

# **The Battle of the Crater: the Civil War's worst massacre.**

by Bryce A. Suderow

After fighting his way south from the Rapidan to the gates of Richmond during May and June 1864, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant found himself stalemated in front of the formidable trenches protecting Petersburg, the rail junction that supplied the Confederate capital.

During June and July 1864, soldiers of Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside's Ninth Corps tunneled under the Confederate lines outside Petersburg and filled two galleries with eight thousand pounds of gunpowder. The goal was to explode the gunpowder to create a breach in the Confederate lines and to rush troops through the gap to seize Cemetery Hill. It was supposed that once this commanding position was taken, the Confederates would be forced to abandon Petersburg and Richmond, Lee's army would be beaten into submission, and the war would end.

At 4:45 a.m., on July 30, 1864, the Federals detonated the explosives beneath a salient held by Gen. Stephen Elliott Jr.'s South Carolina brigade, destroying one battery and a regiment and a half of infantry. In their place was a huge smoldering hole in the ground, a crater, measuring 150-200 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep.

Shortly after the explosion, three white divisions were sent, one after the other, to exploit the break, but they were so badly led that they were easily driven back into the Crater. At 8:00 a.m., Gen. Edward Ferrero's Fourth (Colored) Division, numbering 4,200 officers and men, was ordered forward, its two brigades led by Cols. Joshua K. Siegfried and Henry Goddard Thomas. Siegfried's brigade consisted of the 27th, 30th, 39th, and 43d U.S. Colored Infantry. Thomas's brigade was composed of 19th, 23d, 28th, 29th, and 31st U.S. Colored Infantry.(1)

Despite heavy opposition from Ransom's North Carolina brigade and portions of Elliott's South Carolinians, the 30th and 43d U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) of Siegfried's brigade seized the last Confederate trench that stood between them and Cemetery Hill, capturing 150 prisoners. Thomas's 2d brigade assaulted simultaneously on Siegfried's left but was repulsed with heavy losses in his lead regiment, the 31st USCT. He reformed and advanced a second time at 9 a.m., this time with the 29th USCT in the lead.

Both brigades were met by a furious counterattack by Weisiger's Virginia brigade and Wright's Georgia brigade from Brig. Gen. William Mahone's division. After fierce fighting, most of Siegfried's and Thomas's soldiers were driven back into Union lines or into the Crater, where they joined white troops already seeking shelter there.

At least four Confederate assaults were launched at the Crater between 9:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. It finally fell to Sanders's Alabama brigade of Mahone's division at one o'clock. The Federals took over four thousand casualties in what Grant himself called "the saddest affair I have ever witnessed in the war."(2)

Careful examination of eyewitness accounts, including contemporary letters, demonstrate that several massacres occurred during and after the Battle of the Crater.

The first took place when Weisiger's Virginians and Wright's Georgians killed wounded black soldiers and black soldiers trying to surrender as they charged and cleared the trench of Siegfried's brigade. They also killed black soldiers who had been sent to the rear as prisoners.

George Bernard of the 12th Virginia, Weisiger's brigade, said they littered the trench with murdered blacks:

A minute later I witnessed another deed which made my blood run cold. Just about the outer end of the ditch by which I had entered stood a negro soldier, a non-commissioned officer (I noticed distinctly his chevrons) begging for his life of two Confederate soldiers who stood by him, one of them striking the poor wretch with a steel ramrod, the other holding a gun in his hand, with which he seemed to be trying to get a shot at the negro. The man with the gun fired at the negro, but did not seem to seriously injure him, as he only clapped his hand to his hip, when he appeared to have been shot, and continued to beg for his life. The man with the ramrod continued to strike the negro therewith, whilst the fellow with the gun deliberately reloaded it, and, placing its muzzle close against the stomach of the poor negro, fired, at which the latter fell limp and lifeless at the feet of the two Confederates. It was a brutal, horrible act, and those of us who witnessed it from our position in the trench a few feet away could but claim: That is too bad! It is shocking!

Yet this, I have no doubt from what I saw and afterwards heard, was but a sample of many other bloody tragedies during the first 10 minutes after our men got into the trench, many of whom seemed infuriated at the idea of having to fight negroes.

