

Derek Works, 8th Grade

Mrs. DeMarco

Special Interest

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The 54th Massachusetts Infantry

There are many times throughout history that African-Americans have had significant contributions to warfare. However, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry is one of the most heroic. In a confrontation almost all historians agree was doomed and suicidal, but undeniably courageous, the infantry attacked Fort Wagner on July 18, 1863. Furthermore, they protested the lower wages African-American soldiers were paid in comparison to the white troops.

Only a short while after enlisting and a few days after a previous exhausting battle, the 54th Massachusetts was ordered to charge Fort Wagner head on, along a narrow stretch of beach in a hail of bullets, grenades, and cannons. Their commander, a young white colonel named Robert Gould Shaw, was killed upon reaching the fort as he led his men over the wall. With men dying left and right, they resorted to hand-to-hand combat to battle the Confederates. On this charge, the flag bearer was killed, but Sergeant William H. Carney, in an act that would later earn him a Congressional Medal of Honor, caught the flag and continued to charge toward the fort, despite suffering multiple serious wounds. He rallied his regiment together as they took part of walls in the initial assault, although they were beaten back eventually. Altogether, the 54th Massachusetts suffered 270 casualties at the Second Battle of Fort Wagner.

After the battle, the Confederates buried Shaw with all of his fallen men as an insult intended to discourage other white officers from serving with African-American troops.

However, Shaw's father later said, "We can imagine no holier place than in which he lies, among his brave and devoted followers, nor wish for him better company-- what a bodyguard he has!"

The 54th Massachusetts Infantry was renowned for its courage and patriotism after the battle and motivated many other African-Americans to join the Union Army. In a war fought over slavery, Abraham Lincoln said, "Without the military help of the black freedmen, the war against the South could not have been won."

Works Cited

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