

Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War

Donald R. Shaffer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Shaffer, Donald R. (2009) "Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss2/9>

Review

Shaffer, Donald R.

Spring 2009

Ash, Stephen V. *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War.* W.W. Norton and Company, \$25.95 hardcover ISBN 9780393065862

African American Regiments in the Civil War

Best known for his books on the Upper South and the federal-occupied Confederacy during the Civil War, *Firebrand of Liberty* is something of a departure for Stephen V. Ash. In this book, Ash tells about the early history of two black Union regiments, the 1st South Carolina Infantry (later the 33rd U.S. Colored Infantry) and the 2nd U.S. Colored Infantry (later the 34th U.S. Colored Infantry). Written in an engaging narrative style, the author relies on a variety of sources, but leans heavily on the writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the first commander of the 1st South Carolina. In the end, Ash produces a highly readable account of the first field deployments of the 1st and 2nd South Carolina, but one that, alas, tends to overstate their historical significance.

As Ash notes, the early service of these pioneering black regiments took place in the Department of the South—coastal South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida—which was a relative backwater of the Civil War. Here the war consisted primarily of Union forces blockading port cities such as Charleston and Savannah from their base at Port Royal, South Carolina, periodic expeditions inland, and the futile but intense efforts by Union forces to crack the defenses of Charleston.

Firebrand of Liberty concentrates mostly on the participation of the 1st and 2nd South Carolina in military expeditions during the spring of 1863, particularly a movement by Union forces up the St. John's River in March in which they briefly occupied Jacksonville, Florida. Ash ably discusses the background to Union presence in the Department of the South, where a combination of troop shortages and commanders with abolitionist sentiments led

to some of earliest federal recruitment of African-American soldiers in the Civil War. While these efforts met initial resistance from the Lincoln Administration, mounting casualties and sagging morale in the North forced a reversal in policy during 1862, which made possible the formation of the 1st and 2nd South Carolina. Yet as Ash correctly notes, in Spring 1863, the service of black soldiers in the Union army was still quite new and many northern whites, soldiers as well as civilians, remained highly skeptical of the efficacy of African American regiments. Critics of black recruiting were apt to seize on any failure by black troops to try to stop this endeavor, which even in the North was considered too radical by many people. Stephen Ash portrays the Lincoln Administration as highly sensitive to this sentiment and unwilling to commit to large scale recruitment until African Americans had proven themselves in the field.

Hence, the military expeditions of the 1st and 2nd South Carolina in Spring 1863, Ash contends, played a critical role in the final conversion of the Lincoln administration to black recruitment for the Union army. After the success of a small raid by the 1st South Carolina along the Georgia-Florida border in January 1863, Col. Higginson and his immediate superior, Brig. Gen. Rufus Saxton, decided to mount an even more ambitious mission. This effort would involve not only the 1st and 2nd South Carolina, but also white troops in the Department of the South and the permanent occupation of Jacksonville, Florida, as a base from which to raid into mainland Florida to seize supplies, destroy anything of value to the Confederacy, but above all to liberate slaves, especially young men for service in the Union army. Although the raiders occupied Jacksonville for only a few weeks, made only a few tentative strikes beyond the city, and freed few slaves, the good performance of the black troops and their ability to conduct joint operations successfully with white Union soldiers gained positive notice in northern newspapers.

Although it never met its objectives, Stephen Ash contends that news of the St. John's expedition's successful use of black troops coming at a critical moment, when the Lincoln Administration had to decide whether or not to embrace the mass recruitment of African Americans, essentially tipped the balance in favor of that policy. Ash states, "In the North, friends of black recruitment seized on it as proof that Negroes could serve effectively in Union ranks and should be given every chance to do so" (199). Yet it was not only previous proponents of African American enlistment who were swayed by the St. John's expedition, Ash contends, but also members of the press closely

