

I WANT YOU TO PROVE YOURSELVES MEN

The black troops of the 54th Massachusetts face a brutal test. Before them stands Fort Wagner, guardian of Morris Island. On its ramparts, they will strike a blow for racial equality — with their own hands.

By GREGORY J.W. URWIN

The sun sparkled in a cloudless sky over Readville, Massachusetts, at 11:00 A.M., May 18, 1863, as the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry formed a hollow square and waited to receive its colors. With the Civil War beginning its third year, such ceremonies had lost their novelty, but nearly 3,000 well-wishers and curiosity seekers from nearby Boston turned out to see this new regiment mount its first public parade. In the crowd stood such celebrated abolitionists as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips. No less a personage than

the Bay State's governor, John Albion Andrew, officiated over the proceedings.

"My own personal honor," Andrew told the attentive troops, "is identified with yours. I stand or fall, as a man and a magistrate, with the rise or fall . . . of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment." The round politician meant every word. For him, the 54th represented the consummation of a dream, and a considerable risk. All of the regiment's 1,000 enlisted men were African-Americans — participants in a controversial experiment. They belonged to the first black regiment raised by a Northern state east of

the Mississippi. Their conduct would not only affect Andrew's standing, but would weigh heavily in an oppressed race's struggle for dignity and acceptance.

No governor gave stauncher support to the Northern war effort than Andrew. A long-time abolitionist, he believed the struggle to preserve the Union should include the eradication of slavery. When, on January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, Andrew began pressing the Federal government for permission to enroll blacks in the Union army. Unless African-Americans fought for their own



freedom, Andrew declared, they would remain "a poor, despised, subordinated body of human beings . . . who had lost their masters but not found a country." On January 26, the War Department authorized the governor to form a "special corps" composed of "persons of African descent."

Andrew envisioned the 54th Massachusetts "as a model for all future Colored Regiments." The few black outfits already in existence consisted mainly of runaway slaves, illiterate "contrabands" whose conditioning as docile servants might inhibit their transformation into soldiers. Andrew decided to fill his new black

regiment with Northern free blacks, men who had grown up without having to call anyone "master."

From the outset, Andrew recognized that proper leadership was crucial to the 54th's success. For officers, he sought young white gentlemen "of military experience, of firm Anti-Slavery principles, ambitious, superior to a vulgar contempt for color, and having faith in the capacity of Colored men for military service." These qualities were perfectly embodied in the man Andrew chose as the regiment's colonel, 25-year-old Robert Gould Shaw.

"Rob" Shaw was born in Boston on October 10, 1837. His parents,

A lithograph of the 54th's dusk fight for Fort Wagner.



A white officer and his "Colored" company. A lithograph adorning a recruiting poster for black regiments.

wealthy abolitionists, reared their only son for a life of privilege and principle. "He was . . . one of the most attractive men I ever knew," wrote a friend, who added, "he had such a single and loyal kind of heart: I don't believe he ever did an unkind . . . act without trying to make up for it afterwards." As an adolescent, Shaw studied in Europe, then attended Harvard College for three years, withdrawing in 1859 to enter the business world in New York City.

Anticipating the breakup of the Union, Shaw joined the 7th New York State Militia, a fashionable parade unit that rushed to the defense of Washington, D.C., at the outbreak of hostilities in April 1861. A few weeks after his arrival in the capital, he secured a second lieutenant's commission in the 2d Massachusetts Infantry. "His features were delicate and well-cut, and set off by a fine complexion and winning, merry blue eyes and golden

hair," recalled a fellow officer. "He had charming, easy, frank manners, and gay, yet thoughtful ways. Everyone liked him, and all trusted him implicitly." Thanks to his popularity and attention to duty, Shaw made captain in 15 months. He campaigned in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and survived the Battle of Antietam, Maryland, September 17, 1862, where a spent bullet bruised his neck.

An early advocate of black recruitment, Shaw firmly embraced Andrew's offer to head the 54th Massachusetts. Once committed, he defined his mission as proving "that a negro can be made a good soldier."

Together, Andrew and Shaw assembled an impressive group of regimental officers. "A large number have seen service before," remarked an abolitionist newspaper, "and . . . few regiments have on their roster so many names from the best families of the . . . State." Like their colonel, the officers were young — their average age was 23 — and they exuded a reforming zeal that clashed with the racial prejudice of mainstream Northern society. First Lieutenant Garth Wilkinson "Wilky"

James, the 54th's 18-year-old adjutant, spoke for the most of his colleagues when he testified: "I had been brought up in the belief that slavery was a monstrous wrong, its destruction worthy of a man's best effort, even unto the laying down of life." As seen by his father, James was "vastly attached to the Negro-soldier cause" and "sure that enormous results to civilization are coming out of it."

