

“OH, COULD THEY BUT SPEAK...”

The history and importance of Michigan's Civil War Battle Flags

The Battle of the Crater: “Death in the Crater”

An excerpt from: Father Abraham's Children, by Frank B. Woodford

The sergeants moved quietly among the men of the 3rd Division, prodding them awake, hissing admonitions of silence. The men rolled to their feet, grumbling and growling. They had slept in the open under a fringe of trees, without tents or blankets, their arms and knapsacks at their sides. But the grass was soft, the night warm and still. The Third had slept in worse places.

Had their eyes been able to pierce the darkness for any distance on either side, they would have seen other brigades and divisions also stirring...

A few stars shone faintly. A soft wind from the east gently rustled the trees and carried the brackish smell of the backwaters and salt marshes along the inlets of the James River five or six miles distant. It was an alien smell, which fell strangely upon the nostrils of men accustomed to the pungent tanginess of the pines and tamaracks of the Michigan forests. Now and then, somewhere in the distance, the whump of a mortar would be heard or the single sharp crack of a sharpshooter's rifle.

As eyes became accustomed to the dark, they began to discern familiar outlines. Directly ahead, on slightly rising ground, stood the solid bulk of Fort Morton, one of the several strong points in the Federal lines composed of an intricate net of connecting trenches, rifle pits and bomb shelters. Beyond, but hidden by the gradual slope, was another arrangement of similar works--the first line, which at places almost touched the Confederate defenses. In some places less than one hundred yards separated the opposing lines. Four hundred yards away and slightly to the right, well within the rebel lines, could be seen dimly etched against the blue-black backdrop of night, the crest of a low hill. This eminence was crowned by a cemetery where for years before the war the people of Petersburg buried their dead. Still farther in the distance slept the beleaguered city.

Wherever the Federals had inched their lines forward, they had met and been stopped by the iron defenses of the Confederates, which, having been planted first, followed every advantageous contour of the land. Day and night, sharp eyes looked across the narrow, intervening no-man's land. Fingers rested on triggers, and it was sudden and certain death to lift a head above the protective earthworks.

In front of where the IXth Corps lay, the rebel line bulged out slightly, forming what was called Elliott's Salient. It was manned by a brigade of North Carolinians, supported by the well-served artillery of the scholarly looking, tight lipped Pegram, the best of Lee's gunners.

As the 3rd Division got to its feet, the eyes of the men instinctively strained toward Cemetery Hill in the rear of Elliott's Salient. They knew that was their day's objective. None of them would reach it; the best of them would die in the attempt.

From the rear the cooks came up, carrying huge kettles of steaming coffee. Here and there a man dug into his knapsack for a piece of hardtack. But most of the troops had no interest in food. There were hard knots of nervousness in their stomachs. Some men pulled out their watches. It was 4 o'clock. The day was July 30, 1864.

The IXth Corps stood ready to embark on one of the biggest gambles of the war--a gamble which would end in dismal failure and spread an ineradicable stain of Michigan blood on the red soil of Virginia.

Petersburg was the key to Richmond. It was the junction of a complex of highways and railroad lines, which connected with the capital of the Confederacy from the south, west, and east. If those lines could be sealed off, Lee's army would starve and Richmond could not be held...Federal leaders looked at Elliott's Salient and Cemetery Hill beyond it. If they could wipe out the former and occupy the latter, they would be inside the Confederate works and the door to Petersburg would be open to them.

But how to do it?

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Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants of the 48th Pennsylvania, one of Burnside's IXth Corps regiments, thought he had the answer. If you couldn't run over the Confederate defenses, how about going under them? His regiment was composed of anthracite miners from Scranton; they knew how to dig. He proposed to run a tunnel under the Confederate lines, fill it with explosives and blast the rebels right out of Elliott's Salient.

General Meade and others of high command were dubious, but Burnside was persuaded the plan would work. So on June 25 Pleasants' miners laid aside their rifles, took up picks and shovels, and started to dig. They ran a shaft into the hillside slightly in the rear of Fort Morton and then began to tunnel straight ahead. The shaft was about four feet high and four feet wide, shored up with whatever timbers could be begged, borrowed, or stolen. Meade thought so little of the plan that he refused to issue any material or equipment for the undertaking.

The tunnel started on a line thirty feet below the level of the Confederate works; about half-way to its destination it angled upward until it was eighteen feet below the surface when it reached a point directly under Elliott's Salient.

Day by day, night by night, the Pennsylvanians grubbed forward until they had a tunnel extending five hundred and ten feet from its opening behind the Union lines. Then they dug two laterals, the whole work forming a gigantic underground T. The left lateral was thirty-seven feet long; the right, thirty-eight feet. Into the walls of the main shaft and the laterals they carved out eight magazines.

The Confederates suspected mining operations were going on under them and they sank countershafts and burrowed in several directions, but to no avail. They could hear picks and shovels of the Pennsylvanians, but they could not intercept them. All they could do was wait and see what would happen.

Finally, on July 23, [about one month later] the mine was completed and the shafts and magazines were packed with eight thousand pounds of explosive. The Confederates within Elliott's Salient were literally sitting on a powder keg...

