

## Transcription

### The Attack on Fort Wagner

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#### THE LATE COLONEL SHAW

We publish on page 525 a portrait of the late Colonel Shaw, who was killed at the head of his regiment, the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteers (colored), in the recent attack on Fort Wagner.

Robert G. Shaw was a son of Francis G. Shaw, of Staten Island, and was twenty-seven years of age at the time of his death. At the outbreak of the war he enlisted as a private in the Seventh Regiment. On their return home he obtained a commission in the Massachusetts Second, and took part in all the battles in which that fighting regiment was engaged. Twice—at Cedar Mountain, and again at Antietam—he narrowly escaped a severe wound.

On the formation of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Colored Regiment the Colonelcy was tendered to Captain Shaw by Governor Andrew; and the universal report is that no finer regiment ever left the Bay State than the thousand men whom he led to the war. Colonel Shaw took part in the first attack on Morris Island, which secured us command of most of the Island. His subsequent performance is so well described in the following letter from Mr. Edward L. Pearce (Pierce) to Governor Andrew that we give it entire:

When the troops left St. Helena they were separated, the Fifty-fourth going to James Island. While it was there, General S. received a letter from Colonel Shaw, in which the desire was expressed for the transfer of the Fifty-fourth to General S.'s brigade. So when the troops were brought away from James Island General S. took this regiment into his command. It left James Island on Thursday, July 16, at 9 a.m., and marched to Cole's Island, which they reached at 4 o'clock on Friday morning, marching all night, most of the way in single file, over swampy and muddy ground. There they remained during the day, with hard tack and coffee for there fare, and this only what was left in their haversacks, not a regular ration.

From 11 o'clock of Friday evening until 4 o'clock of Saturday they were being put on the transport, the *General Hunter*, in a boat, which took about fifty at a time. There they breakfasted on the same fare, and had no other food before entering into the assault on Fort Wagner in the evening.

The *General Hunter* left Cole's Island for Folly Island at 6 a.m., and the troops landed at Pawnee Landing about 9 1/2 a.m., and thence marched to the point opposite Morris Island, reaching there about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. They were transported in a steamer across the inlet, and at 4 p.m.

began their march for Fort Wagner. They reached Brigadier-General Strong's quarters, about mid-way on the island, about 6 or 6 1/2 o'clock, where they halted for five minutes. I saw them there, and they looked worn and weary.

General Strong expressed a great desire to give them food and stimulants, but it was too late, as they were to lead the charge. They had been without tents during the pelting rains of Thursday and Friday nights. General Strong had been impressed with the high character of the regiment and its officers, and he wished to assign them the post where the most severe work was to be done and the highest honor was to be won. I had been his guest for some days, and knew how he regarded them. The march across Folly and Morris islands was over a very sandy road, and was very wearisome. The regiment went through the centre of the island, and not along the beach, where the marching was easier.

When they had come within 600 yards of Fort Wagner they formed in line of battle, the Colonel heading the first and the Major the second battalion. This was within musket-shot of the enemy. There was little firing from the enemy, a solid shot falling between the battalions, and another falling to the right, but no musketry. At this point the regiment, together with the next supporting regiments, the Sixth Connecticut, Ninth Maine, and others remained half an hour. The regiment was addressed by General Strong and Colonel Shaw. Then at half past seven or three quarters past seven o'clock the order for the charge was given. The regiment advanced at quick time, changed to double-quick when at some distance on.

The intervening distance between the place where the line was formed and the fort was run over in a few minutes. When within one or two hundred yards of the fort a terrific fire of grape and musketry was poured upon them along the entire line, and with deadly results. It tore the ranks to pieces and disconcerted some. They rallied again, went through the ditch, in which was some three feet of water, and then up the parapet. They raised the flag on the parapet, where it remained a few minutes. Here they melted away before the enemy's fire, their bodies falling down the slope and into the ditch. Others will give a more detailed and accurate account of what occurred during the rest of the conflict.

Colonel Shaw reached the parapet, leading his men, and was probably killed. Adjutant Jones saw him fall. Private Thomas Burgess, of Company I, told me that he was close to Colonel Shaw; that he waved his sword and cried out "Onward, boys!" and, as he did so, fell. Burgess fell, wounded, at the same time. In a minute or two, as he rose to crawl away, he tried to pull Colonel Shaw along, taking hold of his feet, which were near his own head, but there appeared to be no life in him. There is a report, however, that Colonel Shaw is wounded and a prisoner, and that it was so stated to the officers who bore a flag of truce from us; but I can not find it well authenticated. It is most likely that this noble youth has given his life to his country and to mankind. Brigadier-General Strong (himself a kindred spirit) said of him to-day in a message to his parents: "I had but little opportunity to be with him, but I already loved him. No man ever went more gallantly into battle. None knew him but to love him."

I parted with Colonel Shaw between six and seven on Saturday evening, as he rode forward to his regiment, and he gave me the private letters and papers he had with him to be delivered to his father.

I asked General Strong if he had any testimony in relation to the regiment to be communicated to you. These are his precise words, and I give them to you as I noted them at the time:

“The Fifty-fourth did well and nobly, only the fall of Colonel Shaw prevented them from entering the fort. They moved up as gallantly as any troops could, and with their enthusiasm they deserved a better fate.”

One who knew him well wrote of him, most truthfully:

It was that rare quality that commands at once the love and obedience of men that peculiarly fitted Colonel Shaw for a commander. Of a most genial and kindly nature, of manners as gentle as a woman's, of a native refinement that brooked nothing coarse, of a clear moral insight that no evil association could tarnish, of a strength of purpose aiming always at noble ends, of a courage quiet but cheerful and unwavering, he was one of those characters which attracts, and at the same time moulds all others brought under their influence. Even this was observed of him when only a second lieutenant in the Second Massachusetts; how much more has it been shown in the Fifty-fourth! This country has lost in him one of its best soldiers, and one of its most promising men.

Colonel Shaw was only about twenty-seven years of age, and was married a few weeks before he joined the army of the South.