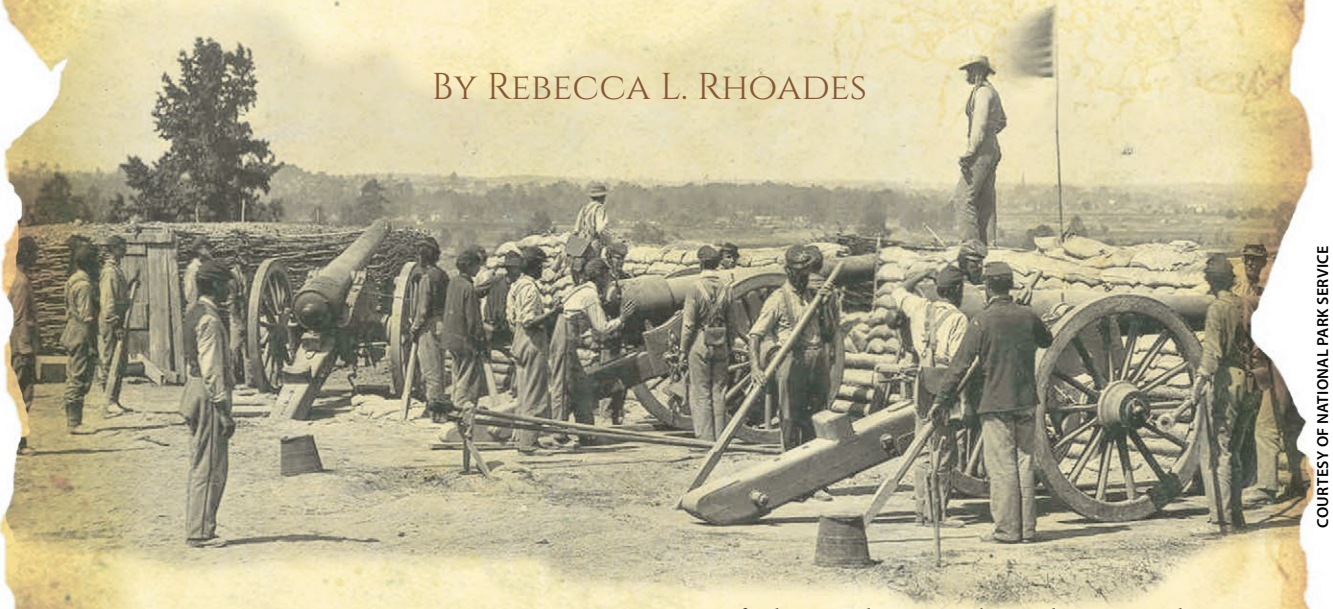
The Colors of BRAVERY

UNCOVERING DIVERSITY IN VIRGINIA'S CIVIL WAR HISTORY

By Rebecca L. Rhoades



COURTESY OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

POPULAR CULTURE HAS A LONG TRADITION of whitewashing Civil War history. White actors portraying Northern soldiers battle white actors playing Southern soldiers. African Americans are relegated to bit parts as slaves patiently awaiting their freedom, and Native Americans, if portrayed at all, are viewed as unpredictable, blood-thirsty savages out for revenge against the white man.

Non-white soldiers were first seen in the 1965 Jimmy Stewart film *Shenandoah*, which depicted—albeit inaccurately—African Americans fighting alongside whites in integrated Union regiments. It wasn't until the release of the award-winning drama *Glory* in 1989 that audiences were presented with a more realistic portrayal. The film told the tragic tale of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first formal unit of the United States Colored Troops (USCT).

Then there is the 2003 epic *Cold Mountain*, which begins with a powerful depiction of an especially horrific battle that took place in 1864 during the Siege of Petersburg, Virginia. At one point in the battle scene, a black Union soldier and a Native American in Confederate garb lock eyes, each seemingly startled by the other's appearance, as they meet in the attack. While the movie and its namesake book severely downplay the role of both groups during this battle, that split-second frame wasn't far from the truth.

One hundred and fifty years after the real-life version of that battle, many people are still surprised to learn that African Americans and Native Americans served during the Civil War. They fought for both the Union and the Confederacy. Some 180,000 African Americans served in the Union army, while more than 20,000 Native Americans donned either blue or gray.

