

Transcription

The Attack on Fort Wagner

From *The Liberator* – July 31, 1863

ASSAULT UPON FORT WAGNER

Desperate valor and terrible loss of the Massachusetts Colored Fifty-Fourth Regiment—Death of Col. Shaw and Col. Putnam

Another attack upon Fort Wagner has failed. Beauregard's star is again in the ascendant. His dispatch says that the federal loss in the attempt to storm the fort on the 18th was, including prisoners, about 2,000, while his own loss was but 150, including, however, many valuable officers. The battle was opened by a furious bombardment of eleven hours from our batteries and monitors. The assault was made by night. The storming party was led by the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts (colored), under Col. Shaw, who, arriving within two hundred yards of the works, gave a fierce shout and rushed up the glacis, followed by other regiments of Gen. Strong's brigade. The enemy awaited the onset in perfect silence, until our men were swarming over the glacis, when they opened upon them furiously with grape, canister, and a continuous fusilade of small arms. The gallant negroes plunged on, regardless of the fire, until many of them had crossed the ditch, containing four feet of water, and had gained the parapet. They were, however, overpowered, and forced to retire with a loss of their brave Colonel, and nearly half their men. The Sixth Connecticut and Ninth Maine, which were next in line, also suffered terribly, and were forced to retire. The Third New Hampshire, led by Gens. Strong and Jackson, now rushed forward, and gained the ditch, but the second brigade failed to be in the readiness as a support, and Gen. Strong gave the order to fall back, soon after which he received a severe wound. The other brigades now came up, and rushing impetuously upon the works, scaled the parapet and descended into the fort. Here a hand to hand conflict ensued, but the enemy rallying in overpowering numbers at length drove our gallant heroes from the position they had so dearly won. The Forty-eighth New York suffered most severely, being accidentally fired upon by one of our own regiments.

[Correspondence of the N.Y. *Evening Post*]

Port Royal, July 24, 1863

Fresh honors crown the colored troops. So fully had their character for bravery and reliance been established, that in the recent assault upon Fort Wagner the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts were allowed to lead our veteran troops, nor did they (to their honor be it said) refuse either the lead or their support.

On forming them into line, General Strong who had by his soldierly and kind bearing toward them secured their confidence, raising his stentorian voice, cried out, "Is there a man here who thinks himself unable to sleep in that fort to-night?" The earth rang with the thunder of their "No!" Turning to the color-bearer, he said: "Is there any man to take his place, if this brave color-bearer should fall?" With lifting of hands, and leaping, and almost yelling, all through the enthusiastic ranks, came the response, "Yes! Yes!!"

GENERAL STRONG'S TESTIMONY

From General Strong himself, as he lay in the hospital four days afterward, suffering from his ghastly wound, I learned that these men had "had no sleep for three nights, no food since morning, and had marched several miles." Under cover of darkness they stormed the fort, facing a stream of fire, faltering not till the ranks were broken by shot and shell, and in all these severe tests, which would have tried even veteran troops, "they fully met my expectations," said the General, "for many of them were killed, wounded or captured on the walls of the fort. No man broke till fired upon."

THE SUPPORT OF THE COLORED REGIMENT

The Sixth Connecticut, who had honored themselves at Jacksonville co-operating with colored troops, supported the Fifty-fourth in the assault. Several of the officers lying in the hospital confirm the testimony of General Strong. The regiment went in seven hundred strong, and brought off only three hundred and sixty sound men. Of seventeen officers, only three came out unhurt. The number of killed I have not learned. About two hundred are now lying in our hospitals. Some, who had not prophesied that the colored man would not stand fire, but had finally yielded in his favor, still contended that ghastly wounds and sufferings, with slaughter and death of comrades, would quash all their love of freedom and soldiering, and silence the boasts of their friends.

WOUNDED COLORED SOLDIERS IN HOSPITAL

On the second and fourth days after the fight, I passed through nearly all the wards of the hospital. On the second day a very large proportion of their wounds had not been dressed, and of course they were very painful. Some lay with shattered legs or arms, or both; others with limbs amputated. Rebel bullets, grape, shells and bayonets have made sad havoc. Standing amidst a large number, I said, "Well, boys, this was not a part of the program, was it?" "Oh, yes, indeed, we expected to take all that comes," said some. Others said, "Thank God, we went in to live or die."

"If out of it and home, how many would enlist again?" With brightened faces, and some raising of even wounded arms or hands, all said, "Oh yes, yes." Some sang out, "Oh, never give it up, till the last rebel be dead," or "the last brother breaks his chains," or "if all our people get their freedom, we can afford to die."

Frank Myers, from Ohio, whose arm was badly shattered by a shell, said, "Oh, I thank God so much for the privilege! I went in to live or die as he please." He stood right under the uplifted sword of their brave Colonel Shaw, on the very top of the parapet, as he cried, "Rush on, rush on, boys!" and then suddenly fell, quickly followed by Myers himself.

No man can pass among these sufferers, so patient, so cheerful, hear them express their desire for a speedy recovery, first and only that they may (the almost universal expression) "try it over again;"

also, their firm conviction that they are soldiers for Jesus, to help on his war for freedom for all the oppressed, and not be inspired with deepest abhorrence of slavery and unquenchable desire for the freedom of their race. I have seen much to admire, in them as servants, laborers in the field; as soldiers, in camp, on the battlefield; but never so much in all these relations that is truly manly, heroic and sublime as exhibited in the furnace fires of war.

