

The Fight for Freedom:

Black Soldiers in the U.S. Civil War

Black soldiers fought in the U.S. Civil War with courage and heroism. A teenager finds this out — by traveling back in time.



Courtesy Chicago Historical Society

An unidentified black soldier, one of the more than 150,000 blacks who fought for the Union Army in the U.S. Civil War.

by **Suzanne McCabe**

CAST

Rafael Soto

Maria Soto, Rafael's younger sister

Ms. Parker, Rafael's history teacher

Jessica, Rafael's classmate

William Adams Jr., Rafael's pen pal

Black soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry:

William Adams Sr., William's father

Halley

B.T.

Ezra

White officers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment:

Sergeant Mulvey

Lieutenant Smith

Captain Lawrence

Colonel Shaw

William Pierce, a newspaper reporter

SCENE 1

Narrator A: Rafael Soto, 13, of Miami, Florida, sits in history class as his teacher, Ms. Parker, lectures about the Civil War.

But Rafael has his mind on other things. He answered an ad in a magazine for a pen pal and was given the address of William Adams, 14, of Boston, Massachusetts. Rafael wrote to William last week and is anxious to get a reply.

Ms. Parker: President Lincoln believed that blacks should be given a chance to fight in the Civil War. Once, while speaking to men who opposed emancipation [freedom for the slaves], he said: "You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you [and the Union]."

Jessica: Ms. Parker, why weren't black soldiers allowed to be officers

in the Union Army?

Ms. Parker: Rafael, could you answer that question?

Rafael: Uh, what did you say?

Ms. Parker: You should pay more attention, Rafael.

Narrator A: The bell rings. But Rafael does not hear it. He is imagining what it would be like to be a soldier in the Civil War.

SCENE 2

Narrator B: It is March 1863. A few men from the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry are walking horses in a field.

The sky is gray. Rain begins to fall. Rafael is walking toward Camp Readville, home of the 54th. The camp is a bleak and cheerless place in winter.

Rafael (to himself): This is weird. How did I get here?

Narrator B: A teenager standing by a campfire calls to Rafael.

William: Hello! What's your name?

Rafael: Rafael Soto. What's yours?

William: William Adams. I came up from Boston this morning.

Rafael: (in disbelief) William Adams? From Boston?

William: Yes. Mama and I are staying there with friends while my dad trains with the regiment. (He motions toward a small lean-to) Let's get out of this rain.

Narrator B: The two boys walk under the lean-to, where some black soldiers are talking as they polish leather saddles.

Halley: I sure hope the rain lets up. I'm tired of this sea of mud.

Adams: I'll be glad when we get shoes and uniforms. But I'll fight barefoot if I have to. Every black man should be free like we are.

William (to Rafael): That's my dad. I'm awful proud of him.

B.T.: I met a fellow in the mess hall who says he's an ex-slave. Escaped all the way from Georgia. He had to travel through woods and thickets so he wouldn't get caught. His feet were raw and blistered by the time he got here.

Ezra: There aren't too many escaped

slaves in this regiment. Mostly free men here.

Narrator B: In a nearby cabin, a white sergeant is shouting.

Sgt. Mulvey: Why should we give rifles to these untrained soldiers? I doubt they can even fight.

Lt. Smith: I don't know, Mulvey. They probably can fight as well as any white man.

Capt. Lawrence: Some of these recruits are tough as nails. And it can't be easy for them — they know what the Confederate Army has threatened: Any black man captured in battle will be made a slave. Either that or he'll be hanged.

Narrator B: Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, leader of the regiment, enters the cabin. The men salute.

Col. Shaw: As you were, gentlemen. Now, if I may lay to rest your concerns. I have no doubt that these men, when tested, will prove their bravery and heroism beyond our highest expectations.

SCENE 3

Narrator C: Arriving back home, Rafael is met by his sister.

Maria: Where have you been?

Rafael: Oh, uh, with a friend. Did I get any mail?

Maria: There's a letter for you on the kitchen table. But it's so old the paper has started to crumble.

