

ECHOES

April 1995

A Visit to The Great Crater at Petersburg, Va.

By Rick Kubiak

It is July 20, 1988 and I'm down on my knees trying to poke my head through the space between two iron bars and looking down into a dark tunnel. I can only see about 10 feet into the tunnel, and I cannot go in because an iron grate blocks the entrance.

I am at the outskirts of the town of Petersburg, Va., at the site of the Battle of the Crater. I looked around for "the crater" and what I found was, to say the least, disappointing. There was a depression in the earth covered with grass, which was about 60 feet wide, perhaps 100 feet long and at the most, 10 to 20 feet deep.

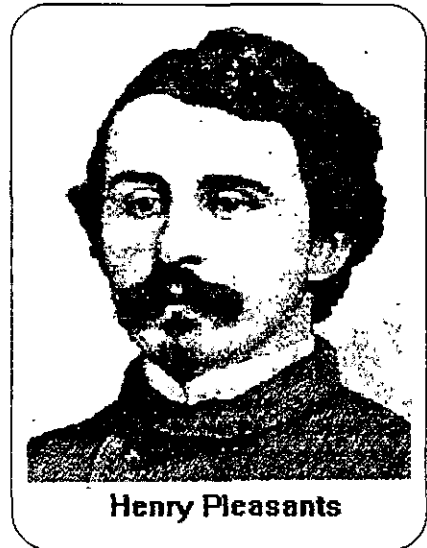
Lincoln to Attend April Dinner

The San Joaquin Valley CWRT will be honored by the presence of President Abraham Lincoln, in the person of Jim Idleman of Aptos, a member of the American Civil War Association, at a dinner meeting Thursday, April 27.

The meeting will be in the Remington restaurant at Clovis and Kings Canyon Avenues. A cocktail hour will begin at 6 p.m. with dinner at 7. The cost is \$15 per person and reservations may be made by sending checks made out to the CWRT, P.O. Box 5695, Fresno, CA 93755. Seating will not be guaranteed without a reservation received by April 25.

Jerry L. Russell of Little Rock, Ark., the national chairman of the Civil War Round Table Associates, will be the speaker at the May 25 meeting, which will be a fund raiser for battlefield preservation.

I thought at first it did not look much like the crater I had expected to see, but upon further reflection I realized that the intervening 124 years had taken their toll on the site. This view whetted my curiosity as to what really happened that fateful day of July 30, 1864. In essence, here is what I found:



Henry Pleasants

In May and early June of 1864 the Union's Army of the Potomac continually pushed south in Virginia, fighting terrible battles against General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, which had discovered its best defensive weapon was entrenching. After heavy losses attacking those entrenchments in the Battle of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse and Cold Harbor General U.S. Grant continued his attempts to get between Lee's army and Richmond, the Confederate capital.

On June 12 Grant abandoned the trenches near Cold Harbor and moved his army across the James River on a hastily constructed pontoon bridge. The troops marched to Petersburg, a vital railroad center 20 miles south of Richmond.

But Grant's Generals did not move quickly enough to enter Petersburg which at the time was defended by only 2,500 men under the command of General P.G.T. Beauregard.

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Lee, having been deceived by the scope of Grant's shift of his troops, now brought the vanguard of his army into Petersburg to assist in the repulsing the Union forces. The result of this massing of the two armies produced the longest sustained operation of the Civil War, known as the Siege of Petersburg. The siege lasted 10 months.

More than 10 miles of fortifications were formed in a semicircle around Petersburg. Almost every hill or piece of high ground was fitted with a fort and artillery batteries, along both Union and Confederate lines. In some places the lines were less than 400 feet apart.

There was little chance of a successful direct assault by either side as long as the defenders were vigilant. In this maze of forts and trenches soldiers on both sides lived, suffered and often died. Skirmishing and sharpshooting took a deadly toll. The shelling became just one more nerve-wracking hardships the men had to endure. There was scorching heat, choking dust, then freezing cold, rain, mud and constant wetness, loneliness and depressing boredom.

It was this boredom that led to an idea by a Union soldier from the 48th Pennsylvania Volunteers. Many of its members were from the upper Schuylkill region and



The San Joaquin Valley Civil War Round Table officers for 1995 are:

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Other board members are Linda Clague, Tim Johnson, Verne Cole, newsletter editor; Rick Kubiak, historian; and the immediate past president, Charles Jorgensen.

Change of address? Call Verne Cole, 435-8410 or Wayne Bowen, 291-4885.

Dues Reminder

Annual dues, which include a subscription to the newsletter, are \$25, of which \$5 goes to battlefield preservation. Newsletter subscriptions are \$10. All dues become payable in January. Those who had paid at other times in the past may have their dues prorated this year if they desire. Checks should be made out to CWRT and mailed to P.O. Box 5695, Fresno, CA 93755.

had been coal miners. Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants tells of his soldier's idea in a letter to his family:

"Suddenly, one evening, I think it was June twenty third, as I stood on a little rise of ground behind our lines, which commanded a view of the battlefield, one of the enlisted men of the 48th, standing near me, muttered: 'We could blow that damned fort out of existence if we could run a mine shaft under it.' "

The soldier had been referring to a Confederate work known as Elliott's Salient, a particularly strong point in the line near a ridge called Cemetery Hill. At this point the two lines lay a mere 400 feet apart.