Within 10 minutes the whole floor of the trench was strewn with the dead bodies of negroes, in some places in such numbers that it was difficult to make one's way along the trench without stepping upon them.(3)

Lt. Freeman Bowley of the 30th USCT wrote, "We were the last to reach the Crater by way of the traverse, and the rifles of the Union soldiers were flashing in our faces when we jumped down in there. As I landed inside, I turned for a second to look back, and caught a glimpse of the Confederates bayoneting the wounded men who had just been shot down."(4)

In a letter to his sweetheart dated August 5, 1864, Pvt. Henry Van Lewvenigh Bird of the 12th Virginia wrote,

"Saturday's fight was a bitter struggle. No furlough wounds given there and no quarter either. Prayers for mercy and the groans of the wounded were alike hushed in death. There was no volley and cheers to excite the men to the Ivork of death. The knowledge of dishonor to the loved ones behind if we failed and victory before us if we succeeded carried everything before it resistlessly. The negro's charging cry of "No quarter" was met with the stem cry of "amen" and without firing a single shot we closed with them. They fought like bulldogs and died like soldiers. Southern bayonets dripped with blood and after a brief but bitter struggle the works were ours. The only sounds which now broke the stillness was some poor wounded wretch begging for water and quieted by a bayonet thrust which said unmistakably "Bois ton sang. Tu n'aurais plus de soif." [Drink your blood. You will have no more thirst].(5)

Dorsey Binion of the 48th Georgia, Wright's brigade, wrote, "When we got to the works it was filled with negroes and they were crying out 'no quarter' when a hand to hand conflict ensued with the breach of our guns and bayonets and you may depend on it we did not show much quarter but slayed them. Some few negroes went to the rear as we could not kill them as fast as they passed us."(6)

After driving Ferrero's division into the Crater, Mahone's division hunted down blacks who were hiding in bombproofs and slaughtered them from about 10 a.m. until noon in a second massacre. The ones they spared were sent to the rear, but many of these prisoners were killed in a third massacre as they ran rearward.

Artillerist William Pegram provided evidence that the Confederates killed blacks as they went to the rear and also hunted down and murdered blacks who hid in Confederate bomb proofs. In a letter dated August 1, 1864, Colonel Pegram wrote:

I think over two hundred negroes got into our lines, by surrendering and running in, along with the whites, while the fighting was going on. I don't believe that much over half of these ever reached the rear. You could see them lying dead all along the route to the rear. There were hardly less than six hundred dead--four hundred of whom were negroes. As soon as we got upon them, they threw down their arms in surrender, but were not allowed to do so. Every bomb proof I saw, had one or two dead negroes in it, who had skulked out the fight & been found & killed by our men. This was perfectly right, as a matter of policy.(7)

The fourth massacre occurred after the Federals in the Crater surrendered. Michael L. Kerrick of Mahone's division wrote, "The Negros hollared No Quarter, Remember Fort Pillow and when our boys charged they took them at their word. At least some did. They killed them with the butts of their muskets. They piled them up three or four deep in the ditches."(8) Lt. Freeman Bowley of the 30th USCT wrote, "As the Confederates came rushing into the Crater, calling to their comrades in their rear, 'The Yankees have

surrendered!' some of the foremost ones plunged their bayonets into the colored wounded."(9)

After the war Mahone tried to evade responsibility for the butchery, but he was found to have incited his men to murder the blacks. According to a member of Sanders's Alabama brigade, General Mahone walked in front of the lines and told us that the negroes in the Crater had holloed "Remember Fort Pillow! No Quarter!" He said it was a life and death struggle, and for us not to take any of them, but to load our guns, fix bayonets, and go stooped as far as we could without being seen, and then to rise and go in among them, and give them h--; and we tried to obey orders. Just before the job was completed General Mahone sent orders to us not to kill quite all of them.(10)

W. A. Day of the 49th North Carolina in Ransom's brigade, Bushrod Johnson's division, described the massacre in the Crater and the murder of fugitive blacks who were hiding in the bombproofs:

They rushed up to the works which we [sic] alive with Yankees both white and black. They halted on the brink and fired one volley into the surging mass, and then turned the butts of their guns and jumped in among them. How the negro's skulls cracked under the blows. Some of them run over on our side and started for the rear, while others made a dash for their own lines, and a great many of them made their escape. I, boy like, ran up the line to see them. When I got there they had the ground covered with broken headed negroes and were searching about among the bomb proofs for more, the officers were trying to stop them but they kept on until they finished up.(11)

It is clear that a massacre occurred. How large was the massacre? An examination of the nominal lists of casualties for each of the eight black regiments engaged, as well as the 1st and 2d brigade and the Fourth Division casualty lists, reveals that 219 officers and soldiers belonging to the Fourth Division were killed, 957 wounded, and 410 missing, a total loss of 1,305.(12)

	KIA	WIA	POW	Total
1st Brig.				
27th USCT	11	45	18	74
30th USCT	18	99	78	190
39th USCT	15	92	47	154
43d USCT	13	81	23	117
Total:	57	317	166	535
2d Brig.				
19th USCT	24	87	3	114

23d USCT	75	116	119	310
28th USCT	13	65	11	89
29th USCT	21	55	47	123
31st USCT	29	41	64	134
Total:	162	364	244	770
Grand Total:	219	957	410	1305

The figure of 219 seems impossibly low for two reasons. The Confederates claimed they buried 750 Yankees after the battle; yet according to the nominal lists of casualties for the Crater, only 504 Federals were killed, 219 of them black soldiers. In other words, the Confederates claimed they had buried 246 more bodies than are listed by the Federal casualty table.

