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The Battle of the Crater: the Civil War's worst massacre

[Civil War History](#), [Sept, 1997](#) by [Bryce A. Suderow](#)

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After fighting his way south from the Rapidan to the gates of Richmond during May and June 1864, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant found himself stalemated in front of the formidable trenches protecting Petersburg, the rail junction that supplied the Confederate capital.

During June and July 1864, soldiers of Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside's Ninth Corps tunneled under the Confederate lines outside Petersburg and filled two galleries with eight thousand pounds of gunpowder. The goal was to explode the gunpowder to create a breach in the Confederate lines and to rush troops through the gap to seize Cemetery Hill. It was supposed that once this commanding position was taken, the Confederates would be forced to abandon Petersburg and Richmond, Lee's army would be beaten into submission, and the war would end.

At 4:45 a.m., on July 30, 1864, the Federals detonated the explosives beneath a salient held by Gen. Stephen Elliott Jr.'s South Carolina brigade, destroying one battery and a regiment and a half of infantry. In their place was a huge smoldering hole in the ground, a crater, measuring 150-200 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep.

Shortly after the explosion, three white divisions were sent, one after the other, to exploit the break, but they were so badly led that they were easily driven back into the Crater. At 8:00 a.m., Gen. Edward Ferrero's Fourth (Colored) Division, numbering 4,200 officers and men, was ordered forward, its two brigades led by Cols. Joshua K. Siegfried and Henry Goddard Thomas. Siegfried's brigade consisted of the 27th, 30th, 39th, and 43d U.S. Colored Infantry. Thomas's brigade was composed of 19th, 23d, 28th, 29th, and 31st U.S. Colored Infantry.(1)

Despite heavy opposition from Ransom's North Carolina brigade and portions of Elliott's South Carolinians, the 30th and 43d U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) of Siegfried's brigade seized the last Confederate trench that stood between them and Cemetery Hill, capturing 150 prisoners. Thomas's 2d brigade assaulted simultaneously on Siegfried's left but was repulsed with heavy losses in his lead regiment, the 31st USCT. He reformed and advanced a second time at 9 a.m., this time with the 29th USCT in the lead.

Both brigades were met by a furious counterattack by Weisiger's Virginia brigade and Wright's Georgia brigade from Brig. Gen. William Mahone's division. After fierce fighting, most of Siegfried's and

Thomas's soldiers were driven back into Union lines or into the Crater, where they joined white troops already seeking shelter there.

At least four Confederate assaults were launched at the Crater between 9:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. It finally fell to Sanders's Alabama brigade of Mahone's division at one o'clock. The Federals took over four thousand casualties in what Grant himself called "the saddest affair I have ever witnessed in the war."(2)

Careful examination of eyewitness accounts, including contemporary letters, demonstrate that several massacres occurred during and after the Battle of the Crater.

The first took place when Weisiger's Virginians and Wright's Georgians killed wounded black soldiers and black soldiers trying to surrender as they charged and cleared the trench of Siegfried's brigade. They also killed black soldiers who had been sent to the rear as prisoners.

George Bernard of the 12th Virginia, Weisiger's brigade, said they littered the trench with murdered blacks:

A minute later I witnessed another deed which made my blood run cold.

Just about the outer end of the ditch by which I had entered stood a negro

soldier, a non-commissioned officer (I noticed distinctly his chevrons)

begging for his life of two Confederate soldiers who stood by him, one of

them striking the poor wretch with a steel ramrod, the other holding a gun

in his hand, with which he seemed to be trying to get a shot at the negro.

The man with the gun fired at the negro, but did not seem to seriously

injure him, as he only clapped his hand to his hip, when he appeared to

have been shot, and continued to beg for his life. The man with the

ramrod continued to strike the negro therewith, whilst the fellow with

the gun deliberately reloaded it, and, placing its muzzle close against

the stomach of the poor negro, fired, at which the latter fell limp and

lifeless at the feet of the two Confederates. It was a brutal, horrible act, and those of us who witnessed it from our position in the trench a few feet away could but claim: That is too bad! It is shocking!

