

THE SIEGE OF Petersburg



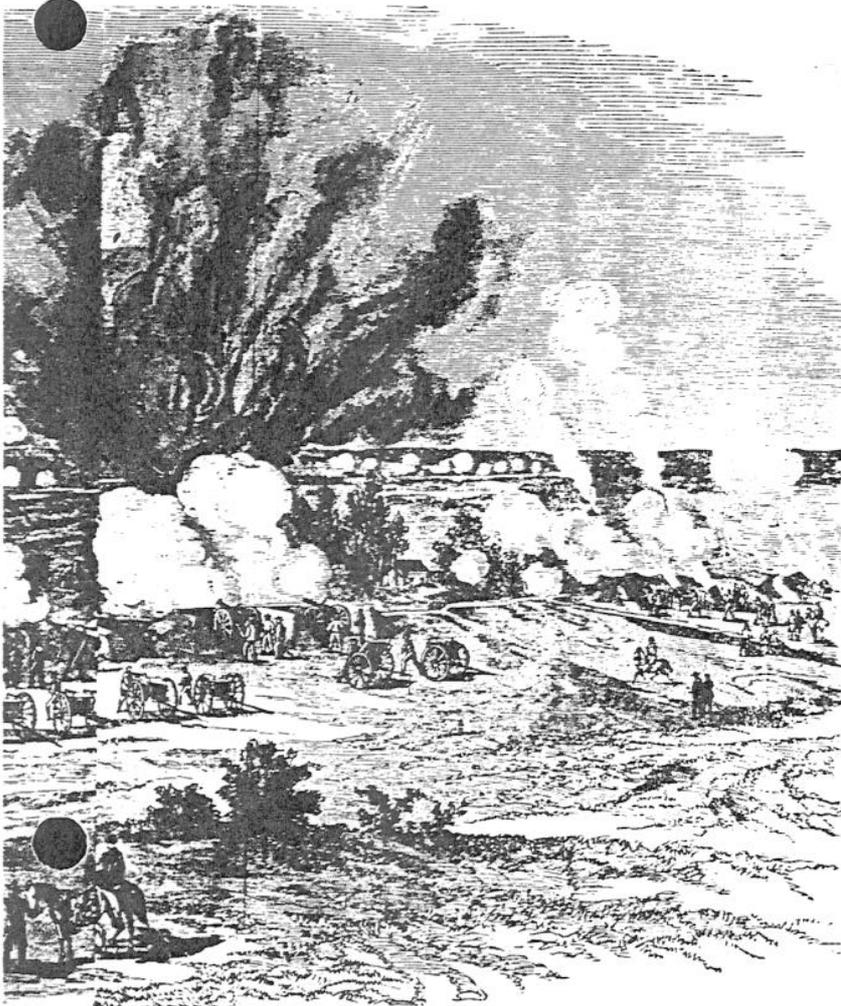
E A S T E R N A C O R N P R E S S

BY 3 A.M. on July 30 the IX Corps lay assembled in the ravine behind the mine entrance, the First Division at the head of the column. Three-thirty came and went and nothing happened. Then the first grey fingers of dawn began to appear. "Four o'clock arrived, officers and men began to get nervous, having been on their feet four hours; still the mine had not been exploded." Pleasants had lit the fuse at 3:15. By 4:15 he knew something was wrong. Sergeant Henry Rees and Lieutenant Jacob Douty volunteered to crawl in and find out what had happened, and discovered that the fuse had died out at the first splicing. Quickly they relighted it and scrambled to safety. At 4:45 the earth erupted with a terrifying roar. "It was a magnificent spectacle," an officer present remembered, "and as the mass of earth went into the air, carrying with it men, guns, carriages, and limbers, 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 re-forming for the attack."

But that was just the beginning of their troubles. Incredible as it now seems, no one made provision for ladders for Burnside's troops to get out of their own entrenchments. As Major Houghton of the 14th New York Heavy Artillery reported: "Our own works, which



Brigadier General James H. Ledlie (seated left) and staff at Petersburg. Ledlie was in command of the First Division, IX Corps, at the Battle of The Crater. (Library of Congress)



Corps Battery Explosion of the Mine



Brigadier General Edward Ferrero. He commanded the Fourth (Colored) Division at the Battle of The Crater. (From N.A.)



