

## The Battle of the Crater

The old Romans had a temple dedicated to war. In times of peace the doors of this temple were shut, in time of war the doors were stretched wide open. And as the Romans were a warlike people, the doors were oftener open than shut. Figuratively the door to our temple of war was shut at Appomattox when we stacked arms before the Union army, and gave up for good the Cause of the South. And yet the war in remembrance is not over, it will never cease while the old soldier lives, while he can fight over its battles mentally, and so long as he can tell to his children and his grand children the memorable days. There is a longing desire among all classes of the people to hear of the tragic events of those days, and hence I am here to tell you about the Crater, what I saw and what we did.

Grant's advance had received such a crushing blow on the 17th of June 1864, that he made no other serious attack. Gen Lee's army had come to our help and taken its position on the line staked off by Beauregard, and both armies went ditching. Beauregard had been sent to a distant field. Gen Lee took command in person, and Wise's Brigade had been merged into the great army of Northern Virginia. The trenches were dug in front of Petersburg, and batteries had been planted on every hill top, and at every point where cannon was needed. Forts had been built along the stretch of ditch, the fortifications had been as strong as military science could make them, the enemy on the opposite hills had done the same, and now the city of Petersburg is beseiged by a powerful army under Grant himself, while the Southern army lay in its trenches watching its opportunity. Mortar batteries had been established at every convenient point on both sides, and often have I seen the duel between opposing batteries as they would hurl their fiery missiles over our heads. We had become acquainted with the mortar shells, for they would sometimes fall in close proximity to us.

The trenches were our home, we lived in them, bearing the heat of summer and the cold and mud of winter. We had nothing but routine duty to do now, sending out pickets at the dusk of evening, and relieving them in the morning before the light of day. Now and then a man would be picked off by a sharpshooter and killed, for sharpshooting was going on day and night. We were under constant fire. Now and then there would be an alarm, then the muskets would rattle, as a real battle was progressing, but it would be only an alarm.

Grant did not dare to rush upon our works, for we were fortified in front and in rear. So some other means must be adopted to reach Petersburg.

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The old Romans had a temple dedicated to war. In times of peace the doors of this temple were shut, in time of war the doors were wide open. And as the Romans were a warlike people, the doors were often open. I figuratively the door to our temple of war was shut at Appomattox when we struck a blow before the Union army, and gave us for good the name of the South. And yet the war in America was not over, it will never cease while the old soldier lives, while he can fight over the battles of history, and so long as he can tell to his children and to his grandchildren the memorable days. There is a lesson to be learned from all classes of the people to learn of the truth, even in those days, and hence I wish to tell you about the Crater, what I saw and what I did.

Grant's advance had received such a crushing blow on the 17th of June 1864, that he made no other serious attack. General Lee's army had come to our help and took its position on the line called off by Lee's hand, and both armies were fighting. Lee's army had been sent to a distant field. General Lee took command in person, and his army had been merged into the great army of Northern Virginia. The trenches were dug in front of Petersburg, and batteries had been planted on every hill top, and at every point where cannon was needed. The trenches had been built along the stretch of the city, the batteries had been placed on the hills, and the enemy on the opposite hills had done the same, and now the city of Petersburg is besieged by a powerful army. Under Grant's plan, the trenches were dug in the trenches which in its opportunity. Mortar batteries had been established at every convenient point on both sides, and often have I seen the duel between opposing batteries as they would hurl their missiles over our heads. We had become acquainted with the mortar shells, for they would sometimes fall in close proximity to us.

The trenches were our home, we lived in them, bearing the heat of summer and the cold and wind of winter. We had nothing but routine duty to do now, sending out pickets at the dawn of evening, and relieving them in the morning before the light of day. Now and then a man would be picked off by a sharpshooter and killed, for sharpshooting was going on day and night. We were under constant fire, now and then there would be an alarm, then the rockets would rattle, as a real battle was progressing, but it would be only an alarm.

Grant did not dare to rush upon our works, for we were fortified in front and in rear, so some other means must be adopted to reach Petersburg.

So as we lay one hot summer day, sweltering in the trenches, there came along some men with long poles in their hands, and at the ends of these poles were iron fixments so adjusted that when thrust on the ground, they would dig holes something like a post digger used for putting in posts for fences. We asked them what they were doing? An. said they, have you heard? Grant is mining and we are trying to find out where he is mining at. One of these mornings you may find yourself flying up in the air between heaven and earth; not a pleasant sensation we bet. We laughed at them and they went their way. So grant was trying to reach Petersburg under the ground.

