

*The Horrid Pit: The Battle of the Crater, the Civil War's Cruellest Mission* by Alan Axelrod, New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers, 2007. Hardback, 284 pages.

Reviewed by Barry Crane

Just when you thought there is enough printed material to give enough information, narrative and synopsis to the Battle of the Crater, there is yet another one which might change your mind or reinforce what you already know about the battle. *The Horrid Pit: The Battle of the Crater, the Civil War's Cruellest Mission* by Alan Axelrod presents another angle on the outcome of the ingenious engineering feat and the disastrous assault that followed on July 30, 1864.

This quick-read narrative should come as no surprise to readers of Axelrod, who drafted up an interesting synopsis of the Civil War with his popular book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Civil War*. It is in that similar fashion, the simplistic yet captivating narrative, where Axelrod excels as he describes this intriguing drama and lackluster execution of a battle plan. If it was not enough to try this grand experiment in the face of (or under, in this case) the enemy, try executing this plan with fellow Union generals and their unique personalities and agendas that just might be more menacing than a regiment of Confederate skirmishers. Take Generals George G. Meade and Ambrose E. Burnside, put them in charge of battle-hardened troops with a desire to end the war and devise tactics to enable a complete surprise and what do you have? Two generals, leery of one another, wasting an absolutely terrific execution of blowing up a mine while completely destroying veteran soldiers in an assault so wantonly mismanaged and ludicrous enough to make Clausewitz cringe.

Axelrod captures the opinion differences of Meade and Burnside, even the intense animosity between Burnside and Meade's chief engineer, Major James Duane. Interestingly enough, Duane was a published author on the use of military tunnels yet he stifled his authority and professional experiences in spite of Burnside. Needless to say the much needed mining equipment, maybe easily obtained by Duane, never made it to the front line and lengthened the entire project. Axelrod proclaims the successful assault following the mining saga could have shortened the war as the fall of Petersburg should have cut off the Army of Northern Virginia's supply lines, leaving a destitute Robert E. Lee to ponder his next move as early as July 1864. In the end, it simply did not matter as many Union soldiers drove into that crater and caused what Ulysses S. Grant would call "the saddest affair I have witnessed in the War." And to think he didn't even say that about Cold Harbor!

The book's positive notes are the easy to read narratives, the succinct biographical portrayals of the key personnel involved and the political drama that unfolds on almost every page. With only a few maps to help out the reader, this book is more likely suited for those who have prior knowledge of the Siege of Petersburg. Upon initial review, *The Horrid Pit* seems devoid of the heavily cited sources typically seen in other works. But therein lies the disparity between this book and others. Axelrod is more concerned with the Union high command and their direct reports instead of a soldiers' synopsis of what

happened and how the foot soldier reacted and what he saw. Needless to say, soldiers' letters back home and post-war reminiscing are generally not included. It is entirely a story more suited for a leadership review of Union interaction, opinions, and perceptions which ultimately led to overall failure in command.

The only issue I had with the book was Axelrod's assessment of the "what if" scenario of a shortened war if the Union succeeded in this mission. Grant simply wanted to destroy Lee's army. I must agree that success in July 1864 against Petersburg would have forced Lee into a more ingenious role of keeping his army in survival mode and creating methods for ensuring their sustainment. The loss of Petersburg could have been Lee's death knell. Instead, this painful period in Petersburg's campaign showcased more troubling issues for Union leadership. An almost endless supply of reinforcements would have to overcome such sickening instances of loss of life.

Alan Axelrod's *The Horrid Pit: The Battle of the Crater, The Civil War's Cruellest Mission* is a welcome addition to reinterpreting the decisions made in Petersburg, deciphering the dangerous personalities of the Union high command, and understanding the conflicting tactics which inevitably caused thousands of unnecessary casualties.