brevet Brigadier-General Stephen M. Weld, in a paper "The Petersburg Mine," read before that Society March 27, 1882; and (b) Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society *Historical Collections*, Volume XXX (Lansing 1906), 130, a statement of General Byron M. Cutcheon in a paper, "The Twentieth Michigan Regiment in the Assault on Petersburg, July, 1864."

⁹⁵ *Official Records*, Vol. XL, 17, 788; and *ibid.*, Part III, 636; also references in footnote 94 of this paper.

⁹⁶ William H. Powell, Major, U. S. A., "The Battle of Petersburg Crater," *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 551; Captain John Featherston "Graphic Account of Battle of Crater," in *Southern Historical Papers*, XXXIII (1905), 366.

⁹⁷ *Battles and Leaders*, IV, 551.

temporary confusion, from which the bewildered men barely rallied in time to prevent disaster.⁹⁸ In later reports and testimony there is general agreement that for more than fifteen minutes after the explosion there was little Confederate fire either of musketry or of artillery.

Information as to the size of the crater varies greatly. Union and Confederate accounts disagree. According to the finding of the Union court of inquiry about the mine explosion, "the crater was 50 to 60 yards long, 20 yards wide and 20 to 25 feet deep" and "was about 500 yards from the cemetery crest."⁹⁹ Since the day of the explosion was one of great confusion and the attackers were driven out in the afternoon, this finding of the court is but an estimation. In his official report Major General B. R. Johnson of the Confederate forces stated: "The crater measures 135 feet in length, 197 feet in breadth, and 30 feet deep."¹⁰⁰

Into this irregular hole, about five o'clock in the morning, the First Division of the Ninth Army Corps of the Union army rushed forward.¹⁰¹ From the very beginning plans went wrong. Arrived at the crater the brigades of this division fell into confusion. By the time they had gone down into and again climbed out of the crater on the opposite side, the Confederates along the trenches had recovered and poured a deadly fire upon the flanks of the men preparing to rush for the crest beyond.¹⁰² The advanced Union troops quickly fell back into the crater for protection. Again in the crater, they were picked off in their disordered formation by Confederate sharpshooters.¹⁰³ In addition Confederate artillery soon opened upon the crater and the adjacent territory.¹⁰⁴ Wright's battery to the northwest of the crater, one gun in a battery to the southwest, and four mortars under Captain Lamkin on the Jerusalem plank road poured a deadly fire into the crowded mass.¹⁰⁵ The initial check had come from failure to mop up the Confederate troops in the trenches to the right and left of the crater.¹⁰⁶ Later trouble was accentuated by artillery fire.¹⁰⁷ In the language of the official report of a Union officer: "The crest of the fort was swept with canister and grape shot from the batteries of the enemy. In the meantime, the enemy opened a heavy bombardment with their mortar batteries. They had perfect range of the crater; therefore almost every shell exploded in the midst of the dense mass of men, killing and wounding many of our brave soldiers at every explosion."¹⁰⁸

In the midst of this confusion the First Brigade of the Third Division advanced to the attack, expecting to move to the left of the crater. It reached the Confederate line of intrenchments and made an effort to clean out the Confederates to the south of the crater, but failed and the men fell back into the crater.¹⁰⁹ The first

⁹⁸ *Official Records*, Volume XL, Part I, 788-789.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 788.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 536, 538, 541.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 526, 536, 538, 541.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 789, 791.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 536, 759, 789.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 536, 791.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 70, 79, statements of Generals Burnside and Warren.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 759.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 555.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 574.

Brigade of this division made a frontal attack against the Confederate rifle pits on the left of the crater,¹¹⁰ but some of the regiments broke and fled back to the Union front line, while the others sought safety in the Confederate intrenchments.¹¹¹

In the meantime the Second Division likewise advanced, expecting to move to the right of the crater. But several regiments, in the advance, overlapped the crater and, caught in a withering fire of grape shot and canister which swept across the crater, sought refuge in the already crowded hole.¹¹² Other regiments moved on to the right and attempted to mop up the Confederate trenches to the north and even to advance to the crest of the hill beyond, but were driven back into the Confederate trenches or into the crater.¹¹³

