

MAJOR GENERAL

AMBROSE E. BURNSIDE

AND THE

NINTH ARMY CORPS:

A NARRATIVE OF CAMPAIGNS IN

NORTH CAROLINA, MARYLAND, VIRGINIA, OHIO, KENTUCKY,
MISSISSIPPI AND TENNESSEE, DURING THE WAR FOR
THE PRESERVATION OF THE REPUBLIC,

BY

AUGUSTUS WOODBURY.

ILLUSTRATED WITH PORTRAITS AND MAPS.



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707

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and fifth corps scarcely fifty. General Gregg, with the cavalry, had a smart engagement with the enemy upon our extreme left, but without any decisive result. At eleven o'clock, General Meade returned to the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac. General Burnside, at a later hour, retired to his own headquarters in the rear, sorrow-stricken by the contemplation of the deplorable result. At two o'clock all was over, and such of our men as could withdraw from the crater had returned to the lines. It was especially mortifying to feel that his own plan of action, which had promised a magnificent victory, should have been set aside at the last moment, and another substituted which eventuated in signal disaster and defeat.

NOTE.

General Meade performed an act of justice to Lieutenant Colonel Pleasants by issuing, on the 5th of August, the following general order:

"The commanding general takes great pleasure in acknowledging the valuable services rendered by Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants, 48th regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers, and the officers and men of his command, in the excavation of the mine which was successfully exploded on the morning of the 30th ult., under one of the enemy's batteries in front of the second division of the Ninth Army Corps. The skill displayed in the laying out and construction of the mine reflects great credit upon Lieutenant Colonel Pleasants, the officer in charge, and the willing endurance by the officers and men of the regiment of the extraordinary labor and fatigue involved in the prosecution of the work to completion are worthy of the highest praise."

How great an encouragement would have been such a recognition while the mine was in progress! But instead of recognition, Lieutenant Colonel Pleasants had nothing but ridicule at the headquarters of the army.

CHAPTER VI.

INQUIRY AND INVESTIGATION.

THE battle of July 30th naturally caused considerable discussion in and out of the army, and the circumstances of the case demanded a complete investigation of the causes of the disaster. General Meade was highly incensed by the language of General Burnside, in reply to the imperative demand for information respecting the obstacles in the way of gaining the crest. He was also displeased with his silence in regard to the events which took place subsequently to the suspension of hostilities. Accordingly, on the 3d of August, he preferred charges against General Burnside, intending to try him by court martial. He also requested General Grant to relieve the offending officer from duty with the Army of the Potomac. These charges were for "disobedience of orders" and "conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline." The specifications of the first charge were, for failure in communicating information and neglect in relieving the eighteenth corps. That of the second was, for addressing to General Meade the despatch to which allusion has already been made. General Grant considered these charges so frivolous that he refused to order the court, and thus that matter dropped.

General Meade, however, was not disposed to allow the case to subside. He therefore immediately ordered a court of inquiry to examine the whole subject. The court met and decided that it could not proceed without the authority of the President. The matter was then referred to Washington, and the court was legalized by the authorities there. It was composed of General Hancock, commander of the second corps,

General Ayres, who commanded a division in the fifth corps, and General Miles, who commanded a brigade in the second corps. These gentlemen were officers in the supporting corps on the day of battle. Colonel Schriver, inspector general at General Meade's headquarters, was the judge advocate of the court. This body convened on the 6th of August, and continued in session, at different times, until the 9th of September. General Hancock presided at its deliberations, and is understood to have objected to the character of its composition. General Burnside made a formal protest to the Secretary of War against the constitution of the court, on the ground that the officers composing it held commands in the supporting columns, which were not brought into action on the 30th of July, and that the judge advocate was a member of General Meade's staff. He felt that he had a right to ask that, if an investigation were made, it should be by officers who did not belong to the Army of the Potomac, and were not selected by General Meade. He did not shrink from investigation, but desired that it should be removed from even a suspicion of partiality. Mr. Stanton did not perceive the force of the objection, and assured General Burnside that he might feel entire confidence in the fairness and justice of the President in reviewing the case. "The action of the board of inquiry," said Mr. Stanton, "will be merely to collect facts for the President's information." The court, in accordance with the order, proceeded to investigate the matter, and on the seventeenth day of its session, delivered its decision. It becomes necessary to examine the "finding" and "opinion" which were expressed, and the testimony upon which they were based.

