

THE BRAVE BLACK REGIMENT: THE FIFTY-FOURTH MASSACHUSETTS
INFANTRY VOLUNTEERS (COLORED), JANUARY 1863 - SEPTEMBER 1864

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
Fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

LEODIS T. JENNINGS, MAJ, USA
B.S., North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, 1983
M.A., Webster University, Saint Louis, MO, 1994

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
1996

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THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

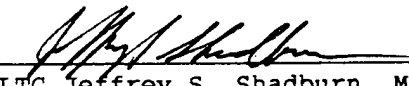
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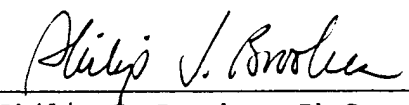
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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

THE BRAVE BLACK REGIMENT: THE FIFTY-FOURTH MASSACHUSETTS INFANTRY VOLUNTEERS (COLORED) AND THE PAY INEQUALITY IT FACED, JANUARY 1863 - SEPTEMBER 29, 1864 by Major Leodis T. Jennings, USA, 67 pages.

This thesis documents the inequality of pay of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) from its inception on January 26, 1863, until the resolution of its pay inequity on September 29, 1864. The regiment achieved pay equity on June 15, 1864. This study also details elements of the early history of the regiment and its major campaigns.

The Fifty-Fourth was the first black regiment officially sanctioned in the North after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. This study focuses on the creation, pay, and legacy of service of the regiment. The Fifty-Fourth underwent its initial training at Camp Meigs in Readville, Massachusetts. The enlisted soldiers were black and the officers white. The regiment's officers were proud to serve in the regiment and often stood by the black soldiers. Both the officers and the enlisted soldiers underwent strict screening requirements. The enlisted soldiers joined the regiment with the understanding their pay would be the same as their white counterparts. This did not occur. This study documents the reaction of the members of the regiment, and details their service, despite this injustice.

This study concludes that the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) performed its missions successfully and served with honor and distinction despite its pay problems. The primary concern of the regiment was principle, and not money. Its success influenced the formation of other regiments during and after the Civil War. The conclusion includes suggestions and areas for further study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this thesis was a very trying, but rewarding experience. The movie "GLORY" was the beginning of my interest and fascination with the members of this regiment. I discovered that fascination with the regiment, and writing a thesis on the regiment, is an entirely different proposition. However, it was through the encouragement and support of many people that I found the perseverance to complete this thesis.

It would be impossible for me to acknowledge everyone that contributed to this work. There are just too many. However, I would like to give special thanks to the following people who deserve special recognition.

Thank you to Mr. Stephen T. Seames, the Military Archivist to the Adjutant General of Massachusetts, and Dr. Donald Yacovane for access to his book before publication.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

United States citizens of African descent trace their roots in the United States military to the American Revolutionary War period. While the country gained its independence, blacks did not gain their personal freedom as a result of the revolution. However, they continued to serve the United States proudly and honorably. After the American Revolution blacks served as soldiers and sailors during the War of 1812. Yet, it was not until the Civil War that blacks made their most important military contributions. During this conflict Negroes were formed into all black units. One of the first, and one of the most important, of these regiments was The Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored).

Some may ask, "Why tell the story of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored)?" As long as the United States hopes to achieve and maintain racial harmony, the story of this regiment and its brave soldiers is relevant. Although the Fifty-Fourth was a colored regiment, its officers were white. The regiment's white officers treated the enlisted soldiers with dignity and the same respect afforded white soldiers. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) proved that blacks were a valuable personnel pool for the military. For the most part, though, the world has been unaware

of the significant contributions of African-Americans during the Civil War.

The formation of black regiments during the Civil War was a multi-faceted process. There were two acts that led directly to their formation. On July 17 Congress passed the Militia Act of 1862 which allowed blacks to serve as laborers in support of the Union Army.¹ However, this act did not give blacks the right to fight as soldiers. It only served as a means to allow blacks to serve as laborers and cooks in support of Union forces. The second act in this process was the Emancipation Proclamation.

On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and authorized the use of blacks as soldiers.² One month later, on January 26, Secretary of War Edward Stanton signed a War Department Order expanding the use and roles of blacks by the North. This order authorized the recruitment of blacks for combat roles in support of the North's Civil War effort.³

In 1989 the movie Glory served as a portrayal of the contributions of one of the many black regiments formed during the Civil War. The regiment portrayed was the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) (hereafter referred to as the Fifty-Fourth). The introduction of these black soldiers during the Civil War had a profound impact on the prosecution of the war. By the end of the war the Union Army recruited 178,895 blacks that were organized into 166 regiments.⁴ The fifty-fourth was an example to prove that black troops would fight and be soldiers even though they were not given equal treatment as

whites. Prominent amongst the inequality they faced was the issue of pay equity.

Thesis Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to detail the bravery and proud service of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) despite the pay inequality they faced.

Significance of Study

Limited information is available on black units with service during the Civil War. The goal of this thesis is to add to the amount of information on black units that served during the Civil War. Consequently this thesis attempts to expand upon the historical data available on black Civil War units. This study documents the history of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) and addresses the following subjects: What was the initial policy regarding the pay of this regiment? How did the regiment and its members react when informed they would not receive the equal pay of whites? What was the character of the regiment's service despite the pay inequality? This thesis is significant because it serves as a comprehensive documentation of the events leading to the formation of the 54th Mass and the subsequent pay problems they encountered. This thesis is not meant to serve as an indictment on the treatment of black soldiers during the Civil War. Instead it is a record of their attempt to achieve equality of pay.

Limitations and Delimitations

The scope of the research for this thesis is limited to issues and events that led to and affected the pay problems of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored). To understand these issues and events some mention needs to be made of the formation of the regiment. The period from 26 January 1863 through 15 June 1863 covers the authorization to form the regiment. Activation of the regiment occurred in June of 1863. The well documented assault on Fort Wagner will be covered along with contributions made by the regiment after the assault. However, this thesis will focus on factors associated with the formation of the regiment and the issue of equal pay for black soldiers.

There is limited information available from the commanders of the Civil War era on the service of the regiment. Although there are numerous entries on the Fifty-Fourth in the War of the Rebellion: Official Records Of The Union And Confederate Armies, their scope is quite limited. Most of the entries concerning the Fifty-Fourth are limited to one or two sentences stating the assignment of the regiment to a given area, or its inclusion in a campaign.

This thesis does not compare the Fifty-Fourth's formation with any other regiment formed during the Civil War. It also does not evaluate the methods and procedures used to recruit and train the Fifty-Fourth. This thesis focuses on presenting documented facts and events that affected the inequality of pay of the regiment.

The major campaigns in Chapter Six are brief summaries of the service of the Fifty-Fourth and are not meant to serve as a regimental history.

Research Question

This thesis will focus on four research questions:

1. What was the initial policy regarding the pay of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored)?
2. How did the regiment and its members react when they were informed they would not receive the equal pay of whites?
3. What was the character of the regiment's service despite the pay inequality?
4. How was the pay issue finally resolved?

Endnotes

¹Dudley Cornish, The Sable Arm-Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865 (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966), 46.

²Office of the Adjutant General, The Negro in the Military Service of the United States, 1639-1886, (Massachusetts), Volume 1.

³Luis F. Emilio, A Brave Black Regiment, The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry, 1863-1865, (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1894), 1.

⁴Ibid, XI.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

General Introduction

The purpose of the literature review is to locate information that is applicable to the thesis questions. It has proven difficult to find literature written to preserve the history of black units formed during the Civil War.¹ While references are available on blacks and the units they served in, most of these references do not cover a unit from its inception to its retirement. Readers must piece information together from numerous sources to gain an appreciation for the accomplishments of these units.

It is possible to reconstruct the history of the Fifty-Fourth by separating the literature into three categories. The first category is primary source works by authors who had personal knowledge or experience with the regiment. The second category is secondary source works that encompass all other writings and publications. Apart from the written works there is a final video category. The bibliography contains additional references..

The material contained in this thesis was compiled from numerous books, magazines, official military records, pamphlets, manuscripts, and letters. Additional information was obtained from the Massachusetts National Guard Military Archives & Museum. The literature

explores the often told, but unconsolidated, story of the Fifty-Fourth. In fact what I have endeavored to do is recount and consolidate some of the unit's major accomplishments.

The first category concentrates on letters from the enlisted members of the regiment. Although it is not as common for enlisted men to write letters of their accounts as it is for officers, sufficient writings are available from the enlisted members of the Fifty-Fourth. I have gained access to numerous personal papers available from members of the regiment and the Governor of the state of Massachusetts. Utilizing all of the above sources plus information provided by the state archives in Massachusetts has provided ample information and publications for this topic.

Primary Sources

A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1865² is a regimental history. The book is written by Captain Luis F. Emilio, an officer in the Fifty-Fourth that survived the assault on Fort Wagner. The book is a firsthand account of the extraordinary physical and moral courage portrayed by members of the regiment. Tracing the unit's history has been relatively simple with the use of this book. However, this information is occasionally influenced by the closeness of the author to his subject matter.

