

# The Horrid Pit: the Battle of the Crater, the Civil War's Cruellest Mission

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## Review

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**Axelrod, Alan** *The Horrid Pit: The Battle of the Crater, The Civil War's Cruellest Mission*. Carroll and Graf Publishers, \$26.95 hardcover ISBN 9780787618115

### Disaster at the Crater

In the recent Hollywood epic based on the popular novel, *Cold Mountain*, Confederate soldier Inman witnesses the explosion and battle at the Crater, a pivotal moment during the siege of Petersburg, Virginia. On July 30, 1864, after days of tunneling, Union soldiers exploded an underground mine that had been constructed beneath the Confederate earthworks. As the earth violently shook and chaos ensued, Union commanders sent soldiers barreling forward to take advantage of the exposed position and end the siege. Union soldiers charged into the Crater, rather than around it, and a complete disaster ensued, resulting in 3,800 casualties as they failed to exploit the opportunity. The battle also saw the usage of black troops, serving in the Fourth Division of the Union IX Corps, who had been sent charging into the Crater and consequently suffered over 1,300 casualties. In his latest work, Alan Axelrod, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Civil War*, attempts to uncover the root of the mismanaged Union disaster and why the Union failed to exploit a prime opportunity to secure victory in the Petersburg Campaign.

The author spends much of his work critically blaming each of the Union officers involved. He starts with Benjamin Butler, who had been put in charge of taking Petersburg early in the Overland Campaign of 1864. Butler, a sorry excuse for a general, failed in his attempt and thus ushered in the long train of Union blunders that resulted in failure at the end of July (16). Grant had been burdened with the failure at Cold Harbor and did not take effective action against George Meade or Ambrose Burnside, who hatched the scheme to blow up the Confederate position. Once the explosion occurred, soldiers marched into the Crater, rather than around the position, trapping several Union soldiers and

leaving them at the mercy of the Confederate counterattack. Axelrod describes Brigadier General James Ledlie, who got drunk and cowered behind the lines, rather than leading his men forward, as a weak man, incompetent, cowardly and dangerous (112) Ledlie ordered others into battle, rather than ensuring that Burnside and Meade's objectives had been carried out on the field and ultimately, the Union failed.

The failures across the Union command structure had horrific results in a number of arenas. First, he rightfully attributes the needless waste of human life, which included many black soldiers, at the feet of an incoherent Union command structure. Second, if the Union had successfully exploited the gap in the line, Axelrod argues that the Civil War would have come to an end rather quickly, as Lee would have had to abandon Petersburg and Richmond in August, 1864, rather than April 1865. Following the Crater, 150,000 additional men fell dead or wounded in the war that drug out almost another full year. Axelrod may exaggerate the potential impact of a Union victory at the Crater on complete victory for the Union in the war. While Richmond would have fallen, Hood's army still remained viable outside of Atlanta. Lee may have moved his forces into the Carolinas and aligned with Hood's army to make a final stand. The Confederacy may also have utilized guerilla tactics to sustain the war effort. Counterfactuals can be useful and compelling but are problematic when the heart of Axelrod's thesis rests on the premise that the war would have ended if the Crater succeeded. He would have been more convincing if he had argued that Lincoln's election may have been guaranteed earlier if Grant secured Richmond rather quickly. Otherwise, the author neglects the other Confederate armies in the field, as well as the growing discontent over the war amongst the northern populace.

The inherent flaw with Axelrod's work comes from his base of primary and secondary sources. He mainly relies on the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, a Congressional report pertaining to an investigation into the conduct of officers during the Battle of the Crater, as well as a wealth of secondary literature about Petersburg and the Crater and the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant and remarks from John Featherston, who offered his analysis of the Crater in 1906. Thus, the work fails to include any new primary sources, such as letters, journals, and diaries from the soldiers who engaged in the digging and fighting around the Crater. With many Confederate soldiers viewing African American soldiers in combat for the first time, their impressions of black soldiers, as well as how African Americans coped with the battle, are vital to our understanding

of the intricacies of race and war. The lack of new primary sources prevents Axelrod from advancing his narrative in a new or tantalizing direction that can provide readers further insight into the Crater. We are simply left with the postwar backbiting and snarling between officers working to secure their reputations. Further primary source exploration may reveal how soldiers remembered the battle and the larger impact the Crater had on the war.

Beyond the sources used to discuss the Crater, Axelrod conveys a weak grasp of the overall historiography of the Civil War. For example, in his discussion of the Fort Pillow massacre, his notes send readers to a Civil War dictionary and a desk reference for more information. Axelrod fails to note recent works on Fort Pillow by Richard Fuchs, Andrew Ward and John Cimprich. Nor does he utilize any works pertaining to black soldiers in combat or the perceptions that white soldiers and officers had of their fellow comrades in arms. The recent works of Chandra Manning, Keith Wilson, and Hondon Hargrove to name a few would enrich his discussion in fruitful ways.

Unfortunately, the author has simply re-fought the engagement of the Crater and the subsequent blame game that emerged amongst the Union command structure who sought to either alleviate or point the finger of blame towards one another. Readers interested in the arguments amongst commanders will benefit from this study. Otherwise, the narrative produces nothing more than a traditional military narrative, with the voices of the common soldier lost in the smoke and chaos of one of the greatest missed opportunities for the Union armies during the Civil War.

*Brian Craig Miller, author of the forthcoming John Bell Hood and the Fight for Civil War Memory, is currently an Assistant Professor of History at Emporia State University. He is currently editing the Civil War letters of Private Silas W. Haven of the 27th Iowa and is also working on a manuscript pertaining to the experiences of Civil War amputees.*