The court declared the causes of failure to be "the injudicious formation of the troops in going forward, the movement being mainly by flank instead of extended front;" "the halting of the troops in the crater instead of going forward to the crest;" "no proper employment of engineer officers and working parties and of materials for their use;" an improper direction of some parts of the assaulting columns, and "the want

of a competent common head at the scene of the assault, to direct affairs as occurrences should demand." The opinion of the court was, that the "following named officers were answerable for the want of success: Major General A. E. Burnside, Brigadier General J. H. Ledlie, Brigadier General Edward Ferrero, Colonel Z. R. Bliss, and Brigadier General O. B. Willcox." General Burnside was answerable because he failed to obey the orders of the commanding general. "1. In not giving such formation to his assaulting columns as to insure a reasonable prospect of success; 2. In not preparing his parapets and abatis for the passage of the columns of assault; 3. In not employing engineer officers, who reported to him, to lead the assaulting columns with working parties, and not causing to be provided proper materials necessary for crowning the crest; 4. In neglecting to execute Major General Meade's orders, respecting the prompt advance of General Ledlie's troops from the crater to the crest; or, in default of accomplishing that, not causing those troops to fall back and give place to others, instead of delaying until the opportunity passed away." General Ledlie was answerable because he "failed to push forward his division promptly, according to orders, thereby blocking up the avenue which was designed for the passage of" the supporting troops; and also because, instead of being with his division in the crater, "he was most of the time in a bomb proof ten rods in the rear of the main line of the Ninth Corps." General Ferrero was answerable because his troops were not ready for the attack at the prescribed time, because he did not go with them to the attack, and because he was "habitually in a bomb proof." Colonel Bliss was answerable because "he remained behind with the only regiment of his brigade which did not go forward according to the orders and occupied a position where he could not see what was going on." General Willcox was answerable because he did not exercise sufficient energy in causing his troops to go forward to Cemetery Hill. The court also expressed the opinion in language, the severity of which is but partially disguised in its softness,

that "explicit orders should have been given, assigning one officer to the command of all the troops intended to engage in the assault, when the commanding general was not present in person to witness the operations."

To support this finding and opinion, the court examined Generals Grant, Meade, Burnside, Warren, Humphreys, Ord, Hunt, Potter, Willcox, Ferrero, Griffin, Hartranft, Mott, Ames, Ayres, and a number of other inferior officers. But no officers on General Burnside's staff were brought before the court to testify in the case.* It is singular to observe how inconclusively the opinion of the court follows from the testimony adduced.

General Meade, testifying in his own behalf, was strangely inconsistent with himself in the evidence which he offered. He submitted to the court his orders on the day of battle, some of which have already been quoted, and by which it distinctly appears that he directed every moment that was made. The substance of his testimony in other respects was, that he disapproved of the location of the mine and General Burnside's plan of attack; that he had one or more staff officers at General Burnside's headquarters in the front; that he learned, before eight o'clock in the morning, that General Griffin had made an attack on the right of the crater and had been repulsed; that the first positive information which he received that there was any enemy in front or "present" was not before nine o'clock in the morning; that he had ordered the troops withdrawn whenever that could be done with security; that, subsequently to the battle, he remained in "total ignorance of any further transactions until about six or seven o'clock in the evening;" that he did not go forward to the front to witness the action at any time; and that, in fine, he had "been groping in the dark since the commencement of the attack." Comment upon such testimony is wholly needless.

* It was stated at the time that the staff officers expected to testify were ill. But they were ready to go before the court previous to its final adjournment.

