

moment assume to embarrass you or them, by an assumption of position or authority. I simply desired to ask the privilege of calling upon them for support at such times, and at such points, as I thought advisable. I would gladly accord to either of them the same support and would be glad to have either of them lead the attack, but it would have been obviously improper for me to have suggested that any other corps than my own should make the attack in my front. What I asked, in reference to calling upon the other corps for support, is only what I have been called upon to do, and have cheerfully done myself, in regard to other corps commanders." General Meade, particularly sensitive in regard to every punctilio of position and rank, could not appreciate the generous nature of the man whom he had thus unjustly suspected; and was not disposed to regard with complete satisfaction the success of General Burnside's operations. Yet he seemed to be somewhat ashamed of the illiberal construction which he had put upon his corps commander's words, and in his reply he wrote: "I am glad to find that there was no intention on your part to ask for any more authority and command than you have a perfect right to expect under existing circumstances. I did not infer that you had any want of confidence in me. I am very grateful for your good opinion as expressed, and shall earnestly try to merit its continuance." Notwithstanding this disclaimer, it became evident, from subsequent events, that General Meade had not forgotten the correspondence.

On the 26th, General Meade called upon General Burnside for a detailed statement of his plan of attack. General Burnside immediately submitted it. "My plan would be," he writes, "to explode the mine just before daylight in the morning, or at about five o'clock in the afternoon. Mass the two brigades of the colored division in rear of my first line, in columns of division—'double columns closed in mass,' 'the head of each brigade resting on the front line,'—and as soon as the explosion has taken place, move them forward with instructions for the division to take half-distance. As soon as the lead-

ing regiments of the two brigades pass through the gap in the enemy's line, the leading regiment of the right brigade should come into line perpendicular to the enemy's line by the 'right companies on the right into line, wheel,' the 'left companies on the right into line,' and proceed at once down the line of the enemy's works as rapidly as possible; and the leading regiment of the left brigade to execute the reverse movement to the left, moving up the enemy's line. The remainder of the columns to move directly towards the crest in front as rapidly as possible, diverging in such a way as to enable them to deploy into columns of regiments, the right column making as nearly as possible for Cemetery Hill. These columns to be followed by the other divisions of this Corps as soon as they can be thrown in. This would involve the necessity of relieving these divisions by other troops before the movement and of holding columns of other troops in readiness to take our place on the crest in case we gain it and sweep down it. It would, in my opinion, be advisable, if we succeed in gaining the crest, to throw the colored division right into the town. There is a necessity of the cooperation, at least in the way of artillery, of the troops on our right and left. Of the extent of this you will necessarily be the judge."

This plan in brief was, to form two columns and to charge with them through the breach caused by the explosion of the mine, then to sweep along the enemy's line right and left, clearing away the artillery and infantry by attacking in the flank and rear—other columns to make for the crest, and the rest of the Army to cooperate. In accordance with this plan, General Ferrero, in command of the colored division, was instructed, that he would be required to lead the attack when it should be ordered, and he was directed to drill his troops accordingly. He examined the ground and decided upon his methods of advance, which were not to go directly into the crater formed by the explosion, but rather upon one side of it; and then to take the enemy in flank and reverse. He informed his officers and men that they would be called upon to make an important

Source: *A. Woodbury, Maj Gen Ambrose and the Ninth Army Corps (1867)*

Burnside's plan

assault and proceeded to drill his division, with a view to familiarizing the troops with the work, which they were expected to perform. For three weeks, in intervals of other duty, they were carefully trained in the various movements, the charging upon earthworks, the wheeling by the right and left, the deployment and other details of the expected operation. The intelligence was received with delight. The drill was performed with alacrity. The soldiers of the colored division, desirous of emulating their brethren of the eighteenth corps in the army of the James, felt that the hour, which they had long expected, had now come, or was fast approaching. They would gain a name and a position in the Army of the Potomac. Selected for the assault, they would show themselves worthy of the honor. They would wipe off whatever reproach an ill-judged prejudice might have cast upon them, and would prove themselves brave men, demanding the respect which brave men deserve.

