

LESSONS from "THE CRATER"

**Beyond the romance, the spiritual quest comes this
challenge from the novel and movie "*COLD MOUNTAIN*:"**

***"WHETHER TO PRESS FORWARD
IN THE MIDST OF WITHERING FIRE
-- OR FIND A SAFER PATH HOME
TO HIGH GROUND?"***

By *Frederic A. Moritz*

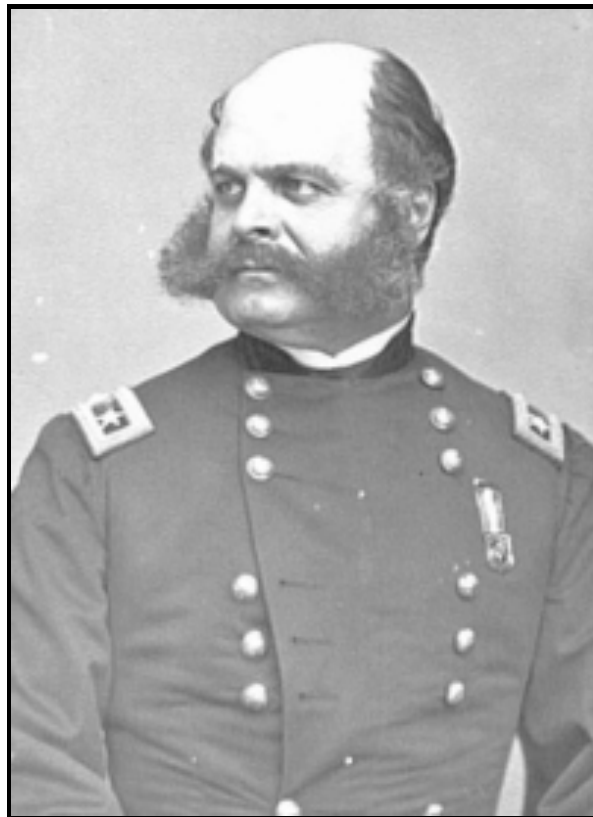


Cold Mountain, North Carolina: escaping war's wounds to the mind;

Great High Mountain
You Don't Have to Move that Mountain
I Went Up to the Mountain
Go Rest High Upon that Mountain
The Scarlett Tide

*"We can build the most innovative of plans,
as did General Ambrose Burnside -- Rhode Island's
most famous native son. But without the power and coordination
to carry them out, we are trapped in the craters we blow open,
trapped amidst the screams."*

A basic principle of strategy was to occupy and hold high ground.
But with so many Confederate trenches and fortifications about, Ambrose Burnside
took the idea of Pennsylvania mining engineer Colonel Henry Pleasants to dig
beneath,
to blow a massive hole beneath a Confederate fort and artillery battery
to gain an opening through Confederate trench lines.
The results were disaster.



[Ambrose Burnside: the Gambler](#)

Burnside reconsidered: insane or stupid?**The Burnside Carbine****Shooting "The Burnside"****Covering the Civil War by Kayak
(Burnside's conquest of New Bern)****Download this essay in .pdf file**

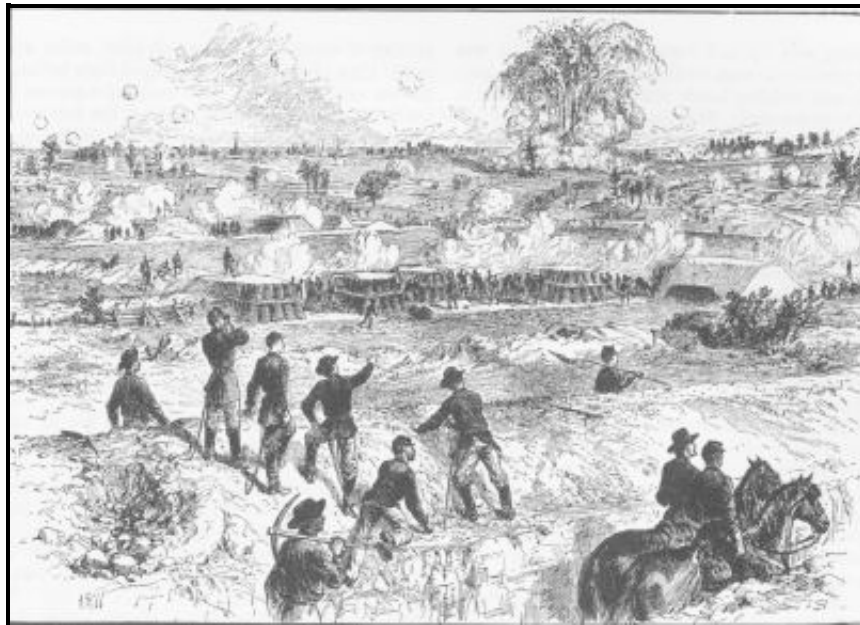
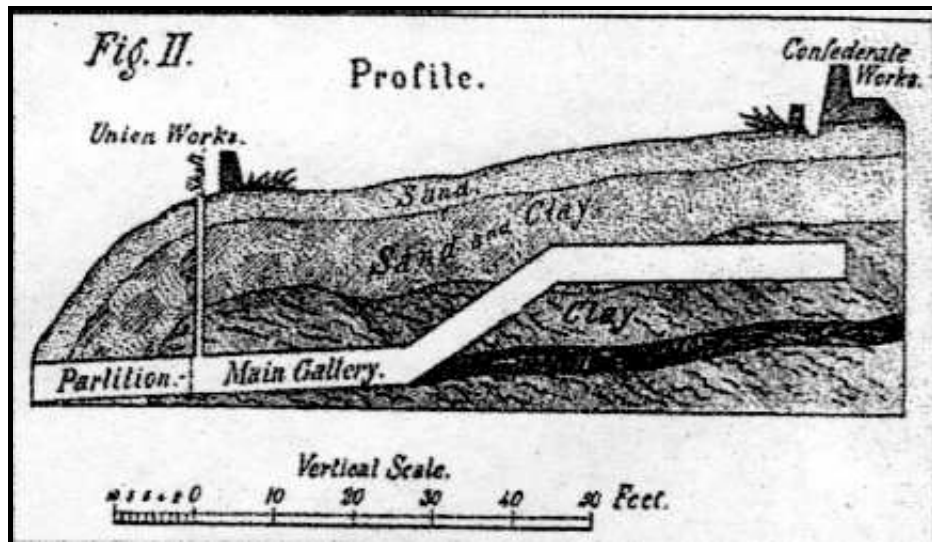
*"The hunger for revenge is a wonderful motivator --
but can lead to disaster when it backfires.
Each side stirred the passions of its troops for race revenge.
The result was a Union disaster, a merciless slaughter
of black Federal troops."*