The testimony of General Burnside and that of his division and brigade commanders, is positive in relation to the fidelity that was manifested by the commander of the Ninth Corps, in his endeavors to execute the commands of General Meade. The formation of his assaulting column must have been determined by the officers having the immediate direction of the attack, and must have been influenced by the condition of the ground. That the troops marched by the flank, instead of an extended front, must have been due to other causes than the failure of General Burnside to obey the orders of General Meade. General Burnside's battle order to his division officers, through whom alone it could be executed, was as clear as General Meade's order to him. Surely, General Burnside was not responsible for the failure of any subordinate officer to obey his orders, any more than General Meade would have been, in case of neglect on the part of any of his corps commanders. A comparison of the two battle orders shows that General Burnside did all that was possible to carry out the wishes of his chief. Indeed, the formation was not altogether by the flank. General Hartranft testified that he "formed his command, which was immediately in rear of the first division, in one or two regiments front." He "put two small regiments together." General Hartranft was a capital officer, and it was General Burnside's misfortune that as good an officer was not in command of the first division.

The second point which the court made, in regard to the preparation for the passage of the assaulting columns, was not well taken. The testimony shows that there was no particular necessity for the leveling of the parapets. The abatis was so much cut up by the enemy's fire as to offer but little obstruction to the advance. General Willcox declared that "what was left of it when his division passed over was no obstacle whatever." The evidence is positive upon that point, and the delay of the troops in passing out of the lines was very brief. Captain Farquhar, the chief engineer of the eighteenth corps, testified that "there seemed to be room enough at" his "sali-

ent to pass over, certainly in regimental front," but the passage was not practicable for artillery. Moreover, a greater number of troops passed out of the lines than could be handled upon the ground which they occupied. It is also to be considered that the attack was to be of the nature of a surprise; that the enemy was immediately in the front, distant but a few hundred feet, and that nothing was to be done before the assault which would give him any intimation of our intentions.

The third point which the Court made against General Burnside in "not causing to be provided the necessary materials for crowning the crest," is entirely discrepant with the testimony. General Burnside testified, that an engineer regiment was detailed for each division of his corps, fully equipped with the necessary tools for intrenching. General Potter testified, that his regiment of engineers was immediately in the neighborhood of the breastwork, prepared with proper tools to level the works for the passage of field batteries, in case the forward movement was successful; that axes, spades and picks were provided, and the *chevaux de frise* on the enemy's lines for two or three hundred yards was broken down. General Griffin testified, that he had in his brigade a pioneer corps with the proper tools. Major Randall testified, that he thought he saw the 25th Massachusetts near the crater, equipped with shovels and spades. The testimony which it is presumed the Court relied upon for its opinion, was indecisive in its character. The witnesses were Major Duane and Lieutenant Beuyard. To the question, whether any working parties accompanied the troops Major Duane answered, that he did not know; neither did he know, whether or not any arrangements were made "for facilitating the debouch of the troops from our lines, and their passage over the enemy's parapets." Lieutenant Beuyard was equally ignorant. He did not know that there were working parties for the assaulting columns, nor that there were any preparations made in the way of collecting gabions, picks, shovels, axes or other tools. These wholly inconclusive statements were allowed to outweigh the positive testimony offered on the other

side. It is true, that General Burnside did not employ the engineer officer who was sent to him, for the simple reason that he preferred his own judgment.

The fourth point which the court made, in regard to the alleged neglect in executing General Meade's orders, to push forward General Ledlie's troops from the crater to the crest, is not supported by any testimony that was offered. On the contrary, Surgeon Chubb testified, that General Ledlie received orders in his hearing, "to move his troops forward from where they were then lying," and that General Ledlie "frequently sent up aides to have them moved forward." Surely it could not have been expected, that General Burnside should assume in person the direction of General Ledlie's division. In fact, the court in censuring General Ledlie based its condemnation of that officer upon his neglect to report the condition of affairs to his commander. Thus General Burnside was censured for not sending General Ledlie's troops forward, and General Ledlie was censured for failing to give the information upon which General Burnside was expected to act. Again, General Burnside was considered answerable for the failure, because he did not withdraw General Ledlie's troops in order to give place to others. But it was manifestly impossible to withdraw the troops, while General Meade was continually ordering them forward. The opinion of the court, therefore, so far as General Burnside was concerned, fails in every point to correspond with the testimony.

