

0. PETERSBURG HOLDS - Story Preface

1. A DESERTER

2. PETERSBURG

3. PETERSBURG HOLDS

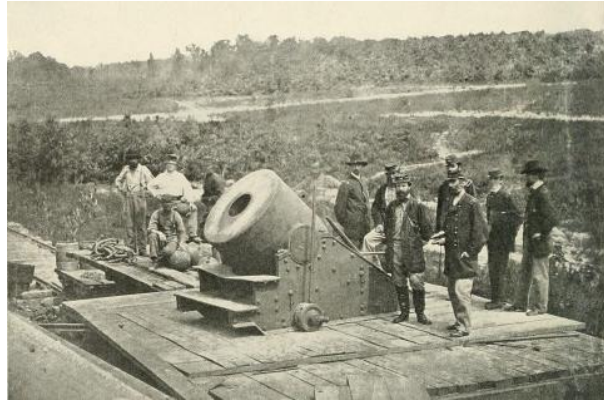
4. BATTLE OF THE CRATER

5. SIEGE OF PETERSBURG

6. THE HOME GUARD

7. OF MONEY AND BOOKS

8. THE REAL COLD MOUNTAIN



This image depicts ordnance used against the Confederate soldiers, by the Union soldiers, during the siege of Petersburg, Virginia. Union military leaders believed that the capture of Petersburg was key to winning the war. The U.S. National Archives maintains this image: "The 13-inch mortar 'Dictator' mounted on a railroad flatcar before Petersburg, Va., October 1864. Photographed by David Knox." NARA image 165-SB-75. Click on the image for a better view.

In the summer of 1864, most important Confederate railroad supply lines ran through Petersburg. For that reason alone, Union generals wanted to capture the town. But those desires were not easily achieved.

In June of 1864, Federal soldiers laid down a pontoon bridge so they could cross the Appomattox River into Petersburg. They were defeated by outnumbered Confederates holding on to Southern territory in the battle of June 15-18.

When Union troops couldn't take the town, they tried to control the rail lines. Although not entirely successful in that endeavor, Lincoln's men realized they would have to dig in for a siege of Petersburg. They lobbed munitions from a huge 13-inch, 17,000-pound railroad-mounted mortar (called "The Dictator") into Petersburg, 21/2 miles away.

When nothing failed to subdue the defenders, Lt. Col. Henry Pleasants (a coal mine engineer from Pennsylvania) came up with a plan to dig a mine shaft (or tunnel) extending under Confederate fortifications.

If the plan worked, Pleasants and his men (most of whom were also Pennsylvania miners from Schuylkill) would fill the end of the tunnel with gun powder, detonate a huge explosion, blow a hole through the Confederate lines, and make a way for Union troops to kill the enemy and capture Petersburg.

A victory at Petersburg - so the thinking went - would surely end the war. That belief was realistic, but it took ten months before this Confederate stronghold fell.

In the meantime, the Union actualized Pleasants' plan which ultimately led to a Congressional inquiry. Jimmy Blankenship, the current Petersburg National Battlefield historian, describes the events of July 1864 as the "worst human behavior of the war."

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/-PETERSBURG-HOLDS-Cold-Mountain>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/-PETERSBURG-HOLDS-Cold-Mountain>

Media Stream



Pontoon Bridge

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Park Service. (NPS)

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Pontoon-Bridge>



Henry Pleasants - Engineer of the Petersburg Crater

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Park Service. (NPS)

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PETERSBURG HOLDS

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