Lee's lines at Petersburg.

This was the famous battle of the Crater. In conception it bid fair to become the most brilliant stroke of the war; in execution it became a tragic fiasco. A section in the center of the Union line at Petersburg held by Burnside's 9th Corps lay within 150 yards of an enemy salient on high ground where the rebels had built a strong redoubt. One day in June, Colonel Henry Pleasants of the 48th Pennsylvania, a Schuylkill County regiment containing many coal miners, overheard one of his men growl: "We could blow that damn fort out of existence if we could run a mine shaft under it." A prewar mining engineer, Pleasants liked the idea, proposed it to his division commander, who submitted it to Burnside, who approved it. Pleasants put his regiment to work excavating a tunnel more than 500 feet long. They did so with no help from the army's engineers, who scoffed at the project as "claptrap and nonsense" because ventilation problems had limited all previous military tunnels in history to less than 400 feet. Meade consequently put no faith in the enterprise. Nevertheless, the 48th Pennsylvania improvised its own tools and found its own lumber to timber the shaft. Burnside borrowed an old-fashioned theodolite from a civilian so Pleasants could triangulate for distance and direction. Pleasants also rigged a coa-
mining ventilation shaft with a fire at the base to create a draft and pull in fresh air through a tube. In this manner the colonel confounded the skeptics. His men dug a shaft 511 feet long with lateral galleries at the end each nearly forty feet long under the Confederate line in which they placed four tons of gunpowder. Reluctantly converted, Meade and Grant authorized Burnside to spring the mine and attack with his corps through the resulting gap.

The sidewhiskered general’s enthusiasm for the project had grown steadily from the time it began on June 25. Here was a chance to redeem his failure at Fredericksburg by capturing Petersburg and winning the war. Burnside’s corps contained four divisions. Three had been worn down by combat since the Wilderness; the fourth was fresh, having seen no action except guarding rear-area supply lines. It was a black division, and few officers in the Army of the Potomac from Meade down yet believed in the fighting capacity of black troops. Burnside was an exception, so he designated this fresh division to lead the assault. The black soldiers received special tactical training for this task. Their morale was high; they were eager “to show the white troops what the colored division could do,” said one of their officers.17 Grant arranged a diversion by Hancock’s corps north of the James which pulled several of Lee’s divisions away from the Petersburg front. Everything seemed set for success when the mine was scheduled to explode at dawn on July 30.

Only hours before this happened, however, Meade—with Grant’s approval—ordered Burnside to send in his white divisions first. Meade’s motive seems to have been lack of confidence in the inexperienced black troops, though in later testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War Grant mentioned another reason as well: If things went wrong, “it would then be said . . . that we were shoving these people ahead to get killed because we did not care anything about them. But that could not be said if we put white troops in front.”18

Apparantly demoralized by the last-minute change of his battle plan, Burnside lost all control over the operation. The commander of the division designated to lead the assault (chosen by drawing straws!), James H. Ledlie, had a mediocre record and an alcohol problem. During the assault he stayed behind in the trenches drinking rum cadged from the surgeon. With no preparation and without leadership, his men attacked
in disordered fashion. The explosion blew a hole 170 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep. One entire rebel regiment and an artillery battery were buried in the debris. Confederate troops for a couple of hundred yards on either side of the crater fled in terror. When Ledlie's division went forward, its men stopped to gawk at the awesome spectacle. Mesmerized by this vision of what they supposed Hell must be like, many of them went into the crater instead of fanning out left and right to roll up the torn enemy flanks. The two following white divisions did little better, degenerating into a disorganized mob as rebel artillery and mortars found the range and began shooting at the packed bluecoats in the crater as at fish in a barrel. Frantic officers, with no help from Burnside or from division commanders, managed to form fragments of brigades for a further penetration. But by mid-morning a southern division commanded by William Mahone was ready for a counterattack. The black troops who had finally pushed their way through the milling or retreating white Yankees caught the brunt of Mahone's assault. As on other fields, rebel soldiers enraged by the sight of black men in uniform murdered several of them who tried to surrender. When it was all over, the 9th Corps had nothing to show for its big bang except 4,000 casualties (against fewer than half as many for the enemy), a huge hole in the ground, bitter mutual recriminations, and new generals commanding the corps and one of its divisions. Grant pronounced the epitaph in a message to Halleck: "It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in the war. Such opportunity for carrying fortifications I have never seen and do not expect again to have." 19