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The Role of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in Potter's Raid

By

Leonne M. Hudson

When South Carolina left the Union in December 1860, the disintegration of the United States had begun. As politicians cast their eyes toward the heavens in search of a dove of peace, the threat of war filled the air. They were keenly aware that time was running out for them to find a solution to save the country from impending calamity. More than 140 years ago, rhetoric collided with reality at Fort Sumter, and the nation found itself engaged in a fateful encounter. The Civil War, that revolutionary event of the 1860s would bring about phenomenal social, political, and economic changes in America.

By 1865, the war had entered its final phase with the outcome no longer in doubt. As General William T. Sherman marched through the Carolinas, he made good on his promise "to wreak vengeance" on the first state to secede from the Union. Although Sherman had moved into North Carolina, he was still burning "with an insatiable desire" to inflict punishment on the Palmetto State. Moreover, the Union general did not want the demoralized Confederate army opposing him in the Tar Heel State as the beneficiary of reinforcements and supplies from South Carolina.

Writing to General John G. Foster, commander of the Department of the South from Fayetteville, North Carolina, on March 12, 1865, Sherman said: "The enemy still has much railroad stock and munitions on the track about Sumterville and Florence, . . . I want you to reach that road and destroy everything possible and exhaust the country of

supplies.”¹ General Sherman also suggested Georgetown, South Carolina, as a point of departure from which to carry out his directive. During the last days of March 1865, transport vessels from Charleston and Savannah deposited an army there. Georgetown, situated on Winyah Bay near the Atlantic Ocean was a wealthy community with large plantations worked by slave labor. The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer regiment arrived at Georgetown from Savannah on March 31st.

The state of South Carolina was the scene of many military operations during the Civil War including several incursions of its interior by Federal soldiers. General Edward A. Potter led the largest of those inland expeditions. He assumed command of the Union force at Georgetown on April 1, 1865. Potter of New York City, served primarily as General Foster’s chief of staff during the war.² The Federal force that had assembled at Georgetown, known as the Provisional Division consisted of six infantry regiments divided into two brigades. Colonel Philip P. Brown commanded the First Brigade and Colonel Edward N. Hallowell the Second. The 54th Massachusetts supplied 700 officers and enlisted men to Potter’s 2,700 man army.³ The regiment’s participation in Potter’s raid was the last campaign of significance for the most celebrated regiment of the 166 black units of the Civil War.

Governor John A. Andrew of Massachusetts was the driving force behind the creation of the 54th infantry. He believed that the participation of black soldiers in the war would serve “as a means of

¹ U. S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 volumes and index (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, part 2, vol. 47, 804. Hereafter cited as *Official Records*.

² Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 380-381.

³ *Official Records*, series 1, part 1, vol. 47, 1027-1028. General Potter’s 2,700 man army consisted of several regiments. Colonel Philip P. Brown was the commander of the First Brigade that consisted of the 25th Ohio, 157th Ohio, 157th New York, and a detachment of the 56th New York. Colonel Edward N. Hallowell was the commander of the Second Brigade, which consisted of the 54th Massachusetts, five companies of the 102nd USCT, the 32nd USCT, a section of Battery F of the 3rd New York Artillery, a detachment of the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry, and a detachment of the 1st New York Engineers.

elevating the people of color hereafter.”⁴ At the request of the governor, Robert Gould Shaw accepted the task of commanding the 54th, the first black regiment raised in the northern states. Born in Boston in 1837, he was handsome, wealthy, charismatic, and well-educated. Colonel Shaw fully understood the challenge of transforming 1,000 civilians into soldiers. On March 5, 1863, General R. A. Pierce, commandant at Meigs, the training camp of the 54th at Readville on the outskirts of Boston, issued General Order No. 1. He enjoined his drill instructors to pay special attention “to the soldierly bearing of the men...as it is easier to form good habits in the beginning than to correct bad ones later.”⁵

Four months after that order, the volunteers of the 54th would have an opportunity to test their training in South Carolina. According to Dudley Taylor Cornish, “it was that on James Island the men of the 54th had their first taste of battle, of honorable soldier’s work.”⁶ The historical legacy of the Massachusetts regiment would be inextricably tied to the Palmetto State because of its courageous assault on Fort Wagner on July 18, 1863. Colonel Shaw’s regiment sustained a total of 269 casualties in the attack. Among the dead was the valiant Shaw who had fallen in the sand; from this would sprout his immortality. In addition to James Island and Fort Wagner, the 54th also participated in the memorable battle of Honey Hill along the South Carolina coast in November, 1864. Parenthetically, the men of the famed unit would end their military careers in the state where they had been christened in the art of warfare.

