

ELLIOTT'S BRIGADE.

HOW IT HELD THE CRATER AND SAVED PETERSBURG.

A Story of the Bloodiest Hand-to-Hand Conflict of the War as Told to the Veterans by Col. McMaster-Lay. Sing and Fling the Mine.

The following paper was read Dec. 5, 1895, before Camp Hampton, Columbia, by Col. F. W. McMaster:

Comrades—The battle of the crater or the mine, as it is sometimes called, which occurred near Petersburg, Va., July 30, 1864, was a terrible contest, and differed from any other engagement during the war of the Federals and the Confederates. It was peculiar from the fact that there was no point from which the spectator could witness the engagement, and the soldier, while fighting for his life, could not see what was transpiring around him.

This resulted from the peculiar structure of the Confederate lines. Before giving a detailed account of the battle, as I saw it, and as described by others, it will assist you to understand the character of the work, and the "locus in quo."

The line of defences around Petersburg has been pronounced the finest engineering of the war, and they came about in this way: General Grant outgeneralized Lee by secretly transferring his army to the south side of James river. Beauregard repeatedly informed General Lee that Grant was crossing the river, and asked for more troops. Lee would not believe the dispatches, and battles began in which Beauregard displayed wonderful strategy. However, Lee was satisfied of his blunder in time to increase Beauregard's troops to 11,000 men. Seeing that an attack on Petersburg was inevitable, General Beauregard instructed Colonel Harris to stake the line of new fortifications on the undulating hills about a mile and a half from Petersburg, on the east side. After the heavy battle of the 18th of June, where the Confederates opposed 57,000 Federals, General Beauregard slipped away after dark and retired to the new line marked out by Colonel Harris, where the soldiers during the whole night, with no tools except bayonets and tin cups, entrenched themselves so securely that the enemy declined to renew the attack the next day.

You will observe this construction of breastworks was opposite to the usual mode of building military fortifications, which is to build from the outside, so the enemy will have a ditch and a breastwork to cross, and the soldiers within the breastwork can have free locomotion on level ground to the rear. By our plan we were hemmed in by a counterscarp at our back, and we could not move except in the ditch. The bank towards the enemy was finally made higher than our heads and we had to make a step called a "banquette" in order to shoot over without much exposure. These trenches ran zigzag for some miles. The enemy made a line nearly parallel.

"Pegram's," sometimes called "Elliott's" salient, was on the highest hill on the line, and the nearest to the enemy. Four cannons were placed in a semi-circular shape on the nose of the hill and pointed to the enemy. It was under the command of Captain Pegram, of Coit's battalion. Immediately in rear of this battery of four guns was a breastwork for infantry to protect the guns in case of an attack by the enemy. This was a very strong, wide and high breastwork, with a wide trench in the rear, which at each end terminated in the main trench, which was continuous. The distance to the enemy's line from this "fort," as the enemy called it, was said to be 80 yards.

On the north side of the crater (our left) the hill sloped to a branch, which passed in a culvert through our line. The distance from the crater to this branch was about 400 yards. About 300 yards down the hill was a covered way of 100 yards running northwest up the branch, near a spring. General Elliott's headquarters was located near this spring, and at the mouth of a ravine, where Mahone and his Virginians won so much glory. This ravine runs parallel with Elliott's line and is 200 yards distant from it. The hill slopes from the trench's front and rear. Immediately north there were four or five traverses running to the rear perpendicular to the main trench perhaps 20 yards. These traverses were erected to protect the line from an enfilading fire of the enemy on our left.

Besides the traverses there were many ditches to obtain access to the rear. In the sides of these ditches close to the trench officers burrowed holes in which to sleep. Some of these were covered with mounds of earth. There was a ditch in the extreme rear which communicated with all the traverses and ditches. No wonder that some of the Federal officers compared this network of ditches to the catacombs of Rome!

THE MINE.

The mine was suggested by Colonel Pleasants, who commanded a regiment from the mining region of Pennsylvania. Its main gallery was 510 feet and the lateral galleries 37 feet, under which were created eight magazines containing 1,000 pounds of powder. The mine was commenced June 25 and finished July 23. By reason of a defective fuse the explosion was delayed from 3:20 to 4:45 a. m. The dimensions of the crater proved to be 200 feet long by 50 feet wide, the explosive charge being 1,000 pounds of powder.

I will mention in passing that during the excavation, the Federals, especially at night, kept up a perpetual fusillade of musketry to deaden the sound of the picks. Bushrod Johnson, in order to discover the sound of the enemy's picks, used a device of General Gracey's, which was a pole 10 feet long, with a sharp iron ring affixed to the end, by which small holes were made in the floor of the ditch for 100 yards. Frequently while the pole was used the enemy would pierce them with bullets.

At these little wells our soldiers would listen for the picks. Besides our engineer sunk a shaft 30 feet deep in the gorge line behind Pegram's battery, but for some cause abandoned it. A short time before the explosion Gen. Beauregard and Col. Harris stopped at my quarters, where Col. Fleming of the Twenty-second and Adjutant Guattlebaum were subsequently overwhelmed. I heard Col. Har-

ris say, "In a week's time they will blow us up here."

