

THE COLORED TROOPS AT PETERSBURG.



GUIDON OF THOMAS'S BRIGADE OF THE COLORED DIVISION --- SHADED PARTS, GREEN; THE FIELD, WHITE.

EAST of Petersburg, on high ground, protruding like the ugly horn of a rhinoceros, stood the Confederate earthwork, fortified as a battery, which we undermined and exploded July 30th, 1864. It did a good deal of goring before we destroyed it. Its position enabled the garrison to throw a somewhat enfilading fire into our lines, under which many fell, a few at a time.

For some time previous to the explosion of the mine it was determined by General Burnside that the colored division* should lead the assault. The general tactical plan had been given to the brigade commanders (Colonel Sigfried and myself), with a rough outline map of the ground, and directions to study the front for ourselves. But this latter was impracticable except in momentary glimpses. The enemy made a target of every head that appeared above the work, and their marksmanship was good. The manner of studying the ground was this: Putting my battered old hat on a ramrod and lifting it above the rampart just enough for them not to discover that no man was under it, I drew their fire; then, stepping quickly a few paces one side, I took a hasty observation.

We were all pleased with the compliment of being chosen to lead in the assault. Both officers and men were eager to show the white troops what the colored division could do. We had acquired confidence in our men. They believed us infallible. We had drilled certain movements, to be executed in gaining and occupying the crest. It is an axiom in military art, that there are times when the ardor, hopefulness, and enthusiasm of new troops not yet rendered doubtful by reverses or chilled by defeat, more than compensate, in a dash, for

training and experience. General Burnside, for this and other reasons, most strenuously urged his black division for the advance. Against his most urgent remonstrance he was overruled. About 11 P. M., July 29th, a few hours before the action, I was officially informed that the whole plan had been changed, and our division would not lead.

We were then bivouacking on our arms in rear of our line, just behind the covered way leading to the mine. I returned to that bivouac dejected and with an instinct of disaster for the morrow. As I summoned and told my regimental commanders, their faces expressed the same feeling. I considered it unnecessary to inform the captains that night, and they were allowed to sleep on.

Any striking event or piece of news was usually eagerly discussed by the white troops, and in the ranks military critics were as plenty and perhaps more voluble than among the officers. Not so with the blacks; important news such as that before us, after the bare announcement, was usually followed by long silence. They sat about in groups, "studying," as they called it. They waited, like the Quakers, for the spirit to move; when the spirit moved, one of their singers would uplift a mighty voice, like a bard of old, in a wild sort of chant. If he did not strike a sympathetic chord in his hearers, if they did not find in his utterance the exponent of their idea, he would sing it again and again, altering sometimes the words, or more often the music. If his changes met general acceptance, one voice after another would chime in; a rough harmony of three parts would add itself; other groups would join his, and the song became the song of the command.

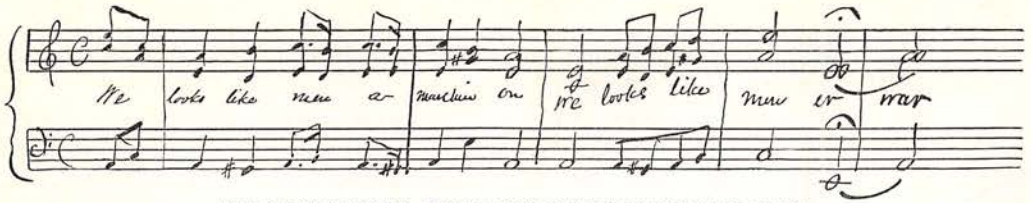
The night we learned that we were to lead the charge the news filled them too full for ordinary utterance. The joyous negro guffaw always breaking out about the camp-fire ceased. They formed circles in their company streets and were sitting on

* There was but one division of colored troops in the Army of the Potomac — the Fourth Division of the Ninth Corps — organized as follows:

Brigadier-General Edward Ferrero, commanding division. *First Brigade*: Colonel Joshua K. Sigfried (of the 48th Penn.); 27th U. S. colored troops, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles J. Wright; 30th U. S. colored troops, Colonel Delevan Bates; 39th U. S. colored troops, Colonel Ozora P. Stearns; 43d U. S. colored troops, Lieutenant-Colonel H. Seymour Hall. *Second Brigade*: Colonel Henry Goddard Thomas, 19th U. S. colored troops; 19th U. S. colored troops, Lieutenant-

Colonel Joseph G. Perkins; 23d U. S. colored troops, Colonel Cleaveland J. Campbell; Battalion of six companies 28th U. S. colored troops, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles S. Russell; 29th U. S. colored troops, Lieutenant-Colonel John A. Bross; 31st U. S. colored troops, Lieutenant-Colonel W. E. W. Ross.

