

GLORY

Glory is a 1989 American drama war film. Captain Robert Gould Shaw leads a company of Union soldiers from a Massachusetts Infantry Regiment in an attack on Confederate troops at the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862. His regiment suffers heavy losses, Shaw is wounded and later loses consciousness. He is awakened by a black gravedigger named John Rawlins and sent to a field hospital. While receiving medical attention, Shaw is told that President Lincoln is on the verge of passing the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves in rebel held territory. While on leave in Boston, Shaw is promoted to Colonel and given command of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first all-black regiment. He accepts and asks his friend, Cabot Forbes, to be his second-in-command. Their first volunteer soldier is another of Shaw's friends, an educated black man named Thomas Searles.

Many more men join the regiment including an escaped slave named Trip, a free black man named Jupiter Sharts, as well as the gravedigger Rawlins. At the military camp, the company is forced to endure the unyielding and strict discipline of Sergeant Major Mulcahy. After spending time doing mostly menial work, Shaw realizes his unit is to be used only for manual labor. Shaw confronts his commanding officers and threatens to report them to the War Department if the 54th infantry is not deployed for combat. Shaw's request is granted, as the regiment later participates in a skirmish in South Carolina where they successfully repulse a Confederate attack. Soon after, Shaw volunteers the 54th infantry to lead an assault on Fort Wagner. After nightfall, he leads the men in a charge upon the fort.

The film's epilogue displays a series of graphics stating that Fort Wagner. It also notes that news of the regiment's courage spurred the recruitment of numerous black volunteers and that, by the end of the war, there were more than 180,000 African American men in uniform, a fact which President Lincoln considered instrumental in securing a victory for the Union.

Accuracy:

Glory, the epic account of the 54th Massachusetts, one of the first all-black regiments in the Civil War, contains numerous historical inaccuracies. Some of them are minor. For instance, the regiment's climactic assault against Battery Wagner, the Confederate stronghold guarding Charleston harbor, actually took place from south to north, rather than north to south as depicted in the movie.

But many of the inaccuracies are major. Robert Gould Shaw was not Governor Andrew's first choice to command the regiment. When the command was offered him, he hesitated before deciding to accept. More seriously from the standpoint of historical accuracy, the 54th, portrayed in the movie as made up largely of runaway slaves like John Rawlins or Private Trip was in fact, a regiment of freedmen, like Thomas Searles, recruited not only from Massachusetts but New York and Pennsylvania as well. Two of Frederick Douglass's sons were among the first to volunteer for the 54th and Lewis Douglass, the elder son, served from the outset as the regiment's sergeant-major.

At the time of the Civil War, most Southerners believed that blacks were naturally servile. But there was doubt about their manly spirit in the North as well. In the movie, a reporter from Harper's Monthly says to Matthew Broderick's Col. Shaw, "will they fight? A million readers want to know." To which Shaw replies, "a million and one," illustrating the fact that in 1863, even elite New England abolitionists had their doubts about the manliness of blacks. By inaccurately depicting the 54th as a regiment of former slaves, Glory reveals the deeper truth that blacks in general were not the natural slaves that Southerners believed them to be and that abolitionists feared that they might be. "Who asks now in doubt and derision, 'Will the Negro fight?'" observed one abolitionist after the assault of the 54th against Battery Wagner. "The answer is spoken from the cannon's mouth...it comes to us from...those graves beneath Fort Wagner's walls, which the American people will never forget."