Also, although the nominal lists give the number of missing blacks at 410, the Confederates state they captured only 200 black soldiers. One paper said that "Amongst the eleven hundred prisoners taken by our forces last Saturday, at Petersburg, two hundred were negroes."<sup>(13)</sup> A study of a list of the 410 black soldiers who were missing and an examination of the service records and pension records of all 410 of these soldiers produces shocking results:

205 killed 13 mortally wounded 62 wounded in action 3 mortally wounded and captured  
13 wounded in action and captured 72 captured

Total: 368 (of 410; the other 42 were not casualties)

The breakdown by regiment is as follows:

	KIA	MW	WIA	WIA & POW	POW	POW	Total
1st Brig.							
27th USCT	24	1	47	0	0	0	72
30th USCT	62	2	118	1	3	5	191
39th USCT	32	1	106	0	0	6	145
43d USCT	26	1	87	0	0	3	117
Total:	144	5	358	1	3	14	525
2d Brig.							
19th USCT	27	0	87	0	0	0	114
28th USCT	19	1	66	0	0	1	87
29th USCT	48	0	56	1	6	11	122
31st USCT	67	3	46	1	2	10	129
23d USCT	118	4	131	0	2	37	285
Total:	279	8	386	2	10	59	744

1st Brig.	144	5	358	1	3	14	525
2d Brig.	279	8	386	2	10	59	744

According to these adjusted figures, the Fourth Division of blacks lost 423 killed, 13 mortally wounded, 744 wounded, 3 mortally wounded and captured, 13 wounded and captured, 73 captured--a total of 1,269 men.

One startling fact is that although 410 blacks were missing after the battle, the Confederates captured only 85 prisoners and killed 423 blacks, counting the missing who were slain. At the Crater, the ratio of blacks killed to wounded was 423 to 757, about 1 to 1.7. In the Civil War the normal ratio of killed to wounded was 1 to 4.8.

These statistics make it clear that the massacre at the Crater was the worst massacre of blacks during the Civil War. Only two other massacres rival its carnage. At Fort Pillow, blacks belonging to the First Battalion, 6th U.S. Heavy Artillery (Colored), and to Company D, 2d U.S. Light Artillery (Colored), lost 185 killed, 40 wounded, and 51 captured, a total loss of 276.(14) At Poison Springs, Arkansas, the 1st Kansas (Colored) lost 117 killed and 65 wounded.(15)

Perhaps it is time to reexamine more closely other Civil War battles to see whether massacres of black soldiers occurred there as well. Possible candidates include Milliken's Bend, Louisiana; Mound Fort, Louisiana; Olustee, Florida; Saltville, Virginia; and New Market Heights, Virginia.

### *Footnotes*

(1) According to Brvt. Maj. Gen. Henry G. Thomas, Siegfried's brigade numbered 2,000 and Thomas's 2,300. "The Colored Troops at Petersburg," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, vol. 4 (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1956), 563.

(2) See Grant to Halleck, Aug. 1, 1864, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. 40, 1:17 (hereafter cited as OR).

(3) George Bernard, *War Talks of Confederate Veterans* (Petersburg, Va.: Fenn and Owen, 1892), 169.

(4) Freeman Bowley, "A Boy Lieutenant in a Colored Regiment," *National Tribune*, June 29, 1899, 1.

(5) Letter to Margaret Randolph, Aug. 5, 1864, Pvt. Henry Van Lewvenigh Bird, Bird Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

(6) Letter, Dorsey M. Binion, Aug. 1, 1864, Michael Musick Collection, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

(7) James I. Robertson, Jr., ed., "The Boy Artillerist," *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography* 98 (April 1990): 243.

(8) Letter, Michael L. Kerrick, Aug. [July?] 30, 1864, folder 8, doc. #110, Petersburg National Park Library, Petersburg, Virginia.

(9) Bowley, "A Boy Lieutenant."

(10) B. F. Phillips, "Wilcox's Alabamians in Virginia," *Confederate Veteran* 15 (Nov. 1907): 490.

(11) W. A. Day, *A True History of Company I, 49th Regiment, North Carolina Troops* (Newton, N.C.: The Enterprise Job Office, 1893), 84.