There was no shortage of excitement among the men of the 54th as Potter’s raid commenced. With confidence, Private Benjamin Bond of

⁴ Official Order of the Governor (John A. Andrew), March 23, 1863, Records of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment (Colored) 1863-1865, M1659, roll 1, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁵ General Order No. 1, March 5, 1863, Records of the Fifty-fourth, M1659, roll 1, NA.

⁶ Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 151. The 54th Massachusetts saw its first action of the Civil War on June 11, 1863. On that date, Colonel James Montgomery took several companies of the regiment on a raid to the undefended and nearly deserted town of Darien. The beautiful Georgia town was destroyed by fire on orders from Colonel Montgomery.

Company B noted that the “troops were all in fine spirits, and seemed anxious to have a crack at the Johnnies.”⁷ Potter departed from his headquarters at Georgetown at 8:00 a.m. on April 5. His destination was Camden, one of the oldest and most historic inland towns of South Carolina. Camden, a distance of more than 100 miles from his base, was reached in thirteen days. In a letter that appeared in the *Christian Recorder* (the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church) on May 20, 1865, Sergeant John H. W. N. Collins of Company H referred to Potter’s trek as “our errand through the State.” Potter’s army, however, was bedeviled by exhaustion as it marched along the Black River. As one scholar has noted, many of his “men had come directly from occupation duties and were no longer accustomed to spending long hours trampling along dirt roads.”⁸ Colonel Henry N. Hooper, commander of the 54th noted that the army covered eighteen miles that day. The men spent their first night in camp near Johnson’s Swamp, approximately the midway point between Georgetown and Kingstree.

Potter’s expedition resumed the next morning at 6:30 with Colonel Hallowell’s brigade leading the way. On that day, the soldiers marched through a region “Where foraging parties found good supplies and draught animals.”⁹ In addition to foraging, the second day’s activities also included skirmishing. Lieutenant Edward L. Stevens, commander of Company A of the 54th confided to his journal that “The Cavalry today made some captives, [and] drove a small party of Rebels across Black River, the latter setting fire to the bridge.”¹⁰ At the end of a nineteen-mile march, the men pitched their tents at Thorntree Swamp.

⁷ *Christian Recorder*, May 27, 1865.

⁸ Noah Andrew Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862-1865* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 376.

⁹ Luis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry 1863-1865* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 291.

¹⁰ John Hammond Moore, ed., “The Last Officer-April 1865,” [Journal of Edward L. Stevens], *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, vol. 67, no. 1, (January 1966), 3.

The next morning General Potter's men proceeded in a northwest direction through open country which was rich with supplies. The small contingent of Confederates in front of Potter's columns was unable to impede his progress. Upon reaching the Northeastern Railroad line, several miles of track were destroyed. At that point, a few hundred men of the 102nd United States Colored Troops (USCT) destroyed the Kingtree Bridge spanning the Black River. Colonel Hallowell reported that the men executed that task without suffering any casualties.

On the afternoon of April 7, Colonel Hooper enjoined Captain Charles E. Tucker to take Companies A and H of the 54th to destroy the Epps Bridge across the Black River. With extreme caution Sergeant Collins, with one corporal and fifteen privates, led the advance. Less than a hundred yards from the Confederates' post, they fired on the advancing party in which "Johnny's balls began to fall thick and fast around us," recalled Collins, and "whizzed about our ears in perfect showers."¹¹ After a brief fight, the Southerners withdrew from their position at the bridge. In describing the operation against Epps Bridge, Captain Tucker noted that "the enemy abandoned the temporary works they had improvised from the flooring...leaving behind the heavy timbering of the work in flames."¹² Having achieved their objective, the two companies joined their fellow comrades that night near Mill Creek.