Undeterred by the smallness of his state's black population, Andrew drew the bulk of his recruits from outside Massachusetts. His agents opened a network of recruiting stations stretching as far west as Chicago, Illinois. Frederick Douglass, the noted black leader, proved an invaluable ally in this work. Mustering his considerable literary talents, he published a stirring manifesto, "MEN OF COLOR, TO ARMS!" which appeared in newspapers across the North. "The iron gate of our prison stands half open," he urged. "One gallant rush from the North will fling it wide open, while four millions of our brothers and sisters shall march out into liberty." Too old to serve himself, Douglass en-



**Fort Wagner's
defenders
photographed in
1861, the
Washington Light
Infantry.**

listed his sons Charles and Lewis, the latter becoming Shaw's sergeant major. By May 12, 1863, the 54th had exceeded its 1,000-man quota. Andrew appropriated the surplus to start a second black regiment, the 55th:

Considering all the ridicule and opposition aroused by Andrew's experiment, the 54th's rapid recruitment was no mean feat. In some towns, the governor's representatives had to limit knowledge of their presence to local blacks to avoid attacks by Negrophobic whites. Even in comparatively enlightened Massachusetts, citizens of New Bedford taunted one of Shaw's officers: "There goes the captain of the Negro Company! He thinks negroes will fight! They will turn and run at the first sight of the enemy!"

For all his idealism, Shaw took a no-nonsense approach to soldiering. He set high physical standards for the rank and file, rejecting up to a third of the applicants who reported to his receiving camp at Readville. He adopted the same disciplinary code as enforced within well-behaved white outfits, standing un-

ruly men on barrels or having them trussed up and gagged. Though strict, Shaw was also fair, and the troops idolized him. "No one could be kinder to a set of men," claimed one private, "than he was to us."

The 54th demonstrated the effectiveness of Shaw's methods at the May 18 flag ceremony in Readville, inspiring one observer to comment: "Here was a regiment of a thousand men, every one of them with an Enfield musket . . . and apparently with rather an uncommon amount of muscle and will to devote to the using of it. They marched well, they wheeled well, they stood well, they handled their guns well, and there was about their whole array an air of completeness and order and *morale* such as I have not seen surpassed in any white regiment."

That same day, orders arrived assigning the 54th to the Union army's Department of the South, a string of island outposts and fortified towns clustered along the coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. On

May 28, parading through Boston to the ringing cheers of the populace, the black soldiers boarded a steamer bound for Dixie.

Upon reaching departmental headquarters, the 54th Massachusetts was brigaded with the 2d South Carolina, a ragtag "contraband" regiment. More than a month of nothing but routine garrison duty followed. Those weeks of segregation and relative inactivity stung Shaw's pride. "It seems to me quite important that the colored soldiers should be associated as much as possible with the white troops," he petitioned a superior, "in order that they may have other witnesses besides their own officers to what they are capable of doing." Shaw confided his frustration to Charlotte Forten, a black woman from Philadelphia who taught in a school for escaped slaves. "I do hope they will give us a chance," he sighed.

The 54th's first taste of action only added to Shaw's worries. On June 11, his regiment and the 2d South Carolina conducted an amphibious raid against Darien, Georgia. To Shaw's horror, Colonel

James Montgomery, the expedition commander, had the defenseless town sacked and burned. "I have gone through the war without dishonour," Shaw fumed in a letter home, "and I do not like to degenerate into a plunderer and a robber, and the same applies to every officer in my regiment." The chivalrous colonel despised "mere guerrilla warfare." He yearned to lead his men in "a fair stand-up fight, such as our Potomac army is accustomed to."

Shaw's period of anxious waiting ended abruptly on July 8, when the 54th embarked to join the 10,950-man army that Union Brigadier General (soon to be Major General) Quincy Adams Gillmore was assembling to besiege Charleston, South Carolina. Renowned as a brilliant artilleryman and engineer, Gillmore wanted to seize Morris Island, part of the southern side of Charleston Harbor. From Cumming's Point, on the island's northern tip, his rifled cannon could fire over the intervening 1,390 yards of water and pulverize Fort Sumter, which guarded the harbor's mouth. Once Sumter was silenced, Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren and a cooperating naval squadron could enter the harbor and force the surrender of the proud city most Northerners blamed for starting the war.