On the Altar of Freedom (1992) is another primary source document. The book is a reprint of letters received from Corporal James Henry Gooding. Corporal Gooding was a member of Company C of the

regiment. His letters faithfully record its activities. He voiced injustices felt by soldiers of the regiment over the issues of equal pay, the refusal to promote deserving black enlisted soldiers to officer rank, and the deeply ingrained racism of whites in both the North and the South.³

Secondary Sources

Few books cover the African-American experience in the War of 1812 or the Revolutionary War. Joseph T. Wilson's The Black Phalanx (1890) and James Bullock's Black Patriots of the American Revolution (1986) are two books that cover this period. They provide detailed descriptions of personal experiences of African-Americans during this time period.

James L. Bowen's Massachusetts in the War (1889) is an example of a post-Civil War author that studied the regiment. As a consequence, his work is a brief history of the regiment. Another example of an author that studied the history of the regiment is Peter Burchard. He wrote One Gallant Rush: Robert Gould Shaw and his Brave Black Regiment (1965). This book focuses more on the assault of Fort Wagner. Garth W. James does basically the same thing in his article "The Assault on Fort Wagner" that was published in War Papers (1891).

"Days of GLORY: How America First Saw the 54th Mass," is an article that was written in Civil War Times in 1990. It depicts the plight of the regiment as seen by more contemporary artists. It is an illustrative account of the regiment. It is important to note that

multiple authors and artists contributed to this work to deliver the common message of the regiment's accomplishments.

"Between Two Fires" is an article written by the contemporary author Charles E. Heller. In his article he attempts to portray the struggles of the Fifty-Fourth as it endeavored to prove itself both to the enemy it fought against and to the army it fought with.⁴ Heller's article recounts, among other incidents, the assault on Fort Wagner, the unit's pay problems, and the gallantry of the Medal of Honor winners from the regiment.

Additional sources are Joe H. May's dissertation "Black Americans and their Contributions Toward Union Victory in the American Civil War, 1861-1865" (1983) and Dudley T. Cornish's The Sable Arm, Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865 (1966). Now is Your Time (1991) by Walter Dean Myers compiles many original documents and firsthand accounts of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored).

One cannot help but notice a recurring theme in these articles and books. Most seem to focus on the assault on Fort Wagner and fail to document the unit's accomplishments after that attack. It took the efforts of post-Civil War authors to read and research the Fifty-Fourth and publicize the exploits of the regiment after the assault on Fort Wagner.

Videos

In the video category the movie Glory ended with the assault on Fort Wagner. Most people probably think the regiment disbanded after the assault. Although it received heavy losses during the assault, the

unit continued to serve illustriously after Fort Wagner. These screen writers have endeavored to publicize the accomplishments of the regiment and tell the story to people the world over.

Glory is an attempt by the entertainment industry's writers and producers to tell the story of the Fifty-Fourth and show the regiment in a positive light. However, as Hollywood often does, a few scenes in the movie are changed from what really happened in an attempt to create mass appeal and sell the movie. What Alan D. Gaff does in his article "True Glory" published in Blue & Gray Magazine (1990) is tell the true story of the regiment and expose the movie's falsehoods. Peter C. Jorgenson attempts to do the same thing in his article "The Making of 'Glory' " (1989). Both correct the movie and give true and factual accounts of the regiment.

Endnotes

¹Joseph B. Coleman, Brave Black Regiment: The Formation Of The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, January 1863-June 1864 (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1995), 24.

²Luis F. Emilio, A Brave Black Regiment, The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry, 1863-1865, (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1894).

³Corporal James Henry Gooding, On the Altar of Freedom, "A Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front," (Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).

⁴Charles E. Heller, "Between Two Fires: The 54th Massachusetts,": Civil War Times. (1972).

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses the historical research method. To gain an understanding of the environment that led to the formation the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored), it is necessary to briefly look at the political and social issues that led to the regiment's formation. Primary and secondary sources were utilized to document the regiment's formation and the pay problems that ensued.

Subsequent research revealed the social and military resistance to the enlistment of blacks in the military. This resistance resulted in the regiment being treated unequally in the area of pay.

Although the regiment was treated unfairly in other areas, this thesis focuses on the pay issue and the service of the regiment. All available data utilized in the thesis originated from the books discussed in the previous chapter and original documents, manuscripts, and organizational records received from the state archives in Massachusetts. Particular emphasis is placed on the formation of the regiment, the initial pay problem, the regiment's reaction to the pay problem, and the regiment's service after Fort Wagner.

Upon the conclusion of gathering data from the different sources related to the research questions, the information was examined and validated to establish the facts surrounding the inequality of pay with the regiment.

Assembling the information in a chronological sequence was the final step in the preparation of this thesis concerning the inequality of pay for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored).

CHAPTER FOUR
FORMATION OF THE REGIMENT

Background

On April 12, 1861 at 0430 the Civil War began with the attack on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina.¹ The North perceived the attack as an act of rebellion. President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed restoration of the Union as the primary aim of the war.

Policies for the recruitment and service of blacks did not change initially at the beginning of the Civil War. Army regulations did not allow blacks to serve in the military. Despite government practices and regulations that were discriminatory towards blacks they still responded to calls to defend the nation. Continually rejected, free blacks in the North continued to volunteer to serve in the Union Army. They were encouraged by the abolitionist movement in the Northern states.²

Official government reasons justifying the prohibition of recruiting free blacks were never clearly documented. Free blacks had previously demonstrated their mettle and worth in battle during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Initially, a few generals considered the use of free blacks and slaves as soldiers. However, these thought were quickly dismissed by the administration. In 1861 the North rejected service by blacks as Secretary of War Simon Cameron

declared "the War Department has no intention to call into service any colored soldiers."³

The North and South fully expected the war to be short in duration. As a result President Lincoln initially requested 75,000 soldiers for a period of ninety days.⁴ Initially men in the North and South were eager to join the cause and fight for their beliefs. By the end of 1862, though, these beliefs began to unravel under the stress of war. As wounded, maimed, and dead soldiers returned in coffins from the war, the number of volunteers on both sides decreased appreciably. In 1862 the south began drafting men into the Confederate Army. The North, however, was not ready to commit to a draft until 1863 and continued with its volunteer army. As the war progressed it became more and more difficult for the North as the number of volunteers slowed to a trickle. This decrease in manpower influenced Northerners to reverse their position on the possible use of blacks in the army.

On July 17, 1862, Congress passed the Militia Act of 1862. The Militia Act of 1862 authorized the enlistment of blacks as laborers and construction workers to meet critical manpower shortages experienced in the North.⁵ Secretary of War Edward M. Stanton authorized the recruitment of black soldiers for special combat units about a month later.⁶

There were three colored regiments formed in 1862 by the Union Army in the western theater. In the summer of 1862 Colonel James Williams recruited the First Kansas Colored. That September, General Butler began organizing the Louisiana Native Guards from free Negroes. The following month General Saxton, in the Department of the South,

formed the First South Carolina Regiment from contrabands." Contrabands were escaped slaves who fled or were taken behind Union lines. Several black regiments were formed with runaway slaves from Louisiana and South Carolina. These regiments became known as the Corps d'Afrique--the African troops.⁸ To further this trend, on January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Consequently, the North began to look at not only recruiting Negroes but at arming them for combat. John A. Andrew, the War Governor of Massachusetts, was an early advocate of enlisting Negroes to aid in suppressing the rebellion. Early in 1863 Andrew visited Secretary of War Edward M. Stanton and received permission to enlist persons of African descent into the Army. As a result of his visit Secretary Stanton issued the following order.

WAR DEPARTMENT,
WASHINGTON CITY, JAN 26, 1863.

Ordered: That Governor Andrew of Massachusetts is authorized, until further orders, to raise such number of volunteers, companies of artillery for duty in the forts of Massachusetts and elsewhere, and such corps of infantry for the volunteer military service as he may find convenient, such volunteers to be enlisted for three years, or until sooner discharged, and may include persons of African descent, organized into special corps. He will make the usual needful requisitions on the appropriate staff bureaus and officers, for the proper transportation, organization, supplies, subsistence, arms and equipments of such volunteers.⁹

With this order in hand, Governor Andrew returned to Massachusetts and immediately set about the task of raising a Negro regiment.

Selection of Officers

The War Department ordered that the commissioned officers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) be white while the noncommissioned officers could be black. Although Governor Andrew protested the policy of having only white officers, the War Department

remained firm and insisted that all officers in the regiment be white or the regiment would not be inducted into federal service. Eventually Andrew relented in order to form the first officially sanctioned regiment of blacks in the North.

