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Slave Revolt at Battery Wagner

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Slave Revolt at Battery Wagner

Abstract

The assault on Battery Wagner: we so often look at that tense moment on a beach in South Carolina from the eyes of the men of the 54th Massachusetts. They hailed from all over the United States. Some were from Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut - born free and willing to risk it all for the freedom of others. Some were from the American South, former chattel property who had seized their freedom of their own accord. [excerpt]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

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Slave Revolt at Battery Wagner

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18, 2014

The assault on Battery Wagner: we so often look at that tense moment on a beach in South Carolina from the eyes of the men of the 54th Massachusetts. They hailed from all over the United States. Some were from Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut - born free and willing to risk it all for the freedom of others. Some were from the American South, former chattel property who had seized their freedom of their own accord.

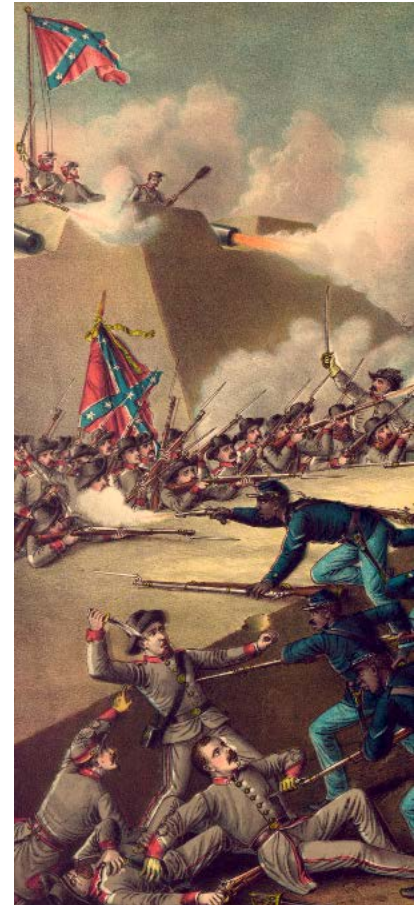
We rarely hop across that sandy embankment and try to get inside the minds of the men defending the works of Battery Wagner against assault on July 18th, 1863. Most of the infantrymen huddled in those sandy dunes, outnumbered by looming Federal forces, were sons of North Carolina.

Imagine sitting with those men, glancing over the battlements at the waves of companies of the 54th Massachusetts forming on the beach, preparing to charge. What is that image?

The 31st and 51st North Carolina hailed from all over low country North Carolina, a smattering of men from this county or that county making up each regiment. If you sat next to some men from Company A of the 51st North Carolina, who were from New Hanover County around Wilmington, the sight likely was a worst nightmare. Those men grew up in a county where 48% of the population was enslaved. When half the county are black men, women and children held in bond through force, a crowd of black men with guns is likely the boogeyman, the childhood fear lurking out behind the house or down the street.

Wander down to Company B or C, whose men were a melange of soldiers from Duplin and Sampson counties likely would have had the same fears. In both Duplin and Sampson Counties, the slaves nearly equaled the free white population. They were an army of disgruntled property, a few abolitionist tracts or a militant Nat Turner-type away from descending on the slave holders and their white friends.

Further down the parapet, the men of the 31st North Carolina glanced at those swarming black soldiers, likely with many of the same thoughts and fears. Their Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Liles was barely in his 30s. When he joined the army and marched away from Wadesboro, North Carolina, he left behind his wife Helen and daughters Lillian, Inez and Laura. Joseph Wilson lived there with the family as well; his job was likely watching over their 15 slaves - 4 men and 11 women, ranging in age from 50 to 1 year old.



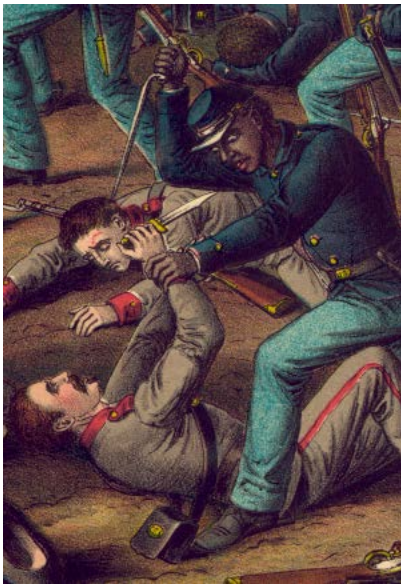
What drove these men to fight in that sand fort in 1863? / PD LOC

Company D's men were no doubt turning to Captain Ruffin L. Bryant for inspiration and encouragement. The company commander was in his mid-thirties. His wife and three children were still home in Wake County. Whether his one slave, a 23 year old man, was still there isn't clear. Certainly glancing over the sand dune and seeing row after row of 23 year old black men, carrying guns and wearing the blue uniform of the United States government must have looked like all of slavery's sins returning with a vengeance. Somewhere nearby, James E. Todd was looking after his men in Company H. At home near Raleigh his father was still looking after the family's five slaves.

Company G's commander Julian Picot likely glanced at those massing troops and flinched. At home, when the war broke out, he owned seven human beings as property who looked like those men. They were just a handful of his 28 slaves in Hertford County, with still more children and women milling around his no doubt bustling home. And now, his property was returning violence against the soul with violence against the body.

Commanding the fort, looking out on his men and worrying about the odds stacked against him was Brigadier General William B. Taliaferro. The nephew of Secretary of War Seddon, Taliaferro was a distinguished Virginia statesman and veteran of the War with Mexico. He had attended both William and Mary College and Harvard University, but it didn't take an ivy league degree to work out the calculus of the coming battle. 5,000 men and 6 ironclad warships loomed beyond his walls.

And some of those men were former slaves. Were any escaped from Taliaferro's Gloucester County, Virginia plantations? Certainly some of those men outside the fort's walls looked like the men who he left behind in 1861. There were 17 young men on his plantation in Virginia of the prime military age. And likely every one of them had more than enough reasons to enlist in the United States army and win freedom for four million.



The Battle of Battery Wagner was not simply a battle in a simple civil war. It was, in many real and even more imagined ways, a kind of slave revolt. And for Taliaferro, slave rebellion was something he knew how to deal with well; the Brigadier General had, just a handful of years before, commanded the militia in Harpers Ferry in the wake of John Brown's Raid.

Fear can be a powerful force in battle. And when the USCT were martialled in battle, the very color of their skin could only serve as a potent multiplier for that fear.

Does violence beget violence? / [PD LOC](#)