There were two reasons which influenced General Burnside in his choice of the storming party. He had early expressed his confidence in the soldierly capabilities of colored men, and he now wished to give them an opportunity to justify his good opinion. His white troops moreover had been greatly exposed through the whole campaign, had suffered severely and had been so much under the fire of the sharpshooters, that "it had become a second nature with them to dodge a bullet."\* The colored troops had not been so much exposed, and had already shown their steadiness under fire, in one or two pretty severe skirmishes in which they had previously been engaged. General Burnside hoped much from them, and would not have been disappointed had he been allowed to carry out his plan of attack. There was still another reason for the inefficiency of the white troops. They were fairly exhausted with unintermitted marching, fighting and skirmishing. The Ninth Corps had had no rest from the start, but had been subjected to un-

\*General Ferrero's testimony before Committee on Conduct of the War.

ceasing labor in most perilous positions. Armies are not mere machines. They are composed of ordinary flesh and blood. General Burnside wished to use his freshest troops.

On the 24th, General Grant again desired that an attempt should be made to assault the enemy's lines at some point, but was finally persuaded by General Meade to wait for a few days for a more favorable opportunity. On the 26th General Burnside's plan of attack was presented. By this time General Meade had come to the conclusion that larger results were to be expected from the mine than he had at first supposed. Now he had cause to think, "that the explosion of the mine, and the subsequent assault on the crest would be successful, and would be followed by results, which would have consisted in the capture of the whole of the enemy's artillery and a greater part of his infantry."\* All that was necessary for him to do therefore was, to approve General Burnside's plan of attack, to order the coöperation of the other corps, to repair to the front to take command of the entire army in person, and reap the harvest of glory, which his subordinates had so carefully prepared for his gathering. Yet he did not approve General Burnside's plan, or choose to adopt this plain course. Why he did not it is impossible to say. Was it because he did not wish that the anticipated success might be the result of another's combinations, but rather desired that it should come from some original design of his own? Or did he have some prejudice against the capacity of colored troops? Or was he determined not to allow General Burnside any discretion in the matter, but to make manifest the supreme authority of the commanding general of an army? The reason which General Meade gave before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, for his rejection of General Burnside's plan, was that "as this was an operation which I knew beforehand was one requiring the very best troops, I thought it impolitic to trust it to a division of whose reliability we had no evidence." The commander of an army

\*General Meade's Testimony before Committee on Conduct of War, in Attack on Petersburg, p. 52.

Meade

must of necessity judge of the reliability of his troops. If he does not consider them able or trustworthy, it is his duty to keep them out of action. Yet the immediate commander of a corps or of a division is presumed to know the capabilities of his soldiers better than an officer further removed from them. If General Burnside was willing to trust his colored division, it would seem like a reflection upon his good judgment to disapprove his opinion. Whatever might have been the motives of General Meade, the fact remains that he did not agree with General Burnside's views upon the subject, and changed the entire plan of operations at so late an hour as to make a remedy for its derangement almost wholly impracticable.

On the 28th General Meade had an interview with General Burnside, in which the whole subject was discussed. General Meade urged that the colored troops were not so reliable for such an assault as was contemplated, as the white troops of the Ninth Corps. The operation was to be a *coup de main*, the assaulting column was to be as a forlorn hope, such as are put in breaches, and the assault ought to be made with the best troops. General Burnside argued—in accordance with what has already been stated—that his white troops were not in proper condition to head an attack of the kind. They had been exposed for forty days to a ceaseless fire and had acquired the habit of sheltering themselves from the enemy's missiles. Moreover, they were worn down by excessive labor, watchings and cares. Their officers had not expected to make an assault—knowing that the colored division had been selected for that purpose—and had not examined the ground. The colored troops on the contrary were fresh and strong, their ranks full, their morale unexceptionable, and their spirits elated by the thought of the approaching conflict. They had been drilled with especial reference to this very movement, and their officers were conversant with all its details, the ground to be traversed, and the work to be done. General Meade could not be turned from his purpose of changing the order of assault, but finally agreed to submit the matter to General Grant. That officer

conferred with General Meade, having had no opportunity of hearing the other side of the case presented by General Burnside in person.\*