General Ledlie was undoubtedly in fault for not accompanying his division, and pushing it forward according to orders. He declares, that at the time he was suffering from illness. But, if such were the case he should have asked to be relieved, that some other more efficient officer might direct his troops. No objection, therefore, can be made to the opinion of the court in his case. It is but fair, however, that General Ledlie should be heard in his own defence. In a letter to the Army and Navy Journal of March 18, 1865—after reciting Lieutenant Colonel Loring's evidence before the Committee of Congress, to

the effect that the first division moved with promptness, but that the troops in going into the crater could not maintain their organization, and that he reported the fact to the division commander—General Ledlie proceeds: "On receiving the report from Colonel Loring, I immediately issued the proper orders, and took the necessary steps for relieving the confused condition of the division. I am perfectly willing that the record of my conduct should stand upon this sworn statement made by Colonel Loring, with the simple addition of the fact that my life was saved on that occasion only because the ball which struck my person had not force enough to penetrate my watch. I was stunned and temporarily injured by the force of the ball, and then, for the first time, retired to regimental headquarters, which were being used as a hospital. I stayed there but a few minutes, and then returned to my post, where I remained until we received orders to withdraw."

General Ferrero absolutely denied the declaration of the court, that he was in a bomb-proof during the action. Surgeon Chubb's testimony was, that General Ferrero went out of the bomb-proof after he received the order to move his troops forward, and that he returned to it subsequently to their repulse. Surgeon Smith's testimony was, that General Ferrero was in front of the bomb-proof at the time his division charged, that he accompanied his troops to the front when they left, and returned at the time they came back. After the opinion of the court was made public, General Ferrero procured affidavits from Brevet Major Hicks, Captains F. R. Warner, W. W. Tyson and A. F. Walcott and Lieutenant Mowry, members of his staff, who positively swore that General Ferrero was not in a bomb-proof at any time during the action of July 30th, but was on the field, and within ten paces of his command. Lieutenant Colonel Loring, who delivered to General Ferrero the order to advance and who saw him frequently through the day, deposed that he was standing in the front line at the time of the delivery of the order; that he did not see General Ferrero in a bomb-proof at any time, and did not believe that he was in one.

Captain Pell, who was sent by General Burnside to General Ferrero, did not upon any occasion find him in a bomb-proof, and Lieutenant Colonel Ross of the 31st colored troops spoke to General Ferrero on the field and saw him cheering on his men. Surgeon Prince of the 36th Massachusetts and Captain Dimock deposed to the same effect. Whether these affidavits are to be believed, in contradiction to the opinion of the court, must be left to the judgment of the reader. There was but one witness in regard to the conduct of Colonel Bliss, and his testimony was, as expressed in his own words, that "Colonel Bliss remained with the last regiment of his brigade and did not go forward at all to" his "knowledge." The testimony in regard to General Willcox's want of promptness was of the most general character and related to the crowded condition of all the troops in and about the crater—no mention being made of any neglect on the part of General Willcox himself.

From a careful examination of the testimony and a consideration of its *ex parte* character, from the partial constitution of the court, and the circumstances connected with the subject of its inquiry, the fairest conclusion to be reached is, that its "opinion" is of little authority. On one point, indeed, the court may be considered to have formed an equitable judgment. That is its intimation of the want of a competent head upon the immediate scene of action. General Burnside was not permitted to exercise the "prerogative" of the commanding general of the army—had even been rebuked upon the mere suspicion that he had any design to do so—and General Meade fought the battle by telegraph, all the while, to use his own words, "groping in the dark from the commencement of the attack." He might as well have been twenty miles away. When it was suggested by General Warren, he refused to go forward where he could see and know what was doing in the front. His reason for declining was, that his position had been taken and was within telegraphic communication of all the corps, and therefore, there was no necessity for going to the front. Why not then have remained at his own headquarters instead of visiting

those of the Ninth Corps? Such a reason could avail in no way to excuse his fighting a battle, without seeing a single soldier who was engaged. Did ever a great captain direct an action so?