At 7:00 A.M., July 10, a Union brigade landed on lower Morris Island. Closely supported by naval gunfire, the Federals quickly occupied the southern three-quarters of the island. All that stood between Gillmore and full possession of that windswept pile of white quartz sand was Fort Wagner, a Confederate stronghold spanning the island near its slimmest point.

Surveying Fort Wagner with his field glasses, Gillmore was hardly impressed. "To us," he recalled, "the place presented the appearance of a succession of low, irregular sand-hills like the rest of the island."

For once, the eyes of this practiced engineer deceived him. Fort Wagner ranked among the most formidable earthworks ever reared on American soil. It measured 630 feet from east to west, and 275 feet from north to south. Its sloping sand walls towered to a height of 30 feet and were held in place by revetments

of turf, sandbags and palmetto logs. The south wall featured a pair of projecting bastions, plus a moat five feet deep and 50 feet wide. In the fort's southeast corner sat a massive bombproof shelter. Constructed of timbers 12 inches thick and topped with 10 feet of sand, it could shield up to 900 men from the biggest projectiles at Gillmore's disposal. Twelve heavy guns poked their ugly snouts over Wagner's thick ramparts, eight of them pointing southward.

The only way for land forces to approach Wagner was from the south, along a stretch of beach no more than 100 yards wide. Bounded on the east by the Atlantic Ocean and on the west by the marshes of Vincent's Creek, this narrow strip offered little cover and no room to maneuver.

In his ignorance, Gillmore tried to take Wagner without a preliminary bombardment. At first light on July 11, three blue-clad regiments raced over the packed sand, hoping to catch the garrison napping. But Confederate Brigadier General William B. Taliaferro, commander of the fort, was more than ready for the attack, and the Federals met with a stunning repulse, incurring 339 casualties.

Disappointed but not discouraged, Gillmore resolved to storm the fort again. But first he would soften up the place. For the next week, Union fatigue parties labored under a broiling sun to erect four protected batteries on an angular line running 1,330 to 1,920 yards from the enemy's works. Taliaferro discerned Gillmore's intentions, increased Wagner's garrison to 1,300 men, and augmented its armament with two 32-pound carronades and four 12-pound howitzers.

The 54th Massachusetts missed the opening acts of the drama unfolding before Wagner. The regiment accompanied a 3,800-man division Gillmore sent to adjacent James Island to divert the Rebels from his main effort. On July 16, three of Shaw's companies got involved in a sharp skirmish at dawn. The untested black troops bore themselves well, stalling superior numbers long enough to prevent the capture of retiring pickets from a white Union regiment. Later that evening, Shaw received orders to



The Boston hero of the Fort Wagner battle, Colonel Robert Shaw. The scion of an old and distinguished New England family, he would die before seeing his clan amass a vast fortune by speculating in Reconstruction-era Southern industries.



**Engineers and men
of the 54th working
close to Fort
Wagner behind a
"sap roller."**

bring his men over to Morris Island.

By the morning of July 18, Gillmore was ready to take a second crack at Fort Wagner. At 10:00 A.M., the 41 cannon and siege mortars emplaced in his batteries roared into action. Around noon, six ironclads and five wooden gunboats hove into range to pound Wagner with some of the heaviest guns afloat. It was arguably the most intensive bombardment of the war. Before it ended, an estimated 9,000 shells had plowed into the fort. The Confederates replied with a few guns discharged intermittently, and ceased fire altogether at 4:00 P.M.

The enemy's silence convinced Gillmore that Wagner's guns had

been dismantled and its defenders annihilated or driven from the fort. Once again, he was wrong. Most of the Southerners had found refuge inside the bombproof. The rest had crouched along the inner bases of the parapets. Aside from kicking up spectacular geysers of smoke and sand, the Union artillery had caused no significant damage, and had killed only eight Rebels and wounded 20 more.

Expecting feeble resistance at best, Gillmore scheduled an assault for dusk. This time, he would throw in 14 regiments instead of three, a total of 6,000 men. They were organized into three brigades: the first under Brigadier General George C. Strong; the second under Strong's West Point classmate, Colonel Haldimand S. Putnam; and the third under Brigadier General Thomas G. Stevenson.