The colored troops were ruled out—very much to the disappointment of themselves, their own commander, and General Burnside. The decision was made known to General Burnside not far from noon on the 29th. General Meade at the same time called at General Burnside's headquarters, where he met the three commanders of the white divisions of the Ninth Corps. On the day previous, he had told General Burnside at an interview which the two officers had at General Meade's headquarters, that he did not approve the order of the formation of the attacking column, "because," as General Burnside testifies, "he was satisfied that we would not be able, in the face of the enemy, to make the movements which were contemplated, to the right and left; and that he was of the opinion that the troops should move directly to the crest without attempting these side movements." On the occasion of the interview with the division commanders on the 29th, General Meade declared, that "there were two things to be done, namely, that we should go up promptly and take the crest." General Meade seemed to have but one plan of action. That was to "rush for the crest." These words he repeated in more than one order on the day of battle. "Don't lose time in making formations," he said, "but rush for the crest."

There seems to have been a little discrepancy in General Meade's recollection of the discussion which took place respecting General Burnside's formation of the assaulting column. As

\*General Grant in his testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War had the frankness to say, that "General Burnside wanted to put his colored division in front, and I believe if he had done so it would have been a success. Still, I agreed with General Meade in his objection to that 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 showing those 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." It is to be observed, however, that General Meade gave a different reason from that to the Committee, when he was stating why he disapproved General Burnside's plan of attack.