Governor Andrew believed that this regiment would be scrutinized far beyond any other that had ever been formed. Therefore, he wanted to insure that it had the finest leadership available. In "Memoirs of Governor Andrew" the Honorable Peleg W. Chandler, a contemporary of Governor Andrew, wrote:

When the first colored regiment was formed, he [Governor Andrew] remarked to a friend that in regard to other regiments, he accepted men as officers who were sometimes rough and uncultivated, 'but these men' he said, 'shall be commanded by officers who are eminently gentlemen'.¹⁰

To lead the regiment Governor Andrew realized that he had to pick officers who had proven themselves in combat. More importantly, he wanted officers who had shown respect for blacks through their words and deeds.¹¹ To lead the regiment he selected Captain Robert Gould Shaw of the Second Massachusetts Infantry. While offering the position to Captain Shaw, he sent a letter to his father seeking his consent because of the sensitivity of the matter. Shaw's father was an abolitionist. Andrew sought his support in convincing the younger Shaw to accept the command. The person picked to lead this regiment would be closely scrutinized. It would be important for all of his family to be supportive of the individual given this difficult leadership position.

At first Captain Shaw refused the offer. However, after much soul searching and deep thought he changed his mind. After Captain Shaw informed the Governor that he would be pleased to accept command,

Governor Andrew petitioned the War Department for a temporary commission for Captain Shaw as a Colonel in the United States Volunteers.

When other officers heard that Colonel Shaw was commanding the regiment they rushed to volunteer. By March of 1863 twenty-nine officers had been appointed. Officers were commissioned from persons nominated by regimental commanders in the field, tried friends of the abolitionist movement, staff officers, and those Governor Andrew personally desired to appoint.¹² The officers were young with an average age of twenty-three. Fourteen had experienced combat. Most of the officers were abolitionists or had antislavery feelings. They were eager to serve in a black regiment. Having recruited the officers, Governor Andrew now set about the task of filling the ranks.

Recruitment of Soldiers

After reviewing the free black male population in Massachusetts it became evident to Colonel Shaw and Governor Andrew that a regiment could not be formed consisting of Massachusetts citizens only. Boston was capable of raising one company while New Bedford could possibly raise a second.¹³ The neighboring New England states did not have a large enough free black population to sufficiently fill the regiment. To assist in recruiting Andrew called on a friend and fellow abolitionist, George Stearns.

Stearns immediately set about the task of recruiting black men for the regiment. Andrew established a committee to raise recruits for the regiment. This committee became known as the "Black Committee" and consisted of Stearns as the leader, Amos A. Lawrence, John M. Forbes, William I. Bowditch, Le Baron Russell, Richard P. Hallowell, Mayor Howland, James P. Congdon, Willard P. Phillips, and Francis G. Shaw (Colonel Shaw's father). Membership in this committee was ultimately

increased to one hundred. One of the first actions of the committee was to publicize the establishment of the regiment. Notices and leaflets were put up in all parts of the country. In Massachusetts daily newspapers ran ads like the following call to arms published in the Boston Journal on February 16th.

TO COLORED MEN

Wanted. Good men for the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers of African descent, Col. Robert G. Shaw. \$100 bounty at expiration of term of service. Pay \$13 per month, and State Aid for families. All necessary information can be obtained at the office, corner Cambridge and North Russell Streets.

Lieut. J.W.M. Appleton
Recruiting Officer.¹⁴

The "Black Committee" did not stop with newspaper ads. As an abolitionist Stearns knew most of the free blacks that were in favor of and fighting for black equality. Stearns enlisted the help of these leaders in recruiting for the regiment. Frederick Douglass was the most prominent amongst these black leaders. Stearns felt that Douglass' participation in the cause was very important because Douglass believed participation by blacks in the war would force whites to treat blacks with fairness. The war could be used as a means of blacks fighting first for emancipation and then for citizenship.

Douglass traveled throughout the North speaking to blacks in an effort to enlist them in the war effort. On one occasion he said,

"We can get at the throat of treason and slavery through Massachusetts. She was first in the War for Independence; first to break the chains of her slaves; first to make the black man equal before the law; and first to admit colored children to her common schools. . . . Massachusetts now welcomes you as her soldiers."¹⁵

By April 1863 enough soldiers had been recruited to fill the regiment. Only a small proportion of the men recruited were slaves that had escaped from the South. The large majority of recruits were free educated Negroes living in the North. Frederick Douglass' two sons were recruited with one (Lewis H. Douglass), becoming the sergeant major. The Fifty-Fourth became the standard that all black units, and black soldiers, were compared with. The regiment could not be satisfied with just being good. It had to be better than good because all of the nation was looking closely at it. By the end of April 1863 nine hundred men had passed the medical test required for entrance into the regiment.¹⁶ Recruitment was now complete. The first black regiment of the North that was comprised of free black volunteers was ready to begin training.

Endnotes

¹Jack D. Forner, Blacks and the Military in American History, (New York: Praeger Press, 1974), 34-35.

²Irving Werstein, The Storming of Fort Wagner (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1970), 18.

³Forner, 34-35.

⁴Ibid., 32.

⁵Dudley Cornish, The Sable Arm-Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865 (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966), 46-57.

⁶Ibid., 80.

⁷Luis F Emilio, A Brave Black Regiment, The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry, 1863-1865, (Boston: Bantam Books, 1992), 2.

⁸Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Army Life in a Black Regiment (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Corner House Publishers, 1984), 1-5.

⁹Emilio, 2.

¹⁰Ibid, 9-10.

¹¹Joseph B. Coleman, Brave Black Regiment: The Formation Of The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, January 1863-June 1864 (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1995), 24.

¹²Emilio, 6.

¹³Coleman, 27.

¹⁴Walter Dean Myers, Now is Your time: The African-American Struggle for Freedom (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 156.

¹⁵Emilio, 14.

¹⁶Coleman, 32.

CHAPTER FIVE

TRAINING THE REGIMENT

On February 21, 1863, Lieutenant E. N. Hallowell and twenty-seven recruits took possession of buildings assigned to the Fifty-Fourth at Camp Meigs.¹ Camp Meigs is located in Readville, Massachusetts a small town located a few miles south of Boston. The training quarters for the regiment had to be prepared prior to the arrival of the volunteers.

Upon his arrival at Camp Meigs, Lieutenant Hallowell was very disappointed in the state of repair of the barracks that the regiment was assigned. The quarters were amongst the worse at Camp Meigs. The twenty-seven recruits and Lieutenant Hallowell looked at the gloomy and run-down quarters, broken windows, sagging roofs, and peeling walls. They found it hard to believe that they were assigned such poor quarters. The supply sheds and mess halls were in equally poor shape. However, none of the volunteers complained. They realized there was no time for complaining because the regiment was scheduled to occupy these barracks in mid-March. Lieutenant Hallowell attempted to sound more cheerful than he felt and told the volunteers he would wire Colonel Shaw to send additional members at once to assist in getting the place in shape before most of the regiment arrived. In Boston there were additional volunteers who could assist in repairing the quarters before they were to be occupied in March.²

Upon receiving this correspondence from Lieutenant Hallowell, Colonel Shaw went to Governor Andrew for assistance. Shaw knew that the governor would do most anything to insure the success of the regiment. As a result, Andrew sent lumber, paint, pipes, and tools to Camp Meigs to improve the quarters to suitable living conditions as soon as possible. Amongst the recruits for the regiment were carpenters, stone masons, plumbers, painters, and plasterers. They were immediately sent to the camp and set about the task of renovating the wartime construction barracks. After several days of work the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) had the neatest quarters in camp Meigs.³

During this time period Colonel Shaw continued to attend to his duties in Boston. He shipped food, weapons, ammunition, and clothing along with medical supplies, sheets, blankets, and numerous other items before the regiment departed for Camp Meigs. The regiment departed Boston Armory for Camp Meigs on March 14, 1863.⁴ The regiment traveled to Camp Meigs via train. In fact a special train transported the regiment.⁵ Numerous well wishers, friends, and relatives of the soldiers were at the station to send the regiment off. At noon the train departed Boston for the two day trip to Readville. The residents of the town watched cautiously as the black volunteers and white officers unloaded the train. The residents had never seen black soldiers before and wanted to see the regiment before the five-mile march to Camp Meigs. It was a clear day without a cloud in the sky. Colonel Shaw wrote to his wife Annie, "Its a good omen. This has been the first pleasant day we've had for weeks."⁶

Camp Meigs was not used to train black soldiers before the arrival of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored). The camp was primarily used to train white soldiers. These soldiers were typically rude and insulting to the Fifty-Fourth. The white soldiers would mock and jeer when they observed the regiment drilling or practicing at a rifle range. However, the regiment began to quickly "shape up" and within weeks the jeering from the white soldiers stopped.⁷

Within weeks of the regiment's initial training at Camp Meigs many of the white soldiers began to change their opinions of the black soldier. A few white soldiers wrote to their families and told them that they were wrong about the black regiment. They stated that the black soldiers were not lazy and shiftless as they once believed, but were a fine bunch of hard-working men who wanted to do their best for the Union.⁸ This observation was close to how the soldiers of the regiment felt. A member of the regiment writing home remarked, "We aim to be the finest regiment in the whole Army! And we're going to do it."⁹