BEAUFORT, S.C., July 23, 1863

To the Editor of the Boston Journal:

In the storming of Fort Wagner on the night of Saturday, July 18, 1863, the 54th Massachusetts led the assault. The fight was of a “hand to hand” encounter at the same time that the guns from Fort Sumter and Cummings Point were pouring shot and shell at “crossfire” at a terrible rate upon our brave troops.

According to all accounts, it was one of the most destructive close encounters of the kind. Officers and men were seen fighting hand to hand with the enemy, some giving, others repelling *bayonet* thrusts. Men dropped from the ramparts of the fort to the ditch as if struck by lightning.

Scarcely would the men mount the parapet when they would be received with grape and canister, or treated to a *hand grenade*. Many of the regiments suffered severely, especially as they were ordered to withdraw from the attack. As near as can be ascertained, the loss of the 54th in killed, wounded and missing, is between 500 and 600. Most of the company commanders being either killed, wounded or missing, it is impossible for me to get a list of the *names* of the men. Of the officers, twenty-one were engaged; only six escaped uninjured. The following is the list:—

1. Col. Robert G. Shaw, supposed to be killed.
2. Major. Edward N. Hallowell is severely, but not dangerously wounded, in the groin.
3. Adjutant Garth W. James, wounded in the shoulder, side, and ankle; is doing well and gaining.
4. Capt. John W. M. Appleton, Co A, wounded in the breast and wrist, not seriously.
5. First Lieut. Wm. H. Homans, Co A, wounded in the left breast.
6. Capt. Samuel Willard Co B, flesh wounds in leg.
7. Capt. Edward L. Jones, Co D. wounded in shoulder and arm, severely.
8. First Lieut. Richard H.L. Jewett, Co D. wounded slightly in forehead, has returned to duty.
9. First Lieut. Charles E. Tucker, Co F, wounded slightly in the cheek—has returned to duty.
10. Capt. Orin E. Smith, Co G, wounded severely in the side.
11. Second Lieut. James A. Pratt, Co G, is wounded and missing.
12. Capt. Cabot J. Russell, Co H, is missing.
13. Capt. George Pope, Co I, wounded in the shoulder badly.
14. Capt. William H. Simpkins, Co K, is missing.

A flag of truce was sent to the rebels for our wounded and dead, but they would not receive it, saying they had plenty of surgeons and medicines for the wounded, and could bury our dead without

any help. Suffice it to say that men could not have been in a worse position exposed to three different fires. This time Massachusetts and her colored troops have shown their bravery. Other regiments declare their surprise, and state that they do not wish better nor braver soldiers. It was their first fight, and they proved themselves worthy of the old Bay State.

I write this to relieve the anxiety of the many friends of the regiment. The wounded are here (Beaufort, S.C.) in excellent hospitals. I have visited nearly all of them, and find them doing well, being in the hands of kind and skillful surgeons.

I hope to be able to forward a full statement ere long.

Yours, respectfully,
H. W. LITTLEFIELD
Lieut. Commanding Camp 54th Reg't Mass. Vols.

THE LATE COL. ROBERT G. SHAW. The public has a right to honor every faithful soldier who falls in the service of his country, in this war for the country's life and integrity as a free republic. Private grief must yield this right, that it may be known by what costly sacrifices, priceless principles are defended and maintained. Would a record could be made and a fitting eulogy given to all who bravely die! This cannot be; but the noble catalogue of the well known heroes is already large, and must, alas! grow larger still.

We have to refer to-day to one whose claims to high respect are somewhat peculiar. In the Spring of 1861, we saw in camp, at Brook Farm, a Lieutenant devoted quietly and modestly to learning and performing his novel military duties,—in appearance hardly more than a boy.

On Thursday, May 28th, that young Lieutenant, with the manly bearing almost of a veteran, rode down State Street, amid greeting cheers, as Colonel of the 54th, the First Colored Regiment of Massachusetts; and now the intelligence reaches us that he met death on the chosen battle field.

It was principle that sent him so promptly to Brook Farm, and made him true to his martial vocation as an officer of the 2nd Mass.; and it was principle that gave his name, ability and character to the inauguration in New England of a new force for the national service.

On his own part, and on the part of those by whom he was so dearly loved as an only son and only brother, it was the conviction that duty called him from a refined and cultivated home, from the peaceful engagements of business, from all that heart could desire to make life's morning joyous, and full of rich, rare promise. The summons of honor, patriotism and humanity was heeded with unquestioning alacrity, and the behests of honor, patriotism and humanity were unflinchingly obeyed to the last.

It would be a sad pleasure at any other time to speak, in the words of friendly eulogy, of the pure character, the fine disposition, the courteous and gentlemanly manners,—of the many sweet and clustering graces that adorned his youth, and blossomed into the fruit of strong virtues in the brief manhood of Col. Shaw.

But now, above all these, calling for special, if not exclusive regard, is his service to the country—the self sacrifice that consecrated all he was to her; that waived aside, for the time, all he hoped to be or enjoy, or rather put it all in peril, that he might be faithful found as a soldier fighting for the holiest of human rights.

How much he risked, how much he gave up, what precious hopes have been blasted, what tender ties have been sundered, what affections, (stronger, God be thanked, than death, and able to triumph over even the grave,) have been agonized by his quick departure from among the living, words cannot tell.

The story of bereavement is for the tears—fast and long flowing, but not bitter—for the memories—sad but never gloomy—of that love-girt and love-untied circle, into which the entrance of sympathizing friendship now would be that of an intrusive stranger.

It is allowed to us only to say here, that when record is made up of those who nobly fought and died to save our free nationality, shining high and bright upon it will be the name Col. Robert G. Shaw, as one from the first to last as courageously true to the principles he represented as he was brave in meeting the foes that lifted their rebellious hands to destroy them.

—*Boston Transcript.*