

"Battle of the Crater"

Hundreds died in one of Civil War's most bloody clashes

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PETERSBURG, Va. - In a war known for bloodshed, the Battle of the Crater was unique in its ferociousness. After Union soldiers exploded a meteor-sized crater beneath a Confederate camp outside Petersburg toward the end of the Civil War in July 1864, hundreds of Union troops rushed unwittingly into the hole to their eventual slaughter.

There were 5, 600 casualties during the bloody eight-hour siege, which is graphically relived in the opening scenes of the film "Cold Mountain."

The crater today is a grassy divot on a quiet hillside that belies what Petersburg National Battlefield historian Jimmy Blankenship calls the "worst human behavior of the war."

Like other battle sites of the nine-month Petersburg Campaign that ended the war, its story is one largely relegated to history mainly, Blankenship says, because those who fought in it wanted to forget.

But park officials took advantage of "Cold Mountain" buzz to offer special guided tours of the site for about two weeks after the film's release in late December. The tours will resume in June for the summer season, and visitors can take a self-guided tour of the crater anytime before then.

The guided tour starts with a brief explanation of the Union's battle plan, such as it was. With thousands of troops camped for weeks behind fortifications on opposite sides of a field near Petersburg, a regiment of Union soldiers from Pennsylvania was directed to dig a tunnel under the Confederate army's main battery and blow it up. The Union would then advance around the hole and capture the Confederate line on top of the hill.

The 5-foot-tall tunnel took four weeks to dig, and was nearly discovered by Confederate soldiers digging a tunnel of their own just above it. Then, on the morning of July 30, 1864, the Union side lit the fuse and exploded 8, 000 pounds of gunpowder beneath what they hoped was the main battery.

Chaos ensued. The explosion sent body parts, cannons and chunks of earth the size of a four-room school house 200 feet into the sky, Blankenship said. The resultant crater was enormous, measuring 170 feet long, 60 feet wide and 30 feet deep.

Union troops charged the hill, but hadn't counted on resistance from Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's four remaining batteries behind the crater. Only one in five Union soldiers survived the dash across the field; those who made it dove into the crater for

cover. "It was a mass of humanity in the hole," Blankenship said. "But that was the safest place to be."

Panic spread among the Union regiments, which included black troops for the first time in a major Civil War battle. Though outnumbered, the Confederate troops were galvanized by the North's disorganization and the sight of the black enemy troops, and managed to capture half of the crater by noon.

The artillery fire was some of the most awesome of the war, Blankenship said. Confederate soldiers stood on the edge of the crater and shot the Union troops at will. Bayonets were tossed into the hole like harpoons, mortar rounds were lobbed in like grenades. American Indian soldiers in the crater began a death chant.

With blood running ankle-deep, the remaining Union troops surrendered around 1PM.. In all, 4,000 Union soldiers were either killed or wounded, compared with 1,600 for the South, Blankenship said.

The crater today is about half its original size because of erosion.

Blankenship said that at one point after the war, the U.S. Army turned the battlefield into a golf course and the crater became one of the holes.



Associated Press **Battlefield historian and tour guide Jimmy Blankenship** stands on a lip of what is left of the crater on the site of the Battle of the Crater at the Petersburg National Battlefield in Petersburg, Va. There were 5,600 casualties during the bloody eight-hour siege, which is graphically relived in the opening scenes of the film 'Cold Mountain.'