As the Provisional Division approached Manning, a small rag-tag Confederate force prepared for their uninvited guests. The bright sun that accompanied the Federal army on its march of April 8, served to illuminate the success of Potter's expedition since leaving Georgetown. The Yankee conquerors had paused for dinner when a caravan of contrabands passed by. Lieutenant Stevens recorded that scene in his journal: "Little boys & girls of such tender ages, as at home would not be trusted outside the yards," he said, "yet these small children Keep up with us marching 20 miles a day... It is Sad & yet encouraging to see the hope in their countenances & their perfect trust in us."¹³ The historian

¹¹ *Christian Recorder*, May 20, 1865.

¹² Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*, 292. See also Henry N. Hooper to William Schouler, April 27, 1865, Records of the Fifty-fourth, M1659, roll 1, NA.

¹³ Moore, ed., "The Last Officer," 5. John Cooper described the Negroes as "old crippled men and women, little boys and girls" who were "all moving along"

Joseph T. Glatthaar insists that “the USCT played the role of avenging heroes to thousands and thousands of joyous blacks.”¹⁴

Potter’s expeditionary force reached Manning, a town of a few hundred people at nightfall on April 8. While there, some soldiers of the Ohio regiments took over the newspaper office of *The Clarendon Banner*. The imaginative Ohioans issued a special edition of the paper with a new title, *The Clarendon Banner of Freedom*.¹⁵ With Manning as a backdrop, Potter’s soldiers advanced toward Sumterville. To facilitate the movement of his army, the 1st New York Engineers with the assistance of a detail from the 54th Massachusetts repaired the long causeway across the Pocotaligo River that had been damaged by the Confederates. The men of the 54th who had helped with the repair work were then “ordered to move over to the opposite side of the causeway to reinforce the picket line.”¹⁶ At about 1:30 a.m., on April 9, the Second Brigade passed over the Pocolatigo Bridge, and marched a short distance before bivouacking. At dawn that Sunday morning, the Union troops resumed their trek to Sumterville. During the day, hundreds of black South Carolinians from nearby plantations rushed to the United States Army of liberation. In the meantime, Potter had been informed by contrabands that a Rebel force of 500 men with three cannons would contest their advance near Sumterville. The three pieces of artillery were in deplorable condition. Vigorous cleaning by the gunners made two howitzers functional, but one piece had rusted beyond any hope of restoration.¹⁷

About three miles from Sumterville, Confederate militiamen dug in their heels behind meager breastworks at Dingle’s Mill on Turkey Creek

with the army. John Snider Cooper Diary, 1865, 2 vols. Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

¹⁴ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 208.

¹⁵ Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*, 293.

¹⁶ Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, 381.

¹⁷ W. H. Garland, “The Battle of Dingle’s Mill, Fla. [SC],” *Confederate Veteran*, vol. 24, no. 1, (January 1916), 549.

and awaited the arrival of their adversaries. The swamp around Dingle's Mill was "dense and boggy" and unable to "float a blanket" according to local residents.¹⁸ Using information supplied by a black South Carolinian, General Potter ordered Colonel Hallowell to attack the Confederates from the left and rear. The 54th was a part of this flanking column. Lieutenant Stevens recorded for posterity that Hallowell's brigade "filed to the right & went considerable distance, & halted & a Skirmish line was pushed out & found a few pickets."¹⁹ Unable to reach the Rebels' position, the United States Colored Troops countermarched to where Colonel Brown's First Brigade was stationed on the main road. A Confederate volunteer remembered hearing "the church bells in town ringing for afternoon service" as the battle got underway. By the time Hallowell's brigade reached their comrades, the action at Dingle's Mill was over. Stevens wrote that the gray-coats abandoned their position with such haste that "their dead & badly wounded" were left on the field. Potter reported twenty-six casualties. He was convinced, however, that the enemy had suffered a much higher number.

An incident at Dingle's Mill clearly illustrated the cruel nature of war. It was common during the Civil War for spectators to visit battlefields to watch the action. Two civilians from Manning went to see the clash of the opposing armies at Dingle's Mill. They were suddenly surrounded by Union troops who had crossed the swamp. The frightened southerners "tied their handkerchiefs to sticks" and surrendered. Although the men proclaimed, "We have not been fighting," the bluecoats "at once shot them."²⁰ The defeat of the Confederates at Dingle's Mill opened the road to Sumterville, located on the Manchester and Wilmington Railroad. According to Captain Luis F. Emilio, historian of the 54th regiment, Sumterville "boasted some good dwellings, two female seminaries, and the usual public buildings." Potter's army went into camp there on the night of April 9.