(12) These lists were obtained from two sources: RG 94, entry 652, box 33; and RG 94, entry 653, box 16. The first entry consists of casualty lists for each Union regiment serving in the war, and box 33 contains lists for black regiments. Entry 653 consists of casualty lists for the various Union armies and is arranged by corps within those armies; this particular box contains casualties for the Fourth Division, Ninth Corps throughout its entire existence as a unit.

(13) *Richmond Examiner*, Aug. 4, 1864, 1.

(14) See John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort, Jr., "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Statistical Note," *Journal of American History* 76 (Dec. 1989): 836.

(15) See report of Maj. Richard G. Ward, 1st Kansas (Colored) Infantry, in OR, vol. 34, 1:754.

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### **The Crater Massacre**

Bryce Suderow's 1997 *Civil War History* article titled "The Battle of the Crater: The Civil War's Worst Massacre" is the most complete analysis of the slaughter of United States Colored Troops. (The article was recently reprinted in Gregory J.W. Urwin ed. *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* [Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2004]). While the article is only five pages long, Suderow includes a great deal of important information and lays out a detailed explanation of the casualties of Brig. Gen. Edward Ferrero's black division. He makes two important points: First, Suderow argues that there were four separate massacres of black soldiers between their introduction to the battle around 8:00am to the close of the battle and the surrender of a sizeable number of the division. Second, he provides a corrective to the exact numbers that may have been executed at some point during the battle.

Suderow claims that there were four separate "massacres" of black soldiers during the battle. To make his point Suderow utilizes the written testimony, both contemporary and postwar. The first massacre occurred around 9:00am when the men of Brig. Gen. David Weisiger's Virginia brigade and the Alabamians under the command of Brig. Gen. Ambrose R. Wright killed black soldiers who were part of the deepest penetration beyond the contours of the crater and were now wounded and trying to retreat back into position with the rest of the Federal units. Of the four "massacres" that Suderow cites this is the least convincing. He references three Confederate accounts and one by Lt. Freeman Bowley of the 30th USCT; all of them suggest that wounded black soldiers were gunned down as they attempted to make their way back into the crater from their advanced position. Part of my problem is with the claim that this represented a massacre. Suderow never defines his terms, which is problematic as his next three instances differ in one crucial respect: the intention to kill specifically black soldiers. Yes, these men were hollering "No Quarter" and I have no doubt that Confederates were enraged by their presence on the battlefield, but given that these are the first units that Gen. Mahone's brigades met it is impossible to know how they would have handled the situation if they had faced white units or a combination of white and black units. In other words, it seems

reasonable to ask, given the gravity of the situation, whether white Federal soldiers might have been gunned down indiscriminately as Confederates made their way closer to the crater itself.

The second instance, which lasted from 10:00am until noon, involved Mahone's men hunting down black soldiers who had taken shelter in bombproofs. Some that were not executed outright were gunned down while being led back through Confederate lines and this represented a third massacre. Both instances are documented by Suderow and here I believe he is on more solid ground as these men were not actively engaged in the fight and at least in the latter example had already surrendered.

Finally, following the battle a number of black soldiers were executed. B.F. Philips, who served in the Alabama brigade which made the final counterattack around 1:00pm, recalled in 1907 that Mahone had sent orders for the men "not to kill quite all of them." A soldier in Robert Ransom's North Carolina brigade also remembered the treatment of black soldiers following the battle: "When I got there they had the ground covered with broken headed negroes, and were searching about among the bomb proofs for more, the officers were trying to stop them but they kept on until they finished up."

The second part of Suderow's article - and the more important part - is his analysis of the actual numbers of black soldiers that may have been massacred. The nominal list of casualties in Ferrero's Fourth Division shows that 219 soldiers were killed in the battle. Suderow believes this number is much too low and here is his argument: While Confederates claimed to have buried 750 Federal soldiers a nominal list suggests a total 504 killed including the 219 black soldiers. So, we have 246 bodies that are unaccounted for as compared with the Federal casualty list. While the list of captured black soldiers includes 410 names, Confederates claimed to only have captured 200 black soldiers. Suderow then went back to the service and pension records of these 410 soldiers and discovered the following: 205 killed, 13 mortally wounded, 62 wounded in action, 3 mortally wounded and captured, 13 wounded in action and captured, 72 captured -- Total of 368 (of 410; the other 42 were not casualties).

Adjusted claims for the Fourth Division, according to Suderow, include 423 killed, 13 mortally wounded, 744 wounded, 3 mortally wounded and captured, 13 wounded and

captured, and 73 captured--a total of 1,269 men. An important point that Suderow makes at the end of the article about the Crater is that while the ratio of blacks killed to wounded was 423 to 757, about 1 to 1.8 the ratio of killed to wounded for the war in general was 1 to 4.8.