Battle for "The Crater," from the movie "Cold Mountain"
YouTube: Video: Visit "The Crater" Today

LESSONS FROM "THE CRATER"**BURNSIDE GAMBLES ON BLACK TROOPS****AIMING FOR THE HIGH GROUND OPENS THE GATE TO RACIAL
MASSACRE****"THE CRATER" IN BOOKS AND MOVIE****WHY BLACKS TOOK A BACK SEAT****LESSONS OF POWER AND COMMAND****THE BATTLE UNFOLDS: CASUALTIES MOUNT****DISORGANIZATION TAKES ITS TOLL**

["CHOOSING STRAWS" FOR A RUM DRINKER TO LEAD
THE SCARED LEAD THE SCARED
ELLIOT'S SALIENT: HOW THE MINE WAS DUG
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"Hell busted:" Battle for "The Crater"

*"We'll rise above the scarlet tide
That trickles down through the mountain
And separates the widow from the bride"*

--The Scarlet Tide, [lyrics](#) from the movie "Cold Mountain"
Live on [YouTube](#) featuring Allison Krause

*"A sad day for our corps.
The old story again...a big slaughter, and nothing gained,"*

-- New Hampshire soldier's [diary](#), July 31, 1864

*"The saddest affair I have ever witnessed in the war...
General Burnside wanted to put his colored division in front,
and I believe that if he had done so it would have been a success. Still I
agreed with General Meade as to his objections to the plan. General
Meade said that if we put the colored troops in front...and it should
prove a failure, it would then be said, and very properly, that we were
shoving those people ahead to get killed because we did not care
anything about them...." -- General Ulysses S. Grant.*

WRITER'S NOTE: For a vivid feel for "The Crater's" savagery,
visit these links based on Noah Andre Trudeau's [The Last Citadel](#);
[eyewitness accounts](#) of the mining;
Confederate [eyewitness account](#) of counterattack; more Union and
Confederate [eyewitness accounts](#).
For eyewitness accounts of massacre of blacks at "The Crater,"
see [Civil War History 1](#); and [Civil War History 2](#)
See also [Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities
and Reprisals in the Civil War](#).

The ghosts from "The Crater" are not still.

They have a story to tell, lessons to teach -- passed down from
generation to generation.

Each generation can be trapped in its own "Crater." Each generation can face afresh the challenge: how to climb out, up to the higher ground?

Whether to press forward in the midst of withering fire --- or find a better way to get around.

Would Americans have won if they poured more lives and weapons into Vietnam? What should be done in Afghanistan?

Can American forces push through "The Crater" they have blown open to move on to "higher ground?" -- or are they, too, trapped in a "turkey shoot?" Is the "way out" forward, backwards or somehow around the sides?

LESSONS FROM "THE CRATER"

Charles's Frazier's 1997 novel Cold Mountain and the 2003 movie version differ greatly in plot and approach. Both place a romantic and spiritual focus on Inman's search for home, for peace, for solace against the brutality of Civil War.

But the broader story does not begin or end with Inman, the Confederate deserter who, after fighting and being wounded at "The Crater," seeks peace by attempting to return home to North Carolina's Cold Mountain.

Neither the movie nor the book explores command decisions and miscalculations which made "The Crater" into a special kind of Hell.

The movie and novel *Cold Mountain* are from a "soldier's eye" point of view.

Three books which help fill the gap are John Cannan's *The Crater*, William Marvel's *Burnside*, and Noah Andre Trudeau's *The Last Citadel: Petersburg, Virginia: June 1864--April 1865*.

Let us look beyond *Cold Mountain* to some of the broader lessons behind the failure of the Burnside plan -- and then examine them in detail below. Then we shall return to the "human dimensions" which *Cold Mountain* so brilliantly explores:

1) No matter how inspired the scheme, without the power to carry it out, without the support of those above and strong direction of those below, there is only withering fire ahead

2) Disaster can happen when the certitude of well laid plans runs head-on against the reality of miscommunication, the unknown, the unknowable, imperfect intelligence, all of the many shifting variables which shatter predictability.

3) Command confusion, conflicting, shifting orders, bickering at the leadership level, failure to forcefully lead advancing troops to higher ground can be as deadly as enemy fire.

4) The hunger for revenge is a wonderful motivator -- but can lead to disaster when it backfires. At "The Crater" each side stirred the passions of its troops for race revenge. The result was a Union disaster, a merciless slaughter of black Federal troops.

5) Experience does not guarantee success. For the longer a unit was in the field under fire, the more cautious it could be, the more hesitant to advance into the barrels of cannon and musket. In such a unit the bravest officers and men might already be dead -- leaving the scared to lead the scared.

General Ambrose Burnside pushed a bold plan to mine, blow up and assault Confederate lines before Petersburg Virginia. He hoped the blast would open the way for the capture of Petersburg to speed the end of the Civil War. The horrendous explosion and Union assault on July 30, 1864 is a backdrop for the novel and movie *Cold Mountain*.

Brilliant in plan, flawed in execution, the assault bogged down in disaster with Confederates on the rim firing down in a "turkey shoot" on the Federals -- trapped below in a crater of their own making.