The Battle of The Crater. This original drawing by Alfred R. Waud depicts the Fourth (Colored) Division going into action. Regimental colors are being planted on the rim of The Crater in the background. The artist was apparently intending to indicate the detail of the sole of the soldier's shoe for the "Harper's" engraver by drawing the oversized foot. (LC)

were very high at this point, had not been prepared for scaling . . . ladders were improvised by the men placing their bayonets between the logs in the works and holding the other end . . . thus forming steps over which men climbed." Then, after this second delay, the men were not prepared for what they would see at the "crater," the hole caused by the explosion, and it struck them dumb with astonishment. The hole, about 30 feet deep, 60 to 80 feet wide, and 170 feet long, was "filled with dust, great blocks of clay, guns, broken carriages, projecting timbers, and men buried in various ways—some up to their necks,

View of the Confederate works after the explosion of the mine and the battle of July 30, 1864. Sketch by Mullen. (SCW)



others to their waists, and some with only their feet and legs protruding from the earth." The explosion wounded buried or killed about 278 Confederates and completely destroyed two guns of the battery. Soon one brigade after another of gaping soldiers milled in and around the crater, but no one was moving forward; brigades and regiments soon became inextricably mixed in the confusion. When finally some did try to get out of the crater, they discovered to their chagrin that they again had no ladders and "owing to the precipitous walls the men could find no footing except by facing inward, digging their heels into the earth, and throwing their backs against the side of the crater." Neither Burnside, Ledlie, nor Ferrero were with their troops to lead them on and help bring order out of chaos.

THESE delays proved fatal. In a short time the Confederates recovered from their shock and soon shell-poured in on the IX Corps from both the right and left



Brigadier General William Mahone led the successful Confederate defense in the bloody Battle of The Crater. (Photo from LC)

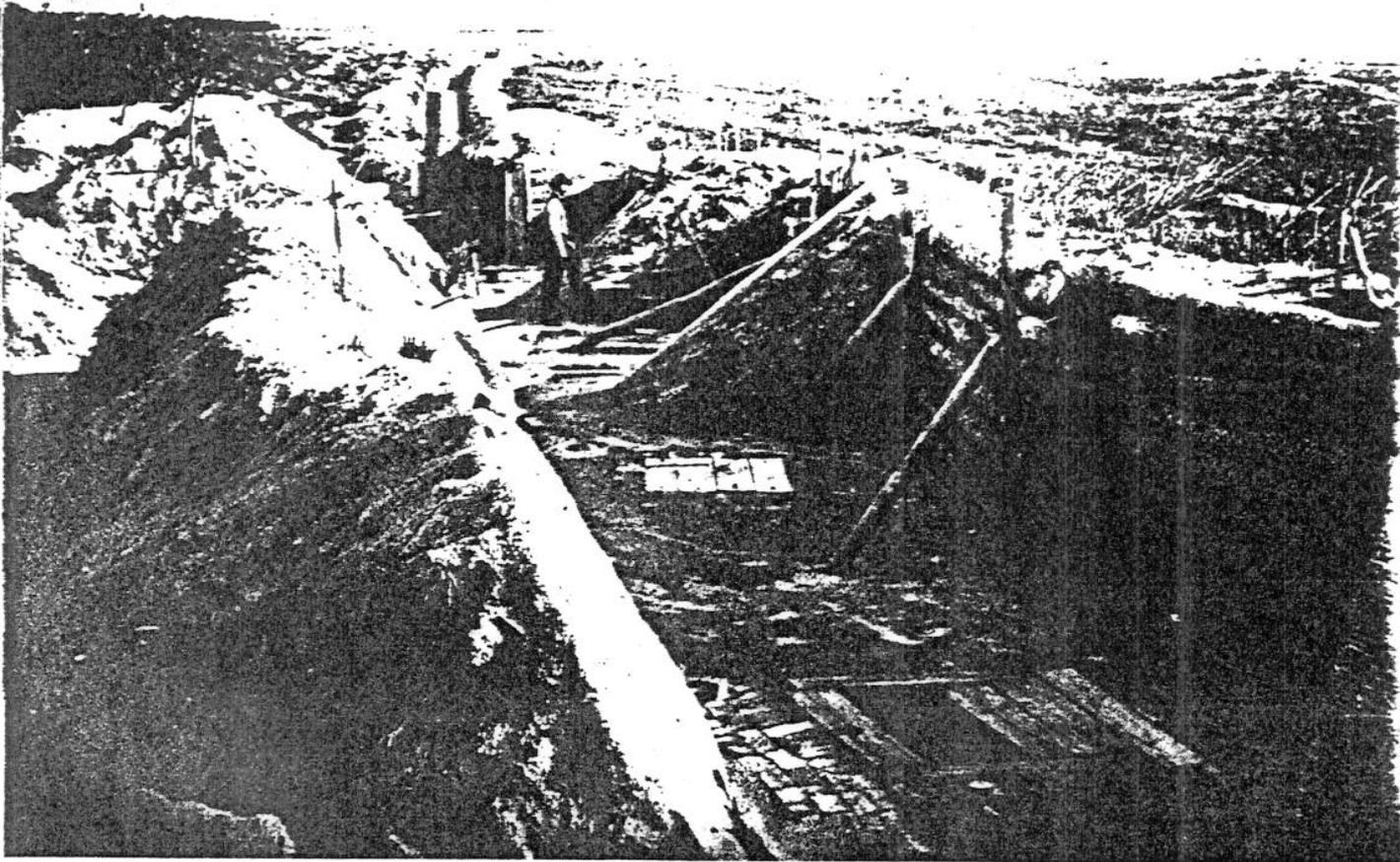
flanks. The only outfit that actually went forward and got close to the crest of Cemetery Hill was Potter's Second Division, but Lee quickly rushed Mahone's division from farther south into the breach and forced the Federals back. Many, however, got caught in the crater and soon Confederate mortar shells started to drop on them with deadly effect. Meade, observing the scene with Grant, ordered a withdrawal about 9 o'clock, but it was past noon before Burnside transmitted it as he kept insisting that a victory could still be won. Many soldiers by then had chosen to run the gantlet of fire back to their own lines, but others remained clinging to the protective sides of the crater.



