

Book Review: *The Battle of the Crater: A Complete History*, by John F. Schmutz. McFarland & Company, Inc. Jefferson, NC, 2009. 428 pages. Hardcover \$75.00. Reviewed by Thomas L. Breiner.

The Battle of the Crater: A Complete History by John F. Schmutz is by far the most comprehensive work on this topic that I have ever encountered. In order to set the tone for this review, I will say that the author has done an excellent job of researching and making sense out of what otherwise is a complete fiasco. From the beginning, the author quickly identifies the primary problem in this project; the relationship between Major Generals George G. Meade and Ambrose E. Burnside. This relationship soured during the Fredericksburg Campaign of 1862 and neither party had work at improving their working relationship. The book does the required review of the 1864 Overland Campaign setting the stage for the siege of Petersburg. From there, our author develops all the details that encompass the digging of the mine, the strategic decisions connected with the planned assault and finally, the incidents of the actual battle and its aftermath.

John Schmutz, the author, does a wonderful job of telling the particulars of the mining project. He is quick to identify that Meade is a major impediment to the success of the project. His attitude is then coalesced within his staff. Why Meade ever authorized Burnside to proceed with the mining operation while never truly supporting it is ludicrous. Meade should have rejected the project from the start, if he was not willing to give it his complete support. Meade's attitude is reflected throughout his staff as Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants of the 48th Pennsylvania Regiment request for mining equipment is continually denied. Meade has done his best to see that this project will not succeed. The fatal flaw comes when Meade rejects Burnside's plan of attack on the afternoon prior to exploding the mine and launching the assault. Burnside is not allowed to lead with the 4th Division which had been training specifically to handle the maneuvers required for the assault. This unit is made up of the USCT regiments. Unfortunately, Grant supported Meade's decision.

Through the eyes of the author, the reader sees a plan of attack that potentially could have ended the Civil War in the East come to a complete failure. Of course considering the actions of Brigadier General Edward Ferrero, Division Commander 4th Division 9th Corps, spending his time with Brigadier General James H. Ledlie, Division Commander 1st Division 9th Corps, in a bombproof sampling the commissary whiskey instead of guiding his division could have created the same problem that occurred with Ledlie's division. This will never be known.

While I was thrilled with the general quality of the author's research and the excellent writing of the work, there are several problems. The only significant flaw in his research, that I observed, was his identification of William Seward as the Secretary of the Treasury instead of Secretary of State. Next, the author seems so enamored with certain passages that he tends to repeat them. I found this practice to be very confusing at times. I thought maybe I had lost my place and I was re-reading the same material. It turns out that I was confused because the author was using the same quotes again. Finally, the maps provided with the text were basically useless. The author describes the action in various trenches

and covered ways around the crater, but the maps never provide an adequate picture of the area.

As far as the author's analysis of the project, I found his conclusions to be direct and to the point. He supports his conclusion with quality details. He identifies where the problems were created and who was responsible. The command structure from Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant on down to the division officers all failed in their responsibilities. There was no one in overall command on the scene, no division commanders were at the front and the plan of attack, even after Meade revised it, was not related to the appropriate brigade commanders. Even the other Corps commanders were at fault for failing to supply the support necessary.

In my opinion, the author has produced a complete history of the Battle of the Crater as promised. I highly recommend this read for all those with any interest in the Civil War and especially the Petersburg Campaign. For those inclined to purchase this work, the book can be ordered through the publisher's website www.mcfarlandpub.com or by calling 1-800-253-2187.