This made a division of only nine regiments, divided into two brigades, yet it was numerically a large division. The regiments were entirely full, and a colored deserter was a thing unknown. On the day of the action the division numbered 4300, of which 2000 belonged to Sigfried's brigade and 2300 to mine. — H. G. T.



SONG OF THE COLORED DIVISION BEFORE CHARGING INTO THE CRATER.

the ground intently and solemnly "studying." At last a heavy voice began to sing, "We-e looks li-like me-en a-a marchin' on, we looks li-like men-er-war." Over and over again he sang it, making slight changes. The rest watched him intently; no sign of approval or disapproval escaped their lips, or appeared on their faces. All at once, when his refrain had struck the right response in their hearts, his group took it up, and shortly half a thousand voices were upraised. It was a picturesque scene,—these dark men, with their white eyes and teeth and full red lips crouching over a smoldering camp-fire, in dusky shadow, with only the feeble rays of the lanterns of the first sergeants and the lights of the candles dimly showing through the tents. The sound was as weird as the scene, when all the voices struck the low "E" (last note but one), held it, and then rose to "A" with a *portamento* as sonorous as it was clumsy. Until we fought the battle of the crater they sang this every night to the exclusion of all other songs. After that defeat they sang it no more.

About 3 A. M. the morning of the battle we were up after a short sleep under arms. Then came the soldiers' hasty breakfast. "Never fight on an empty stomach" was a proverb more honored in that army than any of Solomon; for the full stomach helped the wounded man to live through much loss of blood. This morning our breakfast was much like that on other mornings when we could not make fires: two pieces of hard-tack with a slice of raw, fat salt pork between — not a dainty meal, but solid provender to fight on. By good fortune I had a bottle of cucumber pickles. These I distributed to the officers about me. They were gratefully accepted, for nothing cuts the fat of raw salt pork like a pickle. We moistened our repast with black coffee from our canteens. The privates fared the same, barring the luxury of the pickle.

We had been told that the mine would be fired at 3:45 A. M. But 4 o'clock arrived, and all was quiet. Not long after that came a dull, heavy thud, not at all startling; it was a heavy smothered sound, not nearly so distinct as a musket-shot. Could this be the mine? No; impossible. There was no charging, no yells, neither the deep-mouthed bass

growl of the Union troops, nor the sharp, shrill, fox-hunting cry of the Confederates. Here was a mine blown up, making a crater from 150 to 200 feet long, 60 wide, and 30 deep, and the detonation and the concussion were so inconsiderable to us, not over a third of a mile away, that we could hardly believe the report of a staff-officer, back from the line, that the great mine had been exploded.

At about 5:30 A. M. a fairly heavy musketry fire from the enemy had opened. Shortly after, as we lay upon our arms awaiting what orders might come, a quiet voice behind me said, "Who commands this brigade?" "I do," I replied. Rising, and turning toward the voice, I saw General Grant. He was in his usual dress: a broad-brimmed felt hat, and the ordinary coat of a private. He wore no sword. Colonel Horace Porter, his aide-de-camp, and a single orderly accompanied him. "Well," said the general, slowly and thoughtfully, as if communing with himself rather than addressing a subordinate, "why are you not in?" Pointing to the First Brigade just in my front, I replied, "My orders are to follow that brigade." Feeling that golden opportunities might be slipping away from us, I added, "Will you



MAJOR-GENERAL EDWARD FERRERO, COMMANDING THE COLORED DIVISION. (FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.)

give me the order to go in now?" After a moment's hesitation he answered, in the same slow and ruminating manner, "No, you may keep the orders you have." Then, turning his horse's head, he rode away at a walk.