Rafael Wow! (He opens the envelope and reads): Dear Rafael: We've had hard times since I saw you. Dad has gone off to war with the rest of the 54th Regiment. I wish this war would end so he could return home to us. . . .

Narrator C: After reading the letter, Rafael takes out a sheet of paper to write a reply to his pen pal. He starts the letter but, after a while, he becomes distracted. He stares out the window — and imagines that he is on Morris Island, off the coast of South Carolina.

It is a warm evening in July 1863. The 54th is preparing to storm Fort Wagner, a Confederate stronghold (fortified place) that protects the city of Charleston. Shells are exploding everywhere. The sky lights up with each blast.

War correspondents (reporters) watch as Union soldiers prepare to



A pair of black Union soldiers take aim in this photo posed for the Civil War photographer Mathew B. Brady.

Army News Features



The story of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment is told in *Glory*, a film now showing in movie theaters. The courage of the 54th inspired thousands of blacks and whites to enlist in the Union Army.

attack. Rafael sits down beside the correspondent from the *New York Daily Tribune*.

Pierce: Your first battle, kid?

Rafael: Yeah. I'm a little scared.

Pierce: Oh, don't be. These men of the 54th are as brave as they come. Just wait a few hours and they'll prove it to you.

Rafael: Where are they?

Pierce: It's hard to see through all the cannon smoke. But if you look closely, you'll catch them charging across that narrow strip of beach — between the swamp and the ocean. Of all the Union troops, they've been chosen to lead the attack.

Rafael: That's a pretty high honor. I thought nobody trusted them.

Pierce: Those men went through one of the toughest training programs in the Union Army. Colonel Shaw believes in his men. He knows they will represent the Union proudly. They already have. They fought a heck of a battle on James Island.

Rafael: It's hard to imagine that a man could be denied the right to prove himself just because of the color of his skin.

Pierce: I know what you mean. But people are sometimes slow to learn. They prefer to follow rather than lead. See that man carrying the Union colors? His name is Adams. Now there's a leader. If he weren't a black man, he would have been made an officer. It's a darn shame.

Narrator C: William Adams Sr. marches beside Colonel Shaw, who leads the men of the 54th toward the fort.

Shaw: Charge! (*Hundreds of men from Shaw's regiment follow close behind him.*)

Pierce: There they go. (*As the men near the gates of the fort, a wall bursts into flames.*) Don't look, kid. It's an awful sight!

Narrator C: Col. Shaw is mortally wounded. Just afterwards, William Adams Sr. is struck by a bullet and

falls to the ground.

Ezra (*stops to take the flag*): You're a brave man, Adams. Your son will grow up proud of you.

Adams: Ezra! Will you send the flag to my son? It would mean everything to me.

Pierce: Because of men like him, the bells of freedom will one day ring throughout this land. Well, I've got to get my story written —

Rafael: And I have a letter to write. It won't be easy, either — I know that man's son!

AFTERWORD

Although Union troops did not capture Fort Wagner, the men of the 54th were recognized for their bravery. As one Union soldier wrote later: "They fought like heroes."

Black soldiers proved themselves on the battlefield. As one abolitionist (a person who wanted slavery ended), said, "Who asks now in doubt and derision, 'Will the Negro fight?' The answer is spoken from the cannon's mouth . . . it comes to us from . . . those graves beneath Fort Wagner's walls."

Despite lingering prejudice on the part of some white officers, more than 188,000 black soldiers fought for the Union. President Lincoln later credited them with helping to turn the tide of the war. ☆

YOUR TURN Word Match

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|--------------------|--------------------|
| — 1. emancipation | a. ridicule |
| — 2. stronghold | b. freedom |
| — 3. correspondent | c. fortified area |
| — 4. abolitionist | d. reporter |
| — 5. derision | e. slavery opposer |

Think About It

1. What obstacles did black soldiers confront during the Civil War?
2. Why do you think black men were not trained to be officers?
3. The Civil War ended slavery, but did it end racial injustice? Explain.