The disaster ended Burnside's military career. He was sent on leave and never recalled.

It nailed shut the coffin on what had once been a rising star after his bold amphibious landings to [conquer coastal North Carolina](#),

including New Bern, in March 1862.

General Burnside had reluctantly gone on to head the Army of the Potomac after catching Abe Lincoln's notice with his aggressive, fast moving North Carolina campaigns. He lost that mixed blessing after reverses at Antietam, Fredericksburg, and the "Mud March."

Then came his "Crater," for him the end of the line.



**BURNSIDE THE GAMBLER:
BLACK TROOPS WOULD CARRY THE DAY;
REVENGE AS A MOTIVATOR?**

'Ol Ambrose, he was a risk taker, a man who in his youth loved to try his hand at cards with river boat gamblers. No matter that his childhood teacher was a Quaker, that his Indiana father was

influenced by Quaker teachings, that he was known for kindness and compassion.

Burnside, "friend" of Abraham Lincoln, could pour it on, up the ante, send in wave after wave to be shot down -- as he did when commanding the Union defeat at [Fredericksburg](#) in December 1862. As he was to do again at "The Crater."

Although he was no idealistic abolitionist, at Petersburg he gambled that "green" but fresh, well trained, less war weary black troops placed in front assault could win the day.

(Some white Federal officers saw black troops as weak performers in complicated, disciplined battle maneuvers -- but as fierce and effective in frontal charges)

Burnside appears to have calculated negro troops would be highly motivated to avenge the Confederate killing of several hundred black troops at [Fort Pillow](#), Tennessee three months earlier. On April 12 Nathan Bedford Forrest had taken few black prisoners in what was widely seen as a brutal massacre.

The "Fort Pillow Massacre" became a Union rallying cry and cemented resolve to see the war through to its conclusion. Ambrose Burnside and others could hope the massacre would help motivate revenge seeking black troops to storm "The Crater."

It did not work out that way.

On July 30 Ambrose Burnside played his last game.



*"Jack of diamonds (jack of diamonds)
jack of diamonds (jack of diamonds)
I know you, from old*

*you've robbed my poor pockets
of my silver and my gold"*

--[The Cuckoo](#) Clarence Ashley on YouTube, lyrics from
the movie *Cold Mountain*;
[The Cuckoo](#), in an Irish pub on YouTube

AIMING FOR THE HIGH GROUND OPENS THE WAY FOR RACIAL MASSACRE

A basic principle of strategy was to occupy and hold high ground. But with so many Confederate trenches and fortifications about, Ambrose Burnside took the idea of Pennsylvania mining engineer Colonel [Henry Pleasants](#) to dig beneath, to blow a massive hole beneath a Confederate fort and artillery battery to gain an opening through Confederate trench lines.

The irony was that Burnside's forces, in their bid to charge through "The Crater" as a gateway to seize the high ground of Cemetery Hill to the west, trapped themselves in a vulnerable "low ground" of their very own making.

After a month of preparation, Pennsylvania miners lit a sputtering fuse early in the morning of July 30. The 8,000 pounds of black powder blew at 4:45am.

The blast left some 300 Confederate casualties with as many as 200 dead. A plume of smoke and debris extended several hundred feet into the sky, according to [eyewitnesses](#).

The distance between the Union line and "The Crater" was little more than 500 feet.

It took about five minutes for Federal assault units to begin the rush across "no man's land" into a hole about 170 by 60 feet and 30 feet deep. They found themselves in a desolate chaos of buried and half buried dead and wounded, broken cannon and timbers from destroyed fortifications. Union soldiers found it easier to get in than to get out. Altogether some 15 to 20,000 Federals moved forward into and around "The Crater."

Eyewitness accounts make clear several Union units penetrated through or around "The Crater" to establish offensive positions. Many retreated back into it and nearby trenches for protection

when Confederates counterattacked.

The hole provided little room to reload, little space to fire -- but made hundreds of men easy targets for Confederate bayonet thrusts and skull crushing blows from musket butts.

Black Federals who stormed into battle in the second wave at 8am did some of the fiercest fighting and took some of the heaviest casualties of the battle. Retreating and advancing Federals became intermingled, cramped in narrow trenches, confused, blocked by soldiers huddling for shelter.

Trapped amidst the chaos, the reinforcing blacks were unable to rapidly advance or defend themselves against mortars, musket balls, and the later bayonet charge of fierce counterattack. The way was open for a massacre.

The very act of throwing soldiers into action fragmented them, hobbled them, especially with higher officers at a distance. Junior officers on the scene were rapidly shot down. So there was little clear leadership to inspire and shape movement through "The Crater" to take the next offensive step.

Counterattacking Virginians and North Carolinians began their mobilization at 6am, commencing their attack at 9am. They were ordered to sneak up on their enemies huddled in "The Crater" or sheltering in nearby Confederate trenches: fire one volley in, then plunge down into the crater and trenches to kill with bayonets and musket butts.

As it happened, the black troops who stormed into battle in the second wave did some of the fiercest fighting and took some of the heaviest casualties of the battle.

Their presence also backfired. Accounts of Confederate soldiers indicate the counterattacking forces of General William Mahone showed extra ferocity and tenacity when they realized they could kill large numbers of negro soldiers as they drove back the Union forces.

Advancing Union blacks had yelled "no quarter" in a call for revenge against Confederates for massacre of black troops at [Fort Pillow](#), Tennessee three months earlier, on April 12, 1864.

Counterattacking Confederates angrily picked up the cry -- and shot, clubbed, or bayoneted surrendering or wounded black Federals in "The Crater" and elsewhere on the field (see

eyewitness accounts of massacre of blacks at "The Crater" in [Civil War History 1](#); and [Civil War History 2](#). Blacks who had battled and trampled on the bodies of white "massas" could expect little mercy.