Gillmore detailed Brigadier Gen-

eral Truman Seymour to supervise the assault. Seymour was a crusty veteran of the Regular Army, and a member of the garrison that had surrendered Fort Sumter to the Confederates in 1861. Sneering at Wagner, he vowed, "I can run right over it." He then made a bad joke that would return to haunt him: "Well, I guess we will . . . put those damned niggers from Massachusetts in the advance; we may as well get rid of them one time as another." In reality, Seymour selected the 54th Massachusetts because it was the biggest regiment available and had demonstrated its steadiness on James Island. (Six weeks of attrition had reduced the 54th to 22 officers and 600 enlisted men, but that was still a respectable number.)

Plagued by a lack of transport and two all-night thunderstorms, the 54th Massachusetts did not arrive on Morris Island until 5:00 P.M., while Gillmore's barrage was at its height. Shaw reported to Gen-

eral Strong, who duly informed him, "You may lead the column, if you say 'yes.' Your men, I know, are worn out, but do as you choose." On purely tactical grounds, Shaw should have declined the honor. Kept on their feet for nearly 50 hours, his troops had received no rations and precious little sleep. But he had been praying for a chance like this, and he accepted proudly.

The 54th marched to its starting point 1,200 yards below Wagner. The beach was not wide enough to accommodate a full line of battle, so Shaw deployed his 10 companies in two lines — five in front and five behind. The other regiments formed in columns of companies to Shaw's rear, the entire division stretching a full mile down the beach.

Preparations for the attack mirrored the overconfidence of the Union high command. Gillmore failed to give the troops any special equipment to deal with the obstacles they would encounter. No one briefed officers on the layout of their objective. And Seymour, instead of utilizing the full weight of his division, opted to commit it piecemeal, a brigade at a time. Colonel Putnam was dismayed by the carelessness of his superiors. "We are all going into Wagner like a flock of sheep," he grumbled prophetically.

Impatient for the fray, General Strong rode up to cheer the weary 54th, shouting, "Is there a man here who thinks himself unable to sleep in that fort tonight?" Six hundred voices thundered back, "No!" Pointing to a color sergeant, Strong asked, "Is there any man to take his place if this brave color bearer should fall?" The excited blacks lifted their arms and swore, "Yes! Yes!" After Strong departed to exhort the rest of his brigade, Shaw delivered a brief but memorable pep talk of his own: "Now I want you to prove yourselves men."

When the signal to advance came at 7:45 P.M., Shaw issued these instructions: "Move in quick time until within a hundred yards of the fort; then double quick, and charge!" At the colonel's command — "Forward!" — the 54th Massachusetts moved out with parade-ground precision, each man's feet slapping the sand at the prescribed 110 paces per minute. Before it had

gone far, the regiment discovered its attack route had been eaten away by the ocean tide. Soon the companies on the right were marching in knee-deep water.

As Seymour's column passed through Gillmore's batteries, Union artillerymen slackened their fire, but Rebel guns on James Island, at Cumming's Point and Fort Sumter, and on Sullivan's Island opened up, dropping shells on the beach. Emerging from their shelters, Fort Wagner's defenders waited until Shaw's regiment closed to 200 yards. Then they cut loose all the firepower they had. An officer back with Putnam's brigade described Wagner as a "volcano of detonating death." Sergeant Major Lewis Douglass saw exploding shells clear spaces 20 feet wide in the 54th's ranks.

Staggered by their first exposure to such concentrated fire, the blacks hesitated, but only for a moment. Waving his sword, Shaw sprang to the front, shouting, "Forward, my brave boys!" The men cheered, closed ranks and broke into a run. A shell fragment struck Adjutant "Wilky" James in the side, but he was too intoxicated by the spirit of the charge to let a wound stop him, and chased after his colonel. When the color sergeant carrying the unit's United States flag tumbled into a rifle pit, Sergeant William H. Carney seized the banner and scurried forward.

Had Shaw driven straight ahead, he would have mounted Wagner's southeast bastion and possibly won the battle. The 31st North Carolina Infantry, the Rebel regiment assigned to hold that sector, was so cowed by Gillmore's bombardment that it refused to leave the bombproof. For reasons no one will ever know, Shaw veered left, dashing toward the rampart connecting the two bastions. Here stood the steady 51st North Carolina and the Charleston Battalion, blazing away with nearly 900 muskets.

The blacks ignored their losses and followed Shaw into the moat, sloshing through four feet of water, then scrambling onto the parapet. Two carronades on the southwest bastion and a howitzer stationed outside the fort enfiladed the dripping Yankees, raking them with grapeshot and canister. A cannon



Two views of G.W. James, Colonel Shaw's friend and aide.