Fifteen minutes later an aide to the division commander gave us the order and we moved into the covered-way, my brigade following Sigfried's. This was about 6 A. M. For an hour or more we lay here inactive, the musketry growing quicker and sharper all the time. A heavy cannonading opened. We sat down at first, resting against the walls of the covered-way. Soon, however, we had to stand to make room for the constantly increasing throng of wounded who were being brought past us to the rear. Some few, with

flesh-wounds merely, greeted us with such jocularity as, "I'm all right, boys! This is good for a thirty days' sick-leave!" Others were plucky and silent, their pinched faces telling the effort they were making to suppress their groans; others, with the ashy hue of death already gathering on their faces, were largely past pain. Many, out of their senses through agony, were moaning or bellowing like wild beasts. We stood there over an hour with this endless procession of wounded men passing. There could be no greater strain on the nerves. Every moment changed the condition from that of a forlorn hope to one of forlorn hopelessness. Unable to strike a blow, we were sickened with the contemplation of revolting forms of death and mutilation.

Finally, about 7:30 A. M., we got the order for the colored division to charge. My brigade followed Sigfried's at the double-quick. Arrived at the crater, a part of the First Brigade entered. The crater was already too full; that I could easily see. I swung my column to the right and charged over the enemy's rifle-pits connecting with the crater on our right. These pits were different from any in our lines — a labyrinth of bomb-proofs and magazines, with passages between. My brigade moved gallantly on right over the bomb-proofs and over the men of the First Division.* As we mounted the pits, a deadly enfilade from eight guns on our right, and a murderous cross-fire of musketry decimated us. Among the officers, the first to fall was the gal-

lant Fessenden of the 23d regiment. Ayres and Woodruff of the 31st dropped, killed, within a few yards of Fessenden. Liscomb of the 23d then fell to rise no more; and then Hackiser of the 28th and Flint and Aiken of the 29th. Major Rockwood of the 19th then mounted the crest and fell back

dead, with a cheer on his lips. Nor were these all; for at that time hundreds of heroes "carved in ebony" fell. These black men commanded the admiration and respect of every beholder on that day.

The most advantageous point for the purpose, about eight hundred feet from the crater, having been reached, we leaped from the works and endeavored to make a rush for the crest. Captain Mar-

shall L. Dempsy, and Lieutenant Christopher Pennell, of my staff, and four white orderlies with the brigade guidon accompanied me, closely followed by Lieutenant-Colonel Ross, leading the 31st regiment. At the instant of leaving the works Ross was shot down; the next officer in rank, Captain Wright, was shot as he stooped over him. The men were largely without leaders, and their organization was destroyed. Two of my four orderlies were wounded; one, flag in hand; the remaining two sought shelter when Lieutenant Pennell, rescuing the guidon, hastened down the line outside the pits. With his sword uplifted in his right hand and the banner in his left, he sought to call out the men along the whole line of the parapet. In a moment, a musketry fire was focused upon him individually, whirling him round and round several times before he fell. Of commanding figure, his bravery was so conspicuous, that, according to Colonel Weld's testimony, a number of his (Weld's) men were shot because, spell-bound, they forgot their own shelter in watching this superb boy, who was an only child of an old Massachusetts clergyman, and to me as Jonathan was to David. Two days later, on a flag of truce, I searched for his body in vain. He was doubtless shot literally to pieces, for the leaden hail poured for a long time almost incessantly about that spot, killing the wounded and mutilating the dead; and he probably sleeps among the unknown whom we buried in the long deep trench we dug that day. †



LIEUTENANT CHRISTOPHER PENNELL.
(FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.)

* Major Van Buren's testimony, "Report of Committee on the Conduct of the War," Vol. I.

† While the contemplation of one death softens the heart, the sight of the myriad dead of a battle-field blunts the sensibilities. During the burial of the dead,

I saw a striking instance of this. A stretcher-bearer, seeing that the trousers-pocket of a soldier long dead contained part of a plug of tobacco, deliberately cut it out, and, taking a chew with an air of relish, transferred the rest to his own pocket.—H. G. T.



UNION TROOPS.

THE BATTLE OF THE CRATER. (FROM THE PAINTING BY J. A. ELDER.)

CONFEDERATES CHARGING.