A [Virginia soldier](#) who fought there vividly describes the race revenge which helped motivate the Confederate counterattack. Hand to hand fighting did most of the killing. By 2pm the battle was basically over, although full Federal withdrawal took several hours longer.

Confederate diggers moved in fast to rebuild their lines by shoveling in dirt over some 600 bodies lying in or near "The Crater."

See [Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War](#) on Confederate atrocities against blacks, including the battle for "The Crater."

Edited by Gregory J. W. Urwin, this volume focuses on the tendency of Confederate troops to murder black Union soldiers and runaway slaves. Twelve historians show the war to be a wrenching social revolution whose bloody excesses were exacerbated by racial hatred. It divulges the details of black retaliation and the resulting cycle of fear and violence that poisoned race relations during Reconstruction.

*"I thought I heard a black bell toll
A little bird did sing
Man has no choice
When he wants every thing"*

--*The Scarlet Tide*, [lyrics](#) from the movie *Cold Mountain*

"THE CRATER" IN BOOKS AND MOVIE

In the movie *Cold Mountain* the battle for "The Crater" is a grandiose and dominating visual image, a pivot for the plot's development, a trauma which leads toward Inman's decision to desert.

The movie simplifies, condenses, or omits many of the people and places Inman experiences on his way home.

In the novel by Charles Frazier, as in the movie, Inman is wounded at "The Crater" and deserts after hospitalization. But the images are cooler, less dazzled with blood and emotion. The novel depends far less on battle scenes.

Here is Charles Frazier on the battle for "The Crater" (page 124):

"Inman was in the wattled trenches parching rye to make a pot of what they call coffee when the ground heaved up along the lines to his right. A column of dirt and men rose into the air and then fell all around. Inman was showered with dirt A piece of a man's lower leg with the boot still on the foot landed right beside him. A man down the trench from Inman came running through and hollering, 'Hell has busted!'

"The men in the trenches to left and right of the hole fell back expecting an attack, but in a little while they realized that the Federals had rushed into the crater and then, amazed at what they had done, just huddled there, confused by that new landscape of pure force.

"...The mortar fire blew many of them (the Federals) to pieces, and when that was done, Inman's regiment led the attack into the crater, and the fighting inside was of a different order than he had done before. It was war in its most antique form, as if hundreds of men were put into a cave, shoulder to shoulder, and told to kill each other. There was no room for firing and loading muskets, so they mainly used them as clubs.....

"The raw dirt walls of the crater loomed all around with just a circle of sky above, as if this was all the world there was, and fighting was all there was to it. They killed everybody who didn't run away."



"The Crater:" how it seemed in 1939



*Pouring deadly fire on Federals
trapped in a crater of their own making*

*"I thought I heard a black bell toll
A little bird did sing
Man has no choice
When he wants every thing*

*"We'll rise above the scarlet tide
That trickles down through the mountain
And separates the widow from the bride*

*"Man goes beyond his own decision
Gets caught up in the mechanism
Of swindlers who act like kings
And brokers who break everything"*

--*The Scarlet Tide*, [lyrics](#) from the movie *Cold Mountain*



"The Crater" after the battle

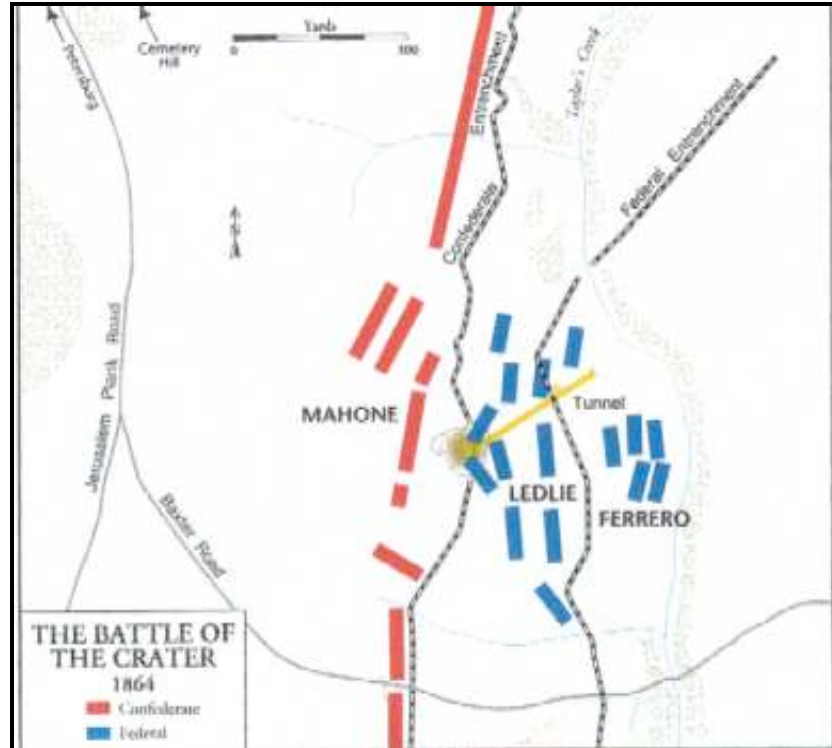
WHY BLACKS TOOK A BACK SEAT:

Despite lack of strong support from General George Meade and drunken cowardice by General James H. Ledlie, Burnside's subordinate in command of the attack, Burnside had pressed on to lose thousands in casualties. Until General Meade called off the operation.

Ironically Ambrose Burnside himself placed the outcome of the battle in the hands of fate. He "cast straws" to pick General Ledlie's units as replacement for the "green" but fresher, better prepared black troops he had planned to use in the first assault.

Supreme commander Ulysses Grant and General Meade on July 28 had barred the coloreds from leading the July 30 attack.