Although the arduous activities of April 9 had exhausted the men of the Provisional Division, their stay in Sumterville was short. The next day, Potter ordered a detachment of the 32nd USCT northward toward

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Moore, ed., "The Last Officer," 7.

²⁰ Garland, "The Battle of Dingle's Mill," 549.

Maysville to destroy a train of cars and bridges on the Manchester and Wilmington Railroad. At the same time he sent a portion of the 102nd USCT toward Manchester about three miles south of town along the same line for the purpose of destroying rolling stock and supplies. Captain Tucker and Lieutenant Stephen A. Swails led a detail of the 54th in destroying three locomotives, fifteen cars, and a machine shop. Swails, a native of New York, was the first black troop of the Massachusetts regiment to be promoted to the rank of second lieutenant.²¹ “Racial prejudice among white soldiers and officers,” according to one scholar, “made the War Department reluctant to commission black officers.”²²

General Potter’s raiders departed from Sumterville for Manchester on April 11, at 6: 30 a.m. with the 54th in advance. After dinner, the 54th reached the remnants of the Manchester Depot that had been destroyed the previous day by the mounted soldiers of the Union army. While the main army rested at the station, the 54th set out on a mission to destroy bridges and cars seven miles away. The exhausted regiment arrived at Wateree Junction where Colonel Hooper conducted a reconnaissance of that rail intersection. His survey revealed that the junction was home to “cars, water-tanks, and several locomotives -- one of which had steam up.”²³

The dark did not deter Hooper from implementing his plan to seize the engine. Crucial to his success was the deployment of several sharpshooters to cover the men of the 54th as they approached the bridge

²¹ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 179. Before the end of the war, many USCT would receive commissions as officers. Believing that Swails’ military record had entitled him to advancement in rank, Governor Andrew promoted him to the rank of Second Lieutenant in early 1864. The War Department, however, was initially against Swails’ elevation in rank. Governor Andrew worked tirelessly on Swails’ behalf, finally convincing Secretary Stanton to accept his promotion of the black officer. Colonel Edward N. Hallowell also supported Swails’ promotion bid. See Hallowell’s Endorsement, October 15, 1864, Records of the Fifty-fourth, M1659, roll 1, NA.

²² Edwin S. Redkey, “Black Chaplains in the Union Army,” *Civil War History*, vol. 33, no. 4, (December 1987), 331.

²³ Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*, 296. See also Henry N. Hooper to Charles J. Baldwin, April 12, 1865, Records of the Fifty-fourth, M1659, roll 1, NA.

leading to the “steam up” locomotive. He then designated eighteen of his troops led by Lieutenant Swails to commandeer the engine. Swails rushed in and occupied the cab of the locomotive as the competing armies were exchanging shots. While enjoying a modest victory celebration, he was shot in the right arm by his own men who had mistakenly believed that he was the engineer. In addition to Swails’ injury, two of his men were “wounded while coupling cars.”²⁴ Sergeant Collins remembered seeing the “coat-tails and dust” of the Rebel engineer who “immediately jumped from the train and ran for his life.”²⁵ The Swails-led action forced the Southern defenders to flee. Weary and hungry, Hooper’s unit finally rejoined the Second Brigade at 7:00 a.m. on April 12. Stevens no doubt spoke for the regiment when he reflected on the previous twenty-four hours of activity. “I don’t think I ever did so hard a day’s work,” he said, “in my life.”²⁶

An ex-slave informed Colonel Hooper that more cars were located about one mile west of the junction. He instructed Stevens to take his company along with Captain Tucker to seize the cars. After crossing the trestle bridge spanning the Wateree River, they proceeded another three miles to the train consisting of three locomotives and thirty-five cars, seizing them without resistance from the enemy.²⁷ The adventurous return trip to Manchester for Stevens and his men tested their fortitude as well as their faith. The journey was progressing routinely until they came upon the Wateree trestle that had been set ablaze by another contingent of men from Hooper’s regiment. Captain Tucker recalled the harrowing experience: “Knowing that any delay would be dangerous, and that life and death hung in the balance,...and we crossed the bridge through flame and smoke in safety,...for scarcely had we accomplished the passage when it tottered and fell, a heap of blazing ruins.”²⁸ The 54th did not return completely unscathed. Corporal Charles Noe of Company

²⁴ Hooper to Schouler, April 27, 1865, Records of the Fifty-fourth, M1659, roll 1, NA.