Two hours of unavailing effort had now passed. The surprise, or *coup de main*, insisted upon by Meade as an essential feature of success,¹¹⁴ had really failed. Nevertheless, under an order from Meade to rush forward all his divisions,¹¹⁵ Burnside, about seven o'clock in the morning, sent forward the Fourth Division of negro troops.¹¹⁶ In column by left flank the negro regiments, with one exception, moved forward rapidly, going around or through and across the crater, and advanced to the open ground beyond in the direction of the crest of the hill. There they met with infantry resistance and, coming under galling artillery fire from the flanks, fell back in disorder, some into the crowded crater and some all the distance to the Union lines.¹¹⁷ In this retreat they were raked by rifle and artillery fire and fell in great numbers.¹¹⁸

The failure of the negro troops ended the hope of Union success. The Battle of the Crater was already lost. Had the Confederates been more assured, they might have refrained from infantry counter-attacks and saved many lives. Their artillery was playing havoc with the Union troops in the crater.¹¹⁹

By nine o'clock Grant and Meade recognized that the enterprise was a failure.¹²⁰ Shortly later Meade gave positive orders for the withdrawal of the Union troops from the crater.¹²¹ Fairly good proof that Grant never had high expectations of a satisfactory result may be seen in the fact that before the mine explosion he had made an engagement to meet President Lincoln at Fort Monroe on the morning of the following day.¹²²

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 574, 575, 586. For a later statement of the commander of this brigade, see *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, Historical Collections*, XXX, 130.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 575, 586-587.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 528, 547, 567.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 528, 547-548, 550 f.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47, 94, 170.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 141, and especially, *ibid.*, Part III, 658 f.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Part I, 64, 528.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73, 528, 597, 599.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 597, 599.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 555.

¹²⁰ *Official Records* Vol. XL, Part I, 48, 144, 170, 529; and *ibid.*, Part III, 662.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, Part III, 551, 590, 636. Grant did not confirm this appointment to meet Lincoln until 10:30 A. M. July 30.

To Burnside in command of the Ninth Corps, every single man of which according to his testimony before the court of inquiry had been put in action,¹²³ withdrawal at once seemed undesirable if not impossible.¹²⁴ His idea was that withdrawal could best be made after the day was over.¹²⁵ He therefore gave orders for withdrawal but left the appropriate time to the discretion of the commanding officers in the crater.¹²⁶

It was hardly less difficult, however, to remain in the crater than to withdraw. The Confederate artillery continued to take deadly toll. Burnside on the following day reported that losses in his corps in the engagement amounted to about 4,500. A great proportion of the loss occurred after the brigade commanders in the crater were made aware of the order to withdraw.¹²⁷

Two other dangers threatened the troops huddled in the crater. One of these was suffering and prostration from intense heat and thirst.¹²⁸ It was late in July, the day was clear and the heat of the sun was almost unbearable. To this was added the body heat of the mass of men in the crater.¹²⁹ Water was lacking and the wounded, particularly, suffered from thirst.¹³⁰

The final danger to those in the crater came from Confederate counter-attacks. The Union attack had been checked by "little more than three regiments of Elliott's, two regiments of Ransom's and two regiments of Wise's brigades, with the efficient aid of artillery."¹³¹ The men crowded into the crater were soon threatened by active counter-attacks. Within an hour after the explosion General Lee was notified. He ordered a concentration at the threatened point and hurried to the Gee house on the Jerusalem plank road, from where, directly behind the crater, he had an open view of the scene and could direct the defense. From the already weak Confederate forces along the lines, brigades were drawn together for assault on the enemy in the crater.¹³² They were withdrawn from the works in such a manner as not to be seen by the enemy, leaving the space which they had covered, unoccupied except by a few skirmishers stationed in the works at twenty paces apart.¹³³ In much the same way that they were withdrawn from

¹²³ *Ibid.*, Part I, 67. ¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 65. ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, Part I, 65, 529; and *ibid.*, Part III, 662.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 65; and, *ibid.*, Part III, 662, 663. ¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Part III, 705.

¹²⁸ *Official Records*, Vol. XI, Part I, 529, 551, 555. ¹²⁹ *Ibid.* ¹³⁰ *Ibid.* ¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 791.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 791, 792, Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 571; Humphreys, A. A., *Virginia Campaign of '64 and 65* (New York, 1883) p. 259; *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, Volume V, *Petersburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg; Historical Collections of the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society*, XXX (1906). Except for the detailed report of Major General B. R. Johnson and less thorough reports of a few other Confederate officers, contemporary Confederate information of the battle is lacking. Magazine articles at a later date written by former Confederate officers must be used.

