

## HEAVY LIFTING: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE CIVIL WAR

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Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

In the summer of 1864, the 54th Massachusetts infantry regiment had had enough.

Composed entirely of African-American soldiers except for its white officers, the 54th had distinguished itself in battle at Battery Wagner on the South Carolina coast in July 1863 (depicted in the movie "Glory") and again in February 1864 at Olustee, Florida. The unit had suffered terrible casualties, including its original commanding officer, Col. Robert Gould Shaw, and had seen its own men and other African-American prisoners massacred by the Confederates.

Worse yet, they were still not respected by their own government. The "colored" units were paid half what the rest of the army earned and their value was still being questioned in Northern newspapers and the halls of Congress.

Nearly 180,000 African-American men would serve in the Union army by the end of the war, accounting for one-tenth of the total soldiers in blue. The vast majority were recruited among the escaped slaves that had flocked to Union lines in the Southern states. Still, almost 8,000 came from New England, including 1,837 from Rhode Island and 1,764 from Connecticut.

One group of Rhode Islanders is dedicated to remembering the only black regiment organized by the state of Rhode Island (most African-Americans served in the United States Colored Troops or USCT as federal rather than state regiments). The 14th Rhode Island Reenactor Program commemorates the 14th RI Heavy Artillery and is organized and directed by Rob Goldman of the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, an experimental school in Providence.

Known as the "Heavies" for the giant coastal defense guns they manned, the 14th served on the coast of Texas and the defenses of New Orleans.

The 14th serves as the central focus for students at "The Met" interested in careers in history and historical preservation. It is completely run by the students.

"The kids run the unit," Goldman said. "It fits with the philosophy (of The Met); it's a visceral, full body experience and a great way to get involved in history."

Though representing an African-American unit, about half the kids in the 14th are Hispanic. It also has significant female participation, including its top leadership, Lt. Savannah Dowd and 1st Sgt. Stephanie Ramirez.

"It's really no different than what we're dealing with today," Sgt. Ramirez explained. "No matter who you are; white, black, even a female, the 14th regiment affected everyone.

"As a Latiná, being diverse and being a different asset to the community, the 14th means a lot to who I am, too."

The kids also get a feel for how difficult it must have been to be an African-American regiment in a war where men on both sides questioned whether blacks could even be considered citizens.

"(An adult) first sergeant tried to take charge of my unit," Ramirez recounted. "I told him go away, this is my company. I know what I'm doing."

Faced with disrespect, it would be easy to quit, a situation that the black regiments in the Civil War wrestled with as well.

"The white officers were sympathetic," said Goldman. "They were dedicated abolitionists, but they recognized that if the black soldiers didn't stay on duty, the whole experiment would fall apart.

"(Colonel Edward) Hallowell was forced to put his pistol to the head of one of the mutineers and threaten to kill him."

The 54th remained on duty and the African-Americans who fought for their own freedom have been recognized by history, if not by their own contemporaries, as being the one thing they most desired - American citizens.

For more information on the 14th RI Heavy Artillery, email Rob Goldman at [rkgoldman@juno.com](mailto:rkgoldman@juno.com) or friend the unit on Facebook.

Also, for those interested in the Civil War, Chief Justice (ret.) Frank Williams will be presenting on Lincoln and the Constitution at the Babcock Smith House on Sunday, March 4 at 2 p.m. Admission is \$2 for nonmembers.

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