

During the war, a total of 186,097 blacks served in the Union army, with the first regiments activated after September 1862. In front of Petersburg, two black divisions numbering about 7,800 men (nineteen regiments) saw action.

In the initial assault upon the city on June 15, 1864, a division of General Edward Hinks attacked the Confederate Dimmock Line. Comprising 3,500 men from the XVIII Corps of the Army of the James, which was commanded by General Benjamin F. Butler, Hinks' troops helped capture and secure a section of the Southern defenses from batteries 7 through 11. In the initial stage of this action, located at Baylor's Farm on the City Point Road, the black troops also captured a gun from Captain Edward Graham's Petersburg Artillery. On the 15th, Hinks' Division lost 378 killed and wounded. They acted in a supporting role on the June 18th assault, suffering a loss of 36 men.



Hinks's Division June 15, 1864
From Sketch by E.F.Mullen

The other division of United States Colored Troops to serve at Petersburg was the Fourth Division, IX Corps, under General Ambrose E. Burnside and the Army of the Potomac. Four thousand, three hundred strong, these men were involved in one of the most well known events of the Siege, the Battle of the Crater, fought on July 30, 1864.

For three weeks, as a Pennsylvania Regiment dug a tunnel under a Confederate fort to blow it up, the black troops were being trained to lead the assault once the battle commenced. The black troops were chosen because they were numerically superior, and having been mainly wagon guards up to this point, they had seen little action. With the white troops showing exhaustion after the severe fighting of the campaign from the Wilderness to Petersburg, it was believed the blacks would have a better chance at being successful.

Unfortunately for the black soldiers, the commander of the Army of the Potomac, General George G. Meade, would change Burnside's plan twenty-four hours before the battle. Instead of leading the assault, their division, led by General Edward Ferrero, would now be the last to go in.

If we put the colored troops in front. . . and it should prove a failure, it would then be said, and very properly, that we were shoving those people ahead to get killed because we did not care anything about them. *Meade*

Once the explosion took place on the morning of July 30, the three white divisions tried to reach their objective, Cemetery Hill. Stiff Confederate resistance along with a lack of leadership on the Union side, bogged down the Union assault in the area of the Crater. When Ferrero's troops attempted their attack,