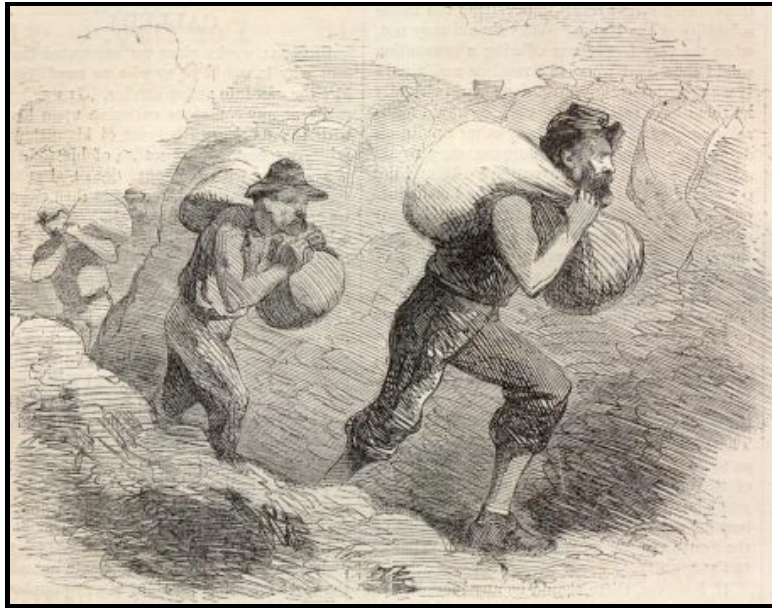
Grant and Meade said they did not want blacks seen as cannon fodder. Perhaps they preferred them kept safe to do their customary much needed menial work of digging trenches for white troops. Perhaps they were sensitive to possible criticism from Congress. Perhaps they understood the danger of a massacre of coloreds.



The line of battle



"The Crater" today



Carrying powder to the tunnel (Harper's Weekly)



Entrance to the tunnel today



Cold Mountain, North Carolina

*"Once I stood at the foot of a great high mountain
That I wanted so much to climb
And on top of this mountain was a beautiful fountain
That flows with the water of life*

*"I fell down on my knees at the foot of this mountain
I cried, 'O Lord what must I do?
I want to climb this mountain, I want to drink from this fountain
That flows so clear in my view'*

*"Then I heard a sweet voice from the top of this mountain
Saying, 'Child put your hand in mine'
I started climbing slowly, 'Watch your steps at the edges
And take one step at a time'*

*"I started climbing upward taking one step at a time
The higher I got the harder I climbed*

*"I'm still climbing upward and my journey's almost ended
I'm nearing the top and you ought to see the view*

*"Oh the water flows freely, there's enough to make you free
So friend if you're thirsty climb this mountain with me"*

--High Mountain, [lyrics](#) from the movie Cold Mountain

LESSONS OF POWER AND COMMAND

"The Crater" teaches lessons of power and command.

For Burnside, even after demotion, still had the imagination, the boldness to embrace a stunningly novel and risky strategy, to mine and break through the Confederate lines. But with his fallen star he was dependent on the support the man who replaced him as leader of the Army of the Potomac, the uncooperative and contemptuous General George Meade.

Burnside lacked the power to command needed backup and resources for his assault -- neither the fresh Afro American troops he wanted at the lead, nor the 12,000 pounds of black powder he had asked for, instead of the 8,000 pounds he was given.

Burnside was notorious for giving subordinates lots of leeway -- a small problem if they were competent, but potentially disastrous if

they needed strict command.

William Marvel's sympathetic biography *Burnside* gives this version of how the black troops were trained. Under the command of General Edward Ferrero, these troops had been used as laborers by every corps General Ulysses Grant had loaned them to in the last few weeks. Now they were sprung free to prepare for the assault:

"The black troops began sprucing up for the big show and practicing the complicated footwork necessary to carry out Burnside's plan. Like more than half the regiments in Burnside's corps now, the Negro battalions were all new -- most were mustered in that spring -- and their training had languished while they dug trenches and guarded wagons....

"The nine black regiments (including two that had joined after the corps left Annapolis) had nearly two weeks in which to prepare. By the time Pleasants had finished the mine and filled it with powder, they knew their parts well. They needed to only to be unleashed after the dust settled." (Page 393)

John Cannan's *The Crater* gives this view:

"Ferrero drilled his troops in preparation for the grand movement he envisioned. The troops moved in formation over entrenchments performing the maneuvers they would make in the actual attack. Burnside was told that the officers and men were extremely confident about their ability to undertake the tasks required of them by the plan....Colonel Henry G. Thomas, the commander of Ferrero's 2nd Brigade, recalled the division's enthusiasm for their assigned role:

"'We were all pleased with the compliment of being chosen to lead in the assault. Both officers and men were eager to show the white troops what the colored divisions could do. We had acquired confidence in our men. They believed us infallible. We had drilled certain movements, to be executed in gaining and occupying the crest. It is a axiom in military art that that there

are times when the ardor, hopefulness, and enthusiasm of new troops, not yet rendered doubtful by reverses or chilled by defeat, more than compensate, in dash, for training and experience.'" (Pages 31-32)

All the special preparations came to nothing. At the last minute supreme commander Grant and General Meade barred an assault led by Afro Americans for fear that they would be seen as cannon fodder. The white troops who took their place had little advance preparation.

Thus Ambrose Burnside, the dynamic wonder boy of the Carolina campaigns, had neither support from the "top" nor effective implementation of command "below."

A calm man known for sunny disposition, he was left to bickering and pouting -- and a final explosion of temper with his superior General Meade -- which helped seal the end of his military career.

THE BATTLE UNFOLDS CASUALTIES MOUNT

Book and movie *Cold Mountain's* graphic creation of lines and confrontation at "The Crater" are fair enough. Each catches much that is authentic, each changes some things for drama's sake.

After a delay in getting the fuse to light and burn, the massive explosion came at 4:45am. The plan sputtered into action like a wet fuse. It was basically over by 2pm.

Union losses were reported in one estimate as at least 504 killed or mortally wounded, 1,881 captured, with 3798 men as casualties that day. Some estimates, especially of blacks, go considerably higher.

