

Union Perspective of the Battle of New Market Heights

by Michael D. Gorman

"I want to convince myself whether the negro troops will fight, and whether I can take, with the negroes, a redoubt that turned (Major General Winfield S.) Hancock's corps on a former occasion." So said Union Major General Benjamin F. Butler to Ulysses S. Grant. Butler, more of a politician than a general, was proposing to take two corps and strike north of the James River at Robert E. Lee's works - a plan that had been tried twice before - and failed.

General Butler had recruited the first black regiments, and advocated their use throughout the war. Despite his urgings, black soldiers had been used primarily for manual labor and garrison duty. Butler believed the blacks could and would fight, and wanted to prove it. After the infamous "Battle of the Crater" on July 30, black troops had been unfairly blamed for the Union failure by Northern newspapers. Butler, who had had no hand in the attack, was incensed. He wrote to Grant urging a court of inquiry to show that the leaders of the assault were to blame, not the USCTs. Grant, eager to put that debacle behind him, ignored Butler's request.

Butler was an inept and controversial general - in May, he had assaulted Drewry's Bluff from the south, in the hopes of breaking the Confederate line and achieving a clear road to Richmond. He hesitated in his attack and was assaulted and driven by Confederate General P.G.T Beauregard all the way back to Bermuda Hundred - exactly where he had started from. Confederates threw up fortifications across the neck of Bermuda Hundred, leaving Butler's army contained "as if it had been in a bottle strongly corked." Neither Grant nor Lincoln was particularly impressed with Butler's performance, but the necessity for Lincoln to have a War Democrat in the field compelled him to leave Butler alone for the time being. After the November elections however, Butler's days would be numbered. With Butler and his army "bottled up" at Bermuda Hundred, Grant laid siege to Petersburg. Butler remained at Bermuda Hundred with what remained of his Army of the James. It was in this political and military climate that Butler hatched his plan. While at Bermuda Hundred, Butler had been studying the New Market Heights defenses. He had gotten some good intelligence that the line of Confederates north of the James was stretched very thin, and could be penetrated if pressed. With these reports in hand, he confronted General Grant with his plan.

Essentially, it would be a two pronged assault. Two divisions of Brigadier General Edward O.C. Ord's XVIII (18th) Corps would cross the James at Aiken's Landing and assault north, taking Confederate Fort Harrison and then pushing up the Osborne Turnpike. A short distance to the east, David B. Birney's X (10th) Corps, along with one division of the XVIII Corps would cross the James at Deep Bottom and storm the Confederate works at New Market Heights. Once they had achieved this goal, they were to drive up the New Market road and link up with Ord. With the two forces combined, they were to march on Richmond. The division from the XVIII corps that was to assault New Market Heights was the Third Division, a division made entirely of USCTs. They were to spearhead the assault. Grant doubtless inwardly chuckled at Butler's proposal. What he was suggesting had already been tried twice; and failed twice. The only difference this time would be that the units spearheading the assault would be black. However, even if Butler's attack failed, it would surely force General Lee to shift some of his troops north of the James and away from Petersburg. Grant had nothing to lose. He adopted the plan.

Butler shifted the Third division of the XVIII Corps to the force assaulting New Market Heights. If all went well, they would carry the Confederate works and be in line to be the first regiments into Richmond. Then there would be no doubt that black troops could fight. Butler obviously

wanted New Market Heights to be the crux of the fighting to come - Birney's force would outnumber Ord almost 3 to 1. The key to Butler's plan was time. It was absolutely essential that both prongs of the assault strike simultaneously at 4:30 AM on September 29. If there was a mix-up, Lee would be able to shift troops from Petersburg, and potentially divide the Union force. Therefore, Butler left nothing to chance. He ordered all baggage left behind so that his troops could move quickly. In addition, he insisted on the strictest secrecy, lest word of the impending assault leak out. Butler assembled his corps commanders on the 28th and issued his orders. These orders, 16 pages long, covered every contingency and were very specific. He wanted no confusion to cloud this attack; unlike at the Crater, this time the black troops would be well led. The troops who would make the assault would not know until nightfall of the 28th that they were to attack when the sun came up. With only a few hours left before they were to move out, the soldiers got little sleep that night. Butler stayed awake most of the night drinking coffee. It must have been especially tense that night for the men of Paine's division - the USCTs. They were by far the least experienced division, and Paine himself had never led a division under fire. Yet they had been given the honor to lead the attack. Butler needed them there. They were well-rested, but more importantly, they were black. Due to a mixup on Birney's part, his 14,000 troops were not assembled until 3:30 AM on the 29th; just an hour away from the time they were supposed to attack. He ordered his men to load their rifles, but to leave the percussion caps off, thus removing the temptation for his men to halt and fire. By this point in the war a general knew that a charge that halted to fire was stopped dead. At 5 AM, the firing began. Birney's skirmishers drove back the Confederate pickets near Deep Bottom and continued advancing. Soon, however, a near disaster occurred. In a dense morning fog, the advancing troops came upon tangled, swampy ground, and the advance became very confused. Only one division - Paine's USCTs - was able to get through the swamps, and of that division, only one brigade, Col Duncan's, advanced toward the Rebel works. Birney's force had, for the time being, been cut in half.

