

African-American Troops in the Civil War: The 54th Massachusetts

The Fifty-fourth Massachusetts was organized in early 1863 by Robert Gould Shaw, twenty-six year old member of a prominent Boston abolitionist family. Shaw had earlier served in the Seventh New York National Guard and the Second Massachusetts Infantry, and was appointed colonel of the Fifty-fourth in February 1863 by Massachusetts governor John A. Andrew.

As one of the first black units organized in the northern states, the Fifty-fourth was the object of great interest and curiosity, and its performance would be considered an important indication of the possibilities surrounding the use of blacks in combat. The regiment was composed primarily of free blacks from throughout the north, particularly Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Amongst its recruits was Lewis N. Douglass, son of the famous ex-slave and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass.

After a period of recruiting and training, the unit proceeded to the Department of the South, arriving at Hilton Head, South Carolina, on June 3, 1863. The regiment earned its greatest fame on July 18, 1863, when it led the unsuccessful and controversial assault on the Confederate positions at Battery Wagner. In this desperate attack, the Fifty-fourth was placed in the vanguard and over 250 men of the regiment became casualties. Shaw, the regiment's young colonel, died on the crest of the enemy parapet, shouting, "Forward, Fifty-fourth!"

That heroic charge, coupled with Shaw's death, made the regiment a household name throughout the north, and helped spur black recruiting. For the remainder of 1863 the unit participated in siege operations around Charleston, before boarding transports for Florida early in February 1864. The regiment numbered 510 officers and men at the opening of the Florida Campaign, and its new commander was Edward N. Hallowell, a twenty-seven year old merchant from Medford, Massachusetts. Anxious to avenge the Battery Wagner repulse, the Fifty-fourth was the best black regiment available to General Seymour, the Union commander.

Along with the First North Carolina Colored Infantry, the Fifty-fourth entered the fighting late in the day at Olustee, and helped save the Union army from complete disaster. The Fifty-fourth marched into battle yelling, "Three cheers for Massachusetts and seven dollars a month." The latter referred to the difference in pay between white and colored Union infantry, long a sore point with colored troops. Congress had just passed a bill correcting this and giving colored troops equal pay. However, word of the bill

would not reach these troops until after the battle of Olustee. The regiment lost eighty-six men in the battle, the lowest number of the three black regiments present. After Olustee, the Fifty-fourth was not sent to participate in the bloody Virginia campaigns of 1864-1865. Instead it remained in the Department of the South, fighting in a number of actions before Charleston and Savannah. More than a century after the war the Fifty-fourth remains the most famous black regiment of the war, due largely to the popularity of the movie "Glory", which recounts the story of the regiment prior to and including the attack on Battery Wagner.

To better show how the 54th felt underfire, here is a letter home from Orderly Sergeant W.N. Collins of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry accounting Plotter's Raid.

"Well, we arrived at Georgetown, S.C., on the 31st (March 1865), and went into camp. On the 1st of April we started upon our errand through the State, and had nothing to molest us for three days. We saw nothing of the Johnnies, and on Friday the 8th of April, at Epp's Ferry, Cos. H and A were detached from the regiment to go and destroy the said Ferry. Myself, one corporal and fifteen privates were in the advance. On we went, neither hearing nor seeing any thing in particular. After advancing about two miles, and wading through water and mud, we spied a Johnny sitting upon his horse as a picket. He left his post and secreted himself. Halting my men for further orders, I received instructions to proceed forward with the utmost caution, and screen my men as much as possible in the woods. The swamp through which we had to pass was waist-deep.

Onward we went, and after getting through the swamp, not over seventy-five yards from Johnny, he saw that we were getting too close to him; and at that time the Second-Lieutenant of Co. A came along, and I told him that Johnny was getting ready to fire; and at that moment, Johnny's balls began to fall thick and fast around us.

