

A LOT OF LETTERS ON TIMELY TOPICS.

Thoughts and Facts That Will
Interest the Reader.

ELLIOTT'S BRIGADE AT THE CRATER

Virginians Not Entitled to the Glory of
That Day—Story of the Fight
From a Participant.

To the Editor of The State

I have often noticed that whenever there is a reunion of the Virginia survivors of the war between the States, that the orators invariably claim the victory at the Crater in front of Petersburg, Va., on the 30th day of July, 1864 for Gen. Mahone and the Virginians.

We are not surprised at that. In fact, there has always been a contention between Elliott's men and Mahone's soldiers as to which of the two commands did the most fighting on that day. But when a prominent South Carolinian, before a South Carolina audience not only follows in the same line but says that Elliott's men were so demoralized that they were replaced in the lines by fresh troops brought up from the flanks by Gen. Lee, I think that it is time that the survivors of the old brigade come forward and tell what they know about that battle.

It is evident that the people of our own State do not understand how that battle was fought, who conducted it, what troops were engaged, or how it was possible for Elliott's brigade to hold the lines at the crater in front of Petersburg, Va., on the 30th day of July, 1864 against such fearful odds.

The battle of the crater was one of the most important battles of the war, and its result had more effect upon the minds of the northern people than any other battle of the war. On the next day the propriety of offering terms of peace to the south was freely discussed in the northern cities. Gold went up to 200 the highest point it ever reached. But the battle of Atlanta was fought and lost by our western army a few days afterwards and the prospects of peace went down with their defeat.

How can our people understand how Elliott's brigade held 30,000 troops with 30 pieces of artillery, concentrated at that point by Gen. Grant, no doubt for the purpose of breaking through our lines at the crater and then swinging his tremendous army right and left and thus destroy our army, unless it is told by those old survivors who were there?

The mine was sprung on the 30th day of July, 1864, at 6 o'clock in the morning. Two hundred and fifty-seven of Elliott's brigade were killed or wounded by the blow-up. Elliott's brigade held the lines, fighting the enemy without assistance, except from the artillery, until Gen. Mahone arrived with his two brigades (his own and Sanders') five hours after the mine was sprung. When Gen. Mahone arrived he deployed his troops and charged the crater, it being packed with 11,000 federal troops that had been driven there by Elliott's brigade, and the artillery under Col. Haskell and Major Colt.

Major Colt's guns were on the next hill to the left of the crater, and had swept the hill in front of the mine with grape and canister from the time the mine was sprung to the close of the battle. Col. Haskell was posted just in rear of our position, near the crater, and did heroic work with his mortars and other guns. Gen. Mahone ran his men up under the very banks of the crater. Small mortars were brought up and bursting shells were hurled into that huddled-up mass of humanity inside the crater. The white flag was hoisted in due time and they surrendered.

It has been learned since the war that when Gen. Grant arrived at the headquarters of Gen. Meade, at about 10 o'clock, on finding that our lines still held out, he ordered his troops to retire from our lines, saying to Gen. Meade that if he, Gen. Meade, could not break through our lines when the mine was first sprung he could not expect to do so three hours afterwards.

It may be asked why the federals had not retired from the crater before Gen. Mahone made his charge? They could not leave the crater without being exposed to almost certain death. When the mine was sprung the enemy had been brought up very near our lines—in fact they were so close that some of them were killed and some wounded by the explosion. They rushed into our lines at once, expecting that the Confederates would be demoralized that they would desert their works and that they, the federals, would have a "walk-over," but they were attacked at once by the 22nd B. C. V., on the right and the 13th B. C. V., on the left so vigorously that they were astonished and jumped into the crater to protect themselves against the bullets from those regiments. More troops were now brought up from the federal lines and broad lanes were cut through their columns by Colt's battery on the left as they advanced, and also by a two-gun battery on the first hill to the right of the crater. This battery had been commanded at first by a Lieut. Otey, but when the mine was sprung Otey with his whole detachment ran and left his guns without firing them. But they were manned and fought later by men from Gen. Wise's brigade.