¹³³ Captain John C. Featherston, "Graphic Account of Battle of Crater," in the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, XXXIII (1905), 360. But note the statements of Captain Charles H. Porter, "The Petersburg Mine," in *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, V, 233 f., that Union soldiers were aware of what was being done.

the works, these brigades were moved forward for attack upon the Union soldiers in the crater and in the old Confederate trenches to the right and left of the crater.¹³⁴ During the heat of the day three Confederate counter-charges were made.¹³⁵ Though some of the regiments in these charges came from other divisions, the majority of them belonged to the Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia brigades of Mahone's division.¹³⁶ In the first two charges the Confederates re-occupied part of their old intrenchments but were unsuccessful in their effort to take possession of the crater.¹³⁷ In the third and final counter-charge by Sander's brigade of Mahone's division, advance was made into the crater itself where after terrific hand to hand fighting, all Union troops who failed to reach the Union lines were either killed or captured.¹³⁸

An interesting fact in connection with the assaults of the Union troops, as was fully brought out in the Court of Inquiry on the Mine Explosion,¹³⁹ is that only brigade commanders accompanied the advance against the Confederate lines. The division commanders remained behind in the Union intrenchments. This was a matter of great significance, for it left the brigades without immediate co-ordination and direction from superior command. Among the causes of failure the court of inquiry cited "the want of a competent common head at the scene of the assault to direct affairs as occurrences should demand,"¹⁴⁰ and three of the division commanders of the Ninth Army Corps were declared answerable for the want of success.¹⁴¹

At 6:30 P. M., on the day of the explosion, Saturday July 30, 1864, Lee reported to the Confederate War Department that General Mahone in retaking the salient had recovered the four guns with which it was armed, captured 12 stand of colors, 74 officers, including Brigadier General Bartlett and staff and 855 enlisted men,¹⁴² to which he added the remark: "Upward of 500 of the enemy dead are lying unburied in the trenches," concluding with the statement that Mahone's loss was slight. Two days later Grant reported to the government at Washington that "the loss in the disaster of Saturday last foots up about 3,500 of whom 450 men were killed and 2,000 wounded," adding as a summary conclusion of the episode: "It was the saddest effort I have witnessed in the war."¹⁴³ Actually the Union losses were 458 killed, 1,982 wounded and 1,960 missing, or a total of 4,400.¹⁴⁴

On the Confederate side the losses were not by any means negligible. Major General B. R. Johnson reported the losses of his division as 19 officers and 149

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Official Records*, Vol. XL, Part I, 753, 791, 792.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* See, also, *Southern Historical Society Papers*, XXXIII (1905), 360.

¹³⁷ *Official Records*, Vol. XL, Part I, 791, 792.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 792. ¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 71, 74, 91, 93, 98, 103, 105, 113, 115, 116, 118, 128, 129.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 127, Potter accompanied his troops.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 128, 129.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 753; and, *ibid.*, Part III, 818.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, Part I, 16.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

men killed, 33 officers and 362 men wounded and 14 officers and 349 men missing or a total of 922.¹⁴⁵ Of this loss the greater part occurred in Elliott's brigade in occupation of the Confederate lines attacked, which as a result suffered heavily from the explosion itself, from the first savage attack, and from captures made early in the day.¹⁴⁶ If to the official losses of this division be added those of Mahone's division it is reasonable to suppose that the total Confederate losses amounted to at least 1,500 or about one third of those of the attackers. Considering the small number of Confederate troops south of the James River at the time such a loss was at least temporarily serious.

Apart from its interest as an episode this battle was significant in the campaign. It proved for the third time in two months that direct assault upon intrenchments was not only unavailing but likely to result in grave disaster. It meant six months of trench warfare in front of Petersburg and a war of attrition in which superior resources in men and the supplies of war must eventually triumph. By the spring of 1865 this eventual triumph was apparent to all.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 793, Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 573, calculates the total Confederate losses at from 1,400 to 1,500.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 788, 790, 791, 793.