**Sergeant Carney,
the Medal of Honor
winner who saved
the 54th's flag.**

blast blew away Sergeant Major Douglass' sword scabbard, but he hardly noticed. "Come on, boys," he bellowed at his comrades, "and fight for God and Governor Andrew!" As Adjutant James neared the moat, a canister ball smashed his ankle. He fell onto his hands and knees, fighting for consciousness while his comrades dashed "by me and over me, with deafening shouts and deafening curses."

Shaw moved untouched through

the maelstrom of whirling lead and iron. He clawed his way up the sandy slope, calling, "Rush on, rush on, boys!" The first to reach the top, he stood erect, pointed his sword at the sky, and cried out, "Onward boys!" At that moment, a North Carolinian fired his musket, and Shaw pitched dead into the fort, a bullet in his heart.

Too decimated to carry the works, fragments of the 54th took cover along the outer side of the south wall, firing over it at their equally stubborn opponents. The Federals clung there for nearly an hour, struggling to maintain a salient so the rest of Strong's brigade could come up and turn the tide. The relief they expected never arrived. Eventually, the surviving blacks and their few officers slipped away into the

protective darkness and headed for the rear.

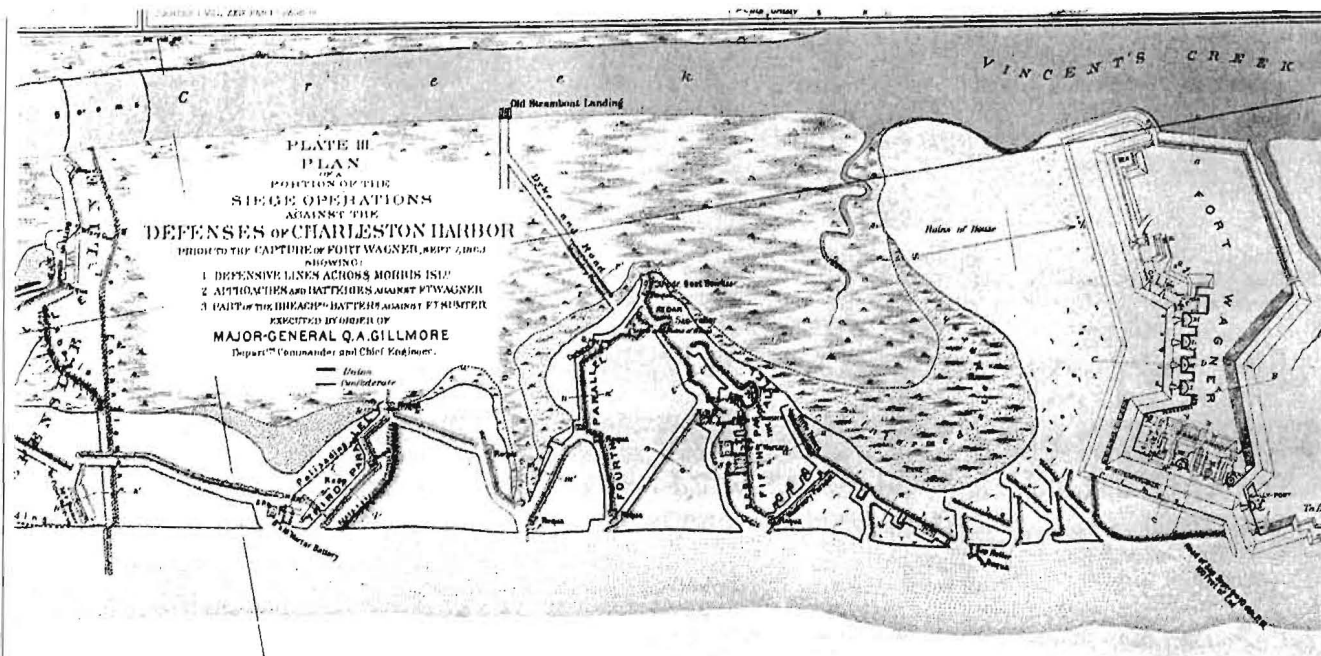
Among the last to leave was Sergeant Carney, who had planted the Stars and Stripes atop the enemy's parapet. He was hit in the breast, right arm and both legs, but he refused to relinquish his tattered flag until he reached a Union field hospital. Before he collapsed from loss of blood, he gasped, "Boys, I but did my duty; the dear old flag never touched the ground." Carney became the first African-American awarded the Medal of Honor.