Nowhere is this fact more evident than at the site of the carnage depicted in *Cold Mountain*. The Siege of Petersburg, which began on June 15, 1864, and ended on April 3, 1865, is the longest siege in American history. It comprises 100 events spread over 292 days and 170 square miles of battlefield. The fiercest of those engagements—and also one of the war's lesser-known events—took place on what is now Petersburg National Battlefield (NB). This summer, the park will be commemorating the battle's 150th anniversary, providing a look at the men who valiantly served and died at the Battle of the Crater.

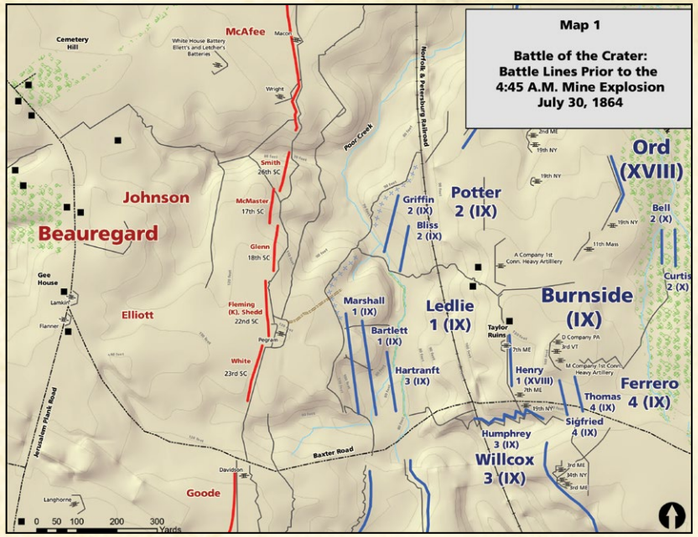
Atrocity on the Battlefield

It was early morning on July 30, 1864. The sky was still dark. Confederate troops slumbered on the battlefield at Petersburg, unaware that Union soldiers had just finished packing more than 8,000 pounds of gunpowder into a tunnel hidden 20 feet below where they lay. At 4:44 a.m., the earth erupted.

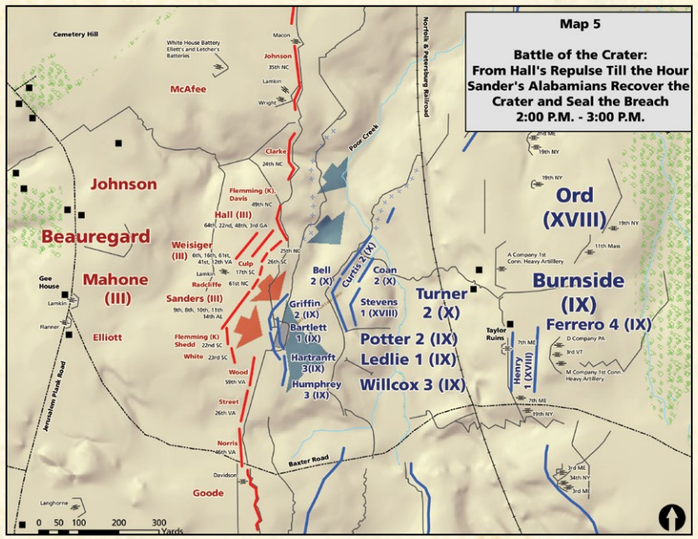
Reports say that the explosion sounded like a "muffled roar" and that the "earth shook." According to a Maine soldier, the heavens were filled with "earth, stone, timbers, arms, legs, guns unlimbered, and bodies unlimbed." It took more than 10 minutes for debris to stop falling from the sky.

When the air cleared, a giant crater had opened in the ground. It measured 170-feet long by 60-feet wide by 30-feet deep. Union soldiers began their advance across the 75-yard field that separated Army lines, but the delay caused by falling debris allowed just enough time for Confederates to regroup. The Yankees were hit with heavy artillery bombardment. According to Jimmy Blankenship, a historian with Petersburg NB, one New Hampshire regiment lost 8 of every 10 men in the charge. To protect themselves from the gunfire, instead of heading around the crater as originally planned, the soldiers went straight for its interior. Once in the crater, however, the men became trapped and were eventually slaughtered.