²⁵ *Christian Recorder*, May 20, 1865.

²⁶ Moore, ed., “The Last Officer,” 11.

²⁷ Cooper Diary, Special Collections Library, Duke University.

²⁸ Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*, 297.

A was desperately wounded when he fell from the train as it crossed the trestle.

The next few days were uneventful for the invading army. The destruction of property continued and the widespread vandalism embarrassed Lieutenant Stevens. He lamented the rogue acts “committed by white & black soldiers” and wished “to be away from such Scenes.”²⁹ With General Potter’s army running out of “bread, sugar, and coffee,” he used the lull in activity “to obtain additional supplies” from “Wright’s Bluff on the Santee.”³⁰ With contrabands pouring into Union lines, guarding them had become a major concern for Potter. He solved that problem by ordering the 32nd USCT to escort the Negroes to the Santee River to be transported to Georgetown.

The Federal columns remained in camp at Singleton’s plantation, a short distance from Manchester, until April 15. At 3: 00 o’clock that afternoon, the raiders moved forward with Camden as their destination. By then, the 32nd USCT had returned from Wright’s Bluff with supplies. In anticipation of an imminent battle, “a heavy Rebel force” had gathered “in the direction of Camden” under General Pierce M. B. Young at a place called Boykins Mill on Swift Creek.³¹ Young was born in South Carolina in 1836, but relocated to Georgia at an early age. He left West Point a few months prior to his graduation when Georgia seceded from the Union. Young offered resistance to Sherman in the Carolinas.³² One source described General Young’s army of nearly 800 troops as “a small band of home guards, boys and old men, mixed with a few furloughed veterans, some of whom came from the hospital.”³³

²⁹ Moore, ed., “The Last Officer,” 12. Cooper recorded in his diary that “the 54th Mass seems to be the worst in this business” of committing outrages “and they are supported in it by some of their company officers.” Cooper Diary, Special Collections Library, Duke University.

³⁰ *Official Records*, series 1, part 1, vol. 47, 1029.

³¹ Moore, ed., “The Last Officer,” 12.

³² Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 348.

³³ Thomas J. Kirkland and Robert M. Kennedy, *Historic Camden: Part Two Nineteenth Century* (Columbia: The State Company, 1926), 174.

Potter's division broke camp on April 16 and encountered skirmishers on the road to Camden. Company C of the 54th suffered two casualties that afternoon when Lewis Clark was killed and Levi Jackson was wounded. By nightfall, Hallowell's brigade had covered sixteen miles and had bivouacked at Spring Hill. As contrabands continued to flock to the Federal army, Lieutenant Stevens rhapsodized that it was "a joyful sight to see families & squads strolling across the fields to join their Liberators."³⁴

The thirteenth day of Potter's expedition was April 17. He and his raiders started for Camden at 6:00 o'clock that morning. The lack of any real opposition no doubt accelerated their advance toward the historic town. Twelve hours later, the Union soldiers had occupied Camden without a fight. In an effort to save whatever rolling stock they could, the Confederates had moved the locomotives and trains to Boykins Mill, eight miles below Camden. The next morning, Potter left Camden at 7:00 o'clock traveling on the Statesburg road. The Union commander ordered five companies of the 102nd USCT to destroy the railroad in that vicinity. The remainder of the army traveled on a wagon road a short distance east of the tracks. The Federal columns encountered no opposition until they reached the fortified position of the enemy at Boykins Mill. The road on which the Federals marched passed by the mill and was bordered on the left by millponds and swamps and on the right by a swamp that extended into the Wateree River. To slow Potter's movement, the enemy flooded the area and tore up the floorboards on the wagon road bridge.

