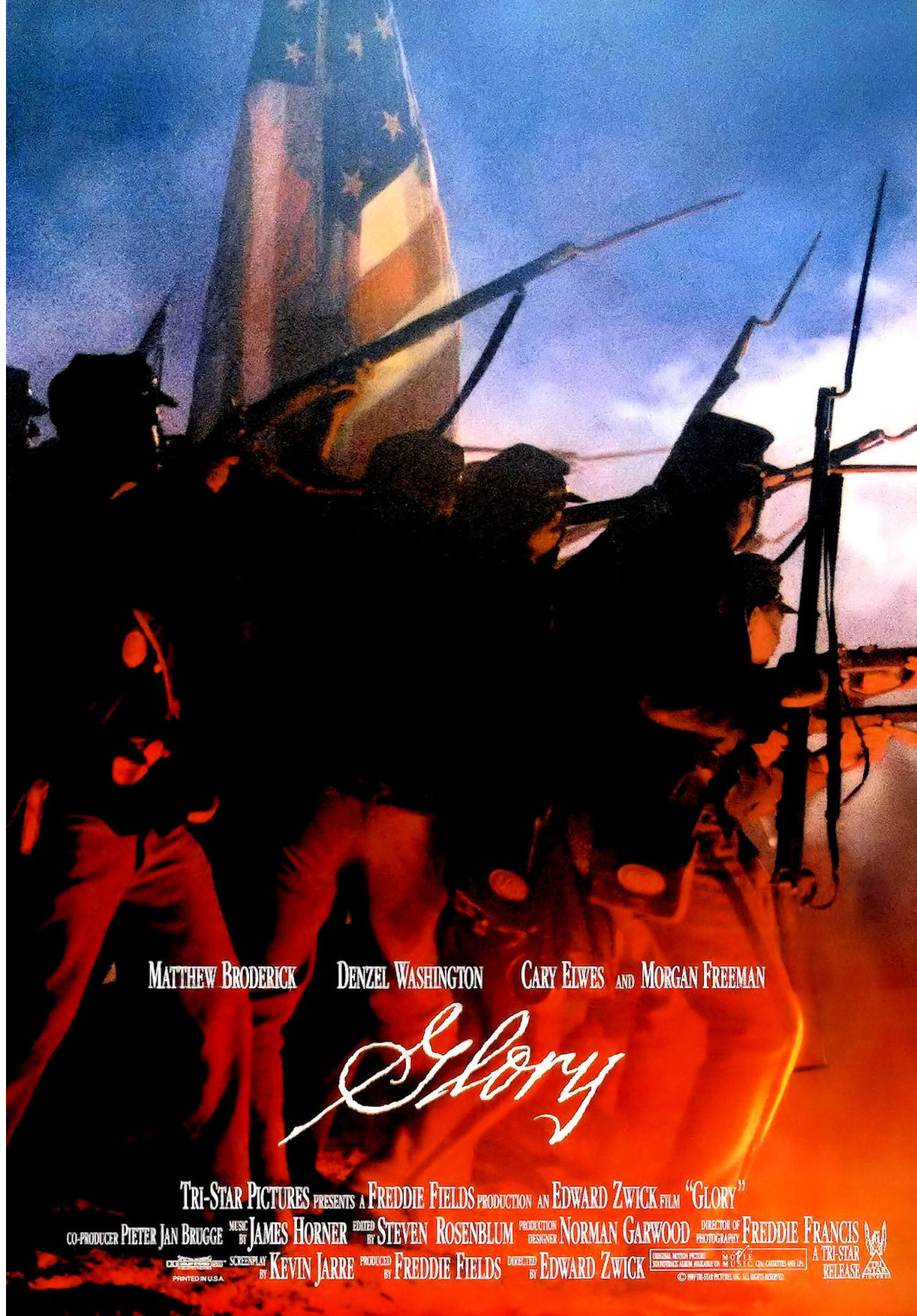




Glory: History or Just a Good Story?