Upon clearing the swamps and leaving the other regiments tangled up in the rear, Paine's division came upon a double line of abatis - felled trees that defenders used to slow an advance. Soon, axe-wielding pioneers were cutting their way through when the Confederates opened fire.

"Here the head of the column seemed literally to melt away under the destructive fire to which it was subjected. It was an anxious moment. Could the men endure the frightful strain?"

Duncan's men pressed forward, leaving the other regiments behind. "Picking a path through the debris in front of the enemy line was risky work. At every step the Negroes were under heavy fire. There was little chance to retaliate. Indeed, at times muskets were absolute hindrances. As he continued to go forward, Mc Murray (John McMurray, Captain of Co. D, 6th USCT, Duncan's Brigade) noticed that the ranks were getting thinner. Seeing fewer and fewer of the thirty men he had started with, he wondered if any had turned back. He passed his first sergeant, who had taken a bullet in his leg; he came upon Emanuel Patterson, who had been shot in the abdomen 'so that his bowels all gushed out.' On he pressed, urging his men forward and passing others of his company, some dead and some wounded. About halfway through the slash (abatis), the captain's life was saved, when a color guard who preceded him through a small opening between the trunk of a fallen tree and its stump was killed instantly by a shot through the breast.

Finally McMurray broke through the slash into a small open space before the enemy's rifle pits. There for the first time he met Colonel Ames. The two officers held a hasty conference and decided to fall back with what remained of the regiment. Ames urged the captain to get the men back quickly and stressed the importance of keeping them well in hand. With their backs to the enemy, the Negro troops proved helpless in the tangled mass of debris and bodies through which they had to return. Once back in the open field, each company officer began the work of collecting his men so that the regiment might be re-formed. For McMurray this proved a

discouraging task. Of Company D's thirty men who had plunged into the slash less than an hour earlier, only three had survived. Twelve had been killed and fifteen wounded. The company's first lieutenant had also been wounded. Over eighty-five per cent of its men had been lost. The regiment's losses were proportionately less, but nonetheless heavy: 3 officers and 39 men killed, 111 officers and 150 men wounded, and 7 missing - a total of 210 out of 367. In forty minutes, McMurray averred, Confederate musketry had accorded his company the dubious distinction of having suffered greater losses than reported by any other Union army company in a single charge."

Duncan's Brigade had been forced to fall back because the other units were bogged down in the rear and could not support them. In addition, in the heat of the battle communication had become a near impossibility. Nonetheless, Birney was determined to go through with the original plan. He ordered Draper's brigade, consisting of the 5th, 36th, and 38th USCT, to advance. Colonel Draper describes the battle: "On the morning of the 29th...my brigade was massed in column in rear of the woods near Ruffin's house before daybreak. We were directed to lie down and wait for further orders. After the Third Brigade had preceded us for half a mile or more I received an order to form line of columns and advance. We advanced immediately across the open field, leaving Ruffin's house on our left. On this field we received a skirmish fire from the woods. When nearly down to the ravine I received an order from Brigadier-General Paine to move my brigade to the right, as "we were getting the worst of it there." We immediately moved by the right flank and again by the left (by the proper evolutions), and formed at the ravine, where the troops lay down in line. We were here subjected to the fire of the New Market batteries, which did little damage. After lying here about half an hour I was ordered to form my brigade into line of double columns and assault the enemy's works in front. The Twenty-second U.S. Colored Troops were to skirmish on our left. This they did for awhile, but did not continue to the works. After passing about 300 yards through young pines, always under fire, we emerged upon the open plain about 800 yards from the enemy's works. Across this the brigade charged with shouts, losing heavily. Within twenty or thirty yards of the rebel line we found a swamp which broke the charge, as the men had to wade the run or stream and reform on the bank. At this juncture, too, the men generally commenced firing, which made so much confusion that it was impossible to make the orders understood. Our men were falling by scores. All the officers were striving constantly to get the men forward. I passed frequently from the right to the left, urging every regimental commander to rally his men around the colors and charge.

