

## **First Deep Bottom and the Crater (July 26<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup>, 1864)**

Between the Jerusalem Plank Road battle and the end of July the Petersburg-Richmond front was quiet. Jubal Early's success in the Shenandoah valley turned into an invasion of Maryland and an attack on the suburbs of Washington forcing Grant to send VI and the recently arrived XIX Corps to defend the capital. Grant decided to launch the first in a series of attacks that would first strike at the Richmond flank, then the Petersburg flank. His motivation was partly due to failure of the command in Washington to defeat Early's force, and partly to the development of Burnside's mine.

Beginning about June 25<sup>th</sup>, the 48<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania, of IX Corps, suggested mining under the Confederate lines. General Burnside endorsed the project. The Army of Potomac staff was less enthusiastic due in part to personal and professional jealousies. Construction of the mine continued despite no support from the Army of Potomac staff. With the mine nearing completion, the staff developed a tactical operation to exploit it. Grant decided to combine the mine attack with an operation north of the James and ended up devising one of the best-conceived operations of the entire campaign.

On the night of July 26<sup>th</sup>, Major General Hancock took II Corps north across James River to threaten Richmond. Following a month of relative inactivity, this might catch Lee unprepared. Two cavalry divisions accompanied Hancock across the river, where they were joined by a third. The cavalry would then swing wide approaching Richmond from the north, to destroy the Virginia Central Railroad, the major link between Lee and Early. Although his mission was protecting the cavalry's flank and rear, Hancock's presence north of the James would force Lee to react in strength. Lee had no choice but to take troops from Petersburg to intercept II Corps.

Hancock crossed on a pontoon bridge near a creek known as Four Mile Run, Bailey's Creek, or Deep Bottom Run. The hydrology at the mouth of the creek created a deep-water area well-suited for large vessels. The Federals maintained two pontoon bridges in this area. The upper bridge, to the west of the creek; and the lower bridge, east of the creek. Based on a conversation with Brig. Gen. Robert Foster, whose troops held the bridgeheads, Hancock elected to cross at the lower bridge. This would require forcing a crossing of Bailey's Creek to threaten Richmond, but it facilitated maintaining contact with Sheridan's cavalry. It also provided the entire force better access to three roads, the New Market Road, Darbytown Road, and Charles City Road leading to Richmond.

The Confederates were constructing a line of entrenchments on the west side of Bailey's Creek, but Lee was unable to garrison this line and station enough men at Petersburg and Bermuda Hundred. Optimally, Hancock would cross the river, form his troops, and attack the end of the Confederate lines protecting the roads to Richmond. This would allow the cavalry to range to the north for Hanover Junction, the vital link between Lee and Early. The successful Federal advance on July 27<sup>th</sup>, along the New Market Road, captured a battery of heavy artillery and a number of prisoners. Upon reaching Bailey's Creek, they found two full infantry divisions (Wilcox and Kershaw) occupied the Confederate works. They advanced no further there.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> Grant ordered an envelopment of the Confederate left flank to free the cavalry for its raid. Hancock shifted to the right to support Sheridan's advance on the Darbytown Road, but Heth's division blocked that route and then Kershaw attacked Sheridan. The Federal cavalry repulsed the attack, then counterattacked, taking about 250 prisoners. Clearly all the avenues of advance were blocked. Late on the 28<sup>th</sup> it was apparent that Hancock would be unable to accomplish anything else north of the James. He did succeed in drawing all but three of Lee's divisions towards Richmond front. It was time to use the mine.

The primary objective of an attack in support of the mine was Cemetery Ridge, 500 yards in rear of the Confederate line. This was the last piece of high ground between the armies and the city. If Federal troops took it, the Petersburg defenses were untenable.

Unfortunately, poor relations between Meade and Burnside influenced this plan. Burnside commanded IX Corps, and formerly commanded the Army of the Potomac. Now, a former commander of the Army of the Potomac, Burnside had to take orders from someone, Meade the current commander that was once his subordinate.

On July 26<sup>th</sup> Meade asked for Burnside's opinion on exploiting the mine. The reply offended Meade provoking an intemperate response. Burnside wanted a fresh division lead the attack, with one regiment on each side fanning out to clear the Confederate works adjacent to the breach created by the mine. Then the remainder of IX Corps would follow. Meade insisted that the lead division move straight forward rapidly for Cemetery Ridge.