Lt. Col. Pleasants, after discussing the idea of a tunnel with his regimental officers decided to present the plan to his IX Corps commander, Major General Ambrose Burnside. Pleasant who had been a mining engineer, had little trouble convincing Burnside of the plan.

General Meade, though, initially opposed it because his engineers said it was "claptrap and nonsense." They argued that no one could dig, undetected, a mineshaft over 500 feet long to a point under the Confederate trenches, fill a chamber with gunpowder and detonate it.

They declared that such a length of mine had never been excavated in military operations, and could not be, that it would either get the men smothered for want of air, or crushed by the falling earth or the enemy would find it and it would amount to nothing.

However, Meade and Grant eventually approved of the plan. Work on the tunnel began on June 25, 1864. Pleasants and his men soon discovered that although they had been promised help none was forthcoming.

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Pleasants got no extra men to help with the digging. Materials for the digging and hauling of dirt had to be fabricated by his soldiers, including barrows and miners' picks. Pleasants had to send to Washington for a theodolite (used to measure distance so they could gauge the length and incline of the tunnel), although one was available at Meade's camp headquarters.

Lumber had been promised for shoring up tunnel walls, but none was delivered and Pleasants resorted to tearing down an old bridge and sending men to obtain lumber from a rebel saw mill.

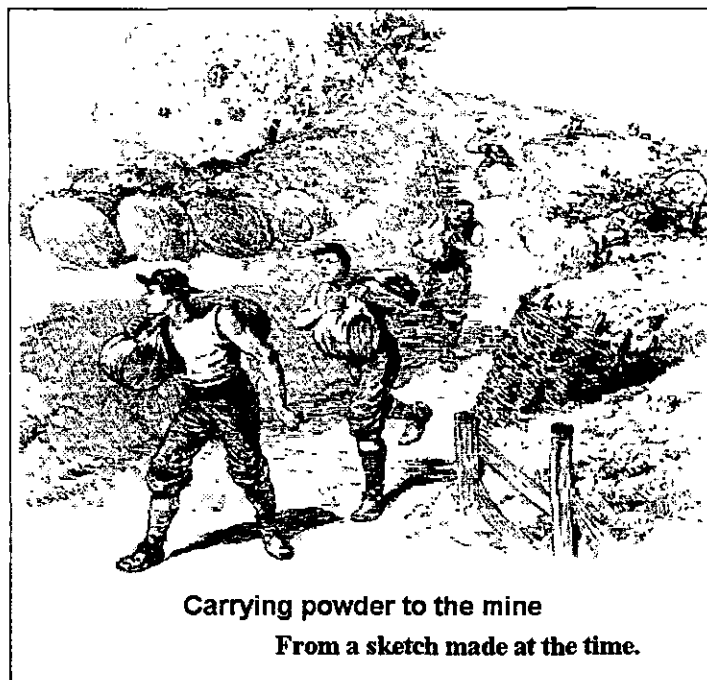
In spite of the lack of cooperation the work continued day after day. Every night the men cut bushes to cover the fresh dirt at the mouth of the tunnel to avoid detection by the Confederates.

The biggest problem to overcome was how to ventilate the 510-foot shaft. Pleasants devised an ingenious method. He described it this way:

"I had the men sink a perpendicular shaft, perhaps two feet wide, from within one of the rifle pits to our tunnel. We then made an airtight canvas door shutting off the section leading to the mouth, and built a hot fire on a grating just beneath the perpendicular shaft. As the work progressed, we ran a tight wooden pipe back to the farthest point where the men were working. The hot fire drew the foul air from the shaft, and the vacuum drew the fresh air by way of the pipe to the point where it was most needed."

By July 17 the tunnel was directly beneath the battery in Elliott's Salient, and 20 feet from the floor of the enemy's works above. By now the Confederates had become suspicious as the faint sound of digging could be heard coming from below. They sank shafts of their own in an effort to locate the Union tunnel, but did not strike it and gave up.

At the end of the main tunnel, Pleasants ran two lateral tunnels each 75 long underneath the Confederate trenches and placed 320 kegs of gunpowder in them. He had requested 12,000 pounds of powder but only received 8,000 pounds because Meade's engineers felt that 12,000 pounds would be excessive.



Carrying powder to the mine

From a sketch made at the time.

By July 27 all was ready. The explosion was set for 3:30 a.m. July 30. Burnside had submitted a plan of attack to Meade calling for the black troops of General Edward Ferrero's division to be the first through the breach made by the explosion. They were to be followed by three white divisions. Ferrero's men had been given several weeks' special instructions for the assignment.

The day before the scheduled explosion, Meade informed Burnside that a white division would have to be the first division through the breach. He stated, and Grant agreed, that if the attack failed they would be blamed for shoving the black soldiers ahead to be killed because they didn't care about them.

General James Ledlie's First Division now was assigned to lead the attack. By 3 a.m. on July 30 the IX Corps lay assembled in the ravine behind the mine entrance. The fuse was lit, but if failed and two men from Pleasant's unit volunteered to crawl into the shaft and relight the fuse.

At 4:45 a.m. the earth erupted with a terrific roar, as four tons of powder exploded in the most awesome spectacle of the entire war. Nine companies of the 19th and 22nd South Carolina were hurled high into the air along with artillery, carriages and limbers. Nearly 300 men were killed or badly maimed. The blast made a crater 170 feet long, 60 to 80 feet wide and 30 feet deep.

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