The discipline of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) was considered to be amongst the best at Camp Meigs. It was common knowledge that white soldiers experienced many cases of disobedience, drunkenness, and disorderly behavior. The black regiment did not experience the same degree of problem behavior. In fact there was far less drunkenness in the regiment than any other unit that had left Massachusetts.¹⁰ Surgeon General Dale wrote, "From the outset, the regiment showed great interest in drilling, and on guard

duty it was always vigilant and active. The barracks, cook-houses, and kitchens far surpassed in cleanliness any I have ever witnessed, and were models of neatness and good order."¹¹

After several weeks of watching and training the regiment, Colonel Shaw was confident that the regiment would behave well in combat. However, he wanted much more than this from his regiment. Colonel Shaw expressed his desire that his regiment perform better in combat than the Corps d'Afrique who had fought the Confederate Army earlier during the Civil War, and received much praise.¹² Colonel Shaw believed that training was the key to a unit's success in combat. He therefore put the regiment through a very tough and rigorous training program. Visitors to Camp Meigs noticed the difference in the training between the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) and the other regiments. On April 30, 1863, Governor Andrew and Secretary Salmon P. Chase visited the regiment and commented on the difference they noticed between the black regiment and the other white regiments training at Camp Meigs. They were impressed with the black regiment.¹³

It took great effort on the part of the soldiers and officers to become this top-notch unit and achieve this degree of recognition. Afterwards, hardly a week went by without the regiment drilling before congressmen, senators, and other high-ranking officials.¹⁴ The soldiers had worked hard to be their best and did not mind displaying it to others. As the regimental band played and the soldiers passed in review, they held their heads high. Sergeant Major Lewis Douglass believed there was something inside the black soldiers that transcended

their appearance. He believed that each man in the regiment marched as though he was marching for all black people.¹⁵

Early in May of 1863 Colonel Shaw wrote to Governor Andrew and informed him that his regiment was ready to carry out any mission.¹⁶ The governor arranged to present the regiment with its colors. On May 18, 1863, visitors poured into Camp Meigs to witness the graduation of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) and the colors presented. As a result of these actions, the regiment was now an officially sanctioned fighting unit for the Union.¹⁷

Later in the day of May 18, 1863, Governor Andrew received an order from the Secretary of War ordering the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) to report to General Hunter, Commander of the Department of the South, for combat duty in South Carolina.¹⁸ When Colonel Shaw informed the soldiers of this order they cheered. At last they would get their opportunity to prove themselves as soldiers. On May 28, 1863, the regiment assembled for the last time at Camp Meigs and marched to the railroad station. At Readville they loaded a special train for Boston's North Station. When the train arrived, the streets were lined with thousands of well wishers. From North Station the regiment marched to the State House and Boston Common. At the State House there was much pomp and ceremony celebrating the regiment. However, none spoke more eloquently and passionately than Frederick Douglass who said,

"my brothers, you are going off to fight the slavemasters. When you are in battle remember the shame, the disgrace, the degradation, of slavery! Remember, that in your hands is held the salvation of the black people of America. for once you have spent your blood, no black man will ever again be enslaved. I am

too old to go with you. But my sons are in your ranks. Go into battle boldly, my brothers! Smash the chains of slavery! Smash them!"¹⁹

After completion of the speeches all of the members of the regiment ate lunch. Afterwards the regiment marched to Battery Wharf to await the transport vessel the De Molay. At approximately four o'clock in the afternoon on May 28, 1863, the De Molay departed Boston Harbor enroute to South Carolina and the regiment's baptism into the Civil War.²⁰ The roster below gives the name and rank of the officers that departed with regiment for South Carolina.

Colonel	-	Robert G. Shaw
Major	-	Edward N. Hallowell
Surgeon	-	Lincoln R. Stone
Assistant-Surgeon	-	Charles B. Bridgham
Adjutant	-	Garth W. James
Quartermaster	-	John Ritchie

Company A.
Capt., John W. M. Appleton
1st Lieut., Wm. H. Homans

Company F
Capt., Watson W. Bridge
2nd Lieut., Alexander Johnston

Company B.
Capt., Samuel Willard
1st Lieut., James M. Walton
2nd Lieut., Thomas L. Appleton

Company G.
1st Lieut., Orin E. Smith
2nd Lieut., James A. Pratt

Company C.
1st Lieut., James W. Grace
2nd Lieut., Benjamin F. Dexter

Company H.
Capt., Cabot J. Russel
2nd Lieut., Willard Howard

Company D.
Capt., Edward L. Jones
1st Lieut., R. H. L. Jewett

Company I.
Capt., George Pope
1st Lieut., Francis L. Higginson
2nd Lieut., Charles E. Tucker

Company E.
Capt., Luis F. Emilio
2nd Lieut., David Reid

Company K.
Capt., William H. Simpkins
2nd Lieut., Henry W. Littlefield

Lewis H. Douglass, a son of Frederick Douglass, was the original sergeant-major. Arthur B. Lee, of Company A, was made commissary-sergeant; and Theodore J. Becker, hospital steward.²¹

Endnotes

¹Luis F. Emilio, A Brave Black Regiment, The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry, 1863-1865 (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1894), 21.

²Ibid., 21.

³Joseph B. Coleman, Brave Black Regiment: The Formation Of The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, January 1863-June 1864 (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: 1995), 34.

⁴Emilio, 23.

⁵Coleman, 34.

⁶Russell Duncan, Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 301.

⁷Emilio, 22.

⁸Coleman, 35.

⁹Robert E. Greene, Swamp Angels (Washington, D.C.: BoMark/Greene Publishing Group, 1990), 87.

¹⁰Emilio, 24.

¹¹Ibid., 23.

¹²Paul A. Hutton, A Brave Black Regiment (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., 1992), 23.

¹³Irving Werstein, The Storming of Fort Wagner (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1970), 50.

¹⁴Coleman, 40.

¹⁵Werstein, 50.

¹⁶Emilio, 24.

¹⁷Ibid., 30.

¹⁸Ibid., 31.

¹⁹Walter Dean Myers, Now is Your Time: The African-American Struggle for Freedom (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 163-164.

²⁰Emilio., 33.

²¹Ibid., 37.

CHAPTER SIX
MAJOR CAMPAIGNS

The Sea Islands

On June 3, 1863, the transport De Molay with the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) dropped anchor outside of Charleston Harbor in Port Royal, South Carolina. Colonel Shaw reported to General Hunter and was told to proceed with his regiment to Beaufort and disembark there.¹ At approximately 1600 hours the De Molay set sail for Beaufort. On June 4 the regiment disembarked at Beaufort and marched to an abandoned plantation where they camped. For four days they remained camped at the plantation with no rations nor tents amidst a constant drizzle. To make matters worse the unit was camped in a mosquito infested area. To Colonel Shaw's surprise and outrage he discovered white troops stationed nearby in an area where there were no mosquitoes or swamp ground. The colonel protested to the officer-in-charge of positioning units, but "no attention was paid to his complaint."² In addition, Colonel Shaw's frustration grew as a result of the duties the regiment was assigned.

The regiment's first mission was on a shell road working on fortifications.³ (A shell road is a road topped with crushed sea shells instead of crushed gravel.) This angered Colonel Shaw. He felt that the regiment must be sent to the front to engage in combat. To live in

a mosquito infested camp and build fortifications was an insult. Colonel Shaw decided to contact Governor Andrew and seek his help in this matter. After hearing of the living conditions and the way the regiment was being used, Governor Andrew immediately contacted the War Department.

Governor Andrew informed the Secretary of War of the regiment's situation. He told the Secretary that he would recall the regiment if the situation was not corrected at once. Secretary of War Stanton knew that this was not an idle threat. Since the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) had not yet been federalized, they were still under state control. Governor Andrew was the regiment's commander in chief and could indeed recall the regiment if he so desired. The secretary did not want to lose the services of the regiment and moved swiftly to correct the situation. The regiment began to receive tents, cots, rations, and other supplies. Remarkably, the quartermaster had these supplies but had withheld them until the Secretary intervened.⁴ As a result of these actions, the regiment's respect for and trust of Colonel Shaw grew immensely.

On June 6, 1863, Colonel Shaw received orders to depart Beaufort and report to Colonel Montgomery at Simon's Island. The regiment arrived at the small island off the Georgia coast on June 8. They were quartered on Simon's Island under much better conditions than before. On June 9, 1863, the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) was sworn into federal service. The regiment was assigned to a brigade that included the 1st and 2nd South Carolina. The brigade commander was Colonel James Montgomery.

June 10 Colonel Montgomery came to Colonel Shaw and asked, "How soon can you be ready to start on an expedition?" Colonel Shaw replied "In half an hour."⁵ Excitement was in the air as the regiment was about to embark on a combat mission. Eight companies of the Fifty-Fourth along with five companies of the 2nd South Carolina (Colored) were called upon to execute a raid on Darien, Georgia.

