

GATE OF HELL
CAMPAIGN FOR CHARLESTON HARBOR, 1863

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The bodies were three deep in the salient. Putnam was found to have fallen on his back, hiding the ghastly wound in the back of his head. The features on his face were calm as his eyes stared at the cloudless sky. All along Wagner's front, the bodies of the dead had been so covered by burnt powder that it was difficult to tell black soldiers from white. Shaw, his body reportedly pierced by seven bullets, was thought to be a mere boy lying on the parapet among his men. Colonel Harris called the scene "pitiless" and was especially moved by the conditions of the dead and dying black soldiers, whom he angrily declared had been placed in front to serve as a shield to the white troops. Such a conclusion seemed logical to Harris because the 54th had not been supplied with any means to scale the sand walls or spike the guns.³⁸

The attack had devastated the Northern regiments. Of the 5,000 Federals who attacked Battery Wagner, 1,515 became casualties with 246 men killed, 890 wounded, and 391 captured. The 54th Massachusetts lost forty-two percent of its men, while the "Saints" from the 48th New York suffered more than fifty percent casualties. The 7th New Hampshire lost eighteen officers, the most of any regiment in the war for a single battle. The Union division commander was wounded, both brigade commanders killed or mortally wounded, and every regimental commander was killed or wounded. Losses in the officer ranks were extremely heavy. Among the dead and mortally wounded were General Strong and Colonels Shaw, Putnam, and Chatfield. An officer from the 48th New York aptly summed up the assault when he commented that Wagner had been the "gate of Hell."

In comparison, the Confederates suffered light casualties, numbering only 222 men. Six Southerners were listed as prisoners, including Lieutenant Campbell, who was carried out of Wagner's salient by the retreating Federals. The heaviest losses for the Confederates came from the artillerymen who worked the field pieces on the beach and the 51st North Carolina. The garrison did, however, sustain some critical deaths among its officers, including Lieutenant Colonel Simkins, Major Ramsey, and Captains William T. Tatum and William H. Ryan, brave men whose experience and leadership would be missed in the coming weeks.³⁹

On the morning of July 19, while both sides were recovering from the fight, the Federals sought a truce to bury the dead and care for the wounded. The Confederates agreed, but would not allow the Union soldiers to come within their lines. Wagner had been roughly treated, and Beauregard did not want the enemy close enough to inspect the damage. In some ways July 19 was almost as deadly and confusing for the two sides as the night of the eighteenth. Neither the Federals nor

the Confederates had enough doctors to handle the wounded. Union surgeons quickly processed their patients and placed them on transports for Hilton Head and Beaufort where the facilities were better.

Even though ordered to keep the Union stretcher-bearers from entering their lines, the Confederate and Union enlisted men mixed freely. Soldiers, who hours earlier had been attempting to kill each other, now talked amiably, "cracked jokes and made cuts at each other." For a moment the war was set aside, but both armies knew that in a short time they would again become bitter enemies.⁴⁰

Beauregard, who had been made aware of the presence of wounded African-American soldiers, ordered special care for all Union wounded, regardless of color. Every available doctor from Charleston was sent to Morris Island where they found that the close-range firing had produced ghastly wounds which resulted in one amputation after another.

Details are sketchy, but reports indicate that only the bodies of Confederate officers were sent to Charleston. The remaining Confederate dead were hurriedly buried behind Wagner, while the Union dead, including officers, were placed in front of the battery. Due to the extreme heat, the burials were carried out as quickly as possible. The Confederates interred the dead in the easiest manner possible, caring little if they placed blacks, whites, officers, and enlisted men in common, mass graves.

While the burials and medical operations were going on, the Confederates discovered that a Federal assistant naval surgeon, John T. Luck, had somehow wandered within their lines. Though enlisted men passed freely between the pickets, Luck, who had been sent ashore by Dahlgren with other surgeons to assist Gillmore's doctors, was quickly seized and soon made to work with the Confederate doctors. Surgeon Luck was later released, and from his testimony would come one of the battle's most infamous legacies.

Surgeon Luck would later claim that while tending the wounded he fell into conversation with General Hagood and the two discussed the disposition of Colonel Shaw's body. According to Luck, Hagood declared that he had known Shaw before the war, but since Shaw had commanded black troops, Hagood stated that: "I shall bury him in the common grave with the Negroes that fell with him." In a short time, the Northern press would take Luck's unsubstantiated story and alter Hagood's supposed words to: "I buried him with his niggers."

