

Into the Crater: The Mine Attack at Petersburg

Kevin M. Levin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Levin, Kevin M. (2011) "Into the Crater: The Mine Attack at Petersburg," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.1.14

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss1/13>

Review

Levin, Kevin M.

Winter 2011

Hess, Earl J. *Into The Crater: The Mine Attack At Petersburg*. University of South Carolina Press, \$44.95 ISBN 978-1-57003-922-5

Venturing into the Crater Once More

Over the past two decades Earl J. Hess has established himself as one of the foremost authorities of Civil War military history. He has done so with award-winning studies of the experiences of the common soldier, battles such as Pea Ridge and Gettysburg, and (in the opinion of this writer) one of the finest brigade histories ever written. In recent years Hess has added to this list with a history of the rifle musket and a 3-volume study of the evolution and influence of earthworks on the war in the Eastern Theater. Rather than rehash the standard narratives, readers have come to expect that Hess will challenge many of their deep-seated assumptions about the war. In the case of his most recent study of the battle of the Crater that task is made more difficult given the publication of four books of varying degrees of quality over the past five years.

The increased attention to the Crater over the past few years stems from both the 2003 release of the movie, *Cold Mountain*, which featured a vivid recreation of the battle, as well as broader resurgence of interest in the final year of the war and the Petersburg Campaign specifically. The lack of scholarly attention has left us with an overly simplistic view of the battle that has tended to focus on the spectacle of the early-morning detonation of 8,000 pounds of explosives under a Confederate salient followed by a futile Union assault. *Into the Crater* offers a necessary corrective to many of the finer points of the story as well as to assumptions that fundamentally alter the way we understand the evolution of the campaign, the battle, and its outcome – both of which serve to move us away from what appears to be a tragedy in the making.

Early on Hess challenges Lt. Col. Henry Pleasants's version of events, which has him pitted against Engineer John G. Barnard, who supposedly

withheld the proper support for the construction of the mine. On the other hand, Hess does not take issue with Major General George G. Meade's reasoning that led him to order Major General Ambrose Burnside to remove his lead division of United States Colored Troops to a supporting role out of concern that a defeat would bring with it accusations of racism. Burnside quickly emerges for Hess as the commander most responsible for the failed attack. According to Hess, he failed to appreciate the various political pressures hanging over Meade in reference to the decision to alter his initial plan of attack. More importantly, according to Hess, Burnside failed to exercise sufficient control over the formulation of a revised plan that included Brig. Gen. James Ledlie's division in the lead, even though its commander had already demonstrated gross incompetence on the field.

For a battle that was relatively small in scope it is here that Hess's book represents a marked improvement to previous studies. And it is here that his work on earthworks pays off. Popular representations of the battle tend to concentrate on the bloody fighting that took place within the crater itself and, while recent books have extended our understanding of the battle into the complex chain of traverses and bombproofs, Hess is able to show how these various structures influenced the close fighting that took place throughout the morning. Hess examines the Union attack in two waves, the first involving three divisions from the IX Corps followed by the advance of Brig Gen. Edward Ferrero's two brigades of USCTs. Careful attention is paid to the scale of the destruction wrought by the initial explosion as well as the quick response by the few unharmed elements of Brig. Gen. Stephen Elliott's South Carolina brigade as well as scattered elements from various units, including artillery, situated nearby. Hess argues that it was this early resistance on the part of Confederate forces that significantly reduced the chances of a Union victory rather than the 9:00am countercharge by Brig. Gen. William Mahone's division, which has traditionally been pointed to as the decisive turning point of the battle.

The author's analysis of the Union second wave focuses, in large part, on the role of Burnside's black division. This is one of the most controversial and misunderstood aspects of the battle, which for a long time were ignored in public commemorations and battle histories. Hess details the division's push to a position west of the crater, the close combat that ensued, and the overwhelming evidence that points to the massacre of significant numbers of black soldiers both during and after the battle. Here Hess explains the racial overtones that shaped this aspect of the battle, but his analysis stops short of providing the reader with

a sufficient grasp of the meaning and significance of the presence of USCTs. [I recommend Richard Slotkin's, *No Quarter* as a supplement to Hess's analysis.] This is not necessarily a criticism of Hess's analysis; his interests simply lay elsewhere. To his credit, Hess is the first historian to touch on the available evidence that points to the execution of a small number of Confederates by members of Ferrero's division. He does all of this while analyzing the final phase of the battle, which included separate attacks by three brigades from Mahone's division.

Hess concludes his study with a chapter on the postwar period that focuses on the history of the battlefield itself, including its use as a golf course in the early twentieth century. More interesting are the myriad ways in which veterans of Mahone's Virginia brigade and others struggled to make meaning of the battle during the four years of divisive political control by the Readjuster Party and Mahone himself as well as through reunions and reenactments.

Earl Hess has given us the most thoroughly researched and thoughtful study of the Crater to date. In his hands we don't just simply understand more about the battle, we understand it better.

Kevin M. Levin is the chair of the History Department at the St. Anne's – Belfield School in Charlottesville, Virginia. He is the author of the forthcoming book, Remembering War As Murder: The Battle of the Crater. You can find him Online at Civil War Memory: <http://cwmemory.com>