Confederates losses are estimated as half the Union losses.

Black Union casualties from Ferrero's Afro American 4th division were put as 1,327, with at least 209 killed, substantially higher than any other division engaged. Some historians take high black casualties as indications both of their heavy, fierce involvement in the fighting and of the Confederate inclination to bayonet or club to death wounded blacks or blacks seeking to surrender (Cannan, pages 147-149).

Five hundred Union prisoners were taken, and 150 of these prisoners were [United States Colored Troops](#).

WHY TRAPPED IN "THE CRATER?" DISORGANIZATION TAKES ITS TOLL

The film has it seem the charging Federals were simply trapped in "The Crater" and then shot down.

Part of the truth. In fact there was some time before the Confederates regrouped. Some of the Federals in the 5am attack did push forward through and around "The Crater" to occupy Confederate lines, to establish offensive outposts.

But the bluecoats were weary, cautious, disorganized and "led" by General Ledlie who was drinking rum in a distant bomb shelter. Despite Burnside's orders, Ledlie did not lead his men forward in a consistent offensive to seize the high ground.

Precious time was wasted, with no coherent move beyond "The Crater." Mass confusion followed when the fresher, specially prepared colored troops (which Burnside had wanted in the lead) were sent forward at 8am.

Despite Burnside's repeated entreaties for aid to push ahead, his superior, General Meade, decided to order withdrawal from "The Crater" and from all supporting offensives.

Supreme commander General Ulysses Grant had himself paid a personal visit to Burnside after touring the trenches around "The Crater." A witness later recalled that Grant was appalled by the collapse of the offensive. He told Burnside shortly after 9am that the attack was doomed and should be called off.

About 10:30am General Mead formally ordered the attack suspended and withdrawal begun. Fighting and massacre continued for several hours amidst confusion and miscommunication -- as Burnside reluctantly and slowly gave up his prized plan.

The distance between [Confederate and Union lines](#) at the site of "The Crater" was unusually close -- little more than 500 feet. How were the Federals able to entrench so near to the Confederates, easily within range of cannon and musket fire?

Part of the answer was hundreds of diggers, frequently blacks, who

built instant trenches, sometimes covered by temporary bullet proof [sap rollers](#). Trenches allowed men to move up close to enemy fortifications without taking direct fire. Afro Americans troops were frequently loaned to different units for menial digging details. Trenches to allow relatively safe movement within range of enemy guns could be dug very fast.

To assault and breach enemy fortifications was another matter.



Enfield musket



Colt revolver

**BICKERING AND CONFUSION:
"CHOOSING STRAWS" FOR A RUM DRINKER TO LEAD**

*"Man goes beyond his own decision
Gets caught up in the mechanism
Of swindlers who act like kings
And brokers who break everything"*

--The Scarlet Tide, [lyrics](#) from the movie *Cold Mountain*

Command confusion, conflicting, shifting orders, bickering at the leadership level, failure to forcefully lead advancing troops to higher ground all played a part. After higher command of Generals Grant and Meade at the last minute excluded the fresh and specially prepared Afro American forces from leading the forward attack, Burnside took the disastrous step of casting straws to chose an officer and command to replace them.

He selected a man who turned out to be an alcoholic, General James H. Ledlie. Who drank to ease his fear. Who was in no condition to dynamically lead the battle weary unprepared men who would replace the blacks. An officer who retreated to a bomb shelter to drink rum while his troops stormed into "The Crater," instead of around it, as had been part of the original plan.

We can build the most innovative of plans, as did General Ambrose Burnside -- Rhode Island's most famous native son. But without the power and coordination to carry them out, we are trapped in the craters we blow open, trapped amidst the screams.

WHEN EXPERIENCE BRINGS DEFEAT: THE SCARED LEAD THE SCARED

This was the paradox of combat: the longer a unit was in the field under fire, the more experienced it was, the more cautious, the more hesitant to advance into the mouths of cannon and musket fire it became. In such a unit the bravest officers and men might already be dead -- leaving the scared to lead the scared.

Survival of the cautious, with younger, less experienced, less courageous officers who took over after other officers fell. So it seems that at "The Crater" badly led, battle weary troops lost the day.

Survival of the fittest? Perhaps. The other side of the coin: those who survived sometimes were or became cowards.

Or deserters -- who wanted out of Hell -- like Inman, the Confederate soldier seeking peace on Cold Mountain.

COLD MOUNTAIN IN THE GREEK HOMERIC TRADITION; SHELTER FROM A RAGING CIVIL WAR?

***Cold Mountain* is a modern retelling of the Homeric legend of**

Odysseus returning from the Trojan war (set in Civil War times).

Author [Charles Frazier](#) put it this way:

"He (Inman) was my great great uncle. And part of the character was based on my great grandfather. Both of them went to the Civil War -- volunteered in the first few months of that war fever and went off to battle. This Inman was in some of the worst fighting of the war. He was in Virginia and was in many battles in key positions. But I knew so little about him. There were no photographs of him; he wrote no letters home. It's just a little fragment of a family story about this guy -- of his war experience, his coming home, and what happened to him when he got there.

"When my father told me the story of this ancestor, that was one of the first things I thought of -- that there were certain parallels to *The Odyssey* that might be useful in trying to think of a way to tell this story. A warrior, weary of war, trying to get home and facing all kinds of impediments along the way, a woman at home beset by all kinds of problems of her own that are as compelling as his.

"So I reread *The Odyssey* -- that was one of the first things I did when I really began working on the book. There was a certain temptation to write parallel scenes -- to try to have a Cyclops scene, or whatever. But really quickly I decided that that would be pretty limiting and kind of artificial. So I just let *The Odyssey* stay in the back of my mind as a model of a warrior wanting to put that war behind him and get home."

He has also explained it is the story of a people, a region caught in between in wartime as pawns in a distant battle.