Strong's five white regiments lost sight of Shaw's command in the fading twilight and directed their attack against Wagner's southeast bastion. Unaccountably delayed for 15 minutes, Putnam's brigade hurried forward in support. But those four additional regiments were too late to alter the outcome. Confederate cannoneers and volleying infantry mowed down whole companies of Yankees. Canister dropped Strong with a mortal wound in the thigh, and Seymour was put out of action when grapeshot struck his foot.

Reports of the carnage before the fort sapped Gillmore's nerve, and he cancelled an order from Seymour summoning the assistance of Stevenson's brigade. Unaware of Gillmore's meddling, Colonel Putnam ran the gauntlet of Rebel fire, clambered into the bastion, and took charge of the remnants of the two shattered brigades. By then, the Southerners had shifted some riflemen from the west and trained enough guns on the bastion to stop the blue-clad intruders from gaining more ground. The Federals were trapped in a confined space and subjected to a three-sided crossfire. They fell in heaps, their corpses doubling as gory breastworks.

Putnam rallied the survivors, voicing his determination to hold out to the last. The Yankees drove a charging Confederate company back to the Charleston Battalion. But seconds later, an enemy bullet penetrated Putnam's forehead, blowing off the back of his skull.

Demoralized and virtually leaderless, the remaining Northerners sought safety in flight. The arrival of Confederate reinforcements in



CWIT COLLECTION

the form of the 32d Georgia Infantry hastened the debacle to its conclusion. Three hours after their foes had entered it, the Georgians swarmed into the bastion, capturing dozens of Federals too numbed by the butchery or too badly wounded to get away.

Conceived in arrogance, Gillmore's second assault on Fort Wagner had ended in disaster. Union casualties totaled 1,515, including 111 officers. Only three regimental commanders returned unscathed. Of the 10 regiments in the storming column, the 54th Massachusetts had sustained the greatest loss — 34 killed, 146 wounded, and 92 missing. Federal authorities later learned that 49 of the missing black soldiers had been either fatally wounded in the battle or murdered on the spot by their Southern captors. Taliaferro's victorious Confederates had suffered only 181 casualties.

The only bright spot Union partisans found in the one-sided slaughter was the sacrificial bravery of Shaw's 54th Massachusetts. "The Fifty-fourth did well and nobly," testified the dying General Strong. "They moved up as gallantly as any troops could, and with their enthusiasm they deserved a better fate." The unit did not abandon its foothold on Fort Wagner until it lost two-thirds of its officers and close to half its men. Had Governor Andrew's showcase black regiment done any less, the Northern public would have seriously questioned the

wisdom of arming African-Americans as soldiers. "In that terrible battle," wrote Frederick Douglass, "under the wing of night, more cavils in respect of the quality of Negro manhood were set at rest than could have been during a century of ordinary life and observation." Before the war's close, the Union army would have recruited 178,895 blacks to fill 166 regiments, a much-needed addition in manpower that helped crush the Confederacy. Shaw and his men had not died in vain.

Of all the policies implemented by the Union government, none infuriated the Confederates more than the employment of black combat troops. The practice struck hard at slavery and white supremacy, both fundamental to Southern society and the Confederate cause. Consequently, the defenders of Fort Wagner were outraged to find themselves doing battle with blacks. They reacted with an ungenerous gesture that was intended as an insult, but instead won Robert Gould Shaw a martyr's crown and made his name a household word across the North.

Finding Shaw among the slain, Wagner's garrison treated him with deliberate disdain. They stripped him down to his underwear and put his corpse on display within their works the morning after the assault. A little later, they dug a trench outside the fort, flung Shaw's body into it, and dropped 25 dead blacks on top. When a Union truce party

An Official Records Atlas map showing the ground over which the 54th was forced to fight in summer 1863.

asked for the return of the colonel's remains, the fort's commander allegedly answered: "We buried him with his Niggers!"

A prolonged Federal siege finally forced the Confederates to evacuate Fort Wagner in September 1863, but no search was made to locate Shaw's unmarked grave. His grieving family asked that he be allowed to rest undisturbed with the men he had led. "In death as in life, then," observed philosopher William James, a brother of Shaw's adjutant, "the Fifty-fourth bore witness to the brotherhood of man." The white colonel and his black soldiers lay buried together until the relentless sea washed away part of Morris Island, strewing their bones into a harbor that has known peace for nearly 125 years. ■

Dr. Gregory J.W. Urwin is associate professor of history at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway. His interest in the Fort Wagner assault stems from raising and commanding a company of black reenactors for the upcoming Tri-Star Pictures release, Glory.