After half an hour of terrible suspense, by starting the yell among a few, we succeeded in getting them in motion. The entire brigade took up the shout and went over the rebel works. When we reached the palisades the rebels fell back to the woods on the side of Signal Hill. We again assaulted and drove them out. I immediately formed for defense, and sent a courier to Brigadier-General Paine for re- enforcements, which arrived in about twenty minutes to a half hour. In this assault we had no supports. Lieut. Samuel S. Simmons, Thirty- sixth U.S. Colored Troops, acting aide-de-camp on my staff, abandoned me shamefully at the ravine, and went to Deep Bottom without my knowledge. I respectfully recommend that he be dismissed for cowardice. His true name is De Forest, and he has been once before dismissed the service. This I have lately learned from officers to whom he has confessed it. All the other officers and men of the brigade, except Captain Strong, brigade commissary, whom I shall mention in a separate report, displayed the greatest courage. A few may be enumerated for particular acts: Lieut. Col. G. W. Shurtleff, Fifth U.S. Colored Troops, though repeatedly wounded, still strove to lead his regiment; First Lieut. Edwin C. Gaskill, Thirty-sixth U.S. Colored Troops, rushed in front of his regiment, and, waving his sword, called on the men to follow. At this moment he was shot through the arm, within twenty yards of the enemy's works; First Lieut. Richard F. Andrews, Thirty-sixth U.S. Colored Troops, had been two months sick with fever and was excused from duty. He volunteered, being scarcely able to walk. He rode to the thicket, dismounted, and charged to the swamp, where he

was shot through the leg; First Lieut. James B. Backup, Thirty-sixth U.S. Colored Troops, excused from duty for lameness, one leg being partially shrunk so that he could walk but short distances, volunteered, hobbled in as far as the swamp, and was shot through the breast; Lieutenant Bancroft, Thirty-eighth U.S. Colored Troops, was shot in the hip at the swamp. He crawled forward on his hands and knees, waving his sword and calling on the men to follow.

When the brigade were making their final charge, a rebel officer leaped upon the parapet, waved his sword and shouted, "Hurrah, my brave men." Private James Gardiner, Company I, Thirty-sixth U.S. Colored Troops, rushed in advance of the brigade, shot him, and then ran the bayonet through his body to the muzzle. Sergt. Maj. Richard Adkins, Thirty-sixth U.S. Colored Troops, distinguished himself by his gallantry in urging on the men. Many sergeants of the Thirty-sixth distinguished themselves in urging on the men, but I have not their names. The brigade numbered about 1,300 effective men when it made the assault. We lost here 13 commissioned officers and 434 enlisted men, at the lowest estimate. Went in with thirty-two line officers and lost 11. At Laurel Hill the loss of the Fifth U.S. Colored Troops increased the figures to 16 officers and 537 enlisted men. Another staff officer, my inspector-general, wounded next day, makes a loss of 17 officers."

Draper's brigade found the Rebel works almost deserted. The few remaining Confederates either surrendered or fled. The fight was over and the victorious men could see how dearly bought their success had been. It was 9 o'clock AM. In the four hours since Paine's division had driven back the rebel skirmishers, 1,026 men had been killed or wounded.

As the black troops stood among their fallen comrades, the answer to the question, "will the negro fight?" had been answered forever. 14 black soldiers were later awarded the medal of honor. Butler's attack had failed to capture Richmond, but the Northern successes North of the James did force Lee to weaken his Petersburg lines.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to the USCTs that fought at the Battle of New Market Heights was paid by John Townsend Trowbridge, a Northern Journalist who visited the battlefield shortly after the war. He wrote; "...Butler's colored regiments formed unflinchingly under fire and made their gallant charge, wiping out with their own blood, the insults that had been heaped upon them by white troops."

Notes

1 "Fourteen Months' Service With Colored Troops," Bvt Lt. Col. Solon A. Carter. MOLLUS, Mass, Vol. I, MBCW, II, #1899. Page 171.

2 "A Union Officer's Recollections of the Negro as a Soldier," Horace Montgomery. Pennsylvania History, Vol 28, 1961. p. 176-177.

3 United States War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series I: Vol. 42, Part 1. p. 819-820. Washington D.C.: GPO, 1893. Hereafter cited as OR.

4 "Under Fire: Black Troops at the Battle of New Market Heights, Virginia." Gwaltney, William W. Article in RNBP file, believed unpublished.