Many years after the war, Hagood wrote that he had never known Shaw, but had seen his body on the morning of July 19. He remembered a naval surgeon who had been captured, but denied talking to

him about Shaw. Hagood also pointed out that there were no special orders given regarding the burial of Federal troops.

From other accounts, however, it is known that Hagood had given specific instructions concerning Shaw's body. In a post-battle meeting presided over by General Hagood, it was decided by Wagner's principal officers that they would return all bodies asked for, except Colonel Shaw's. As Colonel George P. Harrison Jr. of the 32nd Georgia recalled, the Southerners were quite bitter to the commanders of black troops and felt no obligation to treat them in accordance to military customs. Hagood assigned Harrison the duty of burying Shaw. As Harrison wrote, a deep and wide trench was dug in front of Wagner and Shaw's body was laid "there without roughness and with due respect," and then the burial detail "placed on his body twenty of the dead blacks whom he had commanded."

While the burial of dead continued, the doctors completed their emergency operations; and the wounded prisoners were sent to hospitals in Charleston. Beauregard initially made certain that both the black and white wounded were placed together. Conditions in the hospitals were bad. The Charleston doctors, lacking medicines because of the blockade, did what they could. The doctors were aided by some uninjured Union prisoners who served as orderlies.

The unwounded prisoners were divided by race, the whites being placed in a warehouse, while the blacks were put in the city jail and Castle Pinckney. Beauregard still did not know what to do with the black prisoners. He again wired General Cooper for clarification on the status of the African-Americans and asked for instructions. While awaiting a reply, Beauregard, along with his opponent, evaluated the situation.⁴¹

For the South, Battery Wagner and its garrison had done their job. The North was stopped from seizing the rest of Morris Island, and time was gained to complete the work at Fort Sumter, strengthen the defenses on Sullivan's Island, and finish the new defenses on James Island. Beauregard realized the Federals would either have to quit the island, launch another assault, or open siege operations. The latter seemed most likely. The battle would soon become one of engineering skill and determination.

To most Northerners, little immediate good seemed to have come from the attack. Gillmore was not criticized at the time for placing the 54th Massachusetts regiment in front, and many observers thought "prejudice was down," because of the regiment's excellent showing. The 54th was not the first African-American unit to perform well under fire. Black units had been carrying out efficient operations along the

Southern coast and in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Kansas long before the 54th took the field. Over a month before the attack on Battery Wagner, two African-American regiments with some black officers undertook an unsuccessful assault on the Confederates at Port Hudson, but this was a western battle, fought by western soldiers who had no political patrons. It did not gain the publicity and notoriety caused by the near destruction of the 54th and the death of Colonel Shaw.

The 54th had been groomed from the start by its organizers and recruiters to act as heroes in order that they become models for their race. Newspaper reporters and politicians followed their every move. If they had broken and run at Wagner, the whole experiment of using black troops in combat would have been compromised, but this did not happen. Because of the regiment's fine showing, the attack was hailed as proof that African-Americans could fully participate in military operations. The 54th lost more than forty percent of its men and fourteen of its twenty-two officers, but the losses were not as important as the performance of the regiment, which fought like a veteran unit and reformed after a terrible mauling.⁴²

The battle served as a symbol to the abolitionists and others who championed the cause of African-American troops. In a short time, Colonel Shaw and his men became national heroes. They would be immortalized in speeches, poems, editorials, drawings, and paintings. Such comments—"buried with his niggers"—only served to heighten their reputation. Their immortal charge set an example. The Federal government, which had been closely watching the conduct of its new soldiers, increased the enlistment of men of African descent. Before the war ended, nearly two hundred thousand African-American soldiers had served in the Union army. The impact of these men on the Northern war effort cannot be overestimated. The South, already outnumbered on the battlefield, found their enemies even more numerous and determined. After the assault on Battery Wagner, a new face was added to the war from which there was no turning back.

Besides its importance to the cause of black troops, the attack on Battery Wagner was also a turning point in military technology. In his planning, General Gillmore had tremendously underestimated the sand battery. In February 1862, Gillmore destroyed Fort Pulaski's brick walls with rifled artillery, but Battery Wagner was not Pulaski. The Federal artillery was quite capable of crushing a masonry work, but it could only disfigure Wagner's earthen ramparts. At Pulaski, Gillmore had ended the era of masonry fortifications. At Wagner he opened the era of trench warfare.

The bombardment of Battery Wagner was one of the largest in the