"You had this slave/agricultural system in the South and a growing industrial capitalist system in the North, and then you had people like Inman who lived in an older economic system, kind of like subsistence farming. You had people like that in the North and South, and one of the tragedies of the war to me was that those people got caught up, caught in the crossfire

of this war. Many of them died fighting somebody else's battle."

This theme of an older, isolated lifestyle under threat from a distant war comes through much more strongly in the book than in the movie. Both the book and the movie take us back to Odysseus struggling to return to an idealized home which is under threat from both within and from without.

In Inman's case the threats to home are both Federal raiders and Teague's terroristic Home Guard dedicated to hunting down those who refuse to fight for the Confederacy.

The peaceful, elegant horizons and deserted slopes and caves of Cold Mountain become shelters against war for draft dodgers, deserters, musicians and all manner of independent folk. They refuse to accept outside authority and, although southern, refuse to give their lives in defense of slavery.

A point of view expressed by the old goat herding hermit mountain woman who treats Inman's wounds with laudanum on his way to Cold Mountain (*Cold Mountain*, page 217):

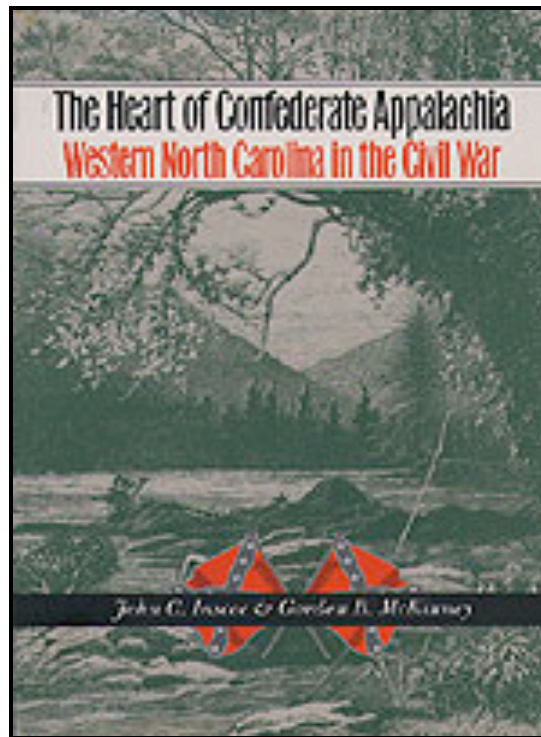
"I've traveled a fair bit in those low counties. Nigger-owning makes the rich man proud and ugly and it makes the poor man mean. It's a curse laid on the land. We've lit a fire and now it's burning us down. God is going to liberate niggers, and fighting to prevent it is against God."

For historical background on the Civil War in North Carolina's Appalachians see [*The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War*](#) by John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney.

This is the story of how the mountains became hiding places for deserters, draft dodgers, fugitive slaves, and escaped prisoners of war -- and of how the conflict in the mountains became a more localized and internalized guerrilla war.

Deserters sometimes became bandits. Differing viewpoints on the war and slavery could reflect deep and bitter family feuds. The people of western North Carolina responded to the war in dramatically different ways. Although Abe Lincoln apparently

hoped western North Carolina might rally to the Federals, the authors argue support for the Union was never as strong as sometimes believed. These [selections](#) give insights on how the war affected the region around Cold Mountain.



[Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina](#) by John C. Inscoe also contradicts the belief that slavery did not exist or was marginal in western North Carolina. Though the patterns of slavery were different in many cases, this book argues the institution was still very strong in the region and had a profound impact on the politics, society, and cultural values of the people of the mountains.

See also [Bushwhackers \(Civil War in North Carolina\)](#) by William R. Trotter. This spotlights the nastiness of the mountain conflict and the difficulties the Confederates had in defending the western area of the state, especially in the latter part of the war. Trotter also deals with Confederate deserters and draft dodgers who flocked to the mountains to hide out. Among the fighters was the [Thomas Highland Legion](#), including a remnant of Cherokee Indians allied with the Confederacy in defense of western North Carolina from Union raiders.

MIXING A NEW BLACK AND WHITE MUSIC

The place Cold Mountain also comes to symbolize the mix of white and "nigger" musical cultures, speeded by the Civil War, which produced the banjo and the fiddle/banjo tunes of the Appalachians.

A [Charles Frazier interview](#) recalls "stumbling upon something" while researching the novel, something which symbolized both the importance of music and the hardships of mountain people caught in the middle of a great civil war:

"...I remember early on in writing the book, going for a walk in the mountains and coming upon a grave -- it was actually two graves, side by side -- in this lonesome hillside, five miles from the nearest road. I found out later that it was an old man and a boy who had been killed by federal raiders who had come over the mountains from Tennessee looking for food.

"They killed these two guys that were just going about their business. Near there is another double grave with a fiddler and a boy in it who were killed by Southern Home Guard in much the same way. Looking at those two graves, and seeing these people who were essentially farmers, caught in that crossfire and killed in this utterly pointless way -- I think did shape some of my feeling toward the war."

That fiddler's grave is the origin of the novel's key musical figure, Stobrod. This wandering, rebellious, white trash former moonshiner builds his own fiddle in the forest after deserting from the Confederate army to shelter near Cold Mountain.

Stobrod and his music symbolize the stubborn independence of the mountain region -- and the future crossover between the music of black Americans and the ballads of Scotch Irish mountain people.

A classic study of this interaction among black and white musicians is Cecilia Conway's [African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia](#).

In the novel (but not in the movie) the wayward Stobrod develops for the first time in his life an obsession to improve his music because of the suffering he has seen in the war. He discovers (*Cold Mountain*, page 233):

"that his main interest has become the musical niggers that often played for the customers. Many a night Stobrod wandered from place to place until he found a fellow working at a stringed instrument with authority, some genius of the guitar or banjo. Then he'd take out his fiddle and play until dawn, and every time he did, he learned something new.

