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Earl J. Hess. *Into the Crater: The Mine Attack at Petersburg.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010. 352 pp. $44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-922-5.

Jay Luvaas, Harold W. Nelson. *Guide to the Atlanta Campaign: Rocky Face Ridge to Kennesaw Mountain (U.S. Army War College Guides to Civil War Battles).* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7006-1570-4; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1569-8.

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Maneuver in the West and Stalemate in the East: The Civil War in 1864

The tide of the Civil War had shifted in favor of the Union by 1864. Victories in the west at Vicksburg and Chattanooga brought the unassuming yet brilliant Union general Ulysses S. Grant to the attention of President Abraham Lincoln. Impressed with Grant's generalship, Lincoln, in early March 1864, promoted him to the rank of lieutenant general, a position that had remained vacant since George Washington commanded the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Now, U. S. Grant would control all of the Union armies in every theater of the war, reporting directly to President Lincoln. Although fond of his armies in the west, Grant understood the politics of war and recognized that both the Northern people and the president expected him to face off with Robert E. Lee in Virginia. As a result, the new lieutenant general decided to travel with the Army of the Potomac under Major General George Gordon Meade but continued to command all Union forces from the immediate rear of that hard-luck army. However, before Grant left the west, he promoted his trusted friend and subordinate William Tecumseh Sherman to head the Military Division of the Mississippi, effectively placing his friend "Cump" in command of the western theater of operations.

Before Grant arrived in Washington, he and Sherman met in a Cincinnati hotel room and hatched the Union strategy for the remainder of the war. Grant's new strategy for victory called for the application of continued pressure against Confederate forces in both the east and the west, thereby keeping the rebellious armies from reinforcing each other. While Grant and the Army of the Potomac drove toward Richmond, targeting Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, Sherman, commanding the armies of the Cumberland, Tennessee, and Ohio, would drive for Atlanta, targeting Joseph Johnston's Army of Tennessee. In both campaigns, Confederate armies were to be the primary objectives. Grant recognized that feinting toward the Confederate capital and the important railroad hub at Atlanta would force the primary Southern armies to position themselves between the advancing Union forces and these cities. In effect, the urban centers would become anvils upon which each Union army would hammer its Confederate counterpart.

Grant's strategy worked but, like every military plan, encountered difficulties. Examining Jay Luvaas and Harold W. Nelson's *Guide to the Atlanta Campaign* and Earl J. Hess's *Into the Crater, the Mine Attack at Petersburg*, illustrates the successes and failures that the Union armies endured during the pivotal campaigns of 1864. Similar to previous campaigns, the Union armies in the west experienced victory while the Federals in the east became stalemated. With the Civil War sesquicentennial already started, examining both books side by side illuminates the fundamental, yet often ignored truth that Grant's grand strategy reinforced with Sherman's operational war of maneuver dictated that the war would be won in the west.

While thousands of people visit the "Big Five" Civil War National Battlefield Parks each year (Gettysburg, Antietam, Shiloh, Chattanooga, and Vicksburg), lesser known parks receive less government aid and public appreciation. Luvaas and Nelson's *Guide to the Atlanta Campaign*, part of The U.S. Army War College Guides to Civil War Battles series, helps illuminate the significance of the oft-forgotten remaining tracts of land that Sherman's armies fought over during the first half of his

Atlanta campaign. Both practical and military considerations prompted the authors to guide travelers through the engagements from Rocky Face Ridge to Kennesaw Mountain. According to Luvaas and Nelson, the action at Kennesaw Mountain "ends the first and most critical phase of the Atlanta campaign. The Union Army did not enter Atlanta until September 2, but much of the ground over which the armies fought and maneuvered in that phase is now under asphalt and concrete. Moreover, by then the military situation had changed significantly in Sherman's favor. He was out of the mountains, with his army united and his line of communications secure" (Luvaas and Nelson, p. 10). In addition, after Kennesaw, Grant granted Sherman more flexibility in his original mission. The lieutenant general freed Sherman from targeting only Johnston's army and permitted him to strike and destroy Confederate infrastructure, namely the central railroad hub, located in Atlanta. Finally, according to Luvaas and Nelson, the early stage of the Atlanta campaign, from Rocky Face to Kennesaw Mountain, provides an example of successful offensive and defensive maneuver. Sherman, "Through constant maneuvering … forced his opponent from one strong position to another, despite the fact that Sherman's objective was known, his line of advance was dependent upon a single railroad, and he had to negotiate every river and mountain range from Dalton to Kennesaw" (Luvaas and Nelson, pp. 10-11).