The blowing of the mine was to be the signal for a concentrated attack, which was intended to carry to Cemetery Hill. It was to be a IXth Corps show, and careful preliminary arrangements were made...

Wilcox' division had two brigades---Hartranft's and Humphrey's--- with a total of six Michigan regiments. The 1st Brigade, which was Hartranft's, was composed exclusively of Michiganders. There were the 17th, 8th and 27th. Humphrey's 2nd Brigade had the 1st Michigan Sharpshooters and the 2nd and the 20th Infantry. In addition, it had the 50th Pennsylvania, the 46th New York, the 24th New York Cavalry (dismounted), and the 60th Ohio. The last two outfits were used on July 30 as reserve and provost guard units. All of the Michigan men in the two brigades were seasoned veterans of many campaigns and battles.

With all assigned positions occupied, the men crouched silently, waiting for the mine to be exploded. The detonation time was scheduled for 4 o'clock. That hour came and passed and nothing happened. Men and officers turned to each other and in whispers asked what had gone wrong. Colonel Pleasants sent two of his men into the tunnel. They returned shortly with the report that the fuse had burned out at one of the splice points. They had fixed it and all was now ready again.

Once more the fuse was lighted---it was now 4:45 o'clock---and in another moment all hell broke loose. Directly in front of the IXth Corps creation itself seemingly erupted in a tremendous geyser of flame and fountain of earth. A brilliant, binding flash lit the sky and the concussion shook the countryside, rocking the Union troops off their feet, deafening them momentarily with the frightful thunderclap.

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“It was a magnificent spectacle,” said one observer; “and as the mass of earth went up into the air, carrying with it, men, guns, carriages and timbers, and spread out like an immense cloud as it reached its altitude, so close were the Union lines that the mass appeared as if it would descend immediately upon the troops waiting to make their charge. This caused them to break and scatter to the rear, and for about ten minutes were consumed in re-forming for the attack.”

It was about 5 a.m. then, when Ledlie’s division moved out. Its rush across no-man’s land to where the Confederate line had been, brought it to the lip of a huge, elliptical-shaped crater, a hundred and seventy feet long, sixty feet wide, and thirty feet deep. The red clay sides were almost sheer.

This was a great wonder! Instead of continuing their forward rush, which at the moment was unopposed, Ledlie’s men slowed down and became sightseers. They crowded around the hole, wide-eyed with amazement. Their curiosity proved fatal. About 287 Confederates and a few artillery pieces had been blasted to smithereens. But on either side of the hole, and to the rear, where they were protected by their trenches, the rebels recovered their senses and began to pour a heavy rifle fire into the broken up, confused, and leaderless mass of Ledlie’s men milling around the edge of the Crater. General Ledlie, who should have been with them and directing them, was sitting comfortably and safely in a bomb shelter in the midst of Willcox’s division.

The deadly fire of the Confederate sharpshooters was punching big holes in the surging mob, which had been the 1st Division. To add to the danger and confusion, Confederate batteries came to life and began to pour their iron hail into the tangled blue mass. The division jumped for the nearest cover, which was inside the rim of the Crater.

This was the moment for Potter’s division to go in. The New Englanders advanced gallantly, but the concentrated fire of the enemy artillery broke them up and they too were pressed into the pit on top of the 1st Division.

The Confederate fire was heaviest on the left of the Federal troops, and to protect that flank, Wilcox now sent his brigades forward. Hartranft went first, leading the 17th, 8th, and 27th Michigan in that order. Moving fast and paying little attention to the murderous fire pouring in on them, the 1st Brigade hit the Confederate line to the left of the Crater and penetrated beyond. They smashed into a rebel battery and managed to turn one of the guns around to sweep across the enemy line to their left.

Humphrey’s brigade left the covered way as soon as it was clear of Hartranft’s men, and it took the ground, which had originally been occupied by Ledlie’s division. Because it was made of more regiments, the 2nd Brigade was formed into two columns, the left one composed of the three Michigan regiments--the sharpshooters, the 2nd, and the 20th. The other column consisted of the 50th Pennsylvania, the 46th New York, and some miscellaneous troops. The Michiganders were sent off on the left oblique behind Hartranft for the purpose of supporting him. Their orders were to clear out the rebel trenches, particularly the laterals, which gave the enemy well-protected positions from which they were delivering a devastating flank fire.

With a cheer, the men advanced in good order, climbing over the Federal breastworks and breaking through three lines of abatis. Once clear and into no-man’s land, they went forward at a run which carried them two hundred yards inside the Confederates lines. Their charge netted them about thirty prisoners and another piece or two of artillery. Theirs was the deepest penetration made that day.

Unfortunately it was not enough. They were exposed to enfilading artillery fire, and angry blasts of canister tore deep gashes in their ranks. The 20th Michigan left its own lines with one hundred and fifty men; by the time it reached rebel position it had lost nearly a quarter of that number. To make matters worse, the Confederates were rallying a large number of troops in a depression or swale between the Crater and Cemetery Hill. They were protected by the contour of the land from the Federal artillery.

