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Men of the 48th Regiment, Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer Infantry, began to dig their tunnel on June 25, 1864. By the evening of July 29th everything was in place, including 320 kegs of black powder (weighing 8,000 pounds) located about twenty feet beneath four of the Confederates' canons.

The town's defenders suspected something was up because they had heard digging sounds from under the earth. Nobody believed, however, that the Yankees could ever dig a tunnel extending 400 feet from the edge of the North's position to the edge of the Confederate defense lines.

How could anyone breathe under the earth for such a distance? Turns out, Col. Pleasants also had a solution for that. Knowing heat rises, he created an ingenious system which provided his men with all the fresh air they needed.

With the powder sandbagged in place - to force an upward explosion - Col. Pleasants' men spliced two fuses together to create a 98-foot line. At 3:15 a.m., on the morning of July 30, Henry Pleasants lit the fuse, exited the mine and waited for the explosion which should have happened fifteen minutes later.

An hour passed...with no explosion. Two men of the 48th went back into the tunnel and discovered the fuse had gone out at the splice point. They reignited it and fled the shaft.

At 4:15 a.m. the earth shook when 4 tons of black powder exploded, gouging out a crater which measured 170 feet long, 60 feet wide and 30 feet deep. Confederate body parts, pieces of canon, and globs of earth as big as a four-room schoolhouse shot 200 feet into the sky.

The spellbinding spectacle delayed the Union charge as troops stared at the amazing explosion instead of immediately rushing through the crater to kill their opponents. Debris blocked their way and ineffective Union leadership undermined the quick-response nature of the mission.

As Union troops flocked inside the crater, surviving Confederate troops turned their weapons on what must have seemed like sitting-duck Yankees. While the men in blue waited for leaders to effectively lead the charge, more men in gray were on the way.

By 6 a.m. General Lee had already sent for Maj. Gen. William Mahone and two brigades from his division to protect the threatened position. Since those troops were part of the Confederate line south of Petersburg, they were able to respond quickly to protect the threatened position.

While Mahone's men charged against the onslaught of Federal troops streaming across the battlefield, Union soldiers inside the crater were in ever-worsening trouble. With the summer sun beating on them, they had no food or water. Blood in the pit was ankle-deep. When Confederate soldiers sent their bayonets into the huddled mass of dead and dying men, those alive had nowhere to go.

Although General Meade had issued an order to withdraw from the crater at about 9:30 a.m., before the Confederate's second charge, General Burnside delayed transmitting that order until many hours later. It wasn't the first time his bad judgment had produced dismal results.

What could have been a war-winning victory for the North turned into a catastrophic failure. About 4,000 Yankee soldiers (compared to 1,500 Confederates) were dead, wounded or captured. Following the Battle of the Crater, General Grant determined only an effective siege (despite continued rebel resistance) would topple Petersburg.

And Inman, Charles Frazier's great-uncle, decided that defending Petersburg (and nearly dying) had totally sapped his fighting strength. While he headed south, toward Cold Mountain, the signs of siege would have been obvious all around Petersburg.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/BATTLE-OF-THE-CRATER-Cold-Mountain>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/BATTLE-OF-THE-CRATER-Cold-Mountain>

Media Stream

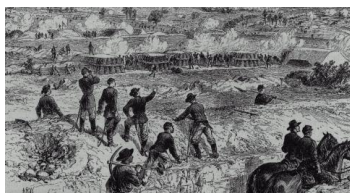


Creating the Tunnel at Petersburg

From "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies" (also referred to as "OR"). Online, courtesy "eHistory" at Ohio State University Department of History.

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Explosion at Petersburg - Crater is Formed

From "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies" (also referred to as "OR"). Online, courtesy "eHistory" at Ohio State University Department of History.

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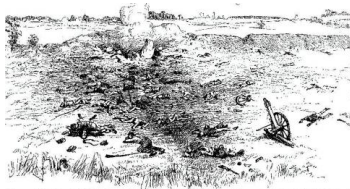


Illustration: The Battlefield Crater

From "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies" (also referred to as "OR"). Online, courtesy "eHistory" at Ohio State University Department of History.

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Petersburg - Charging the Charge

From "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies" (also referred to as "OR"). Online, courtesy "eHistory" at Ohio State University Department of History.

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Major General William Mahone

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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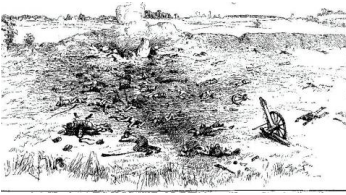


Confederate Soldiers at Petersburg - Summer of 1864

From "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies" (also referred to as "OR"). Online, courtesy "eHistory" at Ohio State University Department of History.

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Drawing: The Crater

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

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BATTLE OF THE CRATER

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Siege of Petersburg - Battle of the Crater

Quoted passage from *Campaign for Petersburg*, Historical Handbook Number Thirteen, (1951).

Online at the National Park Service web site.



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Studio: [Miramax Films](#)

Directed by: Anthony Minghella

Novel by: Charles Frazier

Screenplay by: Anthony Minghella

Release Date: December 25, 2003

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