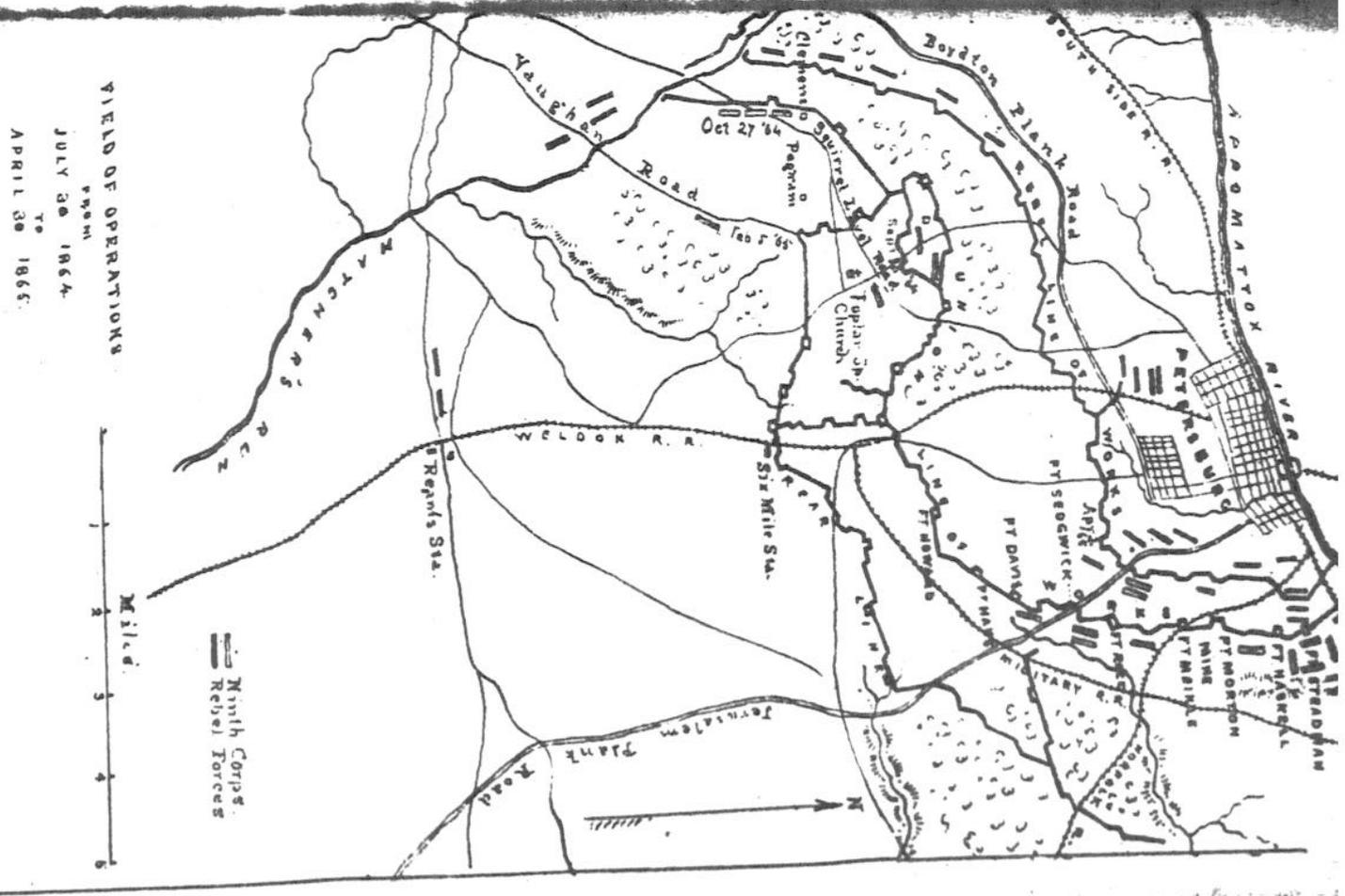
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to General Burnside's "tactical formation," he testified before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, "and what he was to do with his troops, I made no objection." "The only objection I intended to make to" his "plan was to the use of the colored troops in advance."<sup>10</sup> But before the Court of inquiry which, after the battle investigated the whole affair, General Meade testified as follows: "I saw Potter, Ledlie and Wilcox and I referred in the presence of those gentlemen to the tactical manœuvres to be made between that crater and the crest—that the only thing to be done was to rush for the crest, and take it immediately after the explosion had taken place; and that they might rest assured that any attempt to take time to form their troops would result in a repulse."<sup>11</sup> No other conclusion can be reached than that General Meade did object to General Burnside's "tactical formation," and that the entire plan of attack, which had been carefully prepared, was disapproved in all its details. In this situation General Burnside and his division commanders found themselves on the afternoon of the 29th of July.

The decision of General Meade, unexpected as it was, caused no little embarrassment to the officers of the Ninth Corps. The mine was to be exploded at an early hour on the following morning. The colored troops were not to be used in the advance. What division should be selected to take their place? So far as the men were concerned there was little choice between them. There were no special reasons for selecting one in preference to another. Each was as brave as the other. All had been about equally engaged in the very arduous service of the campaign and the siege. General Burnside said to his division commanders: "Gentlemen, there are certain reasons why either one of you should lead the attack. Your division, General Wilcox, and yours, General Potter, are both near the point of assault, and it will require less time to put either of them into position, than to bring up General Ledlie's division.

<sup>10</sup> Attack on Petersburg, p. 44. <sup>11</sup> Attack on Petersburg, pp. 57, 143.



But, General Ledlie, the men of your division have not been in such close proximity to the enemy as those of the other two, and have not had quite so hard work as they. There is really no overpowering reason why either of you should be selected or excluded. Why not draw lots for the position and thus determine who shall make the assault?" No objection was made, lots were drawn, and the choice fell upon General Ledlie—most unfortunately, as was afterwards thought by General Grant, who considered him an "inefficient" officer. General Ledlie was immediately directed by General Burnside to reconnoitre the ground and prepare for the attack. He afterwards reported, that he had attended to that duty, and only waited for darkness and the relieving troops, to take position for the duties of the coming day.

