



A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts

Luis Emilio

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From the Stonewall Brigade to the Iron Brigade, Americans have long been fascinated by the Civil War's most famous and legendary units, and many are familiar with the 20th Maine's defense of Little Round Top at the Battle of Gettysburg. But ironically, perhaps the most famous regiment of the entire war today is the 54th Massachusetts, which was one of the first and ultimately the best known regiment that consisted of black soldiers. Like most black soldiers, the 54th received discriminatory treatment from the Army, as white men on both sides were wary of trusting black soldiers in heavy combat situations, despite the fact that the 54th acquitted itself well in a nearly suicidal attack at Fort Wagner. As a result, the 54th fought in several battles of lesser note, and they might have faded into obscurity if not for the critically acclaimed movie *Glory*, which looked at the lives of its commander, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, and its soldiers. Ironically, though it was unknown at the time of the movie, one of the soldiers in the regiment told his captors he had fought for glory. The movie made the 54th famous, and those who are familiar with the regiment are also familiar with its attack on Fort Wagner, but the story of its creation and its entire service during the Civil War is remarkable from start to finish. The brainchild of abolitionists and the product of a stalled war effort, the 54th was just one of many regiments of black soldiers who fought during the Civil War, and to a large degree it has become representative of the service and sacrifice of black soldiers on behalf of both their country and their civil rights. Luis F. Emilio was born on December 22, 1844. Only 16 when the Civil War broke out, he lied and said he was 18, allowing him to enlist in Company F of the 23rd Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. He moved up the ranks and was promoted to Sergeant by September 1862. Shortly after the Battle of Antietam that same month, President Lincoln ordered the Emancipation Proclamation. Moreover, the Union was beginning the process of enlisting blacks to fight. One of the black regiments being trained was the 54th Massachusetts, and Emilio was among the group of original officers of the 54th selected. Emilio became the Captain of Company E of the regiment, but after the 54th Massachusetts' first action at the Battle of Fort Wagner on July 18, 1863, Emilio became the regiment's acting commander, since Robert Gould Shaw and so many other officers were killed during the daring assault. Emilio continued to fight with the 54th until nearly the end of the war. In the mid-1880s, Emilio began writing his own account of the 54th Massachusetts during the war, and the first edition of *A Brave Black Regiment* was published in 1891.

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