The guide begins in Ringgold, Georgia, and escorts the reader through the first half of Sherman's Atlanta campaign, ending with sites in and around Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park. Each chapter begins with driving directions and provides both interstate road maps and battle maps of the engagements described. Unfortunately, some chapters prove more lucid than others. Those such as chapter 13, "New Hope Church and the Dallas Line," illustrate the guide at its maximum potential. The authors begin with a clear subsection on operations which sets the stage for the reader before delving into the primary-source vignettes which comprise the remainder of the chapter. Other chapters, such as chapter 5, "The Fight from Dug Gap," jump right from bold-font driving directions into excerpts from primary sources meant to convey the eyewitness accounts of the engagement. While the book provides relevant, block-quote citations from period works such as the articles in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (1887-88), William Tecumseh Sherman's *Memoirs* (1875), and Ambrose Bierce's "The Crime at Pickett's Mill" (1888), to name a few, it remains over-reliant on large verbatim extracts from the *Official Records of the Civil War* (1880-1910). The editors present these extracts as historical truths and do not interrogate these often self-serving reports. More authorial narrative and less direct citation would greatly improve the books in this series.

Yet, despite the book's minor shortcomings, the guide offers some interesting scholarship. The most thought-provoking aspect of the book appears in Luvaas's appendix article, "The Greatest Possible Importance: Sherman's Logistics in the Atlanta Campaign." Earlier in the introduction, the authors correctly state that, "The most significant aspect of the campaign, however, was not the battles or even the maneuvers themselves. Sherman's special genius was in his mastery of logistics–his ability to move reinforcements and supplies forward over such hostile and immense territory in the face of a skilled opponent. If the greater industrial capacity and manpower of the North was the basic reason why the North won the war, it was Sherman's concepts and organization that brought this power together before Atlanta" (Luvaas and Nelson, p. 11). Luvaas picks up on this important observation in his appendix, outlining Sherman's logistical genius and its importance in the campaign's success.

Sherman's elaborate logistical preparations predated the army group's departure from Chattanooga, Tennessee. The eccentric and often nervous Union general displayed a keen appreciation for details and perseverated over conquering the distance between the primary Union military depot at Nashville, and the secondary military objective of Atlanta. Relying on a single railroad line and exorcising unnecessary equipment and accoutrements from the ranks, Sherman kept his troops constantly supplied throughout the campaign via advanced depots that trailed behind his armies. This essay is a must-read for Civil War military historians and highlights the complexity of military operations and campaigning during the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, reflecting on the Virginia theater, Lincoln Memorial University's Earl Hess has penned a masterful book on the Battle of the Crater. With Grant unable to outflank Lee during the Overland campaign, primarily due to the lethargy of his subordinates, the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac became stalemated around Petersburg, Virginia. With his options limited, frontal attacks proving unsuccessful, and the 1864 presidential election on the horizon, Grant desperately searched for ways to break the deadlock.

Although several historians have published on the Crater, this book offers a different perspective. According to Hess, "No previous author has yet conducted definitive research with all the sources that are available on the Crater Battle, or mined those sources for a deeper

understanding of the tactical experiences and personal stories of the units and men involved in it, or questioned key assumptions about the engagement" (Hess, p. xii). Thus, Hess sets forth a holistic history of the Battle of the Crater which examines both the Union and Confederate perspectives, from the general's command tent to the soldier's-eye view of the battle.

Hess traces the Petersburg Mine from its origins in the imagination of Lt. Col. Henry Pleasants of the 48th Pennsylvania, through its execution, failure, and bloody aftermath. Pleasants, a former civil engineer serving in Ambrose Burnside's Ninth Corps, believed that he could sink a mine and breech the Confederate salient directly opposite his position. Burnside eagerly grasped the plan and gained approval from both Meade and Grant. Meanwhile, Pleasants recruited former miners for the project and began work in late June, 1864. "Starting the gallery in the bank of Poor Creek, the Pennsylvanians dug fifty feet on June 25. They averaged closer to forty feet per day thereafter, nearly two feet per hour" (Hess, p. 9). Throughout their excavation, Pleasants and the miners conquered numerous problems. For example, in order to provide oxygen to the workers, Pleasants devised a simple yet ingenious ventilation system that allowed the work to continue unabated. Meanwhile, the Confederates, unsure of the extent of the Union activities, attempted unsuccessful countermines in order to thwart the Union excavators.

While the miners continued to dig, Grant remained flexible and incorporated the mine into his broader third offensive: "Grant operated on two tracks while managing the Third Offensive. First he wanted to see if Hancock and Sheridan could make something of their strike north of the James River. If not, Burnside's mine could pave the way for a frontal attack on the Petersburg lines. Even if the Hancock-Sheridan offensive proved successful, Grant wanted to spring the mine with no follow-up attack" (Hess, p. 50). With Hancock and Sheridan's move failing to achieve the maximum result, preparations for the attack plodded along, and Burnside trained a division of black troops (hereafter referred to as USCT) to spearhead the assault. These soldiers would sidestep the enormous crater resulting from the 11,200 pounds of black powder that filled the galleries under the Confederate salient and proceed to enfilade the Rebel line and exploit the breech. Grant and Meade, understanding the delicate politics of the matter, disagreed with Burnside's desire to use the men of the USCT in the first wave of the assault. Knowing that the lead troops would take the heaviest casualties, the top brass feared that using black troops in this capacity would create a political stir. With the 1864 election around the bend, Meade and Grant did not want to create the impression that the Union treated the lives of its black soldiers nonchalantly. As a result, Meade ordered Burnside to pick another division to lead the attack.