Not far from old Blandford Cemetary, say about half a mile, or more, the hills runs boldly out, and on this hill we had a battery of four cannon that commanded the Yankee position in front. It was a very strong position and the enemy had advanced their picket line across the little stream that separated the opposing hills. Here our line of defence made an obtuse angle, and in this angle were mounted the four cannon above referred to.

Back of this angle ran a plateau to a rivine say two hundred yards across. This was the battery the Yankee's had fixed upon to "blow up, and the plateau was to be the battle ground. On the hill next to the right was another battery say two or three hundred yards distant. This battery contained, I think only one cannon. Now you have the ground laid off on which the struggle was to be made. The enemy dug a passage under the ground from their picket post to this battery of four cannon, walled it up so that it could not cave in, and right under the battery put tons of powder, we have never known how much.

The month of July of that year of "64" had come with its long hot days, and the heat of the sun in these trenches was almost unbearable, but we had to bear everything for our Country's sake. The month dragged slowly along, and when it had nearly run its course, on the 29th' Wise's Brigade was moved and so stationed that the 26th Regiment occupied a portion of the ground between the two batteries I have described. Hence we held a position in full view of what was soon to happen. Grant had made a diversion towards Richmond, and to meet it Lee had to take some of his troops out the trenches, and thus we had to take their places.

The morning of the 30th of July, between the break of day and sunrise, I lay fast asleep on a plank at the bottom of the ditch, when I was startled by a sudden quaking of the earth, and by the cry of one of our company;

... we lay out our summer bag, sweating in the trenches, there came  
along some men with long poles in their hands, and at the end of these  
poles were iron spikes so adjusted that when thrust on the ground,  
they would dig holes something like a post-holes, and for nothing in the  
world, we asked them what they were doing. An old fellow, who  
you heard, Grant is talking and we are trying to find out where he  
means. One of these men said you may find yourself lying up in the  
middle of the trench, and you are not a pleasant sensation, we got  
laughed at them and they went their way, so Grant was trying to teach  
us something under the ground.

... for far from old Hildford Cemetery, any about half a mile, or more,  
the hills were boldy out, and on this hill we had a battery of four cannon  
that commanded the Yankee position in front. It was a very strong  
position and the enemy had advanced their picket line across the little  
stream that separated the opposing hills. There on line of defense made  
an obtuse angle, and in this angle were mounted the four cannon above  
referred to.

Back of this angle there were fifteen or twenty two hundred yards across,  
this was the battery the Yankees had fixed upon to blow us, and the  
battery was to be the right ground. In the hill to the right was  
another battery of two or three hundred yards distant. This battery  
commanded, I think only one cannon, how you have the ground laid off on  
which the struggle was to be made. The enemy dug a passage under the  
ground from their picket post to this battery of four cannon, which it  
is that it could not cover it, and that under the battery but tank of powder,  
we have never known how long.

The month of July of last year of '84 had come with its long hot days,  
and the heat of the sun in these trenches was almost unbearable, but we  
had to bear everything for our Country's sake. The month dragged  
slowly along, and when it had nearly run its course, on the 23rd, Grant's  
position was moved and so stationed that the 2nd Division occupied a  
portion of the ground between the two batteries I have described. Hence  
we held a position in full view of what was going on. Grant had  
made a diversion towards Tullahoma, and to a great extent had taken some  
of his troops out the trenches, and thus we had to take their place.

The morning of the 26th of July, between the hour of day a sunrise, I  
lay fast asleep on a plank at the bottom of the ditch, when I was startled  
by a sudden coming of the enemy, and by the cry of one of our company;

look Grant has blown up our works. I jumped to my feet and saw a great cloud of black smoke hovering in the air above, great masses of earth blown up, and men going up with arms and legs extended. The long expected event had come, the mine had been sprung, and the city of Petersburg was shaken as by a mighty earth quake. The smoke had hardly lifted itself away, before Burnside's Corps fifteen thousand strong, negro troops in front rushed upon and took possession of the ground. And now every battery on the opposing hills opened fire, cannon shot swept the field, and mortar shells dropped thick and fast around us. I can best describe the scene in the language of the poet Campbell....

Then shook the hills with thunder riv'n  
And louder than the bolts of Heav'n  
Far flashed the red artillery.

