

Film Review: Glory, 1989, Directed by Edward Zwick

Reviewed by Tracie Harrison

Glory is a film about the first African American regiment formed in the union in 1861, during the Civil War. It portrays the racial struggles the regiment faced, and the tremendous opportunity they had to elevate the view of a nation. It shows the drive of its young military leader Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, to prove that his regiment could fight as well if not better than a white union regiment.

Robert Gould Shaw, was the son of Francis & Sarah Shaw a wealthy family in Boston, with strong abolitionist views. He was raised in the Unitarian Church surrounded by his parents' influential friends such as, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stow and Lydia Maria Childs. His parents devoted their time, money and influence to help end Slavery. He attended school in New York and Boarding school in Switzerland, returning to the States he entered school at Harvard in 1865. While at boarding school, he once wrote to his mother "I don't want to become reformer, apostle or anything of that kind".(Source 1 pg 13) Shaw left Harvard early in 1859 to work for his uncles firm but found he didn't have a "talent for business"(Source 1 pg 23; Source 2)

After the election of 1860 with increasing tension in the States, Shaw enlisted in the seventh New York National Guard, then moved to the second Massachusetts Infantry, a three year regiment, when the seventh was disbanded. He fought in many battles during the first of the war moving up in rank. He developed a deep devotion to his fellow comrades and turned down promotions that would have him leaving the regiment. (Source 2)

President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in, September 22, 1862, freeing black slaves.(Source 1 pg 49-50) Massachusetts Governor John Andrews, an abolitionist and

longtime advocate of allowing African American into the military, pressed Congress to allow him to raise a Black regiment. (Source 3) With the aid of others he raised the funds and men needed to form the North's first African American regiment the fifty fourth. Fredrick Douglas also helped by addressing the racial concerns in the North. In a speech given in New York Douglas stated " the colored man only waits for admission into service of this country....". (Source 1 pg 52) Andrews selected the white officers to lead "this experiment".

In the film Glory, Andrews is shown asking Shaw in person at a party to lead this regiment. In reality, Andrews asked for a list of officers, settling on Shaw primarily because of his parents standing in Boston and their efforts to end slavery. He addressed a letter to Shaw's father, Francis expressing the great importance of this mission. He wanted a man "of the highest tone and honor" from the "circles of educated, antislavery society". (Source 1 pg 53) Francis Shaw personally delivered the letter from Andrews to his son at his winter camp in Virginia. Shaw first turned down the offer from Andrews, however later he accepted.

A "Black Committee" was formed to raise recruits and funds. They had the pick of the north Black population. Many of the men could read and write, they came from large cities, where they had families and jobs. (Source 1 pg 67-68) At the camp the recruits were housed in barracks not tents. They were provided all the necessities needed. As the Governors regiment, they received the best and newest equipment, including uniforms and shoes. As opposed to the films version of the recruits poor conditions and lack of supplies. They did however have a delay in receiving their new weapons. Shaw was harsh, his standards high for officers and recruits were documented in letters. As a model regiment he had a lot to uphold, any misstep could bring a change in the supports and views of what the men could do.(Source 1 pg 71-73) Privately in letters, Shaw wrote to his family referring to the recruits with racist remarks. (Source 1 pg 76) The more time he spent around the men the more he came to respect

them. The film seems to relate this somewhat in the relationships that develop with between the characters.

The fifty fourth received orders in May 1893, to depart from training camp at Meigs to travel by sea to Hilton Head, South Carolina. They marched through Boston to the wharf with great fanfare and parade. (Source 1 pg 87)

In Hilton Head, Shaw met Colonel James Montgomery, who had organized a contraband slave regiment. Shaw would write to his father stating, "Montgomery is a good man to begin under" (Source 1 pg 92) Montgomery invited Shaw to participate in a raid at Darwin, Georgia, ordered by General David Hunter. Shaw took part in the looting of Darwin, but was angered when Montgomery set fire to the town. (Source 4; Source 2) Shaw wrote numerous letters regarding the raid, concerned of the damages done to the image of his regiment. (Source 1 pg 94-97) Hunter was later relieved by Lincoln and replaced by General Quincy Gillmore. Gillmore began attacks on Morris Island, at the time Shaw's men were being used for labor. Fearful that the fifty fourth would be "left behind", he complained to the brigade commander, General George Strong. (Source 1 pg 104). The film suggest blackmail was used due to the raiding with Montgomery to allow Shaw's regiment be used in battle. However, his address to Strong brought orders for the fifty fourth to go to James Island, where it was involved in its first battle of the war. (Source 1 pg 104)

A scene earlier in the film of the wage boycott was actually on the voyage to James Island. The regiment was informed of the decrease in pay from thirteen dollars to ten dollars, in addition the men were docked three dollars for clothing expense.(Source 2) Shaw did write to the Governor for equal pay and the men did boycott payment. The issue would not be settled until eighteen months later when Congress approved equal wages. (Source 1 pg 118; Source 4)

Once on James Island, Shaw's regiment was issued picket duty, to guard the camp. On July 16, 1863, Confederates charged the picket lines. The union held, then fell back and held again with the aid of the fifty fourth. The fight was over as quickly as it had started. The regiment received orders thereafter to march and be transported to Follys Island to reinforce Gilmores assault on Fort Wagner. (Source 2)

Glory set up the battle of Fort Wagner with Shaw volunteering the fifty fourth as the first regiment to attack the fort by land, knowing of the high casualties. In reality, Strong actually met with Shaw at headquarters giving him the opportunity to lead the attack. (Source 1 pg 110). Shaw did find a New York Tribune reporter Edward Pierce, the day before the attack on Fort Wagner and gave him personal letters and items to give to his family if he should not return. (Source 2) Strong was the one to address the fifty fourth the day of attack, on July 18th, 1863, asking the bearer of the national colors, "if this man falls, who will lift the flag and carry on?" It was Shaw who stepped forward responding "I will". (Source 5) A different version than the film shows.

Shaw deployed 624 men in columns of wings, ordering bayonets fixed, muskets at right shoulder and quick step march towards Fort Wagner. As the men drew closer he led them in a double quick march towards the parapets of the fort, under heavy fire. After heavy losses the fifty fourth reached and scaled the forts walls, where Shaw, leading the way, was shot three times and died on the parapets. (Source 5) The white brigades that followed suffered heavy losses before retreating. Shaw was buried in a mass grave with his men. The fifty fourth lost 42% of its regiment, either, killed wounded or missing. (Source 5) In a letter to General Gillmore, Francis Shaw wrote, " You will forbid the desecration of my son's grave." He felt there was no better place for his son to rest than "where he lies surrounded by his brave & devoted soldiers..." (Source 1 pg 120)

The news spread of the actions of the battle at Fort Wagner. The actions of the fifty fourth proved that African Americans could and would fight like their fellow white soldiers.

Only eighty seven years after our Founding Fathers debated over independence from England and our liberty. Drafting of the Declaration of Independence “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal...”. A document drawn up by both slave holders, Thomas Jefferson, and non-slave owners, John Adams. Where free men declared liberties that was denied to others. States that continued to struggle over the differences they had then, and again in 1861. The colonies where brought together by war and a common cause, and later were separated because of their divided interests. Citizens again where called by honor and courage to continue to keep America united.

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