



Where Death and Glory Meet: Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Infantry

Russell Duncan

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On July 18, 1863, the African American soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry led a courageous but ill-fated charge on Fort Wagner, a key bastion guarding Charleston harbor. Confederate defenders killed, wounded, or made prisoners of half the regiment. Only hours later, the body of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the regiment's white commander, was thrown into a mass grave with those of twenty of his men. The assault promoted the young colonel to the higher rank of martyr, ranking him alongside the legendary John Brown in the eyes of abolitionists.

In this biography of Shaw, Russell Duncan presents a poignant portrait of an average young soldier, just past the cusp of manhood and still struggling against his mother's indomitable will, thrust unexpectedly into the national limelight. Using information gleaned from Shaw's letters home before and during the war, Duncan tells the story of the rebellious son of wealthy Boston abolitionists who never fully reconciled his own racial prejudices yet went on to head the North's vanguard black regiment and give his life to the cause of freedom. This thorough biography looks at Shaw from historical and psychological viewpoints and examines the complex family relationships that so strongly influenced him.

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