Eight-and-a-half hours later, when the smoke dissipated and the last rivers of blood had seeped into the red-clay ground, more than 500 Union troops were dead. Another 1,800-plus were wounded, and more than 1,400 were missing or captured. By comparison, 361 Rebel soldiers were dead (278 in the initial blast), 727 were wounded, and 403 were missing or captured. The Battle of the Crater had ended.



This map shows the location of the Union (blue) and Confederate (red) troops prior to the explosion.



COURTESY OF PETERSBURG NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD

This map documents the final hour of the Battle of the Crater.

The African American Experience

Approximately 4,300 African American soldiers, composing the 4th Division under the command of white general Edward Ferrero, served at the Battle of the Crater. It was the largest-single use of USCT in the Civil War.

"United States Colored Troops were supposed to lead the Union attack, and they had been well-trained to carry out the mission," says Emmanuel Dabney, park ranger at Petersburg NB; however, Major General George Meade, concerned about public opinion if they were killed, overruled the plan. General Ulysses S. Grant later told Congress that if there were a massacre, "it would be said… that we were shoving these people ahead to get killed because we did not care anything about them."

Initially held in reserve, the USCT were finally ordered in as reinforcements. They followed their training, going around the hole and forming their attack, all the while chanting "no quarter,

KARL CHRISTMAN/COURTESY OF PETERSBURG NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD

The entrance to the Union tunnel can still be seen at Petersburg National Battlefield.

no quarter," meaning "take no prisoners." The troops were recalling the Battle of Fort Pillow [Tennessee], an event two months earlier in which colored troops fought—and were subsequently massacred. The chant was meant to instill fear; instead, it served as an ugly provocation.

When advancing Rebel troops realized that their opponents were African Americans, they went "berserk," says Blankenship. "They [stopped] concentrating on hitting the white soldiers and concentrate[d] on the African Americans. From their point of view, the battlefield was not an honorable place for African Americans to be."

The USCT suffered severe losses. Many members were murdered as they attempted to surrender or after they were captured. Of the 504 total Union soldiers killed, 209 were African Americans—41 percent of all deaths. Of the 1,879 wounded, 697 were African Americans; and of the 1,413 missing, 421 were African Americans.

"These numbers show that the USCT were in the thick of it," says Blankenship. "There were more African Americans killed, wounded and missing in the Battle of the Crater in less than nine hours than in the entire four years of the war."

Out of tragedy, however, came one particular story of bravery. Former slave Decatur Dorsey was the 39th Regiment's color bearer. Moving ahead of his unit, Dorsey placed his regiment's flag on Confederate fortifications.

"Carrying the flag was the most honorable position you could have in your regiment," says Blankenship. "The drawback is that most flag bearers do not survive the battle because the enemy is trying to kill them and have those flags hit the ground and cause demoralization. So for Decatur Dorsey to get that flag in advance of his regiment and place it up on the enemy's earthworks was an amazing feat."

For his accomplishment, Dorsey received the Medal of Honor. Of the 14 Medals of Honor won in the Battle of the Crater, only one was given to an African American.

Warrior Soldiers

Another young man, equally brave, never received any medals for his heroics.

Sergeant Antoine Scott was an Odawa Indian from Oceana County, Michigan. He had enlisted on July 4, 1863, with Company K of the 1st Michigan Sharpshooters, one of the largest units of Native Americans east of the Mississippi. On July 30, 1864, Company K was mired in the fighting at the crater.

Despite the surrounding chaos, the members of Company K were noticed for their composure.

150th ANNIVERSARY EVENTS

Petersburg National Battlefield invites visitors to help mark the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Siege of Petersburg and the Battle of the Crater. Following are some of the major events occurring in 2014.

July 30
Battle of the Crater—Eastern Front
A commemorative program will take place at the time of the explosion, a keynote address will be given at mid-day, and ranger tours will be provided in the morning and afternoon.

August 1
Battle of the Crater—Panel Presentations
Two panel discussions, each with three speakers and a Q&A session, will be held in downtown Petersburg. One will address the Battle of the Crater; the other will look at the impacts of the Siege of Petersburg on those living in the city. 10 a.m.–noon: Gillfield Baptist Church, 209 Perry Street, Petersburg; 1–3 p.m.; St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 10 Union Street, Petersburg

August 2
Battle of the Crater—Living History Program
Living history programs will run throughout the day, examining the battle, the soldiers and their weapons, and field medicine. Watch Union and Confederate artillery in action. "Meet" Generals Grant and Lee, and hear their thoughts on the battle. The Virginia Civil War 150 HistoryMobile will be on hand, and family activities will be available.

