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White Officers and Colored Troops –
Part III

Lead: On July 18, 1863, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry led a daring assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina. It was the largest civil war engagement involving black troops

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: The 54th Massachusetts Infantry was made up of black troops and white officers. It was one of the first regiments formed after the U.S. government authorized the enlistment of African Americans. It was Federal policy, however, that they had to be

led by white officers. Early in 1863 Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts, an abolitionist and advocate of African American enlistment, began organizing the unit. He was committed to forming a model regiment and offered command to Robert G. Shaw, a battle-tested, well-educated, young officer from a prominent Boston abolitionist family. Shaw accepted, earned the respect of his regiment, which included former slaves, free blacks and the most well known of their recruits – Lewis and Charles Douglass – the sons of abolitionist militant Frederick Douglass. Under Shaw's command, the regiment was organized, disciplined, and operated on the assumption that the notion blacks

could not fight on a par with white troops was inaccurate and emerged from social bigotry.

On July 18, 1863, the 54th Massachusetts quieted its critics. The regiment was ordered to lead the attack on Fort Wagner, a strong Confederate position near Charleston, South Carolina. The action was ill-fated almost from the beginning because Confederate cannon were well-positioned at first to fire down into the charging 54th. Nevertheless, the black troops faced the fire with great bravery, scaled the parapet and held their ground for one hour. Eventually they were pushed back after hand-to-hand combat. The 54th Massachusetts lost half its troops

including Shaw, who died in the initial charge. During the engagement at Fort Wagner, Sgt. William H. Carney, at great risk to his life, lofted the regiment's flag in the face of withering Confederate fire. For this he became the first African American to win the Congressional Medal of Honor. At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

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