Shortly after 1 p.m. a final charge by Mahone's men succeeded in gaining the outside slopes of the crater. Then some of the Confederates put their hats on ramrods and lifted them over the rim. They were promptly torn to shreds by a volley, but before the Federals could reload Mahone's men jumped into the crater where a desperate hand-to-hand struggle with bayonets, rifle butts, and fists ensued. The scene in the crater was now appalling. As Major Houghton described it. "The sun was pouring its fiercest heat down upon us and our suffering wounded. No air was stirring within the crater. It was a sickening sight; men were dead and dying all around us; blood was streaming down the sides of the crater to the bottom, where it gathered in pools for a time before being absorbed by the hard red clay."

ALTOGETHER Grant suffered some 4,400 casualties in killed, wounded, and missing, as opposed to about 1,500 for Lee. And neither Grant nor Meade was very happy about the way the whole operation had been conducted. Meade's official report to Grant was unusually accurate and detailed:

On the 30th, owing to a defect in the fuse, the explosion of the mine was delayed from 3:30 to 4:45 a.m., an unfortunate delay, because it was designed to assault the crest of the ridge occupied by the enemy just before daylight, when the movement would, in a measure, be obscured. As soon as the mine was sprung the First Division, Ninth Corps, Brigadier-General Ledlie commanding, moved forward and occupied the crater without opposition. No advance, however, was made from the crater to the ridge, some 400 yards beyond, Brigadier-General Ledlie giving as a reason for not pushing forward that the enemy could occupy the crater in his rear, he seeming to forget that the rest of his corps and all the Eighteenth Corps were waiting to occupy the crater and follow him. Brigadier-Generals Potter and Wilcox, commanding the Second and Third Divisions, Ninth Corps, advanced simultaneously with Ledlie and endeavored to occupy parts of the enemy's line on Ledlie's right and left, so as to cover those flanks, respectively, but on reaching the enemy's line Ledlie's men were found occupying the vacated parts, both to the right and left of the crater, in consequence of which the men of the several divisions got mixed up, and a scene of disorder and confusion commenced, which seems to have continued to the end of the operation. In the meantime the enemy, rallying from the confusion incident to the explosion, began forming his infantry in a ravine to the right and planting artillery, both on the right and left of the crater. Seeing this, Potter was enabled to get his men out of the crater and enemy's line, and had formed them for an attack on the right, when he received an order to attack the crest of the ridge. Notwithstanding he had to change front in the presence of the enemy, he succeeded not only in doing so, but, as he reports, advancing to within a few yards of the crest, which he would have taken if he had been supported. This was after 7 a.m., more than two hours after Ledlie had occupied the crater, and yet he had made no advance. He, however, states he was forming to advance when the Fourth Division (colored troops), General Ferrero commanding, came rushing into the crater and threw his men into confusion. The Fourth Division passed beyond the crater and made an assault, when they encountered a heavy fire of artillery and infantry, which threw them into inextricable confusion, and they retired in disorder through the troops in the crater and back into our lines. In the mean time, in ignorance of what was occurring, I sent orders to Major-General Ord, commanding Eighteenth Corps, who was expected to follow the Ninth, to advance at once on the right of the Ninth independently of the latter. To this General Ord replied the only debouches were choked up with the Ninth Corps, which had not all advanced at this time. He,