Darien, Georgia

Colonel Montgomery believed there was a small Confederate force in Darien and wanted to see the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) in action. He accompanied the regiment on the raid. On June 11 the regiment arrived at Darien and faced no resistance. A house-to-house search found no evidence of Confederate soldiers. Colonel Montgomery was furious and told Colonel Shaw, "I shall burn this town."⁶ Colonel Shaw was shocked and told Colonel Montgomery that he did not want this responsibility. Colonel Montgomery stated that he would gladly take responsibility for burning the town. He explained to Colonel Shaw, "The Southerners must be made to feel that this was a real war, and that they were to be swept away by the hand of God like the Jews of old."⁷ Colonel Shaw had no choice but to follow orders since Colonel Montgomery was his commander.

Reluctantly, Colonel Shaw followed the order. Only one company of the Fifty-Fourth participated in burning the town along with the Second South Carolina (Colored). Everything in the town was burned except for a church, a few houses, and some lumber works owned by Northerners. Colonel Shaw was very uneasy about the actions he witnessed

at Darien. Colonel Montgomery, himself, applied the torch to the last buildings.⁸ At the completion of the expedition Colonel Shaw wrote Governor Andrew concerning this expedition.⁹ Before he received a reply, the regiment was ordered to report to Hilton Head, South Carolina.

On June 24, 1863, the Fifty-Fourth reported to Hilton Head. The regiment marched on foot for approximately a mile and camped in an old cotton field. Several other regiments were also camped in the area awaiting future training. The regiment made use of this time by practicing drilling and other operations. The encampment was commanded by Brigadier General George C. Strong, an antislavery abolitionist. On June 30, 1863, the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) was mustered for pay.

Until June 30th the regiment was paid by the state of Massachusetts. The regiment would now receive their wages from the federal government. From the beginning it was rumored that terms of the enlistment would not be honored by the government.¹⁰ As the first soldiers reported for pay, they learned they would receive \$10 per month. The regiment was classified with contraband regiments and thus only entitled to \$10 per month. This was three dollars per month less than white privates received from the same paymaster.¹¹ This was not the decision of the pay officer, but of the War Department. The War Department decided that soldiers of African descent were to be paid \$10 per month and not the \$13 received by white soldiers. This decision was based on Sections 12, 13, and 15 of the Militia Act of July 17, 1862, which authorized the employment of Negro soldiers at a rate \$3 a month

below that granted white privates in the Union Armies.¹² To make matters worse the Union practiced withholding the \$3 uniform allowance instead of paying it in cash as was the practice with white soldiers.¹³

Colonel Shaw was outraged by these events. After consulting with the paymaster he attempted to explain the situation to the regiment. He told the regiment that there was not a good reason to explain the difference in pay and that he was going to try and get the difference in pay fixed immediately. The soldiers took a vote and agreed that every soldier in the regiment would refuse to accept his pay until they were paid equally.¹⁴ The soldiers felt that the government was treating them unfairly and not acting in good faith. When they enlisted they were told that the pay was \$13 a month and it included state aid for their families.¹⁵ The soldiers told Colonel Shaw that they had not volunteered merely for money. They would continue to serve under his command until the federal government paid them the same as white soldiers. Colonel Shaw was proud of the response and sought to alleviate the situation.

Colonel Shaw wired Governor Andrew and informed him of the pay problem. The governor was equally outraged. He immediately went to Washington to find out why the regiment was getting paid less than white regiments. The governor did not get the answer he sought. In an attempt to remedy the situation, Governor Andrew asked the Massachusetts legislature to pay the regiment the difference in pay. The legislature voted and agreed to make up the difference. However, the regiment again refused to accept any pay until the federal government abolished the "degrading distinction between white and colored troops."¹⁶ The members

of the regiment were more interested in the principle of justice and money was not an overriding issue.

To show their support for their black soldiers, Colonel Shaw and his officers also refused to accept any salary until their men received the proper pay. It was uncommon at the time for officers and soldiers to stand together. What made this event all the more surprising was the fact that the officers were white and the soldiers black.¹⁷ As a result of the officers and soldiers standing firm on the pay problem, abolitionists began pressuring Congress for a change in the policy and an equal pay bill.

Morris Island

The Fifty-Fourth was encamped on James Island about three weeks when they received orders to report to Folly Island. On July 8, 1863, the regiment embarked on the steamer Chasseur with seven companies and the headquarters. The other three companies traveled on the steamer Cossack. Upon arrival the steamers anchored off Folly Island with several other vessels loaded with troops. Union forces were preparing for an attack on Charleston's outer defenses. This attack would have as its objectives the capture of Fort Sumter, James Island, Morris Island, and the greatest Confederate stronghold of all--Fort Wagner.¹⁸ Fort Wagner prevented the Union from capturing Charleston. If the Union Army captured Fort Wagner, it would be difficult for the Confederate Army to hold Charleston. Charleston was important psychologically to the Union and the Confederates. The Union referred to Charleston as the cradle of secessionism.

On July 11th the Fifty-Fourth was ordered to James Island to serve as reinforcements for General Alfred H. Terry's division. General Terry's division consisted of three brigades. The three brigades were Davis' brigade, Stevenson's brigade, and Montgomery's brigade which consisted of the Fifty-Fourth and the Second South Carolina Regiment (Colored).¹⁹

July 16, 1863, the Fifty-Fourth received its baptism in combat. In the early morning the regiment was awakened by heavy firing on the picket line. The regiment formed a picket line along the right side of Colonel Montgomery's brigade on Morris Island. That night a large Confederate force struck three companies of the Fifty-Fourth on picket duty. A heated exchange commenced with the soldiers of the regiment holding the line long enough for soldiers of the Tenth Connecticut Infantry to retreat and to allow reinforcements to advance to the front. It was during this battle that Sergeant James S. Wilson established his motto of "I Will Never Retreat." Sergeant Wilson was one of the exceptional noncommissioned officers in the regiment. He repeatedly told his men that he would never retreat. During the Confederate attack on Morris Island Sergeant Wilson showed unusual bravery and moral courage. While the Confederates were attacking, he shouted to his men to stand fast. His shouts served to attract more attention to himself as five enemy soldiers advanced on him. He killed three while the other two passed by. Subsequently, a detachment of cavalry moved toward Sergeant Wilson. Rather than retreat, he yelled fiercely and jumped at the cavalry as they surrounded him. For a while he kept the cavalry at

bay with just his bayonet before he was killed.²⁰ He had given his life rather than retreat.

After the battle the regiment was widely hailed as having saved the Tenth Connecticut. One of the Connecticut soldiers wrote to his mother, "But for the bravery of three regiments of the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth our whole regiment would have been captured."²¹ After returning from the battle the Fifty-Fourth was cheered by white Union soldiers. They heard the sounds of "well done, well done" and "we heard your guns." Members of the Tenth Connecticut offered their thanks with gifts to the regiment. The regiment's official losses during the battle of Morris Island were listed as three killed, twelve wounded, and three missing. The regiment believed they had earned the respect of their white counterparts, although it took the blood of their comrades. On July 16th the regiment received orders to move to Morris Island and report to General Strong. That evening Sergeant Major Lewis Douglass wrote to his father, "By the time you get this letter, I will have been in battle. If I do not survive, know this, I am not afraid to die if my death will mean freedom for our people. See to it father. See to it that our sacrifice will not have been in vain."²² That night the regiment was given the advance followed by the other regiments. At the head of the column were engineer guides that pointed out the route.²³

The regiment marched all through the stormy night. "Foot sore, weary, hungry, and thirsty the regiment halted near the beach opposite Folly Island about 0500 on 17 July."²⁴ Upon their arrival Colonel Shaw was immediately summoned to a meeting at General Gillmore's headquarters. General Gillmore was the commander of Union forces on the

gound. He had summoned his brigade commanders to his headquarters to brief them on the upcoming battle. The next evening an attack would be made on Fort Wagner. The Fifty-Fourth would be rewarded for its bravery and courage in battle by being picked to lead the assault on Fort Wagner.

The Assault of Fort Wagner

"Battery Wagner, was so named by the Confederates, in memory of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas M. Wagner of the First South Carolina Artillery who was killed at Fort Sumter."²⁵ The name Battery Wagner was appropriate also, because the fortification was never completed. The Union referred to it as Fort Wagner. Fort Wagner stretched 630 feet across the northern tip of Morris Island. The fortification was built of sand, turf, and a facing of sturdy logs. It also included thick parapets and deep bomb-proof dugouts that provided shelter for its garrisoned soldiers. On the east side of the approach to the fort was the Atlantic Ocean while the west was bound by Vincent's Creek with its sandy marshes. There was a small strip of land that ran between these two water bodies and led to Fort Wagner. At low tide the approach afforded a good pathway to the enemy's position. At high tide, though, the approach would be through deep, loose sand, and over low sand hillocks. The approach to Fort Wagner was unobstructed until an advancing enemy reached a point approximately 200 yards from the fort. At this point the Confederates had dug a line of rifle trenches. Approximately fifty yards closer to the fort was an easterly bend in the marsh that extended to within 25 yards of the sea at high tide. This

created a natural defile making the fort approachable only from the south. In addition to the natural defile the fort's armament was formidable.