The 26th stood firm as a rock and we shot volley after volley, but the distance was too great, our balls fell short and our men farther to our left called to us to cease firing that the bullets were falling among them. At this juncture our ammunition commenced to run low, and Capt. Smith ordered me to go in search of Capt. Street, who was in command of the Regiment, and report our want of ammunition. I pulled off my cartridge box containing 40 rounds and said to the men, use mine until I come back, but I hardly expected ever to return. I found Capt. Street and reported our situation. He remarked that cartridges would soon be in and directly George Spencer came lugging in the ammunition. Three Companies of South Carolinians had been blown up, the battery on our right had been deserted by a cowardly Lieutenant and his men when the explosion took place. They expected to be blown up also, and had run off to Petersburg. But Capt. Bagby of the 24th came to the rescue, manned the gun and worked it with great success.

The enemy attempted to proceed towards Petersburg. The formed line and made a start, but they had not proceeded very far before we saw them running back with necks extended like so many wild turkeys. We judged they met something in the ravine they did not fancy. Nothing farther could be done, we must hold our own, we must keep the enemy confined to the ground he had taken until assistance came.

But the deafening noise, the shrieking shells, the bursting mortar shells, the whizzing minnie balls, they must be endured until our troops could come to the rescue. I heard of but one cowardly act, that of the Lieutenant. Every man amongst us as the enemy expected. Gen Lee had sent us word down the line re-enforcements were coming. "Hold your own men" was the order. And nobly they did it.

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cloud of black smoke hovering in the air above, the masses of earth  
blown up, and men going up with arms and legs extended. The long  
expected event had come, the mine had been sprung, and the city of  
Petersburg was shaken as by a mighty earthquake. The smoke had  
hardly lifted itself away, before the air was filled with a thousand strong  
men, who had rushed from their positions on the ground.  
And how every battery on the opposing hills opened fire, cannon shot  
swept the field, and mortar shells dropped thick and fast around us. I  
can best describe the scene in the language of the poet Campbell.

Then shook the hills with their din,  
And louder than the din of heaven,  
The flash of the red anarchy.

The 24th stood firm as a rock and we shot volley after volley, but the  
distance was too great, our balls fell short and our men farther to our  
left called to me to cease firing that the bullets were falling among them.  
At this juncture our ammunition commenced to run low, and Capt. Smith  
ordered me to go in search of Capt. Street, who was in command of the  
regiment, and report our want of ammunition. I filled off my cartridge  
box containing 40 rounds and said to the men, use mine until I come back,  
but I hardly expected ever to return. I found Capt. Street and reported  
our situation. He remarked that cartridges would soon be in and directed  
George Spencer to take up the ammunition. These cartridges of  
South Carolina had been blown off, the battery on our right had been  
deserted by a cowardly lieutenant and his men, when the explosion took  
place. They expected to be blown to bits, and had run off to Petersburg.  
But Capt. Babby of the 24th came to the rescue, rallied the run and  
worked it with great success.

The enemy attempted to proceed toward Petersburg. The formed line  
and made a start, but they had not proceeded very far before we saw  
them turning back with necks extended like so many wild turkeys. We  
knew they were retreating in the rear they did not fancy. Nothing  
further could be done, we must hold our own, we must keep the enemy  
confined to the ground he had taken until darkness came.

But the deafening noise, the shrieking shells, the bursting mortar shells,  
the whizzing mine balls, they must be endured until our troops could  
come to the rescue. I heard of but one cowardly act, that of the  
lieutenant. Every man except as the enemy expected. Gen. Lee had  
sent us word to hold the line re-enforcements were coming. "Hold your own  
men" was the order. And nobly they did it.

