

1. How do the opening scenes highlight the nature of Civil War combat?
2. How does the attitude of Colonel Robert Shaw toward African Americans change?
3. What differences exist among the black soldiers who make up the 54th Massachusetts?
4. How were black troops treated with inequality in their own Army? The Confederates?
5. What is significant about Colonel Shaw's decision to refuse his paycheck?
6. What attitudes did white soldiers have about the 54th? How did these attitudes change?
7. What do you think is the significance of the 54th and their leadership at Fort Wagner?
8. What feelings/thoughts are you left with at the ending of the film?
9. What scene affected you most and why?
10. Try to assess the accuracies or inaccuracies of the movie.


Subscribe and view additional content on our YouTube channel.

Accompanying primary source:

*Hannah Johnson was the mother of an African American soldier in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, one of the first all-African American regiment to be formed during the Civil War. This letter was written to President Lincoln as an appeal for equal treatment of African American soldiers as prisoners of war.*

“Buffalo [N.Y.] July 31, 1863,

Excellent Sir My good friend says I must write to you and she will send it my son went in the 54th regiment. I am a colored woman and my son was strong and able as any to fight for his country and the colored people have as much to fight for as any. My father was a Slave and escaped from Louisiana before I was born morn forty years agone I have but poor edication but I never went to schol, but I know just as well as any what is right between man and man. Now I know it is right that a colored man should go and fight for his country, and so ought to a white man. I know that a colored man ought to run no greater risques than a white, his pay is no greater his obligation to fight is the same. So why should not our enemies be compelled to treat him the same, Made to do it.

My son fought at Fort Wagoner but thank God he was not taken prisoner, as many were I thought of this thing before I let my boy go but then they said Mr. Lincoln will never let them sell our colored soldiers for slaves, if they do he will get them back quck he will rettallyate and stop it. Now Mr. Lincoln dont you think you oght to stop this thing and make them do the same by the colored men they have lived in idleness all their lives on stolen labor and made savages of the colored people, but they now are so furious because they are proving themselves to be men, such as have come away and got some edication. It must not be so. You must put the rebels to work in State prisons to making shoes and things, if they sell our colored soldiers, till they let them all go. And give their wounded the same treatment. It would seem cruel, but their no other way, and a just man must do hard things sometimes, that show him to be a great man. They tell me some do you will take back the Proclamation, don't do it. When you are dead and in Heaven, in a thousand years that action of yours will make the Angels sing your praises I know it. Ought one man to own another, law for or no, who made the law, surely the poor slave did not. So it is wicked and a horrible Outrage, there is no sense in it, because a man has lived by robbing all his life and his father before him, should he complain because the stolen things found on him are taken. Robbing the colored people of their labor is but a small part of the robbery their souls are almost taken, they are made bruits of often. You know all about this

Will you see that the colored men fighting now, are fairly treated. You ought to do this, and do it at once, Not let the thing run along meet it quickly and manfully, and stop this, mean cowardly cruelty. We poor oppressed ones, appeal to you, and as fair play. Yours for Christs sake,

Hannah Johnson

[In another handwriting] Hon. Mr. Lincoln The above speaks for itself. Carrie Coburn”