August 9–10
Grant's Headquarters, City Point, Virginia
Ranger programs and living history events will bring to life and explore the role of this village as it was transformed into one of the world's busiest ports and one of the largest supply bases of the Civil War.

August 17
Grant's Third and Fourth Offensive: The Battles of the Crater and Weldon Railroad
This event is a follow-up to the bus tour given on August 16 by Richmond National Battlefield Park on the First and Second Battles of Deep Bottom, Virginia, which coincided with the Battle of the Crater and the Battle of the Weldon Railroad, respectively. Tickets are $25, and reservations are required.

August 23
Battles of Weldon Railroad and Reams Station
Rangers and living historians at these two battlefields will provide insight to General Grant's Fourth Offensive of the Siege and the impact it had on the struggle over Petersburg's fate.

September 27–28
Battle of Peebles Farm
Rangers and living historians will present tours and demonstrations on Grant's Fifth Offensive of the Siege.

For information on these and other sesquicentennial events at Petersburg National Battlefield, call **804/732-3531, extension 202**. **nps.gov/pete**

KARL CHRISTMAN/COURTESY OF PETERSBURG NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD

The 23rd Regiment of the United States Colored Troops, portrayed here by living historians, sustained the heaviest losses of the entire 4th Division at the Battle of the Crater.

Reports from both Union and Confederate soldiers noted that several Native Americans, knowing that they were mortally wounded, covered their heads with their shirts and chanted a traditional death song.

"In the midst of the battle and chaos, these men took the time to pay their respects to themselves and their traditions, and people really took note of that," says Eric Hemenway, a tribal repatriation specialist with the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians in Northern Michigan.

Defending those who were chanting was 23-year-old Scott, who was one of the last men to leave the crater alive. He is said to have repeatedly crawled up the side of the crater to fire at Rebel soldiers while other members of his company escaped. For his "conspicuous gallantry," Scott was twice nominated for a Medal of Honor. He never received it.

"There was a lot of prejudice against Native Americans at the time. There was a lot of stigma against them relating back to the War of 1812," says Hemenway. "Interestingly, a lot of ancestors of the men in Company K fought against the Americans in the War of 1812. Fifty years later, the sons and grandsons of these warriors are fighting with the Americans against other Americans. It's a very dynamic and complicated political scenario."

So why did the men of Company K volunteer to fight? After all, at the time, they weren't allowed to vote. They weren't even considered U.S. citizens until 1924.

"The Native American experience is unique," says Hemenway. "They were fighting for their own separate issues, such as treaty rights and land rights. Blacks were fighting for their freedom and to end slavery.

"There were some theories among the Indians that if the South did win, we would become slaves like the blacks," he adds. "And then there's the reasoning that the guys wanted to prove themselves. They're brave, and they come from a long line of warriors, so they're going to fight. And they did. The survival rate for Company K was more than 50 percent, which was pretty good for the Civil War."

One soldier who didn't survive was Levi Konkapot of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohicans of Wisconsin. He was 1 of 600 members of his tribe who fought in the Civil War, and he was killed in Petersburg. It was only a few years ago that Park Service staff at Petersburg identified him, thanks in part to the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act, which requires that tribes be notified of any remains and funerary objects.

In 2012, Konkapot's descendent Jo Ann Schedler visited Petersburg to see his grave.

"Jimmy [Blankenship] showed me where he died, and it was just amazing to me," says Schedler. "You don't know how to feel when you find out the history of your family, and then you can look at the battlefield and hear what happened to them."

She adds, "It's really wonderful that the National Park Service is working to uncover these stories so that they can share them with people who visit and help them understand who was there and fighting during the war and why."

Perhaps Ely S. Parker best understood why. A Seneca Indian, Parker was adjutant to General Grant and was often referred to as "Grant's Indian." But when General Robert E. Lee surrendered, Parker was called upon to draft the articles of surrender, which Lee signed at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865.

At the time of surrender, upon meeting Parker, Lee said, "I am glad to see one real American here."

Parker's reply? "We are all Americans here." ■