It must be evening now, for old Meredith has crawled in through shot and shell and brought Capt. Smith his dinner. A faithful old darkey he must have been to bring his master his dinner whilst a battle is in progress. But he came and Capt. Smith did not have to go hungry. There was no dinner for us, we had no time to devote to our stomachs. We looked over the field but could see no aid approaching. Presently we heard a shout in the distance. Did you ever hear the rebel yell? Ah: you should have heard that, it made the blood leap in our veins, it armed us with redoubled courage. Look men, our Brigade rushes to the charge. Then another shout went up louder than the first, and a second Brigade moves at a double quick across the plateau. It reached its place and aligns itself on the right of the first. Another yell like the demons were turned loose, and a third Brigade issues from the ravine nearer to us, and sweeps across the plateau at a run--then every Yankee battery belched forth its thunder, every mortar sent its shell shrieking through the air, bullets flew, but these men rushes to the charge, not counting the danger, every man a hero, and closed in on the enemy. Oh: it was a grand sight to look upon that desperate charge. Braver men never went into battle. Well might General Lee say to Sir Garnett Wolsey when remarking on the sorry appearance of his men. Sir you should see them go into battle. And I say to you, my friends, you should have seen these men go into battle. When the shout was raised we could see the Yankees streaming back to their works--they knew what was coming. We closed to the left to make the connection with the charging force, and by one supreme effort the works were carried and victory perched upon the Southern banner. I asked what troops they were, they told me that they were Georgians of Mahones division. Brave Georgians: Not the charge Murat on the sandy plains of Egypt, not the charge of the English at Balaklava, not the charge of Pickett at Getysburg could surpass this in brilliancy and splendid courage.

This closed the fighting, night came on and every gun was silent, not even the accustomed sharpshooting went on. The next morning a flag of truce was sent in by the enemy asking the permission to bury their dead. Of course it was granted, and then we had an opportunity to look over the field and to visit the great hole that had been made by the explosion of the powder. We found the space in front of our works all strewn over with dead, mostly negros who had been slain in the attack bringing to mind the words of the same poet,

Ah: few shall part where many meet,  
And every turf beneath their feet  
Shall be a soldier's sepulchre.

It was a round hole of considerable depth, resembling the crater of a volcano, hence its name. It is said that ten thousand men were lost on both sides in this battle, about an equal number on each side, with no benefit to the attacking party. And now, my friends, I would say in

It must be evident now, for old Meredith has owned in his own  
and still and bright Cape Smith his dinner. A faithful old  
must have been to bring his master his dinner what a battle is in pro-  
cess. But he came and Cape Smith did not have to hurry. There  
was no dinner for us, we had no time to devote to our stomachs. We  
looked over the field out could see no aid approaching. Presently we  
heard a shout in the distance. Did you ever hear the rebel yell?

You should have heard that, it made the blood leap in our veins, it showed  
us with redoubled courage. Look ahead, our battle ranges to the charges.  
Then another shout went up louder than the first, and a second Division  
moves at a double quick across the plain. It reared its place and  
lights itself on the right of the first. Another yell like the first was  
turned loose, and a third Division issues in our rear. Every nearer to us,  
and every nearer the first, at a run then every Yankee battery belched  
forth its thunder, every mortar sent its shell shrieking through the air,  
ballets flew, and there in an instant to the charge, not counting the danger  
every man a hero, and closed in on the enemy. Oh, it was a grand sight  
to look upon that desperate charge. It never has never went into battle,  
Well might General Lee say to Sir Garnett Wolsey when remaining on  
the sorry appearance of his men. Sir, you should see them in this battle,  
And I say to you, my friends, you should have seen these men go into  
battle. When the shot was raised we could see the Yankee straggling  
back to their works--they know what was coming. We closed to the left  
to make the connection with the charging force, and by one supreme effort  
the works were carried and victory proclaimed upon the Southern banner. I  
asked what troops they were, they told me that they were Georgia's  
Macon's division. Brave Georgia! Not the charge what on the sandy  
plains of Egypt, but the charge of the British at Balaklava, not the charge  
of Robert at Gettysburg could surpass this in brilliancy and epic heroism.

This closed the fighting, the sun came on and every man was silent, not even  
the accessories and shouting went out. The last word was a loud ex-  
clamation by the enemy asking the permission to bury their dead. Oh,  
course it was refused, and then we had an opportunity to look over the  
field and to visit the dead hole that had been made by the explosion of the  
power. We found the space in front of our works all strewn over with  
dead, a deadly stream which had been there in the exact path of the  
works of the enemy.

And now shall we have any more?  
And every man cheerfully  
shall be a soldier's welcome.

It was a grand sight of considerable depth, reaching the water of a  
volcano, hence the name. It is said that ten thousand men were lost on  
both sides in this battle, about an equal number on each side, with no  
benefit to the attacking party. And now, my friends, I would say in



conclusion that I would like to see a monument erected on this very spot with this inscription on it. To the brave men who fought the battle of the Crater.

The above article on the Battle of the Crater was written by Captain Joseph L. Pollard and published in Tidewater Democrat Friday July 30th, 1897, thirty three years after the battle.

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