The men of the 31st making the charge were being mowed down like grass, with no hope of any one reaching the crest, so I ordered them to scatter and run back. The fire was such that Captain Dempcy and myself were the only officers who returned, unharmed, of those who left the works for that charge.*

We were not long back within the honey-comb of passages and bomb-proofs near the crater before I received this order from the division commander: "Colonels Sigfried and Thomas, if you have not already done so, you will immediately proceed to take the crest in your front." My command was crowded into the pits, already too full, and were sandwiched, man for man, against the men of the First Division. They were thus partly sheltered from the fire that had reduced them coming up; but their organization was almost lost. I had already sent word to General Burnside by Major James L. Van Buren of his staff, that unless a movement simultaneous with mine was made to the right, to stop the enfilading fire, I thought not a man would live to reach the crest; but that I would try another charge in about ten minutes, and I hoped to be supported. I then directed the commanders of the 23d, 28th, and 29th regiments to get their commands as much together and separated from the others as possible in that time, so that each could have a regimental following, for we were mixed up with white troops and each other to the extent of almost paralyzing any effort. We managed to make the charge, however, Colonel Bross of the 29th leading. The 31st had been so shattered, was so diminished, so largely without officers, that I got what was left of them out of the way of the charging column as much as possible. This column met the same fate in one respect as the former. As I gave the order, Lieutenant-Colonel John A. Bross, brother of Lieutenant-Governor Bross, of Ohio, taking the flag into his own hands, was the first man to leap from the works into the valley of death below. He had attired himself in full uniform, evidently with the intent of inspiring his men. He had hardly reached the ground outside the works before he fell to rise no more. He was conspicuous and magnificent in his gallantry. The black men followed into the jaws of death, and advanced until met by a charge in force from the Confederate lines.

The report of the Confederate General Bushrod Johnson, to which I have had access, says that the Confederate troops in this charge were the first brigade of Mahone's division, with the 25th and 49th North Carolina and the 26th

and part of the 17th South Carolina regiments. It was no discredit to what was left of three regiments that they were repulsed by a force like that.

I lost in all 36 officers and 877 men; total, 913. The 23d Regiment entered the charge with 18 officers; it came out with 7. The 28th entered with 11 officers, and came out with 4. The 31st had but 2 officers for duty that night.

The First Brigade worked its way through the crater, and was halted behind the honey-comb of bomb-proofs. Here the 43d charged the intrenchments, capturing a Confederate flag and recapturing a Union stand of colors and a few prisoners. Owing to the crowded condition of the bomb-proofs, it was impossible to get the rest of the brigade on. Too much praise cannot be awarded to the bravery of officers and men; the former fearlessly led, while the latter as fearlessly followed, through a fire hot enough to cause the best troops to falter. But few of the field-officers escaped. Colonel Delevan Bates fell, shot in the face. Major Leeke stood, urging the men on, with the blood gushing from his mouth. Adjutant O'Brien fell, shot through the heart. Captain Wright of the 43d Regiment himself captured a Confederate stand of colors and 5 prisoners, and brought them in. Lieutenant-Colonel Wright with two bullet wounds retained the command of his regiment. Colonel Sigfried concludes his official report thus: "Had it not been for the almost impassable crowd of troops of the other divisions in the crater and intrenchments, Cemetery Hill would have been ours without a falter on the part of my brigade."

Nor was the giving way a willing movement on the part of the colored troops. One little band, after my second charge was repulsed, defended the intrenchments we had won from the enemy, exhibiting fighting qualities that I never saw surpassed in the war. This handful stood there without the slightest organization of company or regiment, each man for himself, and impelled by his individual instinct, until the enemy's banners waved in their very faces. Then, and not till then, they made a dash for our own lines, and that at my order. Speaking of this stand, General Burnside says in his official report: "But not all of the colored troops retired; some held the pits behind which they had advanced, severely checking the enemy until they were nearly all killed."

The engagement was over. We not only had been four times cut to pieces, but repulsed. The enemy having retaken their former lines, the troops, black and white, in the crater were

* My brigade guidon, which Lieutenant Pennell held when killed, was captured by Private John W. Niles, Company D, 41st Virginia, was stored in Richmond,

and there retaken by our troops when we entered that city on April 3d, 1865, and is now stored in the War Department.—H. G. T.