The Committee on the Conduct of the War also made an investigation and report concerning this unfortunate transaction. The committee met, at different times, from December 17th, 1864, to January 16th, 1865. The principal witnesses who had been before the court of inquiry were also examined by the committee. Besides these, Lieutenant Colonels Loring and Van Buren, of General Burnside's staff, and Lieutenant Colonel Pleasant added their testimony. The evidence was more complete and clear than that offered before the court. The officers expressed their opinions with greater freedom, and the questions which were put by the committee were more thorough and searching in their character. General Meade's testimony, which has already been commented upon, was somewhat contradictory to itself in different parts. General Grant's evidence contained a very remarkable admission. He said, "I came to the south side of the river before the explosion took place, and remained with General Meade until probably a half or three-quarters of an hour after the springing of the mine. I then rode down to front; that is, I rode down as far as I could on horseback, and went through to the front on foot. I there found that we had lost the opportunity which had been given us." This statement deserves something more than a passing consideration. General Grant, by his own showing, must have been at the front as early as six o'clock. At that time, he considered that the opportunity had passed. He had the supreme control. The query now arises, Why did he not order the troops to be withdrawn? That would seem to have been his imperative duty. Yet the fact remains that the troops were permitted to go forward under General Meade's orders, to crowd into the crater, and to remain there at least three hours subsequent to the time when, in General Grant's judgment, the opportunity of victory was lost. General Grant was

especially severe upon General Ledlie, whom he was disposed to consider mostly answerable for the failure. He blamed himself for allowing General Burnside to put General Ledlie in charge of the assaulting column. It is evident from his testimony and from that of General Meade, that the subject of employing the colored troops to lead the attack was not properly presented to his mind. In one breath he approves General Meade's order, and in another he declares that the attack would probably have succeeded, if made by the colored division.

General Warren gave it as his opinion that "there should have been two independent columns, to have rushed in immediately after the explosion of the mine, and to have swept down the enemy's lines right and left, clearing away all his artillery and infantry by attacking in the flank and rear. This would have allowed the main column to have followed on to the main crest rapidly and without molestation." The failure was caused by the delay of the attacking column to advance to the Cemetery hill. The testimony before the committee, as well as that before the court, was positive and clear in regard to General Burnside's repeated directions to his division commanders to send their troops forward to the crest. He evidently did all that could be done, except leading them in person beyond the crater. That was a task which he could hardly have been expected by any one to perform.

The committee, after a review of the testimony, and a careful recital of the facts, express their opinion in decisive terms. "In conclusion," they say, "the cause of the disastrous result of the assault of the 30th of July last is mainly attributable to the fact, that the plans and suggestions of the general who had devoted his attention for so long a time to the subject, who had carried out to so successful completion the project of mining the enemy's works, and who had carefully selected and drilled his troops, for the purpose of securing whatever advantages might be attainable from the explosion of the mine, should have been so entirely disregarded by a general who had evinced no faith in the successful prosecution of that work, had aided

it by no countenance or open approval, and had assumed the entire direction and control only when it was completed, and the time had come for reaping any advantage that might be derived from it." This report was submitted to the Senate on the 6th of February, 1865, and was ordered to be printed. With its conclusions, rather than with the opinion of the court of inquiry, a fair and impartial mind will be likely to agree.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

FOR the next few weeks after the explosion of the mine the two opposing armies in front of Petersburg lay in comparative quiet. General Lee had detached a force in the early part of July to make a diversion by way of the Shenandoah valley upon Maryland. To meet and counteract this movement General Grant despatched the sixth corps from the Army of the Potomac to Washington and its neighborhood. The nineteenth corps, opportunely arriving from the South, was also sent in that direction. On the 7th of August, General Sheridan was appointed to the command of the forces in that quarter and soon afterwards inaugurated a very brilliant campaign in the Shenandoah valley, the details of which do not properly come within the province of this narrative.

On the 13th of August General Burnside was granted leave of absence from the Ninth Corps, and immediately left the army for his home in Providence. He was not again called into active service during the continuance of the war. Mr. Lincoln refused to accept his resignation, awaiting some opportunity for sending him again into the field. Immediately before the accession of Mr. Johnson to the presidential chair the resignation was once more tendered and was accepted by the new President on the 15th of April. After the close of the war, General Burnside engaged in business in New York and at the West. In the spring of 1866, the people of Rhode Island demanded an opportunity of expressing their approval of the