



54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment



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The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment was one of the first official black units in the U.S. armed forces. Led by the white officer Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the regiment was met with disdain by Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who accused President Lincoln of encouraging a black revolt. Though promised equal pay, the black soldiers were initially paid less than their white counterparts. The 54th Regiment refused to collect their unequal payment, and Congress eventually relented. The regiment suffered several hundred casualties at the battle of Fort Wagner, but established a reputation for heroism and helped to significantly bolster the Union's recruitment of black troops.

One month after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew officially began recruitment for the 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry unit on February 9th, 1863. It was the first army regiment of black soldiers in the Civil War, and Andrew hoped it would serve as a model for future regiments. He appointed Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the son of a prominent white abolitionist family, to lead the troops. The regiment was composed primarily of free men from 24 different states, and included Frederick Douglass' two sons, Lewis and Charles, along with William Carney and James Henry Gooding.

News of the 54th Regiment's formation was not universally well received. In a proclamation issued on December 23, 1862, the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, fueled a common fear by accusing President Lincoln of encouraging blacks to revolt, stating: "African slaves have not only been excited to insurrection by every license and encouragement but numbers of them have actually been armed for a servile war." In his proclamation Davis threatened to re-enslave black soldiers and execute white officers captured by the Confederacy (Carnahan 126). Despite considerable opposition, the 54th Regiment began training at Camp Meigs in Readville, Massachusetts, and received moral support from local abolitionists like Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Upon recruitment, members of the regiment were promised payment of \$13 and a clothing allowance, equal to pay of white soldiers. But once they began their service, they received only \$10 a month with \$3 withheld for clothing. As an act of protest, the regiment refused pay for 18 months. In a letter from Corporal James Henry Gooding to President Abraham Lincoln, Gooding clarified the regiment's complaint, writing:

Now the main question is. Are we Soldiers, or are we LABOURERS. We are fully armed, and equipped, have done all the various Duties, pertaining to a Soldiers life, have conducted ourselves, to the complete satisfaction of General Officers, who, were if any, prejudiced against us, but who now accord us all the encouragement, and honour due us: have shared the perils, and Labour, of Reducing the first stronghold, that flaunted a Traitor Flag: and more, Mr. President.
(reprinted in Newkirk 231)

Ultimately, Congress relented and retroactively issued the soldiers their deserved payment.

When the 54th reached capacity, in May 1863, the full regiment of 1,100 black soldiers was ordered to Hilton Head, South Carolina. Under Colonel James Montgomery, the regiment was commanded to loot and burn the nearly abandoned town of Darien, Georgia. Colonel Shaw and his troops completed this lamentable task with considerable reluctance. The Colonel wrote to his wife, Annie, on June 9, 1863: "I told him, I did not want the responsibility of it, and he was only too happy

to take it all on his shoulders; so the pretty little place was burnt to the ground...One of my companies assisted in it, because he ordered them out and I had to obey” (reprinted in Duncan 342). Democrats, who were largely opposed to the idea of African American soldiers, criticized the raid on Darien as an act of barbarism, and slandered the reputation of the 54th regiment.

On July 8, 1863, the 54th regiment was called to James Island, South Carolina to aid in the assault and capture of Charleston. In their first battle, on July 16th, the Union army was wholly outnumbered and the 54th regiment lost 14 troops. Two days later on July 18th, during the famous battle of Fort Wagner, the unit charged the Confederate troops and engaged in hand-to-hand combat, suffering several hundred casualties. Congress awarded the Medal of Honor to Sergeant William Harvey Carney, making him the first black man to receive recommendation for this honor. (His medal was not officially awarded until 1900.) Although the battle represented a significant defeat for the unit, the 54th regiment was used as a model for other all-black units and significantly bolstered black recruitment within the Union. The regiment’s heroism also helped to defuse the tension surrounding black enlistment that led to the New York Draft Riots in July 1863. The 54th Regiment would later participate in the Battle of Olustee, the Battle of Honey Hill, and the Battle of Boykin’s Mill. In a letter from Lewis Douglass, who survived the Battle of Fort Wagner, to Helen Amelia Loguen, he wrote: “This regiment has established its reputation as a fighting regiment not a man flinched, though it was a trying time. Men fell all around me...Remember if I die I die in a good cause. I wish we had a hundred thousand colored troops we would put an end to this war” (reprinted in Haskins 91).

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