The explosion did not blow up all the ground occupied by Pegram and the infantry in his rear; but left a few feet of his line and the gorge line—please mark this point, as the space left made a fine rallying point for troops and the Federal writers confound it with the crater proper.

ARTILLERY.

Major Coit, who was with Captain Wright during the whole engagement, says Wright shot near 600 rounds of shells and canister. It was 455 yards from the centre of the crater. Davidson's battery of one gun on the south about 375 yards, was commanded by Maj. Gibbes of this city until he was wounded, and afterwards by Capt. Chamberlain and Maj. Haskell, who brought up two small Coehorn mortars about 11 o'clock and placed them near the crater under the order of Gen. Mahone. These batteries undoubtedly rendered more effective service than the rest of our artillery during that day. Wright's battery was built especially to resist an assault on the salient. It was located behind the right wing of Ransom's brigade and commanded three sides of the crater. Davidson's single gun could not be pointed on the crater or to its rear, and could only be used on the masses as they charged the crater in the front.

The chief officers of the Federal artillery repeatedly reported that they had no difficulty in silencing the Confederate guns except two (Wright's and Davidson's). The reason assigned was that one gun was on the line and they expected that their infantry would take it in 15 minutes after the springing of the mine—hence they had not placed mortars to silence it and the other was so concealed by the woods that they could not locate it. Hence their failure to silence it, notwithstanding they honeycombed the ground around the battery so that you could step from hole to hole around it after the battle. Gen. Potter says: "The most formidable fire I saw came from a battery on the right; behind some timber which it was very difficult for our batteries to reach. I ordered my artillerymen to turn their whole attention to it; but apparently they produced no effect." This evidently was Wright's battery.

There have been some extravagant publications about the rest of our artillery during the battle, but the greater part is "Vox et paeterea nihil."

THE BATTLE.

Outside of the artillery firing the whole force of Federal infantry was directed against Elliott's front, except during a few minutes the charge was made on the right of Ransom's right, just before Mahone came up. The South Carolina regiments were in the following order from left to right: Twenty-sixth, Seventeenth, Eighteenth, Twenty-second, and Twenty-third. The Eighteenth and Twenty-second were blown up; only one man in Company E, of the Eighteenth survived, and at our last meeting Capt. Lake informed us that he and two others survived out of the 34 of Company G of the Twenty-second.

Adjutant Fant and myself were asleep in our bomb-proof, 10 feet from the line and about 20 yards of the blow-up. We sprung from our blankets and witnessed the greatest consternation amongst our men. The sentinels and a few others stood their ground, but the great majority, roused from their sleep, rushed down the trench. I saw one man listlessly scratching the counterscarp. Numbers of the Eighteenth who extricated themselves rushed down the trench, and a few of them, bless their brave hearts! asked me for guns.

An amusing incident occurred at this time illustrating how even the bravest men are affected in a panic. Lieut. Moss of Company E had gone to sleep with his coat off, which was contrary to orders. In relating personal experiences after the battle he said that without coat and shoes he had run down to Ransom's brigade, and coming to his wits he cried out: "What! old Moss running!" and immediately returned to his company. The panic was not confined to our men. The Federal lines were formed for the assault and were so frightened with the sight of the earth, timber, cannon and falling human bodies that they broke ranks and it took 10 minutes to reform them.

General Hancock thus describes the scene: "July 30th, 1864, 4:45 a. m. At this hour the head of our column arrived nearly in rear of the Eighteenth corps and we witnessed the explosion of an immense mine under one of the enemy's redoubts. The earth was thrown to a great height and seemed from where we stood to rise in the air like an enormous whirlwind. The whole redoubt must have been torn to pieces and many men killed. Immediately after all our artillery opened and I have scarcely ever heard a more crushing roar of big guns. Very soon the little valley along which the entrenchments ran was covered by a heavy pal of black smoke which lay suspended but a short distance above the earth, which, with the thunderous roar of the artillery, made one of the most magnificent war pictures I have ever beheld."

General Leidle's division, 3,000 strong, bounced over their breastworks, by companies. About 100 yards off was the crater. The abbatis and the cheveau de frise were destroyed by the explosion. The enemy soon filled the crater and the little plateau former by a part of Pegram's trench and the gorge trench already described.

We could see through the smoke the moving masses and began a feeble fire from Elliott's brigade and I suppose from a part of Wise's brigade. I saw Stirling Hutto of Company H, a boy of 15, standing on top of the breastwork firing at the enemy. I rushed up and pulled him down and ordered him to stand on the banquette and shoot over the breastworks.

About this time General Elliott and Major Coit arrived on the scene of action. Coit came to look after Pegram's battery and found every man killed except one who had gone to the spring for water. Coit went to Wright's battery, fired his guns and then the other batteries took it up. At 5:15 Wilcox's division came over his breastworks 150 yards distant. He sent some of his troops to our right. The colonel of the leading regiment was killed which diverted his men to the crater, and we found General Hartant half an hour after, examining one of his guns in the crater. About this time General Elliott with Colonel Smith and some of his men came up to me and General Elliott directed me to follow Colonel Smith's regiment, as he intended

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