Union Fort Morton, opposite The Crater. (LC)

however, pushed a brigade of Turner's division over the Ninth Corps' parapets, and directed it to charge the enemy's line on the right, where it was still occupied. While it was about executing this order the disorganized Fourth Division (colored) of the Ninth Corps came rushing back and carrying everything with them, including Turner's brigade. By this time, between 8 and 9 a.m., the enemy, seeing the hesitation and confusion on our part, having planted batteries on both flanks in ravines where our artillery could not reach them, opened a heavy fire not only on the ground in front of the crater but between it and our lines, their mortars at the same time throwing shells into the dense mass of our men in the crater and adjacent works. In addition to this artillery fire, the enemy massed his infantry and assaulted the position. Although the assault was repulsed and some heroic fighting was done, particularly on the part of Potter's division and some regiments of the Eighteenth Corps, yet the exhaustion incident to the crowding of the men and the intense heat of the weather, added to the destructive artillery fire of the enemy, produced its effect, and report was brought to me that our men were retiring into our old lines. Being satisfied that the moment for success had passed, and that any further attempts would only result in useless sacrifice of life, with the concurrence of the lieutenant-general commanding, who was present, I directed the suspension of further offensive movements, and the withdrawal of the troops in the crater when it could be done with security, retaining the position till night, if necessary. It appears that when this order reached the crater (12:20) the greater portion of those that had been in were out; the balance remained for an hour and a half, repulsing an attack of the enemy, but on the enemy's threatening a second attack, retreated in disorder, losing many prisoners. This terminated this most unfortunate and not very creditable operation. I forbear to comment in the manner I might otherwise deem myself justified

in doing, because the whole subject, at my request, has been submitted for investigation by the President of the United States to a court of inquiry, with directions to report upon whom, if any one, censure is to be laid.

GRANT agreed with Meade's request for a Court of Inquiry. "So fair an opportunity will probably never occur again for carrying fortifications," he wrote to Meade the next day. "Preparations were good, order ample, and everything so far as I could see, subsequent to the explosion of the mine, shows that almost without loss the crest beyond the mine could have been carried. This would have given us Petersburg with all its artillery and a large part of the garrison beyond doubt."

The Court of Inquiry concluded that if Meade's order had been carried out the attack would have been successful. Burnside was censured for not obeying the orders of the commanding general, specifically regarding a prompt advance after the explosion, and for not "preparing his parapets and abatis for the passage of the columns of assault." As for Ledlie, the Court concluded that instead of leading his troops he "was most of the time in a bomb-proof ten rods in rear of the main line of the Ninth Corps works," and that Ferrero was also in a bomb-proof "habitually, where he could not see the operation of his troops." Burnside and Ledlie later resigned, and Ferrero was transferred elsewhere.



would never be the same again. Now it was only a question of time, provided the North did not become impatient and fail to re-elect Lincoln who would support Grant to the end. The failure to capture Petersburg quickly was tragic, to be sure, as it would have shortened the war immeasurably and, thereby, saved many lives, but the fact was that Lee now lay pinned down on the Petersburg-Richmond defense line and could not get out. Never again would he assume the offensive, threatening to win the war by bold, aggressive moves with the famed and feared Army of Northern Virginia. As one Confederate general wrote later, "However bold we might be, however desperately we might fight, we were sure in the end to be worn out. It was only a question of a few months, more or less."

Things remained fairly quiet for several days while the men dug fortifications and trenches and the weather grew hotter. Then Meade ordered the II and VI Corps to extend to the left and march on the Weldon Railroad which Grant was anxious to cut off from Petersburg. Lee himself went over to the right of the line on June 22 to observe the action. General William Mahone reported to him that he believed he saw an opportunity for a flank attack, and Lee agreed. What Mahone observed was a gap carelessly left between the two Federal corps, and here he struck swiftly, rolling up two divisions and capturing over 1,500 prisoners. The Federals then withdrew and the railroad was saved for awhile longer, but Grant's left now extended west of the Jerusalem Plank Road, so that important artery was lost to the Confederates and Lee had to extend his defense line. Now investing Petersburg Grant had the IX Corps on his right, then the V, the II, and the VI held the left of the line on the south. Butler's Army of the James held its position at Bermuda Hundred and was also responsible for the ground the Federals held north of the James River.

