

---

December 14, 1989

## **Review/Film; Black Combat Bravery in the Civil War**

By VINCENT CANBY

**LEAD:** Before the Battle of Antietam on Sept. 17, 1862, Robert Gould Shaw, a young white Bostonian with strong abolitionist sentiments, wrote to his mother, "We fight for men and women whose poetry is not yet written."

Before the Battle of Antietam on Sept. 17, 1862, Robert Gould Shaw, a young white Bostonian with strong abolitionist sentiments, wrote to his mother, "We fight for men and women whose poetry is not yet written."

Less than a year later, with Shaw's help, those men (if not their women) would be fighting for themselves.

Shaw, 25 years old and a full colonel, would be leading into battle the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, one of the first black fighting units to be enlisted in the Union cause in the Civil War. Garth Wilkinson James (the younger brother of William and Henry), was among the officers of the 54th. Lewis H. Douglass, son of the great black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, was among its first enlistees.

Against all popular expectations, the 54th and the other black regiments proved their valor and discipline in engagements throughout the war, most spectacularly in the bloody assault on Fort Wagner, at the mouth of Charleston Bay, on the afternoon and evening of July 18, 1863. With Colonel Shaw at the head of his troops, the 54th was given the honor of initiating that assault.

It might have seemed that liberation was at hand. The Emancipation Proclamation (announced on Sept. 22, 1862), promised freedom for all slaves in territories then "in rebellion." By the end of the war, 178,895 blacks had served in the Union Army, 10 percent of the total Union forces. Approximately one-third of the Union Navy's 3,222 casualties were black men.

Yet 75 years later, during World War II, a large number of America's black soldiers were still members of segregated units. The Navy had a place for blacks, but preferably as mess stewards.

In June 1964, one young black man and two white men were murdered outside Philadelphia, Miss., at the height of a drive to obtain for blacks the rights that had been theirs by law for 99 years. Not until Korea and then Vietnam, the lost war, were black troops allowed to fight and die for their country with something approximating equality.

These associations help give an almost overwhelming emotional impact to "Glory," the new, beautifully acted, pageantlike movie that tells the story of the Massachusetts 54th.

"Glory" is the first serious American movie about the Civil War to be made in years. There haven't been that many anyway - D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," Buster Keaton's "General," David O. Selznick's "Gone With the Wind" and John Huston's "Red Badge of Courage." Almost everything else has been balderdash or has used the war peripherally.

Although "Glory" employs the devices of fiction and sometimes is as brightly colored as a recruiting poster, it seems as severe as a documentary alongside those earlier films.

Kevin Jarre's good, lean screenplay is based on Colonel Shaw's letters and on two books, Lincoln Kirstein's "Lay This Laurel" and Peter Burchard's "One Gallant Rush." The director is Edward Zwick, the co-creator of television's "Thirtysomething," whose only other film credit is "About Last Night," the forgettable screen adaptation of David Mamet's "Sexual Perversities in Chicago."

Nothing either of these two men has done before is preparation for the success of "Glory."

Their cast is superior. As Colonel Shaw, Matthew Broderick, whose face in repose looks like a Mathew Brady photograph, gives his most mature and controlled performance to date. Denzel Washington ("The Mighty Quinn"), an actor clearly on his way to a major screen career, plays Trip, the escaped slave who functions as the film's (probably necessary) late-20th-century black sensibility. Morgan Freeman is the film's black conscience.

They are the stars, though the movie is really an ensemble piece that is more about the time and the circumstances than it is about the eccentricities of particular characters. As in a pageant, the characters serve principally to illuminate a glorious moment of history, which they do with consistent conviction.

"Glory" begins in the manner of one of those re-enactments one sees at battlefields where, in cause of tourism on summer weekends, local citizens put on period costumes and play at history. The uniforms in the movie seem awfully clean and well pressed. During the first charge at Antietam, which opens the film, the boys' faces are prettily smudged, as if by a volunteer makeup artist. One seems to be looking at a tasteful re-enactment even though bodies are cut in

two and one head disintegrates.

Very quickly, however, the strength of the idealism that fired these men becomes apparent and dramatically urgent. Though pageantlike, "Glory" has mind as well as soul.

The movie unfolds in a succession of often brilliantly realized vignettes tracing the 54th's organization, training and first experiences below the Mason-Dixon line. The characters' idiosyncracies emerge.

In addition to Mr. Washington's Trip, there is Searles (Andre Braugher), the very proper, Boston-born-and-bred young black man, an intellectual, who is called Snowflake by his comrades and who sleeps with his glasses on. Mr. Freeman's Rawlins is the regiment philosopher. Sharts (Jihmi Kennedy) is a country boy who stutters and turns out to be a crack shot.

Shaw's troubles have a bit of the white man's burden about them. His responsibility sets him apart from his subordinate officers and from old friends, including the baffled Searles, a boyhood chum. He is not, however, a martyr. He deals with specifics. When, as happened, his men are denied the pay given white soldiers, he joins them in refusing any pay. (One of the crazier injustices suffered by the black troops was the Government's decision to pay them \$10 a month, out of which \$3 would be withheld for clothing. White troops received \$13 a month, plus a \$3 clothing allotment.) Shaw's black troops are further discriminated against when shoes are not issued to them. It is assumed they will never see battle anyway.

"Glory" is best when its focus is kept short. One of the film's least effective sequences is historically true: a raid on the tiny South Carolina village of Darien during which Shaw was forced by a superior officer to order his men to plunder and burn all buildings.

The movie adds a little raping to the sequence and quickly becomes far more hysterical and melodramatic than the same event reported in Shaw's measured, profoundly distressed letter home.

The attack on Fort Wagner, which is the climax of the movie, comes as close to anything I've ever seen on screen to capturing the chaos and brutality that were particular to the Civil War battles. Weapons maimed as often as they killed. Soldiers were so disciplined that they marched in firm lines into the sights of guns fired at point-blank range. Hand-to-hand combat was commonplace.

The toll taken in each battle was, of course, enormous. Yet still the men continued to move forward. They had to believe in what they were doing. For all of the carnage and suffering, the

Civil War was a time of limitless optimism for many, something that now seems immensely sad.

"Glory" is celebratory, but it celebrates in a manner that insists on acknowledging the sorrow. This is a good, moving, complicated film. The Brutality And the Chaos GLORY, directed by Edward Zwick; screenplay by Kevin Jarre, based on the books "Lay This Laurel" by Lincoln Kirstein and "One Gallant Rush" by Peter Burchard and the letters of Robert Gould Shaw; director of photography, Freddie Francis; edited by Steven Rosenblum; music by James Horner; production designer, Norman Garwood; produced by Freddie Fields; released by Tri-Star Pictures. At Gemini Twin, 64th Street and Second Avenue. Running time: 122 minutes. This film is rated R. Robert Gould Shaw ... Matthew Broderick Trip ... Denzel Washington Cabot Forbes ... Cary Elwes Rawlins ... Morgan Freeman Sharts ... Jihmi Kennedy Searles ... Andre Braugher Mulcahy ... John Finn Morse ... John David Cullum Russell ... John David Cullum Governor Andrew ... Alan North General Harker ... Bob Gunton Colonel Montgomery ... Cliff DeYoung

[© 2015 The New York Times Company](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Your Ad Choices](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Terms of Sale](#)

[Terms of Service](#)

[Work With Us](#)

[RSS](#)

[Help](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Site Feedback](#)