Yet this, I have no doubt from what I saw and afterwards heard, was but a sample of many other bloody tragedies during the first 10 minutes after our men got into the trench, many of whom seemed infuriated at the idea of having to fight negroes.

Within 10 minutes the whole floor of the trench was strewn with the dead bodies of negroes, in some places in such numbers that it was difficult to make one's way along the trench without stepping upon them.(3)

Lt. Freeman Bowley of the 30th USCT wrote, "We were the last to reach the Crater by way of the traverse, and the rifles of the Union soldiers were flashing in our faces when we jumped down in there. As I landed inside, I turned for a second to look back, and caught a glimpse of the Confederates bayoneting the wounded men who had just been shot down."(4)

In a letter to his sweetheart dated August 5, 1864, Pvt. Henry Van Lewvenigh Bird of the 12th Virginia wrote,

"Saturday's fight was a bitter struggle. No furlough wounds given there and no quarter either. Prayers for mercy and the groans of the wounded were alike hushed in death. There was no volley and cheers to excite the men to the Ivork of death. The knowledge of dishonor to the loved ones behind if we failed and victory before us if we succeeded carried everything before it resistlessly. The negro's charging cry of "No quarter" was met with the stem cry of "amen" and without firing a single shot

we closed with them. They fought like bulldogs and died like soldiers.

Southern bayonets dripped with blood and after a brief but bitter struggle

the works were ours. The only sounds which now broke the stillness was

some poor wounded wretch begging for water and quieted by a bayonet thrust

which said unmistakably "Bois ton sang. Tu n'aurais plus de soif." [Drink

your blood. You will have no more thirst].(5)

Dorsey Binion of the 48th Georgia, Wright's brigade, wrote, "When we got to the works it was filled with negroes and they were crying out 'no quarter' when a hand to hand conflict ensued with the breach of our guns and bayonets and you may depend on it we did not show much quarter but slayed them. Some few negroes went to the rear as we could not kill them as fast as they passed us."(6)

After driving Ferrero's division into the Crater, Mahone's division hunted down blacks who were hiding in bombproofs and slaughtered them from about 10 a.m. until noon in a second massacre. The ones they spared were sent to the rear, but many of these prisoners were killed in a third massacre as they ran rearward.

Artillerist William Pegram provided evidence that the Confederates killed blacks as they went to the rear and also hunted down and murdered blacks who hid in Confederate bomb proofs. In a letter dated August 1, 1864, Colonel Pegram wrote:

I think over two hundred negroes got into our lines, by surrendering and

running in, along with the whites, while the fighting was going on. I don't

believe that much over half of these ever reached the rear. You could see

them lying dead all along the route to the rear. There were hardly less

than six hundred dead--four hundred of whom were negroes. As soon as we got

upon them, they threw down their arms in surrender, but were not allowed to

do so. Every bomb proof I saw, had one or two dead negroes in it, who had

skulked out the fight & been found & killed by our men. This was perfectly

right, as a matter of policy.(7)

The fourth massacre occurred after the Federals in the Crater surrendered. Michael L. Kerrick of Mahone's division wrote, "The Negroes hollared No Quarter, Remember Fort Pillow and when our boys charged they took them at their word. At least some did. They killed them with the butts of their muskets. They piled them up three or four deep in the ditches."(8) Lt. Freeman Bowley of the 30th USCT wrote, "As the Confederates came rushing into the Crater, calling to their comrades in their rear, `The Yankees have surrendered!' some of the foremost ones plunged their bayonets into the colored wounded."(9)

After the war Mahone tried to evade responsibility for the butchery, but he was found to have incited his men to murder the blacks. According to a member of Sanders's Alabama brigade,

General Mahone walked in front of the lines and told us that the negroes

in the Crater had hollod "Remember Fort Pillow! No Quarter!" He said it

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