Fort Wagner was protected by guns of every size. Its armament was reported on July 15, 1863, as being the following.

On sea face, one ten-inch Columbiad, and two smooth-bore thirty-two pounders. On southeast bastion, operating on land and sea was one rifled thirty-two pound gun; on southeast bastion, operating on land and sea, one rifled thirty-two pound gun; on south point of bastion operating on land, one forty-two pounder carronade; in the curtain, with direct fire on land approach to embrasure, two eight-inch naval shell-guns, one eight-inch sea coast howitzer, and one thirty-two pound smooth-bore cannon; on the flank defenses of the curtain, two thirty-two pound carronades in embrasures; on the southerly face, one thirty-two pound carronade in embrasure; in southwest angle, one ten-inch sea coast mortar; on bastion gorge, one thirty-two pound carronade. There were also four twelve-pound howitzers.²⁶

Less than two miles away were the guns of Fort Sumter and its many shore batteries that were in range of Fort Wagner. From the Union perspective, Fort Wagner was well guarded.

Brigadier General William B. Taliaferro commanded Morris Island, and therefore, also commanded Fort Wagner. The fort's garrison included the Thirty-First and Fifty-First North Carolina regiments, the Charleston Battalion, two companies of the Sixty-Third Georgia Heavy Artillery, and two companies of the First South Carolina Infantry that were acting as artillery men. The force totaled over 1,700 soldiers.

On July 18, 1863, at 0900 the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) disembarked at Pawnee Landing near Morris Island. After a foot march of approximately six miles they reached Lighthouse Inlet and rested, to await transportation.²⁷ Later, when all was ready, the Fifty-Fourth boarded a

small steamer, traveled to Morris Island, and remained near the shore for further orders.²⁸ Upon his arrival at the island, Colonel Shaw and Adjutant James reported to General Strong for further orders. General Strong informed Colonel Shaw that Fort Wagner would be stormed that evening. General Strong knew of Colonel Shaw's desire to have his regiment fight side by side with white troops. The General said to Colonel Shaw, "You may lead the column, if you say 'yes.' Your men, I know, are worn out, but do as you choose."²⁹

Colonel Shaw immediately ordered Adjutant James to return and have Lieutenant Colonel Hallowell bring the regiment forward. General Seymour had been chosen to command the assault column. He gave the following reasons as to why the Fifty-Fourth was given the honorable, but dangerous duty of leading the assault of Fort Wagner.

It was believed that the Fifty-Fourth was in every respect as efficient as any other body of men; and as it was one of the strongest and best officered, there seemed to be no good reason why it should not be selected for the advance. This point was decided by General Strong and myself.³⁰

At approximately 1800 hours Lieutenant Colonel Hallowell and the regiment arrived at General Strong's headquarters. The soldiers were worn-out and hungry from two consecutive days of fighting and moving. They had received no hot food and little sleep. General Strong expressed his sympathy for the soldiers and his desire that they have food. It could not be, however, for it was necessary that the regiment move on to its assigned position.³¹ Before departing with the regiment Colonel Shaw gave Mr. Edward L. Pierce, a personal friend, his letters and some papers. He requested that Mr. Pierce "forward the letters and

papers to his family if anything occurred to him requiring such service."³²

The attack on Fort Wagner was scheduled to begin at 1945 hours. Three red rockets fired by the warship New Ironsides was the signal to begin the assault. The Fifty-Fourth was to attack with three companies abreast, in triple ranks. Company K was the color company. They would carry the flag and lead the assault. Before the regiment departed on the assault, General Strong rode to the front to give an inspirational talk to the regiment consisting of the following words.

Boys, I am a Massachusetts man, and I know you will fight for the honor of the State. I am sorry that you must go into the fight tired and hungry, but the men in the fort are tired too. There are but three hundred men behind those walls, and they have been fighting all day. Don't fire a musket on the way up, but go in and bayonet them at their guns."³³

Calling out the color bearer, General Strong said, "If this man should fall, who will lift the flag and carry it on?"³⁴ Colonel Shaw who was standing nearby quietly responded, "I will."³⁵ At which time, the men were appropriately inspired and prepared to execute their unenviable task.

As the Fifty-Fourth waited to embark on this dangerous mission, the regiment consisted of twenty-two officers and six hundred enlisted soldiers. Colonel Shaw's last orders to the regimental executive officer, before the assault were, "I shall go in advance with the National flag. You will keep the State flag with you; it will give the men something to rally around. We shall take the fort or die there! Good-by!"³⁶

The Union forces started their bombardment of Fort Wagner on the night of July 18, 1863, with naval gun fire and artillery. Brigadier General Taliaferro foresaw this bombardment as fires preceding an assault on his fort. In preparation for an assault he aligned his ground forces with three companies of the Charleston Battalion on his right along the parapet, the Fifty-First North Carolina along the curtain, and the Thirty-First North Carolina along the southeast bastion. Two companies of the Charleston Battalion were placed outside the fort with the mission of covering the gorge. A small reserve was assigned. This reserve was given the mission of not committing itself until their was penetration of the walls of the fort. General Taliaferro also foresaw that the defile along the approach route would break up any attacking formation at a pivotal moment in any battle when the enemy was at close range.³⁷

The Union Army set up a siege line approximately 1,350 yards south of Fort Wagner. However, the preparations usual in an assault were not made.

There was no provision for cutting away obstructions, filling the ditch, or spiking the guns. No special instructions were given the stormers; no line of skirmishers or covering party was thrown out; no engineers or guides accompanied the column; no artillery-men to serve captured guns; no plan of the work was shown company officers. It was understood that the fort would be assaulted with the bayonet, and that the Fifty-Fourth would be closely supported.³⁸

At 1945 hours three red-tailed rockets were launched from the warship New Ironside and the regiment moved out. Colonel Shaw gave the command of attention and said, "move at a quick time until within a hundred yards of the fort; then double quick, and charge!"³⁹ There was barely enough room for the regiment to maneuver through the defile. They came

under intense artillery and musket fire as they progressed along the defile. At this point Colonel Shaw gave the command to move out at the double quick, rationalizing that they would close on the enemy quicker and thus expose themselves for a shorter period of time. In addition to the fire from the fort, the Fifty-Fourth had to negotiate naval gunfire from the coast and the large holes the shells left. As shells from the Confederate shore battery impacted near the lead company the colorbearers noticed the flags were giving the enemy targets. They began to case the colors. Colonel Shaw saw this and ordered them to uncase the colors and charge on. The regiment forged on without firing a shot. The regiment was taking heavy losses on its approach. These losses, however, did not stop or slow the momentum of the regiment's assault.

As the lead company got within 300 yards of the fort the moon came out. The attacking force could now be clearly seen by the Confederates. Once the lead company closed within 200 yards of the fort the regiment began to receive direct fire from the cannons in the fort. At the same time hundreds of Confederate soldiers opened fire. Several of the soldiers in the lead company were killed by this initial volley. As the members of the regiment saw their comrades dead and lying sprawled on the ground they continued on. Before the enemy could fire a second volley Colonel Shaw moved forward waving his sword overhead and ordered the regiment forward.⁴⁰

Colonel Shaw remained steadfast in his desire to lead the regiment's assault. As he and the lead members of the regiment scaled the walls of the fort the only fire was from the officer's revolvers.

Upon reaching the fort Colonel Shaw was shot through the heart. As the remainder of his men scaled the walls they opened fire with their muskets and engaged in furious hand-to-hand combat. The assault on Fort Wagner lasted approximately ten minutes before the Confederates finally drove back the Fifty-Fourth. The regiment's charge had been made and repulsed by the enemy before any Union troops arrived to support them.

The Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) was the only Union unit to scale the walls of Fort Wagner and gain entry into the fort. They did so at a heavy cost. There were accounts of soldiers bodies strewn all along the approach. Official casualties from the assault were listed as follows for the enlisted men.

Killed	9
Wounded	147
<u>Missing</u>	<u>100</u>
Total	256

Among the officers, Colonel Shaw, Adjutant G. W. James, and Captain S. Wilard were killed, and eleven other officers wounded.⁴¹ The assault had taken a terrible toll on the regiment. The only positive thing to come out of the Union's assault on Fort Wagner was the exemplary performance of the Fifty-Fourth. Sergeant Robert J. Simmons, Sergeant William H. Carney (the color bearer), Corporal Henry F. Peal, and Private George Wilson were recommended for the Medal of Honor. They became the first blacks to receive this highest of decorations. Sergeant Carney's actions particularly stood out. He became the first black to receive the Medal of Honor. The Fifty-Fourth and its members had proved their mettle in battle both individually and collectively.