THUS the siege of Petersburg, which would last almost ten months, began. Almost every hill and rise of

AND SO the decision was made—the war in the East would now be primarily a siege operation. So the campaign that began early in May in The Wilderness ended some six weeks later in the trenches around Petersburg. And in those six weeks Grant had suffered between 60,000 and 70,000 casualties, and Lee's army still stood undefeated, and to some, particularly President Lincoln's political enemies, it all seemed like wasted effort. What they could not understand was that the war



Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants engineered the mine.

ground was capped with a fort and artillery batteries, along both the Union and Confederate lines, and in some places the lines lay less than 400 feet apart. There was little if any chance that any part of either line could be taken by direct assault so long as the defenders remained alert. One Federal soldier wrote later: "In building our works we utilized the dead bodies of the rebels by burying them in the earth which we threw up from the trenches, serving the double purpose of burial and increasing the size of the breastworks." In this vast maze of trenches, forts, redoubts and tunnels the soldiers of both sides lived, suffered, and died. Constant skirmishing and sharpshooting took its deadly toll. Constant shelling back and forth was just another of the nerve-wracking hardships the men had to endure, along with scorching heat and choking dust, then mud and constant wetness, followed by freezing cold and utter loneliness. But in the mud and general filth of the trenches, disease was the greatest killer of all, and one of the most depressing things that had to be endured was complete boredom.

IT was this boredom, more or less, that led to the next significant action. As the days wore on and the awful monotony of siege tactics became apparent to the soldiers, some members of the 48th Pennsylvania Volunteers in General Robert B. Potter's division of the IX Corps, many of whom had been coal miners from

the upper Schuylkill coal region, came up with an idea. In front of their position stood a Confederate work known as Elliott's Salient, a particularly strong point in the line near a ridge called Cemetery Hill. Behind earthen embankments lay a battery of four guns, with two veteran South Carolina infantry regiments stationed on either side. Behind these were other strong defensive works. At this point the two lines lay less than 400 feet apart. One day Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants, the commanding officer of the regiment and a mining engineer by profession, heard one of the enlisted men mutter, "We could blow that damned fort out of existence if we could run a mine shaft under it."

From this and other remarks grew the idea of a Union mine under the Confederate fortification. When Pleasants told his regimental officers, "That God-damned fort is the only thing between us and Petersburg, and I have an idea we can blow it up," they were receptive. The division commander then passed the idea along to Burnside who was agreeable and passed it up to Meade. Meade was lukewarm to the whole idea and his engineer officers thought it all "clap-trap and nonsense" because, they said, the shaft or tunnel leading to the mine could not possibly be ventilated without being observed by the Confederates. But Grant said to go ahead with it.

Work started on June 25, but Pleasants soon discovered that, although higher ups promised all the help he would need, none was forthcoming. "My regiment was only about four hundred strong. At first I employed but a few men at a time, but the number was increased as the work progressed, until at last I had to use the whole regiment—non-commissioned officers and all. The great difficulty I had was to dispose of the material got out of the mine. I found it impossible to get any assistance from anybody; I had to do all the work myself. I had to remove all the earth in old cracker-boxes; I got pieces of hickory and nailed on the boxes in which we received our crackers, and then iron-

"The Forty-eighth Pennsylvania, Colonel Pleasants, mining the Confederate works in front of Petersburg, July 15-20, 1864."





Carrying powder to the mine. From drawing by A. R. Waud. (HW)

clad them with hoops of iron taken from old pork and beef barrels—Whenever I made application I could not get anything . . . I could get no boards or lumber supplied to me for my operations. I had to get a pass and send two companies of my own regiment, with wagons, outside of our lines to rebel saw-mills, and get lumber in that way, after having previously got what lumber I could by tearing down an old bridge. I had no mining picks furnished me, but had to take common army picks and have them straightened for my mine picks. . . .”