The Lieutenant got wounded in the right arm. I had two men wounded - one in the right leg, the other in both shoulders; and it appeared to us that the Johnnies had nothing much but bird-shot to fire at us, which whizzed about our ears in perfect showers. The writer got stung slightly in the left hand by one of these diminutive missiles from Johnny's shot-gun. They saw that we were determined to complete the job, and they destroyed the levee and fled. So we returned to our command on the 8th. We entered Manningville with a loss of but one man killed, who belonged to the 4th Massachusetts Regiment.

On the 10th we left Manningville, and arrived at Sumterville on Sabbath, the 11th; and after a short and sharp fight, we took the place, captured three pieces of artillery complete, killed five rebels, wounded some more, and also captured a few.

We encamped in the city that night, and destroyed the depot, together with three locomotives and a train of thirty-five cars. We left on the 13th, after destroying every thing that fire would burn, and went to Manchester, and there destroyed one locomotive and a train of twenty cars.

The 54th was detailed to go seven miles from the place for the purpose of destroying some trestle-work. After a considerable amount of delay, the advance guard, which was from Co. F, Sergeant Frank M. Welch commanding, pushed forth. They had not gone far when they espied a train of cars, with locomotive attached, and a full head of steam on. The column at once halted and Colonel Henry N. Hooper went forward to see for himself and there, sure enough, was the train. The sharp report of a rifle soon told those on the train that the blood-hounds were on the track. The engineer immediately jumped from the train and ran for his life. Nothing could be seen of him but coat-tails and dust. The command to move forward was given. With a loud yell and tremendous cheer the boys charged over the trestle-work, three miles in length, caught the cars, and ran them ourselves in place of the rebels.

Lieutenant Stephen A. Swails got wounded in his right arm. There are forty cars and six locomotives, and we destroyed them all. Some of the cars were loaded. We then turned the track upside-down. Sergeant Major John H. Wilson and Private Gee. Jorris, of Co. A, got mashed by the cars. Private Jorris got his collar-bone broken. The Sergeant Major has got partly over the injuries he received.

Leaving there, we encamped at Singleton's plantation, and sent two thousand contrabands to Georgetown in charge of the 32 U.S.C.T. When they returned, we started upon our mission - and from that time, the 14th, we fought every day with the rebels, and drove them before us. But at length they made a stand at Swiss Creek, and fought desperately. We captured nine prisoners. On the 15th we left for the purpose of taking Camden, which we did capturing all of the rebel sick and wounded there, numbering, a least, from three to four hundred men.

On the 16th. we left Camden, and from that we fought until we got to Swiss Creek, where the rebels again made a stand. Cos. F and H were on the skirmish line, the battalion on the reserve, the 102d U.S.C.T. in the center, and the 3rd U.S.C.T. on the left wing. We drove them to their den, when they fought quite desperately for a time. For if they flee from the horsemen, how can they contend with the footmen? The rebels had a dam constructed all around them, and there was no way of getting at them but to pass over it in single file. The left wing went to extreme right for the purpose of flanking Johnny and there it was that we lost our noble Lieutenant Edward L. Stevens. Who will help us mourn

his loss - for he fell in defense of the dear old flag?

Corporal Uames P. Johnson and Corporal Andrew Miller of Co. H had six privates wounded. But the 54th stormed the hill and carried it at the point of the bayonet, making themselves masters of the field, as they always do. Just like them! Brave boys they are! Who will say, Three cheers for the 54th Mass. Vols., 32d and I02d U.S.C.T., and for the 25th Ohio Vols., the I07th Ohio Vols., I5th and 56th N.Y. vols., and the 4th Mass., and the 3d New York Artillery, and for General [Edward E.] Potter's brave troops? For we are the ones that destroyed and drove the rebels from the field, totally demoralizing them.

The last fight we had was at Statesburg, and there the rebels stood for the last time; for we slaughtered them in great numbers. They left the field strewn with their dead and wounded. We captured, for the rest, in South Carolina, on our return to Georgetown, fifteen locomotives, and one hundred and forty cars loaded with ammunition, small arms and stores. We destroyed them all. We captured five hundred contrabands, five hundred prisoners, destroyed a vast deal of property, and captured about eighty head of horses. We are now encamped at Georgetown, and I hope we will soon be home with our friends and relatives."