



Fort Stedman diorama 23 inches by 45 inches

*“The key to taking
Richmond is Petersburg.”*

--Union General Ulysses S. Grant



Fort Stedman fortifications today

Petersburg 1864–1865

James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, focuses on the campaign that decided the Civil War.

For nearly ten months, the Union Army, numbering 122,000, slugged it out with the Confederate Army (55,000 men) in the engagement at Petersburg. They fought over control of the railroads that provided supplies to Petersburg and to the Confederate capital of Richmond.

The two armies dug elaborate defensive positions, from which they fought and in which they sought safety. Safety came in the form of “bombproofs,” -- excavations six feet square by six feet deep. These were covered with

logs topped by earth and connected to each other by trenches called “covered ways.” Sometimes only yards apart, the two sides fought it out seesaw fashion -- a grim precursor to the trench warfare of World War I.

On July 30, 1864, there occurred at Petersburg one of the most spectacular events of the Civil War. In an attempt to punch a hole in the Confederate defenses, Union soldiers tunneled under Confederate earthworks and exploded four tons of gunpowder --blowing a 170-foot wide hole in the fortifications. Two hundred

and eighty Confederates were killed or wounded. Incredibly, through a combination of ineptitude and absentee leadership on the part of the Union commanders, the follow-up attack failed. Trench warfare resumed.

The Union forces sustained 4,400 casualties. Reflecting on the “Battle of the Crater,” Grant said, “It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in this war.”

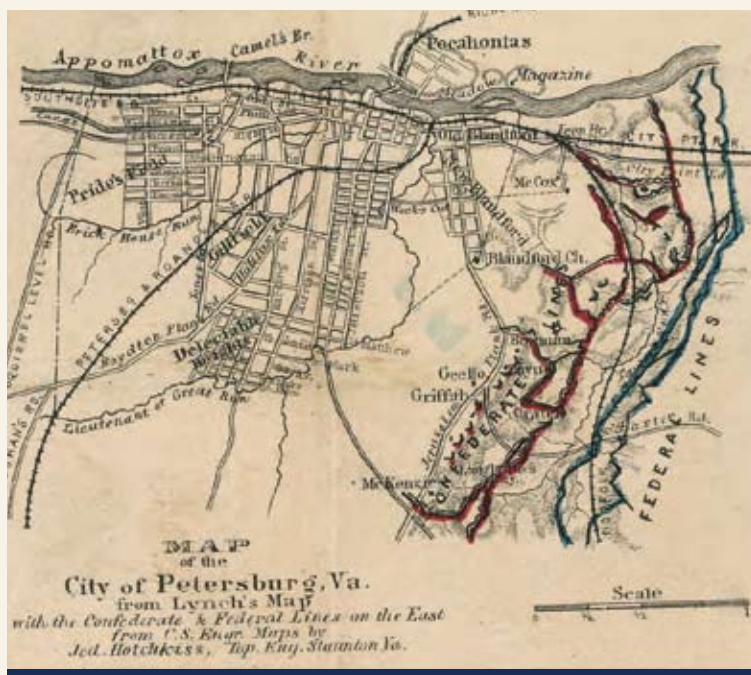
The following Spring, Lee sought to break out of the Union stranglehold with a concentrated attack on what was viewed as a weak point in the Union lines.



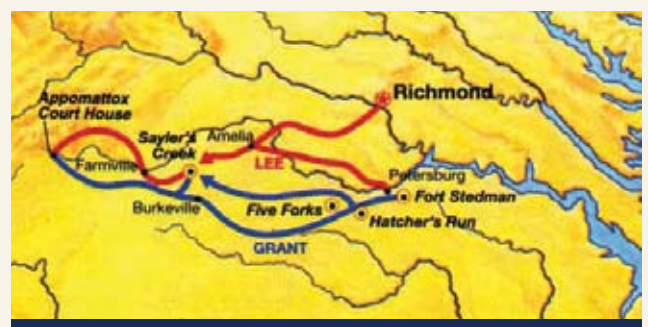
Dead Confederates in the trenches of Fort Mahone, April 3, 1865, Library of Congress



Union reinforcements attack through the Sally port



Petersburg, Virginia operations map made by Major Jedediah Hotchkiss (1828-1899), a topographic engineer in the Confederate Army. Library of Congress



MILITARY NOTE

Most accounts of the Battle of Petersburg refer to the action as a siege. A "siege," accurately defined, entails the surrounding of an enemy force and a blocking of their escape. Robert E. Lee was never trapped at Petersburg – he could have left at will.

ABOVE RIGHT
Open Fire!

ABOVE LEFT
Battle map

If successful, Lee would pass through the breach and link up with the forces of Confederate General Joe Johnston, in North Carolina. The immediate objective was an enclosed field redoubt, Fort Stedman.

The Fort was protected by distinct lines of entangling obstacles. The first was a thick row of abatis -- small felled trees that were piled together and interlocked. Girding the parapets of the Fort itself was a heavy seeding of breast-high fraises -- angled rows of logs with their ends sharpened to points. Vulnerable areas, such as entry ways, were further protected by

chevaux-de-frise -- movable obstacles of criss-crossed, sharpened branches.

Just before dawn on March 25, 1865, Confederate General John B. Gordon launched the attack. The plan was for skirmishers to quietly eliminate the Federal pickets. They would be followed by fifty men with axes, who would clear lanes through the belts of obstacles. Close behind were three storming parties of 100 men each, which would precede the main force of over 7,500 men.

The opening phases of Gordon's assault plan went off with few hitches. The initial Union response

was ineffective and the Fort was overrun. The Confederates came away with nearly 1,000 prisoners. This success was, however, temporary, as the follow-up attacks failed to widen the breach. The Confederates became lost and confused in the labyrinth of earthworks, connecting tunnels,



Confederates stymied by the fraises

traverses, and bombproofs. Union forces retreated and regrouped. Artillery batteries in Federal Battery IX and Fort Haskell delivered devastating enfilading fire and infantry reinforcements arrived to launch a counterattack.

Gordon informed Lee that the gamble had failed and received permission to withdraw his men. The Fort Stedman affair had been a costly failure. Lee had gained nothing and lost 2,700 men. Federal casualties were 1,000.

On April 2, Grant ordered an all-out assault on the Petersburg defenses. Lee knew that he must pull out and advised Jefferson Davis that Richmond must be evacuated.

Lee retreated west, hoping to find supplies for his exhausted troops, but found himself surrounded by Union forces. He surrendered at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865.

Jim Hillestad is a frequent contributor to The Standard and is proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570/629-7227 or visit his website: www.the-toy-soldier.com



Fort Stedman map



Confederate advancing through the abatis

Mortars at Petersburg



Conventional rifled artillery were unable to harm opposing forces who were shielded by earthen field works. Mortars were designed to fire explosive shells over the walls of fortifications, destroying structures and forcing those inside to stay in bombproof shelters.

Mortars ranged in size from the 5.92-inch Coehorn mortar which was relatively lightweight (firing a 17-pound charge from a forward trench in the battlefield), to the 13-inch Seacoast mortar which fired a 197-pound charge to a distance of 4,300 yards. The latter was deployed by Union forces at Petersburg, and was appropriately named "The Dictator."

More than 70,000 mortar shells were expended during the battle of Petersburg.

