

# THE MEN OF THE 54TH

**W**hen President Abraham Lincoln gave free black Americans the right to bear arms after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863, free blacks answered the call. From January to May 1863, black leaders such as Frederick Douglass recruited men from across the North. In the end, African Americans from 24 states and Canada enrolled.

As a result of this effort, the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment became the first all-black unit recruited in the North. Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, a member of a prominent Boston abolitionist family, was appointed to command the regiment.

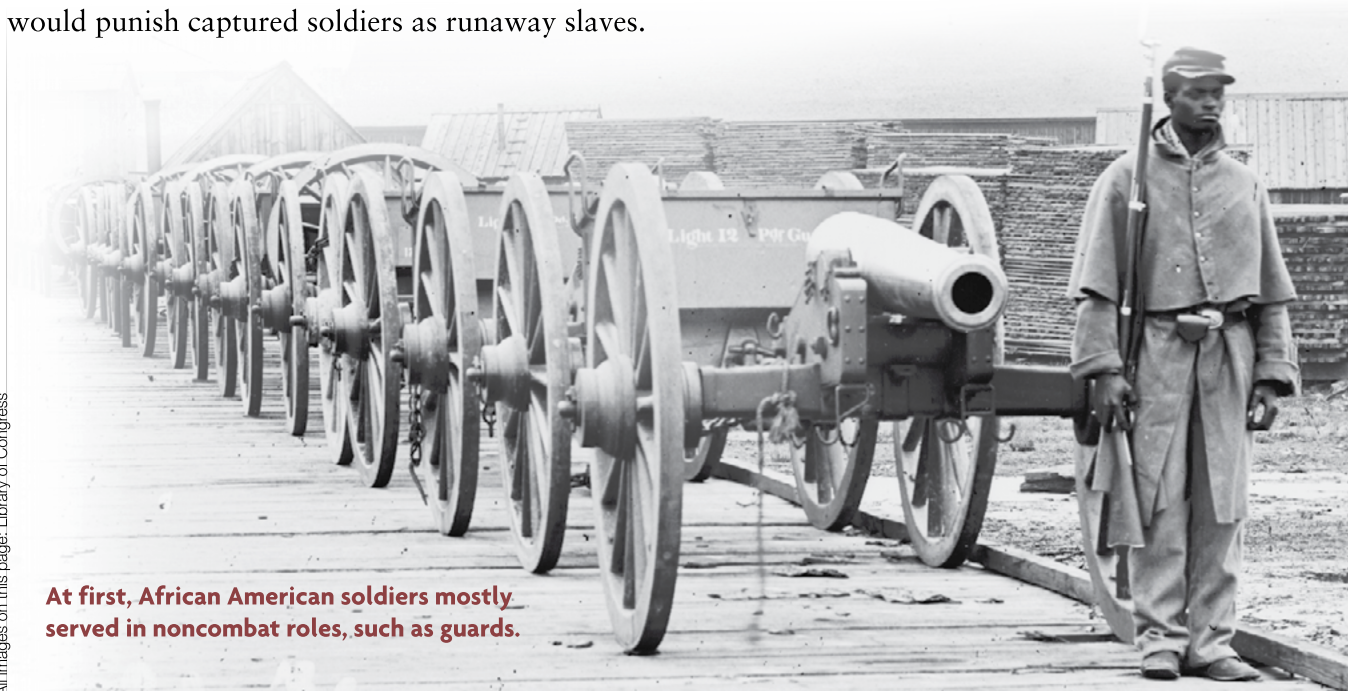
The 54th Massachusetts was not the first black unit to go into battle, however. Various officers had organized a dozen others during 1862, mostly of freed slaves in Southern areas held by Union forces. Black regiments had participated in earlier battles in 1863 at Port Hudson and Milliken's Bend in Louisiana. But the 54th was the one that achieved the greatest glory for its bravery under fire.

## FIGHTING PREJUDICE

Despite their willingness to fight, black soldiers faced many problems. They usually received lower pay. They often were given little or poor training, second-rate tents and uniforms, and inadequate weapons. Blacks also risked death or enslavement because the Confederacy announced that it would punish captured soldiers as runaway slaves.



Colonel Robert Gould Shaw



At first, African American soldiers mostly served in noncombat roles, such as guards.