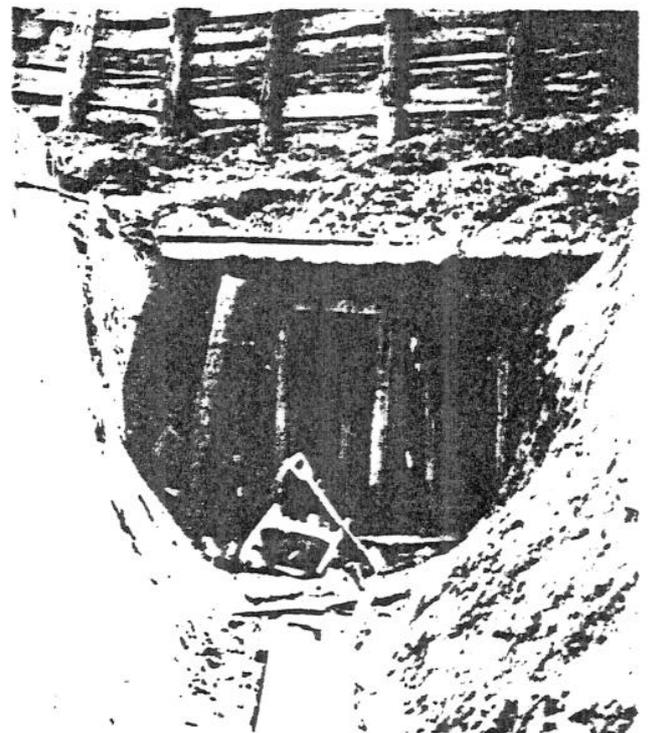
DESPITE the lack of cooperation, the work went ahead day after day. Every night the men cut bushes to cover the fresh dirt at the mouth of the tunnel; otherwise the Confederates would have known what was going on. However, the biggest problem with the 510-foot shaft was ventilation. Generally it had been considered impossible to dig a tunnel for any considerable distance without spacing shafts at regular intervals to replace the polluted air with a fresh supply. In this instance, of course, that was out of the question because of the proximity of the enemy. But Pleasants and his men came up with an ingenious solution, based on the application of the simple physical principle that warm air tends to rise. Behind the Federal picket line and to the right of the tunnel, although connected with it, the miners dug a ventilating chimney. Between the chimney and the tunnel entrance they put up an airtight canvas door. Through the door and along the floor of the tunnel they laid a square wooden pipe. A fire was then built at the bottom of the ventilating chimney, and as the fire warmed the air it went up the chimney, and the draft thus created drew the foul air from the end of the tunnel where the men were working. As the foul air rushed out, of course, fresh air was drawn in through the wooden pipe to replace it.

By July 17 the diggers were directly beneath the battery in Elliott's Salient, twenty feet from the floor of the tunnel to the enemy works above. The average height

of the tunnel was five feet, with a base four and a half feet in width, tapering to two feet at the top. By now the Confederates had become suspicious, as the faint sounds of digging could be heard issuing from the earth. Consequently, they sank countermines of their own in an effort to locate the Union shaft. When they failed to locate anything suspicious, their fears diminished, helped along, no doubt, by the belief that it was impossible to ventilate a tunnel of any length over 400 feet without air shafts above it.

THE next step in Pleasant's plan was to burrow out into lateral tunnels at the end of the long shaft. Accordingly, on July 18 work began on two branches extending to the right and left, paralleling the Confederate fortifications above. When completed on July 23, these additional tunnels added another seventy-five feet to the total length of the excavation, for a grand total of a little over 585 feet. Then 320 kegs of black powder, weighing on the average twenty-five pounds each, were placed in the two lateral tunnels in eight magazines. The total charge was thus about four tons or 8,000 pounds. The men sandbagged the powder to direct the force of the explosion upward, and spliced two fuses together to form a 98-foot line.

BY JULY 27 all stood ready with the explosion set for 3:30 a.m. July 30. Burnside submitted his plan of attack, which was to have the division of colored troops now under General Edward Ferrero go in first and fan out to the left and right along the line, then the other



Entrance to Confederate countermine in Fort Mahone. (From LC)

divisions would go forward and take the crest of Cemetery Hill. Grant and Meade, however, objected to this plan on two counts. Meade was afraid they would be blamed for putting the colored troops in first, and Grant agreed, primarily for political reasons. As Grant later stated: "General Meade said that if we put the colored troops in front (we had only one division) and it should prove a failure, it would then be said, and very properly, that we were shoving these people ahead to get killed because we did not care anything about them. But that could not be said if we put white troops in front." Unfortunately this decision was not relayed to Burnside until the night of July 29, which, of course, necessitated last minute changes in his battle orders.

The other objection was to the first division through the gap fanning out to the right and left. Meade, with Grant's approval, changed the orders so that the leading division would charge straight ahead for the crest of Cemetery Hill, the next two divisions advance to the left and right of the crest to protect the flanks, and then the colored division followed by the V Corps, and if necessary the XVIII, would come through for the general advance all along the line. A total of 110 guns and 54 mortars would be alerted to begin a bombardment as soon as the explosion occurred.