General Meade issued his battle order: "1. As soon as it is dark, Major General Burnside, commanding Ninth Corps, will withdraw his two brigades under General White,\* occupying the intrenchments between the plank and Norfolk roads, and bring them to his front. Care will be taken not to interfere with the troops of the eighteenth corps moving into their position in rear of the Ninth Corps. General Burnside will form his troops for assaulting the enemy's works at daylight of the 30th, prepare his parapets and abatis for the passage of the columns, and have the pioneers equipped for work in opening passages for artillery, destroying enemy's abatis, &c., and the intrenching tools distributed for effecting lodgements, &c.

"8. At half-past three in the morning of the 30th, Major General Burnside will spring his mine, and his assaulting columns will immediately move rapidly upon the breach, seize the crest in the rear, and effect a lodgement there. He will be

\*General Julius White—favorably known as the commander of a division in the twenty-third corps in East Tennessee—came to General Burnside in July and was assigned to duty in the Ninth Corps. At this time he was in command of the fourth division in the temporary absence of General Ferrero, who was away for a few days on leave. General Ferrero returned to camp on the 29th, and General White was appointed Chief of Staff during the day of battle. General Parke was at the time disabled from service by sickness.

*Meade's  
"revised"  
Battle plan...*

followed by Major General Ord, who will support him on the right, directing his movement to the crest indicated, and by Major General Warren, who will support him on the left."

The other corps commanders were directed to move their troops in accordance with the above order. General Warren, of the fifth corps, was to "concentrate all his available forces on his right and hold them prepared to support the attack of the Ninth Corps." General Ord, of the eighteenth corps, was to form his command in the rear of the Ninth Corps and be prepared to support General Burnside. General Hancock, of the second corps, was to move from Deep Bottom, where he had been making a feigned attack "to the rear of the intrenchments held by the eighteenth corps, and be prepared to follow up the assaulting and supporting columns." General Sheridan, with the entire cavalry of the army, was to move against the enemy's right below Petersburg. Engineer officers were to be detailed for each corps, ponton trains were to be prepared, supplies of intrenching materials provided, field artillery to be got in readiness, and all the guns along the line were to open upon those points in the enemy's line that commanded the ground over which our troops were to move. Promptitude, rapidity of execution, and cordial coöperation were commended to the officers and men. Headquarters of the Army of the Potomac for the day were to be established at the headquarters of the Ninth Corps in the rear.

*Burnside's orders*

General Burnside issued his battle order:

- "1. The mine will be exploded to-morrow morning, at half-past three, by Colonel Pleasant.
- "2. General Ledlie will, immediately upon the explosion of the mine, move his division forward as directed by verbal orders, and if possible crown the crest at the point known as Cemetery Hill, occupying, if possible, the cemetery.
- "3. General Willcox will move his division forward as soon as possible after General Ledlie has passed through the first line of the enemy's works, bearing off to the left so as to effectually protect the left flank of General Ledlie's column,

and make a lodgement, if possible, on the Jerusalem plank road to the left of General Ledlie's division.

"4. General Potter will move his division forward to the right of General Ledlie's division as soon as it is apparent that he will not interfere with the movements of General Willcox's division, and will, as near as possible, protect the right flank of General Ledlie from any attack on that quarter, and establish a line on the crest of a ravine, which seems to run from the Cemetery Hill nearly at right angles to the enemy's main line directly in our front.

"5. General Ferrero will move his division immediately after General Willcox's until he reaches our present advanced line, where he will remain until the ground in his front is entirely cleared by the other three divisions, when he will move forward over the same ground that General Ledlie moved over, will pass through our line, and, if possible, move down and occupy the village to the right."

The formations and movements of the troops had already been explained in personal interviews of General Burnside and his officers. Headquarters of the Ninth Corps for the day were to be at the fourteen gun battery in the centre of our position in front. Such was the state of affairs as the 29th of July closed upon the intrenched camps.