"He first spend his attention on matters of tuning and fingering and phrasing. Then he began listening to the words of the songs the niggers sang, admiring how they chanted out every desire and fear in their lives as clear and as proud as can be. And he soon had a growing feeling that he was learning things about himself that had never sifted into his thinking before."

Unlike the novel, the movie shows no interaction between Stobrod and black musicians, no black influence on what he creates. In both the novel and the movie, unlike in history, Stobrod survives his wounding by the Home Guard, as a symbol of a mountain spirit that survives the war.



"Tinprint" of Stobrod (left), other musicians from movie Cold Mountain

WAR'S WOUNDS TO THE MIND

The Hell of "The Crater" can never be left behind, for it (plus the battle at Fredericksburg, Virginia) follows Inman in his dark dreams, fearful remembrances, amidst ominous omens he encounters on his way.

The movie fails to catch this as clearly as does the novel. The printed word masterfully brings alive Inman's flashbacks and the dark intrusion of his moods, all not far what today is popularly referred to as [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder](#) (PTSD).

(For graphic evidence of how Frazier uses language to paint wounds of the mind caused by battlefield stress, click on this [Sparknotes](#) version, check out the summary and analysis of Chapter 1, "The Shadow of a Crow.")

Not so far is this from [Achilles In Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character](#), where Dr. Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who treated Vietnam veterans for *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*, finds Homer's Trojan War [Iliad](#) and [Odyssey](#) on the battlefields of Vietnam.

Men who are struggling to find their way home after trauma.

In *Cold Mountain*, Inman is not a man of hate, but in battle he has experienced some of the ingredients of post traumatic stress: both guilt and grief. He is a survivor longing for normalcy, a normalcy which is denied him when he is shot down just before reaching Cold Mountain.

The loss of friends in battle is a primal source of what is today called post traumatic stress.

(Remember the movie scene of a dying young friend in *Cold Mountain*. Remember how Inman tried unsuccessfully to save him by leaping into "The Crater" at Petersburg -- only to watch him later die of a bayonet wound. To look upon horror and not be able to change it is, for the vulnerable, a key pillar of the PTSD symptom known as "trauma related guilt:" [source one](#); [source two](#).)

It is said soldiers do not like to talk of painful loss, yet that is part of their healing. Note that in *Cold Mountain*, [music](#) is part of the

healing -- for the trauma of the Civil War. The musician also is a survivor who ministers to the soul.

So we have in the movie *Cold Mountain* the religious hymns and folk tunes with their combinations of mourning and celebration, their catharsis of suffering.

Hymns of the 19th century were cut of that, and that is part of their power, their beauty. For to be washed in the blood of the lamb is to temporarily come free from both sin (guilt) and grief.

"And am I born to die?
To lay this body down!
And must my trembling spirit fly
Into a world unknown?
A land of deepest shade,
Unpierced by human thought
The dreary regions of the dead,
Where all things are forgot.
Soon as from earth I go
What will become of me?
Eternal happiness or woe,
Must then my portion be!
Waked by the trumpet sound,
I from my grave shall rise;
And see the Judge with glory crowned,
And see the flaming skies!"

--Idumea, [lyrics](#) from the movie *Cold Mountain*
Now [listen](#) to the song in shape note;
Now [listen](#) to this song in Appalachian banjo



Odysseus returning from the Trojan war

COLD MOUNTAIN IN THE CHINESE TRADITION

China's history was one of alternating chaos, civil war, and stability enforced by bureaucratic, strong dynastic rule. After war and chaos it was natural to come a striving for peace either through strong government or retreat to the serenity of the mountain monastery.

Fear of civil war and anarchy has been a powerful force in China for strong centralized rule, right on down to the communists. Ruthless suppression could be the price of peace.

Civil war was endemic to China -- and so there is this distant link to the trials of Inman, who never made it to the peace of a mountain retreat -- gunned down at the gates to Cold Mountain.

For in violent times those who seek peace can be those who suffer.

Here are some Chinese thoughts about related but different themes, the search for peace of the mind.

The name Han Shan means: Cold Cliff, Cold Mountain, or Cold Peak. Han Shan is known in Japan as "Kanzan."



Han Shan

*"People ask the way to Cold Mountain.
Cold Mountain? There is no road that goes through.
Even in summer the ice doesn't melt;
though the sun comes out, the fog is blinding.
How can you hope to get there by aping me?
Your heart and mine are not alike.
If your heart were the same as mine,
Then you could journey to the very center!"*

- Han Shan, 750

**Translated by Burton Watson
*Cold Mountain: One Hundred Poems***

"The Way to Hanshan is a queer one;

*No ruts or hoof prints are seen.
Valley winds into valley,
Peak rises above peak;
Grasses are bright with dew,
And pine trees sigh in the breeze.
Even now you do not know?
The reality is asking the shadow the way."*

- Han Shan, 750

**Translated by R. H. Blyth
Zen and Zen Classics, p 134.**

*"Cold Mountain is a house
Without beams or walls.
The six doors left and right are open
The hall is blue sky.
The rooms all vacant and vague
The east wall beats on the west wall
At the center nothing."*

- Han Shan, 750

**Translated by Gary Snyder
Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems
House With No Walls**

*"Thirty years ago I was born into the world.
A thousand, ten thousand miles I've roamed,
By rivers where the green grass lies thick,
Beyond the border where the red sands fly.
I brewed potions in a vain search for life everlasting,
I read books, I sang songs of history,
And today I've come home to Cold Mountain
To pillow my head on the stream and wash my ears."*

- Han Shan, 750

**Translated by Burton Watson
Cold Mountain: One Hundred Poems**

*"You find a flower half-buried in leaves,
And in your eye its very fate resides.
Loving beauty, you caress the bloom;
Soon enough, you'll sweep petals from the floor.
Terrible to love the lovely so,*

*To count your own years, to say "I'm old,"
To see a flower half-buried in leaves
And come face to face with what you are."*

**- Han Shan, 750
Translated by Peter Stambler**

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