aligned with the Lincoln administration and President himself. As evidence, he alludes to a March 24, 1863, editorial in the *Evening Star*, a Washington, D.C., paper with moderate Republican sentiments. This editorial spoke glowingly of the St. John's expedition and pronounced as successful the experiment with black soldiers in the Union army. Ash also mentions that the same day, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton met with Lorenzo Thomas, Adjutant General of the U.S. Army with instructions for Thomas to begin the large-scale recruitment of African Americans. "It is not farfetched to suppose that the *Evening Star* column of March 24," Ash asserts, "presumably seen that day by the president and his advisers, tipped the balance in their minds" (201). In addition, Ash alludes to a May 1863 entry in Thomas Wentworth Higginson's journal in which he related a conversation with unnamed Union officer close to Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase, which explicitly confirmed that Lincoln's cabinet awaited learning of the fate of the St. John's expedition before going forward with the decision on large-scale recruitment of black men into the Union army.

While the aforementioned evidence raises interesting questions about a heretofore obscure episode, it is far from convincing in substantiating Ash's thesis that the St. John's expedition was "a pivotal episode of the war" (xii) or his contention that "Had the black troops suffered disgrace in Florida, had they crumbled in the face of Confederate counterattacks, or clashed with white troops sent as reinforcements, or abused the civilian population, the whole movement to enlist blacks would very likely have been halted in its tracks" (xiii).

While it is not far-fetched to believe that Lincoln and his cabinet considered the St. John's expedition as they weighed whether to expand recruitment of black men into the Union army beyond a heretofore limited experiment, Ash ignores a constellation of factors that Lincoln, a pragmatic and cagey politician, who surrounded himself with other cagey politicians, would have considered in making such a sensitive and momentous decision. As Lincoln and his "team of rivals" often held their deliberations close to the vest, historians cannot be entirely sure every factor they weighed in deciding about large-scale black recruitment. However, one thing that unquestionably was very much on their minds was the growing difficulty by early 1863 in recruiting white men into the Union army. The sizeable voluntary enlistments of 1861 and 1862 had by that time evaporated in the face of mass casualty lists and the Union's lack of progress on the battlefield. Lincoln desperately needed new soldiers by early 1863, and it should not be forgotten that while the St. John's expedition was in progress that Congress passed a military draft bill that Lincoln signed into law.

Rather than being seen merely in light of this expedition, the Lincoln administration's decision on black recruiting must be understood in the larger context of the war, especially but not limited to the pressing need for new federal recruits. Indeed, when Lincoln signed the final Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, he embraced emancipation as a war aim in a way that made reversing his commitment to black freedom all but impossible and under such a policy large-scale recruitment of black soldiers was all but a matter of time.

It is also highly interesting that Lincoln and his men pressed ahead with the large scale recruitment of black soldiers while the St. John's expedition was still in progress. The fact that they did so bespeaks of a decision already made and politicians grasping at the first good news that might justify that decision with the public. In fact, the *Evening Star* editorial of March 24, rather than being critical in swaying Lincoln and his men seems more part of a media campaign by his administration to sway still skeptical moderate Republicans of the wisdom of large-scale black recruitment into the Union army.

This observation, of course, is as speculative as most of Stephen Ash's evidence which he uses to try and bolster his contention of the great historical significance of the St. John's expedition in the Civil War. What arguably amounts to coincidence and self-serving gossip cannot elevate a previously obscure expedition to the status of a critical turning point in the Civil War. That being said, Stephen Ash has written a highly readable account of some of the first field experiences of black soldiers in the war, preceding by months more famous encounters such as Milliken's Bend, Port Hudson, and Fort Wagner. For that reason alone, *Firebrand of Liberty* is a useful addition to the growing literature on black Union soldiers. It is unfortunate the author decided to load down his book with a speculative thesis that is unworthy of the fascinating and still important story that he has tell.

Donald R. Shaffer is Assistant Professor of History at Upper Iowa University in Fayette, Iowa. His book, After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans (University Press of Kansas, 2004) won the Peter Seaborg Award for Civil War Scholarship. He is also the co-author with Elizabeth Regosin of Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Pension Bureau Files (NYU Press, 2008).