Burnside had the commanding generals of the three white divisions draw straws to see who would lead the charge. General James Ledlie of the First Division won the draw. He had been with the division just six weeks.

In the meantime, Grant sent the II Corps over to the north side of the James at Deep Bottom as a diversionary tactic, and Lee reacted to it by withdrawing troops from Petersburg, so that on July 30 the Confederates had only about 18,000 troops in the lines around the city. Then Meade ordered Hancock to make a night march and be in rear of the XVIII Corps by daylight to support the attack if needed. And Meade reminded all corps commanders that "promptitude, rapidity of execution and cordial cooperation, are essential to success."

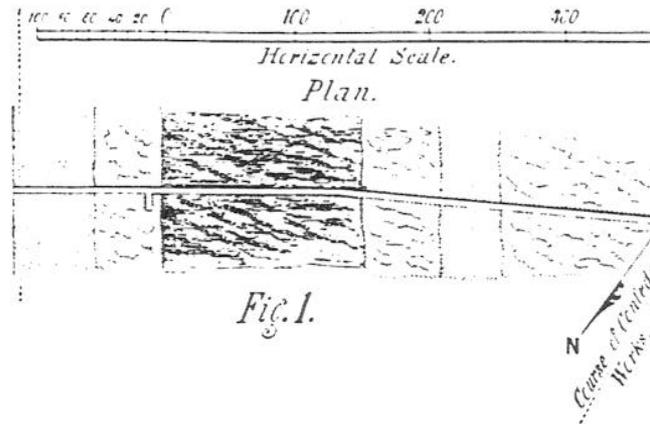


Fig. II.

Profile.

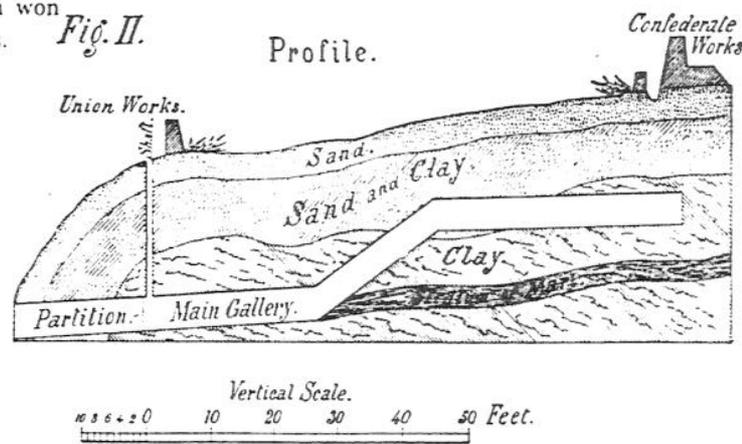
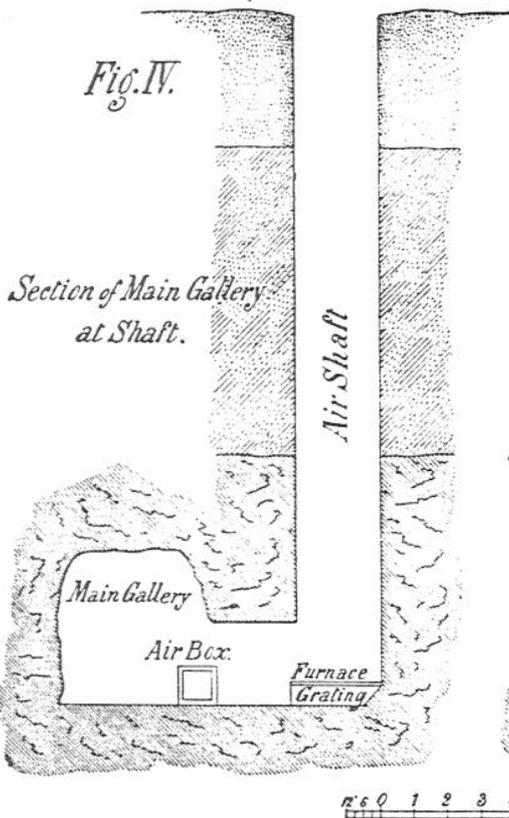


Fig. IV.