Burnside tasked his 4<sup>th</sup> division, commanded by Edward Ferrero, a veteran of Antietam and most of the IX Corps campaigns, as lead. It was his freshest and largest division. It was also the largest unit of black troops in the Army of the Potomac. Meade refused to allow Burnside to use these troops in the lead role. Burnside insisted that Meade consult with Grant on this, and to his regret, Grant supported Meade. Both Grant and Meade questioned the operations success and were afraid that if the black troops suffered heavy casualties there would be political repercussions.

The situation worsened because Burnside did not learn of the decision until the night before the attack. Burnside had no contingency plans in case Grant denied his appeal. He then resorted to drawing straws to decide who would lead the attack. Of his three other divisions, competent veterans led two. The 2<sup>nd</sup> commanded by Robert Potter, and 3<sup>rd</sup> by Orlando Willcox. The 1<sup>st</sup> division was commanded by an incompetent drunk and coward who had sacrificed his men in a foolish attack at the North Anna, James Ledlie. Ledlie's division was composed almost entirely of converted cavalry and heavy artillery units. Ledlie drew the short straw.

Despite instructions to the contrary, Burnside refused to remove obstructions to artillery fire and movement along his front, fearing it would tip the enemy off to the attack. At 04:45 on July 30<sup>th</sup>, the mine exploded and Ledlie attacked. Ledlie's division attacked, Ledlie remained in the trenches with a bottle of rum, and immediately occupied the crater made by the explosion. Potter and Willcox followed on each flank, but were unable to do more than occupy a few hundred yards of trenches.

Confederate reaction was swift, but under-manned. Initially the defense consisted of detached artillery positions and a few Coehorn mortars. Although the orders were to move to Cemetery Ridge, no one at the point of attack got the troops moving. Only a feeble effort to advance beyond the crater itself was made. Enfilade fire from Confederate batteries to the north and south hampered this attempt. Brig. Gen. E.P. Alexander suspected a mine, and positioned several batteries to enfilade a breakthrough. Efforts to suppress the fire with Federal counter-battery fires failed because of a stand of trees between the lines. Some of the very obstacles Burnside refused to cut down.

A division of troops from the Army of the James attacked on the right and made some headway, and then at 07:30 Ferrero's men assaulted over the same ground covered by Ledlie. They advanced a little beyond and slightly to the right of the crater but were forced back by fire from the flanks and front. Significantly, their commander, Edward Ferrero, whose troops charged across the stone bridge at Antietam, took refuge in the same trench bombproof with James Ledlie, to share the bottle of rum. The result was the troops occupied a few hundred yards of trenches and men were stuffed into the crater, where they did nothing as combat troops, but becoming excellent targets for the Coehorn mortars.

The few efforts to advance by scattered detachments, not organized brigades were broken up by artillery fire and the remnants of Confederate infantry in the area. Confederate reaction was largely outstanding. The regimental officers to either side contained the break once they recovered from the shock of the explosion.

Between 08:00 and 09:00, after Ferraro's men fell back from their attempt to advance, Gen. William Mahone moved his division sealing the breach. By 09:45, barely 5 hours after the attack began, both Grant and Meade were convinced that it was impossible to make further progress, ordering Burnside to withdraw his men. Burnside waited nearly three hours, until 12:30, to send the order. He could not believe the plan failed.

Mahone had not been inactive and now the Federal troops still huddling along the Confederate lines were in no position to retreat. They tried digging a connecting trench to allow them to run back to the Union lines under protection but a series of attacks by Mahone at about 12:45 and 14:00 eliminated the Federal lodgement. Casualties among Ferraro's men were heavy, and prisoners few.

The attack failed for a variety of reasons. Beginning with naming James Ledlie to lead it, and that was a decision made by Burnside. The last minute refusal to allow the black troops to lead the attack forced some change on the IX Corps commander, but he should have let one of his veteran division commanders lead the effort. It is also true that if the original plan was followed, the regiments sweeping into the Confederate trenches to the left and right, that the enfilade artillery fire might have been suppressed. However, the amended plan would have worked if there had been someone at the point of attack to lead the troops. Apparently, Ledlie did not brief either of his brigade commanders on the mission. Burnside spent the entire time at a Federal battery overlooking the operation.