

Glory Be

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Glory. Freddie Fields, producer. Edward Zwick, director. RCA Columbia Pictures. 1990.

If movies are larger than life, then the story of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was made for the big screen. Organized in the spring of 1863, following Lincoln's promulgation of the Emancipation Proclamation, the 54th Massachusetts embodied the transformation of the war for Union into a war for freedom. Its organizers—led by Massachusetts governor John Andrew, Senator William Sumner, and John Brown-supporter Charles Stearns—were among the most active white opponents of slavery. Its recruiters—led by Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and John Mercer Langston—were among the most militant black abolitionists. Its ranks were filled by black men eager to enact the principles of equality and to bloody the Southern chivalry in the process. After enrollment and training, the regiment shipped out for the Sea Islands of South Carolina, where it was placed in the front ranks of the Union assault on Charleston, the seat of the Southern secessionist movement. Soon thereafter, the men of the 54th took to the field against the Confederate stronghold of Fort Wagner. When the smoke cleared, they had won everything but the battle, demonstrating their mettle to all except the most obdurate racists. But the rebels were not the 54th's only enemy. Like black soldiers throughout the war, the men of the 54th fought on two fronts, battling not only the slave-holding regime, but also the discriminatory policies of their own government.

The story of the 54th is the narrow neck in the hourglass of Afro-American history between the American Revolution and the age of segregation. Drawing on more than a century of slavery in the South and freedom in the North, the black men who filled the ranks of the 54th carried the aspirations and ideals of their people into the confrontation with the slave-holding enemy. The experience transformed them. Traveling widely, seeing the world from the perspective of the victor, and sharpening their racial consciousness, they returned home with a new sense of their power to remake their lives. Veterans of the 54th moved into positions of leadership within the black community and played an important role in representing black people in the larger white-dominated society. Their wartime service shaped black life into the twentieth century.

Other black men—some 179,000—shared this experience with the