By Laurence D. Schiller

A great deal of what we call 'history' is comprised of a variety of narratives. These might be primary sources, such as journals, letters, diaries, collected speeches, oral history, contemporary newspaper stories, etc. or they might be secondary narratives written by historians or others who interpret historical events and narratives to create their own telling of history. In the modern era, we have added electronic narratives to our list, including movies, TV, YouTube, podcasts, and the like. Professional historians rely heavily on such narratives to create their own works, but, as we have learned from the internet, not every narrative that is created is accurate or complete, whether primary or secondary. Amongst other things, we have to look at a narrative's biases, what audience was it written for, the extent of the narrator's knowledge of the events being described, and so forth. As a rule, primary narratives are all valid historical sources but must be used carefully with their strengths and weaknesses noted and put into context with other sources and narratives.



In 1989 the movie *Glory* was released to critical acclaim. Its narrative was the story of the 54th Massachusetts, the first African American regiment raised in the northern states. For most Americans, this was the first time they had become aware that there were black soldiers in the Federal army during the Civil War, not just auxiliary forces, but units that fought regular battles. The movie traced the story of this "Brave Black Regiment" from its recruitment and training outside of Boston, its voyage to South Carolina, and eventually its first taste of combat. Although the 54th was involved in combat operations until the end of the Civil War, the movie ends with its climatic, and unsuccessful, assault on Fort (or Battery) Wagner on Morris Island outside Charleston harbor on July 18, 1863, which resulted in the deaths of four officers, including its Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, and total casualties of 281 out of 624 engaged.

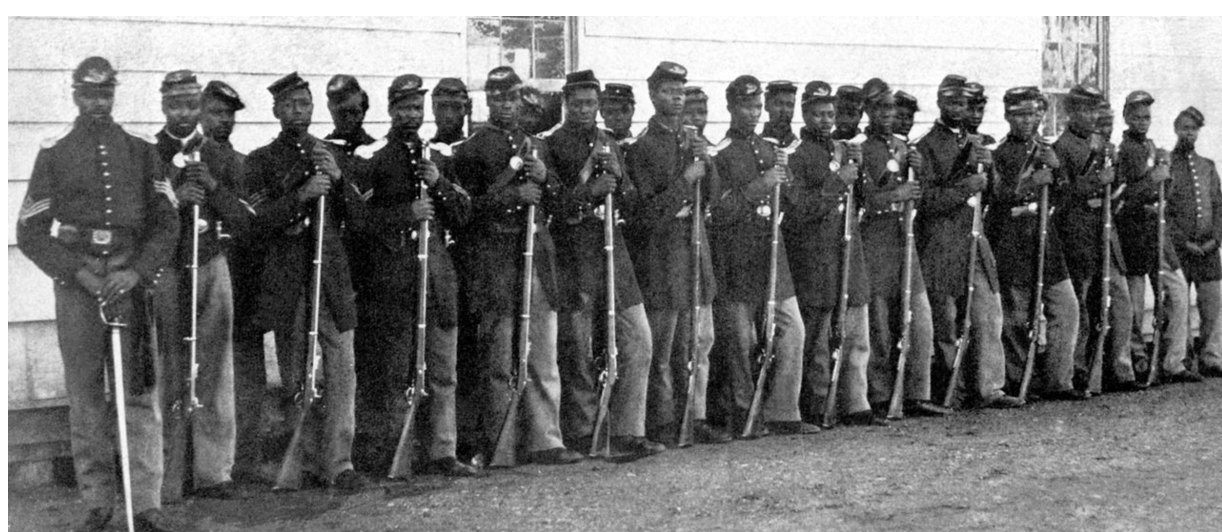
Glory revolved around a few specific characters, white and black. Governor John A. Andrews approached the son of a wealthy Boston abolitionist family, Robert Gould Shaw, and promoted him from Captain in a white Massachusetts regiment to Colonel of the 54th. His sidekick, Cabot Forbes, becomes the major while an educated black family friend of the Shaw's, Thomas Searles, joins the rank and file. Soon we meet other enlisted members, most particularly a gravedigger, John Rawlins, who will become the Sergeant Major of the Regiment, and a bitter escaped slave, Silas Trip, who hates the world and takes it out on anyone in his vicinity. The movie makes it clear that the cultured Thomas is lost amongst, as Trip so eloquently puts it, "the dummies and field hands". As Shaw struggles not only to understand his charges, but to get proper equipment and treatment from the racist military establishment, we see the regiment, and him, grow to be a unit, unified in purpose and desirous to show they are MEN. Along the way there is plenty of tension, not only between white and black, but between Shaw and Forbes and between the various enlisted men, focusing especially on Trip, Rawlins, and Searles. Their struggles are overshadowed by the proclamation of the Confederacy that captured blacks will be sold into slavery and their white officers will be tried on grounds of trying to incite slave revolt. Three critical scenes are the whipping ordered by Shaw of Trip for being AWOL, when the War Department refuses to pay the men the same wage as white soldiers and they rip up their vouchers, and the final confrontation between Trip and Rawlins where Rawlins calls him out for his attitude.