As Potter approached Boykins Mill, the bulk of the Confederates took up a defensive position on the opposite side of the creek. The railroad bridge that crossed the swamp lands a few hundred yards "west of the wagon road, was covered by enemy riflemen in trenches."³⁵ The 32nd USCT who were the skirmishers for Hallowell's brigade went forward but was unable to cross Swift Creek because of deep water. Colonel Brown, hoping for better success than the black Federals ordered the 107th Ohio to ford the stream and turn the enemy's right flank; but the creek would not cooperate with his plans.

Potter then turned to Colonel Hooper's 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, instructing them to reconnoiter the left flank of the Rebel's

³⁴ Moore, ed., "The Last Officer," 13.

³⁵ Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, 391.

position. Hooper led his men over plowed fields in search of a place to cross the creek. He was rescued from that futile flanking movement by Negroes who told him “that the Swamp was impassable at any nearer point...than Boykin’s Mills which were two miles distant.”³⁶ With that advice, Hooper shifted his black warriors to a road leading to Boykins Mill. At that moment, a scout named Stephen Warren Morehouse rushed to Major George Pope telling him “there’s a lot of Rebs through there in a barn.” Believing that quick action was necessary in order to avert a potentially dangerous situation, he led Company E to the place where the Confederates had congregated. The approach of the black troops caused the barn dwellers to abandon their sanctuary in favor of refuge on the other side of the stream. Pope ordered the company to hold that point while he scrambled to rejoin the 54th.³⁷

With confidence tinged with caution, the 54th continued their march to Boykins Mill. The skirmishers were the first members of the regiment to see the mills. They also discovered that a dike dammed the stream running through Boykins Mill. Swift Creek divided into streams, resulting in the formation of an island just below the Confederate stronghold. The main road crossed the first stream, the island, and the second stream. The first branch was spanned with a bridge and the second with a ford. The army in gray had destroyed the planking of the bridge, leaving only the stringers holding it in place. Captain Watson W. Bridge who commanded the skirmishers attempted to cross the skeletal structure but was halted by a heavy volley. That attack left two dead and four wounded of the 54th’s Company F.

Colonel Hooper quickly realized the hopelessness of a frontal assault against the well-fortified Confederate position. He then ordered Major Pope to carry out a diversionary tactic a few hundred yards downstream. Pope and his four companies relied on “an old white-headed negro” to lead them through the swamps to a ford on Swift Creek. Pope instructed Lieutenant Stevens to make a demonstration toward the creek to attract the attention of the Rebel defenders. As soon as Stevens had completed the deployment of his troops along the creek, the Confederates unleashed a storm of musketry fire. Stevens was fatally

³⁶ Hooper to Schouler, April 27, 1865, Records of the Fifty-fourth, M1659, roll 1, NA.

³⁷ Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*, 301.

wounded in the attack when a bullet hit him in the head. Two men of his company recovered his body from the stream.

In the meantime, a concentration of the enemy blocked Pope's path and thwarted his attempt to ford the stream below Boykins Mill. Colonel Hooper responded to this exigency by dispatching a messenger to General Potter to request a cannon. Once the field gun had arrived, he made plans to dislodge his adversaries. On orders from Hooper, Lieutenant Charles Hallet occupied the island between the streams and provided cover for "the main attacking column, now slated to go across the top of the dam."³⁸ Lieutenant Lewis Reed seemed oblivious to the galling fire of the Confederates as he courageously led the 54th across the dike. Hooper reported that after firing half a dozen shells: "I had the satisfaction to see quite a number of Rebels rapidly leave our front. Although the enemy maintained his position for a while he soon fled. The regiment gained the enemy's breastworks and the affair at Boykin's Mills was over."³⁹

Captain Emilio called this action at Boykins Mill the "last fight of the Fifty-fourth." The charge of the 54th coincided with the advance of the 102nd USCT and the 107th Ohio. With Yankees pouring over Swift Creek, the faithful guardians of Boykins Mill gave up the fight as hopeless. The United States Cavalry pursued their vanquished foes but to no avail. The victorious troops occupied Boykins Mill at 4:00 p.m. on April 18. Although the battle of Boykins Mill was contested under difficult conditions, it proved that black troops were capable of handling responsibility in time of peril when under the command of competent officers. After the war, Joseph T. Wilson of Company C of the 54th recorded his observations of the battle:

The heroes of Wagner and Olustee did not shrink from the trial, but actually charged in single file. The first to step upon the fatal path, went down like grass before the scythe, but over their prostrate bodies came their

³⁸ Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, 393.

