



Robert Gould Shaw's Courageous Decision

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

Frederick Douglass wrote, "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship." Blacks had served in the U.S. military during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, even though a 1792 federal law had forbidden them from bearing arms for the United States. Whether blacks should be allowed to join the U.S. army during the Civil War was a controversial question as President Lincoln feared that allowing them to do so would push the loyal slave states to secede.

However, by 1862, an increasingly large number of former slaves had been freed as a result of Union victories. Additionally, fewer whites were volunteering to fight in the war. These factors led Congress in July of 1862 to enact the Second Confiscation and Militia Act, which freed slaves who had masters in the Confederate Army and allowed blacks to serve in the military. A few days later, Lincoln released a preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, which promised freedom to former slaves who served in the U.S. army.

Military service was something abolitionists in the North had been pushing for from the beginning of the conflict. However, just how these new "colored" units would be organized and how they would perform under the duress of combat was unknown. In March of 1863, John A. Andrew, the Governor of Massachusetts, commissioned the first of these new regiments. It would be designated the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment and be primarily made up of African-Americans. However, per the order of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, white officers would command it. The man called upon for this task of commanding the 54th was Robert Gould Shaw.

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Robert Gould Shaw was born in Boston in October 1837. He was the only son of a wealthy mercantile family who possessed radical abolitionist views. Shaw was a rebellious youth who often tested the patience of his parents and teachers. He found the worlds of college and business to be boring and longed for more. As the crisis deepened in the nation, Shaw volunteered his service part time with the 7th New York militia, a regiment made up mostly of boys from high society in New York City. After the election of Abraham Lincoln and the secession of the southern states, the men in the 7th were enlisted into the regular army for a period of thirty days.

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Life in the army was not easy or glamorous. The troops slept in the rain, wind, mud, freezing cold, and stifling heat. Disease ran rampant through camps and doctors only had rudimentary methods with which to comfort the soldiers under their care. Bouts of extreme boredom were only broken by the monotony of training drills.

Day after day, the men would be mustered out of their camps at dawn for roll call and march to and fro for hours on end in tedious preparation for contact with the enemy. Combat in the Civil War was gruesome and extremely dangerous. The soft lead .54 caliber minie balls used by the armies would shatter bones, causing serious injuries in what would otherwise be minor wounds.

Once his thirty-day enlistment came to an end, Shaw re-enlisted as a lieutenant in the 2nd Massachusetts Infantry. He served with this regiment for the first bloody two years of the war, taking part in combat in several major engagements, including the battles of Winchester and Cedar Mountain. In September 1862, Shaw found himself with his regiment at the horrific slaughter at the battle of Antietam.

It was after this narrow Union victory that Lincoln made his Emancipation Proclamation and, with it, the provision allowing African-Americans to serve in the Union Army. In early 1863, Shaw was approached by his father, who asked if he would take charge of a new colored regiment being formed, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment.

This decision was a difficult one for Shaw. He only had one year left to serve on his original enlistment, and had seen more than his fair share of carnage during the war. He had developed an interest in a woman, from whom he was separated because of the war. Additionally, he would be taking command of a new, untried, and controversial unit that would be under the microscope of public scrutiny. Finally, the Confederate government made a declaration on December 23rd, 1862, which stated, "Every white person being a commissioned officer or acting as such, who during the present war shall command Negroes or mulattoes in arms against the Confederate States, or who shall voluntarily aid Negroes or mulattoes in any military enterprise, attack or conflict in such service, shall be deemed as inciting servile insurrection, and shall if captured be put to death or be otherwise punished at the discretion of the court."

Shaw struggled with this decision. He wondered if he could stand being in the army for another three years away from his love and his family. He also thought of duty, his country, and the cause for which he had engaged. In the end, the latter considerations won out. Robert Gould Shaw would become the colonel of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry regiment.

Shaw had to fight hard every step of the way to ensure equal treatment for his troops. Through his efforts, he secured good uniforms and equal pay for his soldiers. He went South with his regiment as ordered, hoping to test them in the crucible of battle. On July 18, 1863, while leading his men in a gallant charge against Fort Wagner outside of Charleston,

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South Carolina, Robert Gould Shaw was killed. 54 members of the 54th were killed, 67 went missing, and a further 149 were wounded. However, the bravery they displayed proved that black soldiers were the equal of their white comrades.

In what they thought would be a final act of disgrace, the Confederate soldiers dumped Shaw's body in a mass grave along with many of his black soldiers. After the fort fell in September 1863, the Shaw family was contacted to see if they would like to retrieve the body of their son. They declined the offer, knowing that Robert would rather spend eternity with his men.