

Thunder At The Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments That Redeemed America

Leonne M. Hudson

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

Recommended Citation

Hudson, Leonne M. (2017) "Thunder At The Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments That Redeemed America," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.2.26

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss2/21>

Review

Hudson, Leonne M.

Spring 2017

Egerton, Douglas R. *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments That Redeemed America*. Basic Books, \$32.00 ISBN 9780465096640

Passing the Military Test

Professional historians have produced a steady flow of books about United States Colored Troops (USCT) in recent years. It is well known that African American soldiers played an unforgettable role in helping to defeat the Confederate States, thereby guaranteeing the preservation of the Union. Doubtless, the Civil War was a transformative event in the nation's history, which ultimately brought about freedom for the slaves. In a real sense, Douglas R. Egerton's book, *Thunder at the Gates* is a biographical study of the three black Massachusetts regiments of the Civil War: the 54th, the 55th, and the 5th Cavalry. By focusing on only three units, the author is able to provide the reader with a close up view of the regiments in all of their military dimensions. Egerton meticulously chronicles the recruitment, organization, and performance of these units. While the officers of the Massachusetts regiments are not ignored, this volume is foremost about the rank and file members of the units. Although the Fifty-fourth, the most celebrated black unit of the Civil War receives the most attention in this work, the other two regiments do not suffer from a lack of analysis. Egerton tells a compelling story of intrepidity, sacrifice, struggle, and determination in this impressively researched and superbly crafted monograph.

Egerton provides a nuanced discussion of northerners' opposition to the idea of black enlistment. They offered a wide range of arguments against the creation of a black army. White resistance to colored enrollment did not discourage Negro men from wanting to join the Union war effort. They found support for their quest to form a "liberating army" from influential advocates such as Governor John A. Andrew of Massachusetts and Frederick Douglass. The North and President Abraham Lincoln himself slowly came around to the notion that colored men were needed to help fight the war. When the Emancipation

Proclamation unlocked the door of enlistment for black men, they walked through with confidence and enthusiasm. They would have many opportunities to prove that they were worth the federal government's investment in them as soldiers. The men of the Massachusetts units were motivated to join the fight in order to demonstrate their patriotism, to free the slaves, to experience adventure, and to acquire money. Egerton maintains that in 1863, "virtually all Americans" fully "understood that the three black regiments were to serve as a test case" (7). We cannot, however, lose sight of the fact that the Massachusetts regiments were three of the 166 African American units that helped the Union army to emerge victorious. There was as much apprehension as excitement surrounding the creation of the Fifty-fourth, the first black regiment organized in the North. The colored soldiers were prepared to spill their blood and that of the enemy for the Union and for their race. Egerton reveals that it did not take the troops of the Bay State long to learn that prejudicial treatment in the United States Army would be a part of their military life. The unequal pay was a constant reminder to black volunteers that they were less valuable than their white comrades in the eyes of the Lincoln government. The pay inequity added to the misery and deprivation of their loved ones on the home front.

This volume makes it clear that the success of the three Massachusetts regiments was inextricably tied to the leadership ability of the white officers who commanded them. The heroic performance of the 54th at the battle of Fort Wagner on July 18, 1863, attracted national attention and earned the black warriors the admiration of a grateful nation. On page 145, Egerton writes that "the assault on Wagner, while a military disaster, quickly became a political victory." The death of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw at Wagner endeared him to black soldiers and civilians alike. Fort Wagner was not the only place where African American troops experienced military setbacks. The USCT including the 54th were led "into a trap" by General Truman Seymour at the battle of Olustee in Florida on February 20, 1864. This was the largest battle fought in Florida during the tumultuous years of the 1860s and a defeat for the Union army. Several thousand USCT were on duty in South Carolina during the war. The 54th and 55th were part of General John P. Hatch's army that saw action at the battle of Honey Hill near Beaufort on November 30, 1864. Egerton argues in *Thunder at the Gates* that inadequate reconnaissance work combined with poor leadership doomed Hatch's army. In several battles during the Civil War, the bravery of the colored soldiers could not overcome the incompetent leadership of white officers. The author missed the opportunity to point out that the real

significance of the Confederate triumph at Honey Hill was that it prevented the Union army from cutting the Charleston and Savannah Railroad. This victory allowed General William J. Hardee to evacuate his army of 12,000 men from Savannah via the railroad as General William T. Sherman marched on the beautiful city by the sea in December 1864. As the war came to a close, the Fifty-fourth along with several other United States colored units took an active part in General Edward A. Potter's raid in South Carolina. The freeing of more than 6,000 slaves in the Palmetto State was especially satisfying to the men of the Massachusetts regiments. The black men in blue were doubtless most proud of their role as liberators.

This richly illustrated study does an outstanding job of capturing the human quality of the soldiers of the Massachusetts regiments. Their humor, trepidation, loneliness, disappointment, solidarity, valor, and sadness are on display in this book. Like other Union regiments, the author points out that the men of the 54th, 55th, and 5th Cavalry had their share of cowards, deserters, and unsavory characters. Egerton offers an insightful observation on the complexional divide within black regiments. Officers routinely recommended light-skinned African American soldiers for advancement, thereby connecting complexion to privilege. Although Stephen A. Swails, Peter Vogelsang, and James Monroe Trotter were exemplary soldiers, the fact that they were nearly white was a bonus. When the 21st USCT marched into Charleston, the birthplace of the revolution on February 18, 1865, followed a few days later by the Massachusetts 55th and 54th, celebrations erupted in the city among the former slaves. The occupation of the city by black troops provoked anger among white Charlestonians. On farms and plantations across the South, black soldiers represented freedom for the slaves.

Although Colonel Shaw's leadership of the Fifty-fourth was brief, his men responded to his death by raising money for the construction of a monument in his honor. Success finally crowned their efforts with the dedication of the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial in Boston on May 31, 1897. In discussing the generosity of colored troops, Egerton fails to mention that many of them enthusiastically contributed to a fund to construct a monument to the memory of Abraham Lincoln who was the architect of the black army. Several dignitaries including President Ulysses S. Grant attended the unveiling of the Freedmen's National Monument in Washington on April 14, 1876, twenty-one years before the unveiling of the Shaw Memorial.

The soldiers of the 54th, the 55th, and the 5th Cavalry exhibited the same tenacity in the fight to win their political rights after the war that they had displayed on the battlefield for two years. The veterans of the Bay State regiments found injustice and oppression as deeply entrenched in American life after the war as the Confederate positions they had attacked during the conflict. The author convincingly reminds us that racism did not end with the collapse of the Confederacy, but endured down through the years to the present. Egerton concludes that the men of the Massachusetts regiments “had stood their ground when faced by formidable odds at James Island, at Wagner, at Honey Hill, and at Olustee, and they were not about to be intimidated by white conservatives who wished to restore the antebellum social and political order” (306-307). The success of the Massachusetts regiments taught the nation that the color of a person’s skin was not an obstacle to achieving excellence. *Thunder at the Gates* is a significant addition to the literature on African American troops of the Civil War. Egerton’s historical record of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth, Fifty-fifth, and Fifth Cavalry is a noteworthy accomplishment.

Leonne M. Hudson is associate professor of history at Kent State University and the author of a monograph, articles, chapters, and book reviews on the Civil War. He is currently writing a book of the reaction of black Americans to the death of Abraham Lincoln.