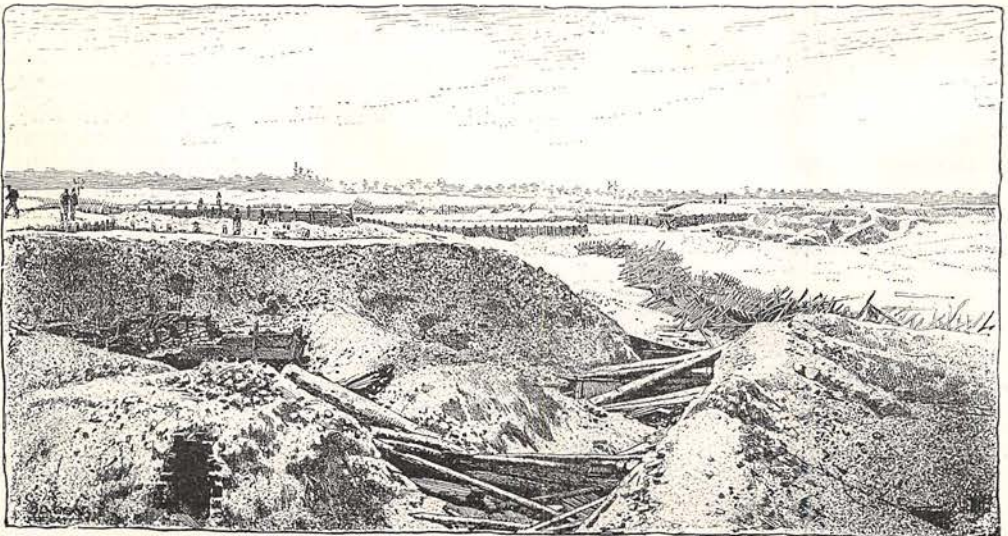
cut off from our army. Squads there occasionally made a dash for our lines, but as many fell as reached them safely. By direction of officers in the crater the men began a covered-way toward our lines (that is, a deep trench running somewhat diagonally between the two lines with all the dirt thrown toward the enemy's side, so that a man passing along it was almost sheltered from musketry fire). Another, by direction of General Burnside, had been started from our lines to meet it. This was the situation when the enemy made their last charge on the crater. Its inmates had repelled three charges. They were weak, exhausted, and suffering from want of water. They succumbed, and most of them fell into the hands of the enemy. Of this last scene in the battle the Confederate General Bushrod R. Johnson, commanding the opposing forces at that point, says in his official report :

"Between 11 and 12 A. M. a second unsuccessful charge having been made by Wright's brigade of Mahone's division, I proceeded to concert a combined movement on both flanks of the crater. . . . A third charge a little before 2 P. M. gave us entire possession of the crater and adjacent lines. This charge on the left [our right] and rear of the crater was made by Sanders's brigade of Mahone's division, the 61st North Carolina of Hoke's division, and the 17th South Carolina of this division. . . . These movements were all conducted by General Mahone, while I took the 22d and 23d South Carolina into the crater and captured 3 colors and 130 prisoners. Previous to this charge the incessant firing kept up by our troops on both flanks and in rear had caused many of the enemy to run the gauntlet of our cross-fires in front of the breach, but a large number still remained unable to advance, and perhaps afraid to retreat."

Thus ended in disaster what had at first promised to be a grand success. We were back within our old lines and badly cut up. We had inflicted a heavy, but by no means equal, loss on the enemy.

A ridiculous little incident happened directly after these terrible scenes which helped us all to forget for a moment our wretchedness. My cook, an elderly African, was a most abominable and unerring destroyer of raw material, and when called to account his usual reply was: "De meat was so tough, sah, I done parbiled a little fust, sah"; so his camp companions nicknamed him "Old Parbile." It was now noon; we had had our breakfast at 3 A. M. Being hungry, I sent several times for "Old Parbile," and finally dispatched a giant sergeant, Adam Laws, with instructions to bring "Parbile" at the point of the bayonet if necessary. In due time I heard the sergeant's mighty voice uplifted with, "Git up you dar!" and simultaneously a hearty peal of laughter rang along our dejected line. Turning, I saw poor "Parbile" writhing along on his knees in an agony of fear. In one hand he had a tin pail with my dinner, and in the other he held a palm-leaf fan to shield himself from anticipated missiles of the enemy. The sergeant was accelerating his speed with the muzzle of his gun and with a "Hurry up dar now, de cunnul will be lovin' glad to see yo'!" Nothing could have been happier in its effect on the whole command than this trifling incident, and the scanty ill-cooked meal was the better for the sauce.

Henry Goddard Thomas.



INTERIOR OF THE CONFEDERATE FORT MAHONE, KNOWN AS "FORT DAMNATION." (FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.)