It is here that Hess singles out Burnside as the main perpetrator of the Crater attack's eventual failure. According to Hess, "Although Burnside had gallantly embraced the mine project and played a key role in its success, he failed to deal with important issues related to the follow-up attack. Meade had a legitimate argument for changing both the lead unit and the mode of approach in the attack plan, but Burnside abdicated his responsibility as corps commander in drawing straws to see who would replace the black division in the vanguard. Burnside ultimately bears the responsibility for allowing a palpably incompetent general to command one of his divisions.... After more than a month of careful preparation, the success of the mine attack rested on a few hours of hasty, frustrated changes of plan, and the man chiefly responsible for dealing with those changes failed to manage them effectively" (Hess, p. 62). And thus, after detonating the mine on July 30, Union troops launched a poorly planned and coordinated attack designed to exploit the breach in the Confederate salient. The Federals became trapped in the crater, fodder for Rebel cannon fire and musketry.

It is from this point forward that Hess provides one of the best descriptions of Civil War combat to date. As the author of *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (1997), Hess is no stranger to the drama that unfolded on many a Civil War battlefield. He brings his unique skills to the table at this juncture in describing the horror of late nineteenth-century warfare. More pointedly, he lucidly depicts the brutality that black soldiers suffered at the hands of Confederates, tacitly, and correctly, reminding readers that both racism and slavery prompted the Civil War. In one graphic and heart-wrenching account Hess describes, "A group of 12th Virginians witnessed a particularly horrifying incident that amounted to nothing less than cold-blooded murder. A black noncommissioned officer was tormented by two Confederates. One beat him with a ramrod while the other shot him at close range in the hip. The man begged for mercy as the Rebel calmly reloaded and held the muzzle of his gun to his stomach and pulled the trigger" (Hess, p. 166).

Ultimately, Hess draws two important conclusions. First he locates the responsibility for the Union loss: "The chief blame for the failure of July 30," Hess writes, "must rest with Burnside. It was not Meade's fault that Burnside

elected to choose the lead division by drawing lots, and it was not Meade's fault that Burnside apparently confused his division leaders while giving them instructions for the next day. It also was not Meade's fault that a thoroughly incompetent officer had been allowed to command Burnside's 1st Division for weeks. All of those issues were the responsibility of the 9th Corps commander.... The seeds of failure were planted at 9th Corps headquarters on the night of July 29" (Hess, p. 235). Yet Hess extrapolates beyond the immediate consequences of the assault's failure and delegating blame. He ultimately concludes that the attack, though tragic, kept pace with the overall significance of the Petersburg campaign, in effect, stating that Sherman's Carolina's campaign and not the fighting around Petersburg ultimately checkmated Lee, forcing him to abandon his entrenchments. According to Hess, "Holding Petersburg was not essential to holding Richmond, for Lee could still supply his army by way of railroads entering the Confederate capital.... Lee gave up Richmond and retreated west when he lost Petersburg to Grant on April 2, 1865, because Sherman was bringing sixty thousand Union veterans of the western campaigns toward the city to help Grant deal with the Army of Northern Virginia. He had to move or be trapped in the capital, a threat that the Army of the Potomac and the Army of the James could not offer him in July 1864. The Battle of the Crater held the potential to end the Petersburg campaign, but probably not the war, in a single stroke" (Hess, p. 237).

With the 150th anniversary of the Civil War just beginning, examining these two books side by side illuminates fundamental truths about the war that all should keep in mind throughout the country's solemn, collective remembrances. Despite the lore that Lost Cause mythology has wrought since the termination of hostilities in 1865, the Virginia theater was not the decisive arena of the Civil War. Sherman's maneuver campaign, which resulted in the capture of Atlanta, and not the events within the stalemated, strategically sterile, eastern theater, determined the outcome of the war. It not only deprived the Confederacy of a vital railroad hub and supply depot but also ensured Lincoln's reelection, thereby promising further executive prosecution of hard war against the rebellion. Subsequently, while Grant and Lee remained ensconced in their siege works outside Petersburg, Sherman marched to Savannah, then struck north through the Carolinas, forcing Lee to abandon his defenses and ultimately leading to the surrender at Appomattox. Thus during 1864, maneuver in the west strategically eclipsed the stalemate in the east.

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