As a movie, *Glory* tells a wonderful narrative. There is struggle against racial oppression, personal strife and resolution, and heroic courage in the face of death. It has some of the best filmed Civil War combat sequences of any movie and it poignantly makes the point the creators desired that black Americans, along with their white officers, fought and died for their freedom in the Civil War. But, is it just a good story, such as so many Hollywood pictures, or is it good history? The answer is, actually, both.

The movie falls far short as an accurate depiction of the history of the 54th Massachusetts. Yes, Shaw was the colonel; yes, they did participate in the Combahee expedition, the burning of Darien, and the battles on James Island and Fort Wagner; yes, they did show the world their courage on July 18. Indeed, the named characters outside the regiment, such as Colonel James Montgomery, who was never a slave owner, Governor Andrews, and General George C. Strong, are all real enough, but aside from Shaw, not one character in the 54th is a real person, not even Major Forbes. Although the movie shows the regiment struggling to get equipment, the truth is that the 54th was Andrews' pet experiment to demonstrate that blacks could make good soldiers. They received proper equipment when they arrived at Camp Meigs and Shaw never had to threaten a quartermaster to get proper shoes. Moreover, the enlisted men were hardly escaped field hands. Andrews recruited such renowned abolitionists as Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips to go through the north and recruit fit and literate black men. Members of the 54th came from throughout the northern states and only the highest quality of men were permitted to join. Frederick Douglass's own two sons were members and one, Lewis, was the real Sergeant Major, hardly a gravedigger. Other examples of bending the truth are the pay scene and Trip's whipping. In the former, Shaw actually received notification when already in South Carolina that the men would only get \$10 a month, instead of \$13 paid to whites and protested through channels and through his father. There was never a scene as depicted in the movie. Moreover, no USCT soldier was ever whipped. One colonel out west tried it and his regiment mutinied and would not permit it. Not only was flogging not allowed in the Federal army, but the symbolic significance of such an act was too great for anyone else to try it. The real story of the 54th is remarkable enough.

But the *Glory* narrative is still excellent for although it is not the real story of the 54th, except in the broad outlines, the tensions between black and white, and within their own racial groups, the racial discrimination it shows, the obstacles black troops had to overcome to prove themselves, and much more that the movie depicts were all real enough. Many of the scenes in the movie were actually taken from other black units, for example the singing the night before the assault on Wagner, which was taken from a South Carolina colored unit. *Glory* succeeds as a narrative because it tells the real story of the US Colored Troops and makes its points to its audience, modern day Americans, using the only black regiment anyone had likely heard of.

Ultimately, the significance of the movie is that it showed that black Americans would and did fight and die for their country. Most whites did not believe that before the assault on Wagner. As the *New York Tribune* put it, "It is not too much to say that if this Massachusetts 54th had faltered when its trial came, two hundred thousand troops for whom it was a pioneer would never have put into the field...but it did not falter. It made Fort Wagner such a name for the colored race as Bunker Hill has been for ninety years to the white Yankees." And for reminding us of that, *Glory* succeeds as a narrative, one that gives a pretty accurate picture of what African Americans of that era went through to try and prove that they were indeed men.



Civil War photograph of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry

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