The hours had fled apace. The day was now spent, and but little time remained. General Ord was so slow in coming up to relieve the troops of the Ninth Corps in the trenches, that at nine and three-quarters o'clock in the evening, General Meade ordered the assaulting column to be formed without reference to General Ord's movements, thus leaving the trenches vacant. At half past two o'clock on the morning of the 30th, General Ledlie's division began its formation, and passed on to the designated place of its *débuté* for the attack. It was but an hour and a half to daylight. It was but an hour to the time of action. Certainly it was an anxious night to the commander of the Ninth Corps. All his plans had been frustrated by the superior authority of his commanding general. The

mine, which had been constructed under such discouraging circumstances, had finally been regarded, though with evident reluctance, as promising a success. Its explosion would result in a magnificent triumph or a miserable disaster. The one would be for the glory of General Meade. The other would be visited upon the head of the unfortunate corps commander who had taken the enterprise in hand. General Burnside left his headquarters in the rear, repaired to the front of the line and watched for the morning.

At quarter past three o'clock, the fuses were fired. All eyes were turned to the rebel fort opposite, beneath which eight thousand pounds of powder were suddenly to be ignited. In the gray of the morning it was discernible but three hundred feet distant. The garrison was sleeping in fancied security. The sentinels slowly paced their rounds, without a suspicion of the thinness of the crust which lay between them and the awful chasm below. Our own troops, lying upon their arms in unbroken silence, or with an occasional murmur, stilled at once by the whispered word of command, looked for the eventful moment of attack to arrive. A quarter of an hour passed—a half hour, and there was no report. Four o'clock came, and the sky began to brighten in the east. The rebel garrison was bestirring itself. The rebel lines gradually assumed once more the appearance of life. The sharpshooters, prepared for new victims, began to pick off those of our men who came within the range of their deadly aim. Another day of siege was dawning. Still there was no explosion. What could it mean?

The fuses had failed. The dampness had penetrated to the place where the parts had been spliced together, and the powder would not burn. Two men, Lieutenant Jacob Douty and Sergeant, afterwards promoted to Lieutenant, Henry Rees of the 48th Pennsylvania, volunteered to go into the mine to ascertain where the fuses had failed, to put them once again in order, and to relight them. At quarter past four o'clock, they bravely entered the mine, rearranged the fuses and again lighted them. In the meantime, General Meade had arrived

at the permanent headquarters of the Ninth Corps, in the grove about a mile in the rear of our main line, had comfortably bestowed himself with General Grant in company, and sent two aides de camp to General Burnside to transmit all necessary information. Not being able to see anything that was going forward, and not hearing any report, General Meade became somewhat impatient. He was not in an amiable mood, and at fifteen minutes past four o'clock, he telegraphed to General Burnside to know what was the cause of the delay. General Burnside was too busy in remedying the failure already incurred to reply immediately—expected, indeed, that before the despatch could be sent the explosion would take place. General Meade ill-naturally telegraphed the operator to know where General Burnside was. At half past four, the commanding general became still more impatient, and was on the point of ordering an immediate assault upon the enemy's works, without reference to the mine. Five minutes later, he did order the assault.

At precisely sixteen minutes before five o'clock, the mine exploded. Then ensued a scene which beggars description. The ground heaved and trembled. A terrific sound, like the noise of great thunders, burst forth upon the morning air. Huge masses of earth, mingled with cannon, caissons, camp equipage, and human bodies, were thrown up. It seemed like a mountain reversed, enveloped in clouds of smoke, sand and dust, upheaved by the explosion of four tons of powder. A moment more, and all that was left of a six gun battery and its garrison of two hundred men and more, was a great crater, two hundred feet long, fifty wide, and twenty-five deep, with the debris of the material of what had been one of the strongest of the enemy's works. The effect upon the rebel forces in the immediate vicinity was wonderful. Some seemed paralyzed with astonishment and fear. Others fled from their works as though they thought that the entire line was mined, and that all would be involved in a common destruction.

Now was the time for action. Forward went General Led-