General Strong made the following comments concerning the heroism of the regiment after the assault. "The Fifty-Fourth did well and nobly; only the fall of Colonel Shaw prevented them from entering the fort. They moved up as gallantly as any troops could, and with their enthusiasm they deserved a better fate."⁴² The one consolation for the regiment after the assault of Fort Wagner was that it "had carried the courage of a race through a storm of Confederate bullets and through the terrible burden of their own fear to the very teeth of the enemy."⁴³

Olustee Station

On January 29, 1864, the Fifty-Fourth received orders to depart Hilton Head, South Carolina, for Florida. The regiment would be part of a brigade consisting of the Third United States Colored Troops (USCT) and the Eighth USCT. The brigade was commanded by General Gillmore while the aggregate Union forces in Florida would be commanded by General Truman Seymour. The purpose of this expedition to Florida as reported by General Gillmore was as follows:

1. To procure an outlet for cotton, lumber, timber etc.
2. To cut off one source of the enemy's commissary stores.
3. To obtain recruits for the Negro regiments.
4. To inaugurate measures for the speedy restoration of Florida to her allegiance.⁴³

These purposes were not approved by or coordinated with General Seymour. The entire expedition was in defiance of orders from General Gillmore.

On 5 February the regiment departed Hilton Head arriving in Jacksonville, Florida on the seventh. On February 18th Companies A,B,G, and H departed Jacksonville for Baldwin where they were reunited with

the rest of the regiment. On February 20, 1864, troops were positioned for the attack near a small railway siding called Olustee Station.

The Fifty-Fourth marched nine miles that morning to Sanderson, Florida, and was placed in reserve. As the battle began, wave after wave of Union forces were repulsed by a superior Confederate force. The Seventh Connecticut and Eighth United States Colored Troops received excessive losses and were forced to give ground.⁴⁵ By the middle of the afternoon General Seymour judged the battle lost and sent for the Fifty-Fourth to cover his retreat. Colonel Hallowell, who was now the commander, ordered the regiment to advance toward the sound of battle at a double quick time, discarding unnecessary equipment as it advanced.⁴⁶ As the regiment ran onward they were greeted by retreating Union forces that shouted, "We're badly whipped." and "You'll all get killed."⁴⁷ The Fifty-Fourth marched on led by Sergeant Cezar of Company C, shouting the battle cry of "Three cheers for Massachusetts and seven dollars a month!"⁴⁸

Upon reaching the battlefield the regiment formed on the left flank of the Union forces and immediately opened fire. The Confederates returned this fire with flanking musket and shell fire. After some time under these conditions the regiment exhibited a desire for more aggressive action. Suddenly Sergeant Wilkins with the national flag was seen advancing followed by the men around him. They advanced approximately 100 yards before Colonel Hallowell ordered them to return from their dangerous position.⁴⁹

By this time the other Union units had retreated from the battlefield and the Fifty-Fourth stood alone. The regiment was under

intense fire and returned fire rapidly. Many of the men jarred their rifled-muskets on the ground and sent the loads home without using their ramrods.⁵⁰ Being the only Union forces left in battle the regiment was called to rally on the colors still carried by Sergeant Wilkins. Giving nine loud cheers to confuse the enemy, the regiment started to retreat. The movement to the rear continued, interrupted by the regiment stopping every two or three hundred yards to turn and fire on the pursuing enemy. This action seemed to confuse the enemy.

The regiment continued its movement and executed a night march until 2:00 a.m. the next morning. The Fifty-Fourth had engaged in intense combat and marched thirty miles in a single day. At 4:00 a.m. the regiment was ordered to march back ten miles and escort a disabled train full of wounded Union soldiers. The wounded soldiers were in danger of being captured by the enemy. Tired and hungry the regiment marched to help their fallen comrades. Dr. Marsh, of the Sanitary Commission, who was present and witnessed the exploits of the Fifty-Fourth made the following comments.

Through eagerness to escape the supposed pursuing enemy, too great pressure of steam was employed, and the flue collapsed; and here the immortal Fifty fourth (colored) did what ought to insure it higher praise than to hold the field in the face of a victorious foe, -with ropes it seized the engine (now useless) and dragged it with its doomed freight for many miles...They knew their fate if captured; their humanity triumphed. Does history record a nobler deed?⁵¹

The regiment arrived back at Jacksonville at approximately 8:00 a.m. Nearly one-half of the men were without shoes and their knapsacks had been discarded to allow them to get to the battle quicker. Colonel Hallowell reported losses as thirteen killed, sixty-six wounded, and eight missing. He cited Sergeant Major Stephen A. Swails for "coolness,

bravery, and efficiency during the action" despite a severe wound.⁵² As a result of these and other actions, Sergeant Major Swails later became the first Negro to be commissioned in the Fifty-Fourth.

As a final epitaph to the battle of Olustee Station an officer from the Fifty-Fourth had the following letter published in the Chicago Tribune on March 9, 1864.

We have had a fight, a licking, and a foot-race.. We marched 110 miles in 108 hours, and in that time had a three hour's fight. Our regiment lost one man in every five--going in five hundred strong, and losing one hundred in killed, wounded, and missing...When we returned to Jacksonville we were all crippled from severe marching. Before going into battle [we] were double-quickened for a mile, and as [we] went in General Seymour said to Colonel Hallowell, 'the day is lost; you must go in and save the corps.' We did go in and did save it, checked the enemy, held the field, and were the last to leave-and covered the retreat.⁵³

The Final Victory

The Fifty-Fourth returned to the Charleston area for seige duty. Through participation in several actions inland, the Fifty-Fourth returned to Charleston its primary role during the occupation was grand guard. The regiment was tasked with guarding Confederate prisoners. It was also during the siege of Charleston that the regiment was reminded of the general dislike of black soldiers. On July 15, 1864, a lieutenant and some of the soldiers from the Fifty-Second Pennsylvania refused to work with and be under an officer from the Fifty-Fourth. Lieutenant Marcy stated, "I will not do duty with colored troops."⁵⁴ The lieutenant was arrested, court-martialed, and given a dishonorable discharge.

On August 3 a special exchange of prisoners was arranged with the Confederates. The exchange consisted of fifty Union and fifty

Confederate officers. The Union officers gave Quartermaster Ritchie a list of enlisted men imprisoned by the Confederates. This list included forty members of the Fifty-Fourth captured on July 16 and 18 during the assault on Fort Wagner. Regrettably, these prisoners were returned to the Union.

On August 29th word reached the regiment that Sergeant Cross and a few other men had received full pay while they were in Beaufort, South Carolina. On August 18th the War Department issued Circular Number 60 which stated, "officers commanding colored organizations should make an investigation to ascertain who of their men enlisted prior to January 1, 1864, and were free April 19, 1861."⁵⁵ Freedom could be established by a sworn statement from the soldier.

When Colonel Hallowell mustered the regiment for its first pay in accordance with the new regulations he administered the following oath:

You do solemnly swear that you owed no man unrequited labor on or before the 19th day of April, 1861. So help you God.⁵⁶

This oath became affectionately known in the regiment as the "Quaker Oath."⁵⁷ Some members of the Fifty-Fourth were not free men on April 19, 1861. Still they took the oath as free men. This seemed a small price to pay for these men to qualify for pay. After all the members of the regiment had experienced and gone through, it was an injustice to require them to take any oath.

September 28, 1864, was a banner day for the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) . This was the day the regiment received its back pay for eighteen months of selfless duty and service to the Union. The regiment was ecstatic that their pay

travails were over. It required the grand total of \$170,00 to pay the regiment. An officer wrote:

We had eighteen months waiting, and the kaleidoscope was turned. - nine hundred men received their money; nine hundred stories rested on the faces of those men, as they passed in at one door and out of the other. Wagner stared Readville in the face! There was use in waiting! Two days have changed the face of things, and now a pretty carnival prevails. The fiddle and other music long neglected enlivens the tents day and night. Songs burst out everywhere; dancing is incessant; boisterous shouts are heard, mimicry, burlesque, and carnival; pompous salutations are heard on all sides. Here a crowd and a preacher; there a crowd and two boxers; yonder, feasting and jubilee. In brief, they have awakened "the pert and nimble spirit of mirth, and turned melancholy forth to funerals."⁵⁸

Endnotes

¹Luis F. Emilio, A Brave Black Regiment, The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry, 1863-1865 (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1894), 36.

²Irving Werstein, The Storming of Fort Wagner (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1970), 67.

³Ibid., 38.

⁴Ibid., 67.

⁵Emilio, 44.

⁶Ibid., 46.

⁷Ibid., 46.

⁸Ibid., 46.

⁹Ibid., 43.

¹⁰Paul A. Hutton, A Brave Black Regiment (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1992), 51.

¹¹Dudley Taylor Cornish, The Sable Arm, Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865 (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966), 183.

¹²Ibid., 46.

¹³Ibid., 190.

¹⁴Ibid., 187.

¹⁵Glory.

¹⁶James M. McPherson, The Struggle for Equality (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 214.

¹⁷Werstein, 80.

¹⁸Ibid., 68.

¹⁹Ibid., 53.

²⁰Joseph T. Glathaar, Forged In Battle, The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 276.

²¹Emilio, 100.

²²Robert E. Greene, Swamp Angels (Washington, D.C.: BoMark/Greene Publishing Group, 1990), 88.

²³Emilio, 63-64.

²⁴Ibid., 65.