When the reinforcements of the enemy got in reach of Elliott's men they poured volley after volley into their ranks and they too jumped into the crater. It continued much the same. As the reinforcements of the enemy were brought up they would be subject to the same dangers and would invariably jump into the crater until as I said before 11,000 federal troops were in that crater, 100 feet long, 30 feet deep and 20 feet wide, with a bank surrounding them 15 feet high. All organization was obliterated, their officers had lost control of them and they were as helpless as so many cattle. In their position they could not retire. They were hemmed in on three sides by Elliott's men and Haskell's batteries and could not advance, while if they attempted to retire they would be mowed down like wheat before the scythe by the batteries on the right.

and left. Therefore they preferred to surrender.

I had the honor of being the commander of a company in the 18th B. C. V. and was officer of the day of my regiment on the 19th day of July, 1864. The light of my regiment rested on the battery (Branch's) that was blown up and the whole right wing was enveloped, covered up with timbers, earth and debris. Those of us who were not struck by flying timbers emerged from the debris and attacked the enemy at once. Being officer of the day of my regiment I deemed it my duty to assume the direction of affairs in my immediate neighborhood, and if possible grasp the key to the situation before it was too late.

The air was so filled with smoke and dust that we could not see ten feet away, but I was satisfied that the enemy were upon us. I ordered the men to fire over the breastworks. I then, with the assistance of Adjutant Sims and Lieutenant Anderson, gathered as many men as could be spared from the left of the regiment, and with them occupied a line of works running around the rear of the battery, now the crater. The dust and smoke were still dense; in fact we were groping in the dark. Suddenly we came in contact with about 200 of the enemy. They ordered us to surrender. In reply we gave them the contents of our rifles. They returned the fire and now that the guns were all empty a hand-to-hand fight ensued. Swords, bayonets and the butts of rifles were freely used.

This lasted only for a few moments however, for a shell thrown from our mortar battery in our rear fell among us, bursting with a crash. It buried Confederates and Federals right and left, killing and wounding several, and completely separating the contending parties.

The Federals now dashed over into the crater, where they could fight from cover, while we were unprotected. We fell back to a cross-ditch that had been laid off and prepared by our engineers in light from in case of disaster. The fire from the crater was very severe and we retired, walking backward, fighting as we fell back, the officers using their pistols while the men used their rifles. Adjutant Sims was mortally wounded and Lieutenant Anderson and half the men with us were killed before we reached the ditch. The balance of our regiment had taken position in this ditch before we arrived under Capt. Bridges.

We now received orders from Gen. Elliott, through A. A. G. Evans, to hold and fight from the cross ditch, and only to fire when the enemy showed themselves. Then Gen. Elliott drew out the 26th B. C. V. from the left of the brigade and made a direct charge on the enemy in the crater—but Elliott was shot down and his men were 'rawn back.

Col. Smith then made another attempt to charge the crater with the 24th B. C. V., but Smith was wounded and his brave men again driven back. The enemy then hurled Ferrero's division of drunken negroes against our left, and they did succeed in driving back our left near the crater, so that the line or ditch we occupied was enfiladed by their fire and we were compelled to fall back to another cross-ditch 100 feet to our rear.

Seeing us fall back the negroes charged us, yelling, 'No quarter! remember Fort Pillow!' We gave them one broadside, and they, too, dashed into the crater for protection. Several attempts were now made by the enemy to cross the hill toward Petersburg, but the fierce firing of Elliott's men from the right and left and from the rear—for Col. McMaster, who was now in command of the brigade, had placed his regiment, the 17th B. C. V., and the 18th B. C. V., in a rear line between Petersburg and the crater, about 100 yards in rear of the crater, prepared for just such an emergency—drove them back into the crater dripping with blood.

No other attempt was made by the Federals to leave the crater. Gen. Mahone appeared in the ravine between Petersburg and the crater at 11 o'clock.

Please publish this and oblige. Respectfully,

John Floyd,

Capt. 18th B. C. V., late C. S. A.
Harrison, N. C., Jan 18, 1898