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And to add injury to insult, their riflemen in the lateral trenches had clean shots at the backs of the Michigan soldiers who had pressed beyond them. Wilcox's entire division now was under galling fire from the front, rear, and left.

Still the Michiganders held on, trading death for death in heaping measure, until the 46th New York, having had enough of the slaughter, panicked and broke. They ran for the Crater, the most convenient cover. In their terrified rush, they swept over the Pennsylvanians and other units of the 2nd Brigade, forcing them also into the hole. This left the six Michigan regiments in the two brigades unsupported and exposed to the full fury of the Confederate counterattack. In order to ease the pressure the remaining division of the Corps--Ferrero's Negro troops [the first to be used in combat against Lee's army] was thrown in at the right of the Crater where Potter should have been.

But it was too late. The Michiganders on the left, the Colored men on the right, fought desperately. Foot by foot they were pressed inward and soon they too were sliding into the Crater. In the melee the casualties were frightful. Colonel Wright of the 27th was cut down with wounds which disabled him permanently. Rather than surrender their colors the 20th cut up their standards and buried the pieces in the dirt at the bottom of the pit.

The trouble was obvious. The sector chosen for the Union attack was too narrow for such a large body of troops. With an entire Corps crowded into a limited space, there was not enough room to maneuver and confusion reigned.

The crater was solidly packed with a mob--no longer a Corps--of men who were as much concerned with avoiding being trampled by their own comrades as they were with what the enemy was doing. Several thousand of the IXth Corps were wedged into the bottom of the pit. All semblance of order and organization disappeared. Divisions, brigades, and regiments were hopelessly tangled.

Some of the Federals had avoided being pushed into the hole and they managed to get back to the safety of their own lines, but the number was pitifully small. Union artillery was turned loose and blue-clad sharpshooters in the advanced Federal rifle pits tried to clear the rim of the Crater of advancing Confederates. They were only partially successful. The rebels were members of General Billy Malone's Virginia division, men who had followed Stonewall Jackson. They were superb fighters and masters of the art of counterattack. They worked their way to the edge of the Crater and fired down on the seething mass. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

A few Union soldiers attempted to climb to the edge of the hole and organize some kind of defense. The odds were heavily against them. The walls were so steep that it was impossible to climb them unless the men turned their backs, dug in with their heels, and inched their way up backwards. Some managed to do this. A Confederate charge carried over the rim and into the Crater itself. The quarters were too close for rifle fire; the bayonet did its bloody work. The invaders, however, were overcome, and a Union defense line was established around the edge which succeeded in holding the rebels back at a respectful distance. Confederate mortars found the range though, and soon their shells were dropping on the besieged men.

General Burnside saw the complete collapse of his Corps' effort and about noon ordered a general withdrawal. But there was no easy way out. A few officers in the pit took counsel among themselves and decided the risk was too great. They resolved to hold on until dark, when the opportunity for safe escape would be better. Colonel Cutcheon of the 20th Michigan wriggled his way across no-man's land to the Federal lines. He asked for picks and shovels to be sent to the Crater in order to give the trapped men a chance to dig their way out through a protected trench. But no tools or sandbags were immediately available and his plan was abandoned. Cutcheon bravely returned to his men, empty-handed.

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The afternoon sun beat mercilessly down on the men in the Crater. They had not eaten since the previous evening. Their canteens were empty and there was no way to refill them. Neither was there any help for the wounded. It was more than most of the men could stand. The long wait until dark was a prospect, which few relished. Let those wait whom so desire! The others, singly and in small groups, risking death rather than remain longer in that hell hole, climbed the sides and dashed for the Union lines. After a while there weren't many left except the dead and wounded. One of the last groups to pull out of the crater was the remnant of Hartranft's three Michigan regiments. Late in the afternoon the Confederates again charged the rim, and the Michiganders who had been defending it managed to scramble out and withdraw.

The battle of the Crater was ended.

More facts from Father Abraham's Children

- *Approximately eight thousand men of the IXth Corps took part in the assault.
473 were killed
1,646 were wounded
1,356 listed as missing
Total loss 3,475 and other casualties brought the day's toll to 3,798 [almost half]*
- *From the Union standpoint, the battle of the Crater was a boldly conceived but badly managed undertaking. It failed for two reasons: first, because the sector chosen for the attack was too narrow to accommodate such a large number of troops...and second, because of the failure at corps and division levels to provide leadership and hold units together.*
- *[While some Generals were censured,] there was no censure for the Michigan regiment. It was universally agreed that they had conducted themselves with brave distinction...Colonel Cutcheon, who had a ringside seat, declared "there was no more gallant soldier than General Hartfranft and no more braver men than those he commanded...whatever may be said of other commands, it can be truly said of the Michigan regiments that they behaved with their customary gallantry, and none of them performed its duty more worthily than the 20th Regiment."*
- *The Native Americans who fought with the First Michigan Sharpshooters were noted to have done a ritual death chant with their shirts pulled over their heads. They inspired many men to safety.*