²⁵Hutton, 75.

²⁶Emilio, 75-77.

²⁷Ibid., 68.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., 72.

³⁰Ibid., 81.

³¹Hutton, 79.

³²Emilio, 73.

³³Ibid., 84.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

• ³⁶Emilio., 83.

³⁷Ibid., 78.

³⁸Ibid., 85.

³⁹Ibid., 77.

⁴⁰Ibid., 80.

⁴¹Ibid., 96-97.

⁴²Ibid., 100.

⁴³Walter Dean Myers, Now is Your Time: The African Aamerican Struggle for Freedom (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 153.

⁴⁴James M. McPherson, The Atlas of the Civil War (New York: MacMillan Publishers), 1994, 76.

⁴⁵Emilio, 167.

⁴⁶Todd Haskins Fredericks, 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry - Battle of Olustee, Florida, February 20, 1864 (New York: Vargas Art Publishing).

⁴⁷Emilio, 169.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Emilio, 173.

⁵⁰Fredericks.

⁵¹Emilio, 181.

⁵²Cornish, 268.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Emilio, 226.

⁵⁵Ibid., 228.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid., 236-237.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYSIS

The story of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) is a story about the struggles of African-Americans in America. It is a story of the black man's struggle to become a soldier in the United States Army and receive equal pay. It is a story of the struggle of African-Americans to earn the respect of whites, and one day gain citizenship. Above all, though, this a story about the courage and valor of a group of men that served their country under the most difficult conditions and still persevered. The soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) paved the way for blacks to serve in the military after the Civil War, received equal pay and became the precursor to the 9th and 10th Cavalry regiments formed after the Civil War.

This thesis chronicled the major events which led to the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored), the quality of its service, and the pay inequality the regiment faced. Most studies of the Fifty-Fourth concentrate on the assault of Fort Wagner. This study focused on other elements of the regiment's service and the struggles it faced.

Before the Fifty-Fourth, all black soldiers were paid \$3 less than the amount paid white privates. This was in accordance with the Militia Act of 1862. The members of the Fifty-Fourth volunteered, on

the premise that they would be paid the same as whites. When the regiment was federalized and informed that they would be paid \$3 less than white soldiers, they refused the pay. They refused the pay on the grounds that they served with, ate the same food, wore the same uniform, and fought and died just like white soldiers. In fact a black soldier performed his duties at considerably more risk than his white counterparts. It was common knowledge what the Confederates would do to captured black soldiers. Their decision was not a selfish one--it was based on principle.

This principle was not based solely on money. This was evidenced when the Massachusetts state legislature offered to pay them the difference in pay. Again they refused the pay until the federal government abolished its degrading distinction between white and black troops. The soldiers did not pout over this degradation but continued to serve and fight gallantly.

Nothing affects a soldier's morale more adversely than a pay problem. The only thing that could be worse is his family not being take care of or paid. The Fifty-Fourth experienced both of these injustices but continued its gallant service. At Morris Island they were credited with saving the Tenth Connecticut. Who can forget Sergeant James S. Wilson and "I will never retreat." Their performance during the assault on Fort Wagner was widely heralded. Sergeant Carney and three other members of the regiment received the Medal of Honor as a result of their actions. At the battle of Olustee Station they hitched ropes to a disabled train and pulled wounded Union soldiers over eight miles to safety. Sergeant Major Stephen A. Swails was recommended for

and received a commission as a result of his coolness, bravery, and efficiency in action.

It was over eighteen months before the regiment achieved equality of pay. Yet, the morale of the unit never waned. Their motto during the attack at Olustee Station was, "Three cheers for Massachusetts and seven dollars a month." Through all of the unit's travails they maintained their morale and a sense of humor.

The most interesting aspect of the regiment's service was its willingness to serve eighteen months without receiving any pay rather than be humiliated and accept less than what they deserved. This injustice was finally resolved on September 29, 1864, when the Fifty-Fourth was mustered and paid back pay. The members of the regiment had persevered for a principle. The principle was equality of pay and treatment. In attaining equality of pay the regiment proved that a black soldier's life was worth the same as a white soldier's life. Ultimately, they proved a black man's life is the same as a white man's.

It would be inappropriate to do a story on the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) without mentioning the strong leadership they received from some whites. Central amongst them was Colonel Shaw, but it all began with Governor Andrew. He knew the importance of the regiment and that the success or failure would go a long way toward elevating or depressing the view of the character of black Americans throughout the country. To insure the regiment had strong leadership, he held the officers to a higher standard than officers in other Massachusetts regiments. The officers of the Fifty-Fourth had to pass Governor Andrew's personal test and have previous

military experience. Colonel Shaw and all of the officers of the regiment deserve special recommendations. Special note should be made of the fact that they also refused pay to stand by the black soldiers until the government corrected the inequality.

The story of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) is a proud one. Yet, the regiment was often omitted from history books. Therefore, it becomes necessary to tell the regiment's story for the following reasons. (1) The regiment played a vital role in the Civil War effort of the Union. (2) The regiment was often ostracized and separated from white regiments causing the regiment to embark on unnecessarily long and grueling foot marches and yet the regiment still served and fought as bravely and gallantly as white regiments. (3) The regiment fought gallantly on James Island, Morris Island, Fort Wagner, Olustee Station, and many other battles. And (4) most important of all, the regiment did all this while receiving unequal pay.

On the night before the assault of Fort Wagner, Sergeant Major Lewis Douglass wrote his father, Frederick Douglass. He expressed his desire that the story of the regiment be accurately told so that he and other members of the regiment would not die in vain. The members of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) did **not** die in vain. They served as the precursor for black regiments formed after the Civil War. They fought and won the battle of equal pay resulting in other blacks not having to do the same.

Areas For Future Study

Blacks served with honor and distinction in the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. This did not stop the opposition to blacks becoming soldiers during the Civil War. This opposition originated from forces in both the civilian and military community. Although the greater American society was opposed to free blacks in the military, they encouraged the formation of contraband units. More research should be done on these and their accomplishments. Examples of these, and other black regiments formed early in the Civil War, were the First Kansas (Colored), the First South Carolina (Colored), and the Louisiana Native Guards.

This thesis sought to highlight some of the accomplishments of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) after the assault on Fort Wagner. This paper highlighted a few of the regiment's campaigns after the assault. A more detailed study should be done on the regiment after the assault on Fort Wagner until its retirement.

APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY OF PAY AND EVENTS

July 17, 1862	Congress passes the Militia Act authorizing the enlistment of blacks as laborers and for construction duties to meet critical manpower shortages. The Act authorizes the employment of Negro soldiers at a rate \$3 a month below that granted to white privates in the Union Armies.
August 25, 1862	Secretary of War Stanton issues an order that states, "Volunteers of African descent are to be entitled to and receive the same pay and rations as are allowed by law to volunteers in the service."
December 9, 1862	Representative John Hickman of Pennsylvania introduces a bill to authorize President Lincoln to raise 100 Negro regiments
January 1, 1863	Emancipation Proclamation becomes law.
January 26, 1863	War Department issues order that authorizes the formation of Negro units.
May 1863	The Bureau for Colored Troops is established by Secretary of War Stanton.
June 4, 1863	War Department publishes General Orders No. 163 which states that "Persons of African descent who enlist...are entitled to ten dollars per month and one ration; three dollars of which monthly pay may be in clothing."
June 9, 1863	The Fifty-Fourth is sworn into federal service.
June 30, 1863	The Fifty-Fourth is mustered for pay for the first time. Paymaster offers to pay members of the regiment \$10 per month rather than the \$13 they were promised. The regiment votes to refuse the pay until they are paid equally.

July 2, 1863 Shaw	Governor Andrew receives letter from Colonel detailing the regiment's pay reduction.
September 1863	Governor Andrew goes to Washington to seek equal pay for his black regiments. The request is denied.
November 16, 1863	Massachusetts legislature passes law to pay difference to black soldiers.
November 23, 1863	Members of the Fifty-Fourth refuse the pay from Massachusetts. Members of the regiment state "to pay this regiment the difference what the United States Government offers us and what they are legally bound to pay us is tantamount to advertising to the world that we are holding out for money and not for principle,-that we sink our manhood in consideration for a few more dollars."
December 1863	Secretary of War, Edward Stanton asks Congress to enact legislation equalizing the pay of black and white soldiers.
June 15, 1864	Congress enacts legislation granting equal pay to black soldiers. The law is retroactive to January 1, 1864 for all Negro soldiers that were free men on April 19, 1861.
August 18, 1864	War Department issues Circular No. 60 which directed commanders of Negro regiments to find out which of their men had been free on April 19, 1861.
August 29, 1864	First members of the Fifty-Fourth are paid equally.
August 31, 1864	Colonel Hollowell musters the Fifty-Fourth under rules of new legislation. Administers "Quaker Oath" to all members of the regiment.
September 28-29, 1864	Federal paymaster arrives to pay the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers (Colored) from their time of enlistment (back pay). It takes \$170,000.00 to pay the regiment.

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