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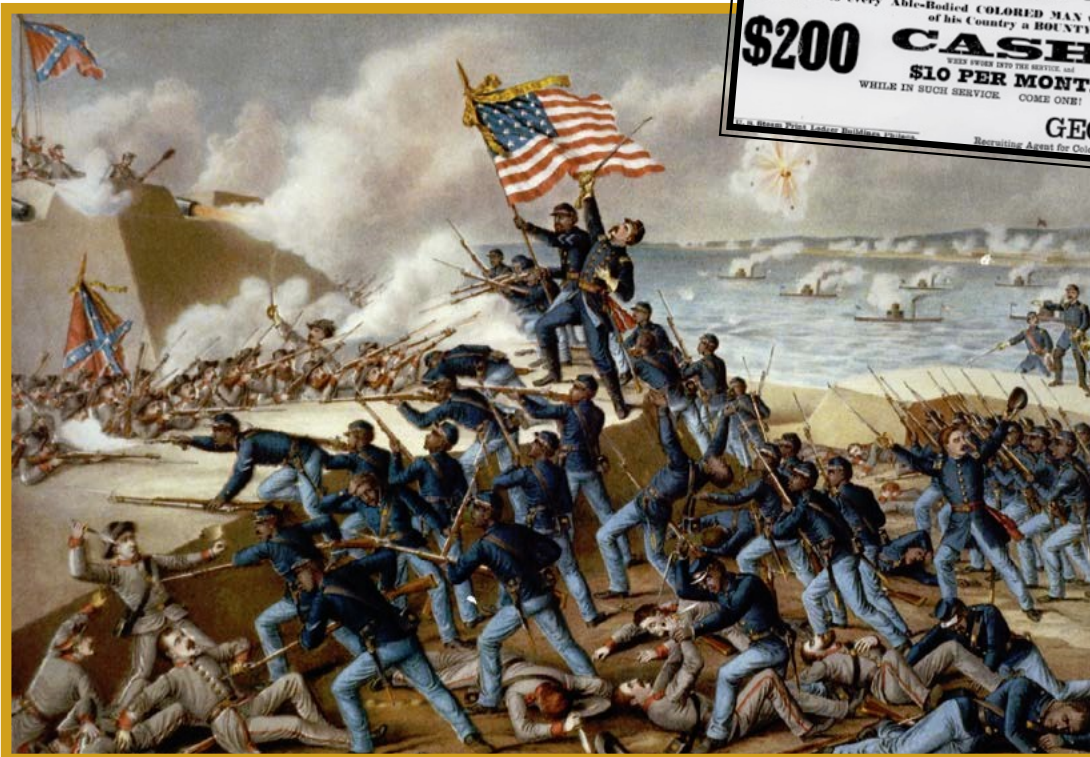
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Shaw and other white commanders of black regiments encountered prejudice from their fellow Union officers and civilians. The Confederacy also announced a policy of treating captured white officers of black troops as criminals subject to immediate execution. Shaw, however, was determined to give his men the best available training and equipment. He encouraged them to boycott their lower pay until it equaled the amount that white soldiers received.

### ON THE ATTACK

After spending some time in Beaufort, South Carolina, drilling, digging ditches, building fortifications, and doing guard duty, the 54th Massachusetts received its orders. Earlier efforts by Union army and navy units to take the strategic port city of Charleston, South Carolina had failed. Several Confederate forts in the harbor, including two well-defended fortifications on Morris Island—Fort Wagner (also referred to as Battery Wagner) and Fort Gregg—and nearby Fort Sumter, controlled the entrance to the harbor. Union forces hoped that if they could take Morris Island, the rest of the area would fall.

The plan was for a Union bombardment of Fort Wagner to begin on July 18, 1863. When the bombardment stopped, the 54th Massachusetts would lead the attack on the fort. But first the men of the 54th had to get into position. Doing so involved slogging through marshland in the rain on the first day. The next day, the men struggled over hot sand.



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The courage that the men of the 54th showed during the storming of Fort Wagner helped convince others that African Americans could fill valuable roles as soldiers.



# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The following is an excerpt from a letter written by George W. Stephens, a black sergeant of the 54th, to Captain Luis F. Emilio, the officer in command of the shattered regiment at the close of the battle:

“I care not who the man is who denies the fact, our regiment did charge the fort and drove the rebels from their guns. Many of our men will join me in saying that in the early stages of the fight we had possession of the sea end of Battery Wagner. Indeed, most of the colored prisoners taken from there were captured inside the battery.”—G.E.H.



The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment was immortalized in a famous sculpture by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. It can be seen across from the Massachusetts State House in Boston.

At twilight on July 18, with little rest and little food, the 54th Massachusetts received the command to attack.

## CHARGE!

It has been reported that there were only 300 Confederates in the fortifications. Actually, there were 3,000 troops, who had remained sheltered during the Union bombardment. When the men of the 54th had marched to within 200 yards of the fort, the Confederates opened fire. The artillery cut bloody gaps 20 feet wide into the ranks of the 54th.

When they reached the battery, the 54th soldiers still had not fired a shot. The men fought their way to the top of the fortifications, where their commander, Shaw, was shot through the heart. The black soldiers fought hand to hand with the Confederate defenders. When the flag bearer of the 54th fell, Sergeant William H. Carney took the flag. Although shot several times, Carney carried the flag back to the safety of the Union lines without it ever touching the ground. Carney's bravery in action later earned him the Medal of Honor, the country's highest military honor.

## MEN OF VALOR

The attack was an overwhelming defeat for the Union. Of the 630 men the 54th sent into battle, 34 were killed, 93 captured, and 146 wounded or missing in action. Of the 3,000 Union troops that fought, approximately 1,500 were killed, wounded, or missing in action. The Confederates refused truce requests for the retrieval of Shaw's body and buried him in a mass grave with dead black soldiers.

Although the Union lost the battle, the fearless courage the men of the 54th showed at Fort Wagner not only silenced those who had been prejudiced against them, it also encouraged more free blacks to enlist. Shaw's family publicly claimed that they were honored to know that their son was buried alongside the brave men he had led into battle.

In the end, the men of the 54th paved the way for an estimated 200,000 black army and navy troops who participated in fighting during the war. And by September 1863, a Union siege that followed the attack on Fort Wagner forced the Confederates to abandon the site.



## FAST FACT

Fort Wagner actually was a battery. Made of earth and logs and not stone walls, batteries were extensions of nearby forts built to protect a more important position.