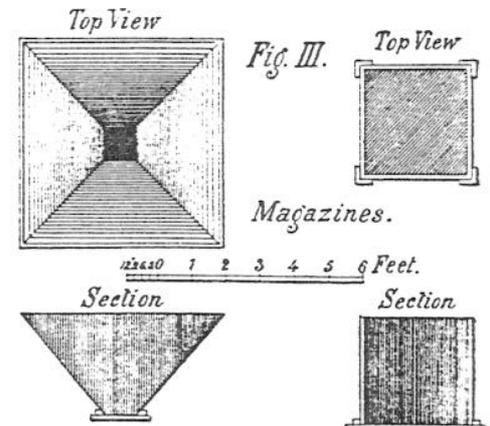


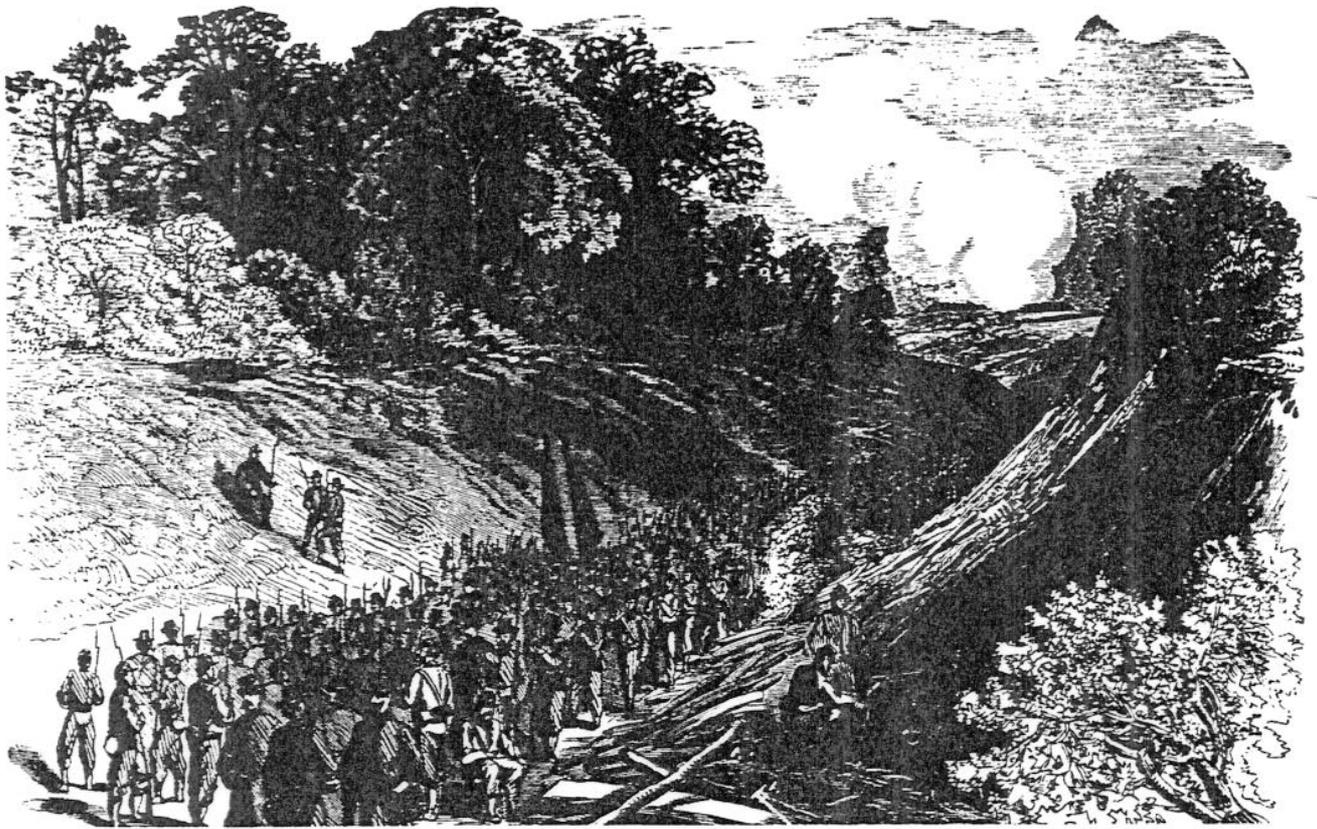
Section of Main Gallery.



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Details of the mine. (B&L)





BELOW: "Before Petersburg, July 30, 1864. Explosion of the mine, and charge on the Confederate works." (Both drawings reproduced from "The Soldier in Our Civil War." Vol. II)

ABOVE: "The Fifth Army Corps awaiting the order to advance, after the explosion of the mine, Petersburg, July 30, 1864."

