

History 225

Re: Notes w/ Sable Arm

Source: McPherson, "The Glory Story"

Question: Can Movies teach history?

Answer: Yes, for Glory. This is the most powerful movies about the Civil War ever made. Better than Gettysburg(1993), and a walk away from Gone With the Wind, always touted by the tv reruns as the greatest movie ever made. Glory throws a cold dash over the romanticism and false use of stereotypes that punctuate Gone With the Wind.

The story of the 54th Massachusetts recruited by Governor Andrews of Massachusetts. Their were earlier uses of black troops in the Vicksburg campaign (Port Hudson and Milliken's Bend and in the fighting that took place in Kansas)but very little press coverage of these engagements.

There was nothing but press available when the 54th went up against the fortifications at Ft. Wagner in Charleston campaign. The portrayal of the attack is the most authentic recreation of battle in the Civil War.

Ft. Wagner was the black man's Bunker Hill.

The death of Robert Gould Shaw had a greater impact on New England culture than all the other 35,000 Massachusetts men who fell in this war for Union and liberty. Not only was Shaw well connected; that he came from an abolitionist family; was a Harvard graduate; but it was the stinging response from the Confederate commander of Ft. Wagner when after the failed assault and under a flag of truce the Union commander on the scene sent a party to the fort to retrieve Shaw's body. The response was "That we buried him with his niggers."

Add to this that two of Frederick Douglass boys were in the 54th, and one was wounded in the attack. The brother of William and Henry James, Garth Wilkinson James, was also one of the wounded in the engagement.

The movie Glory does not make the connection between the assault on the fort and the New York draft riots that had occurred just days before. But the juxtaposition was not lost on the North. (A nephew of one of the black sergeants in the 54th was beaten to death by the rioters.) That could have been played up in the movie.

Incidents of poetic license, in the sense that there is a poetic truth that transcends the literal truth, would be the impression that the men of the 54th were former slaves. Truth was that most were free men of the North.

The watermelon scene. . . replaces the moonlight and magnolias of Gone with the Wind

Enlistment of Negro Troops:

The enlistment of Negroes began in late 1862
It was a significant event in the Civil War.

Some blacks were recruited in the northern states and formed the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Regiments. Recruitment was made easier with the enunciation of the Emancipation Proclamation. This gave blacks in the north a stake in the war.

Most of the blacks who served in the Union Army were from the south. These blacks were "contrabands" or war. . . They either slipped into the Northern camps or was picked up as the Northern armies rumbled through the Old South. Many of them served for the duration as laborers, teamsters, cooks, carpenters, scouts and spies.

Negro scouts and spies were extremely invaluable to Union officers. They knew the lay of the land with more intimacy than Union maps could reveal. Former slaves and run-aways served as spies. . . and were in many reported cases instrumental in assisting Union soldiers who escaped from Confederate prison camps and were trying to find their way back to Union Lines.

Some of the recruiting in the South by Union soldiers was better characterized as impressment. Blacks were simply swept up and forced to serve in the Union army -- mostly to do the heavy fatigues labor around the camp sites. Impressed blacks rarely served in any combat role during the war. . . .

Many blacks volunteered for service. . . fleeing into the Union army when they learned that northern soldiers were in the vicinity. The earliest use of black troops in Missouri-Kansas theatre, and South Carolina and in Louisiana were mostly volunteers.

The Case of Robert Smalls:

Some demonstrated a certain ingeniousness in getting
"signed Up"