³⁹ Hooper to Baldwin, April 28, 1865, Records of the Fifty-fourth, M1659, roll 1, NA.

comrades, until the enemy panic-stricken by such determined daring, abandoned their position and fled.⁴⁰

The affair at Boykins Mill was a costly one for the 54th. Having been on the attack against a fortified position, the regiment sustained fifteen casualties: two killed and thirteen wounded. That was the highest number of casualties by one regiment in any action during Potter's expedition. At the abandoned fort, the 54th destroyed more than fifty bales of cotton, a gristmill, and a sawmill. Lieutenant Stevens along with Corporal James P. Johnson were buried at Boykins Mill. Twenty years after the war, their bodies were disinterred and given a final burial at the National Cemetery at Florence, South Carolina. Captain Emilio remembered Stevens as "a genial comrade and brave officer" who "must have been the last officer, or one of the very last officers, killed in action during the Rebellion."⁴¹ According to Sergeant Collins' observations of the battle, the 54th "destroyed and drove the rebels from the field, totally demoralizing them."⁴²

With the battle of Boykins Mill etched in their minds, the Union soldiers left that site and began their trek back to their coastal headquarters. Marching in a thunderstorm, the Federal division went into camp about three miles from the battle-scarred field. The adverse conditions did not put a damper on their earlier achievement at Boykins Mill. At 6:00 a.m. on April 19, the army resumed its march with the 54th as the rear guard. After marching a short distance, Potter's men encountered the enemy at Rafting Creek. Although the Confederates commanded two pieces of artillery and were protected by trenches, they offered only a token resistance to his movement. Potter reported that his flanking action caused the Rebels to retire "in great haste." At 12:00 noon, the 54th Massachusetts relinquished its rear guard duty and joined the advance unit for the remainder of that day.

⁴⁰ Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx: African-American Soldiers in the War of Independence, the War of 1812, and the Civil War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 278.

⁴¹ Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*, 305.

⁴² *Christian Recorder*, May 20, 1865.

At Beech Creek, near Statesburg, the Confederates attempted to disrupt Potter's march. Volunteers of the Ohio and New York regiments, drove the Rebels through Statesburg in a state of confusion. A detachment of the mounted unit pursued them for several miles, capturing many prisoners and scattering others in several directions. The Union army destroyed a large quantity of rolling stock, supplies, and ordnance during its stay at Middleton Depot on April 20. The 54th assisted other regiments in wrecking and burning eighteen locomotives and 176 railroad cars there. The clouds of smoke that rose over the depot and disappeared into the heavens was symbolic of the Confederate nation itself. This image doubtless formed a magnificent backdrop for Potter's expedition as it turned toward Georgetown the next day.

While camped at a plantation in Manning, a Confederate officer brought Potter the news of a truce between Generals Sherman and Joseph E. Johnston. The men spontaneously celebrated this revelation, convinced that the war was finally over. According to Emilio, "the Fifty-fourth was brought to a field, where the last shots loaded with hostile intent were fired as a salute."⁴³ On April 23, however, the euphoria of the Yankee soldiers quickly subsided when they learned of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. This tragic event produced emotions ranging from despondency, to bitterness among the northern troops. Private Bond of the 54th perhaps expressed the opinion of many in his regiment when he said: "We also much regret the loss of the inestimable services of President Lincoln. The country has thereby met with its greatest misfortune."⁴⁴

General Potter relinquished command of his men to Colonel Brown on April 21. He then proceeded to Beaufort to meet with General Quincy A. Gillmore who had assumed command of the Department of the South. The Federal division reached its base at Georgetown late in the afternoon on April 25, after a twenty-day journey that had covered nearly 300 miles. One of the major problems at the Union base was sickness. On May 1, Colonel Hallowell made an urgent plea to William J. Dale, Surgeon General of Massachusetts to send additional doctors to Georgetown. "The large number of 'Contrabands' recently brought into the Department," he said, "has created an unusual demand for Medical

⁴³ Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*, 307.

⁴⁴ *Christian Recorder*, May 20, 1865.

officers.”⁴⁵ On May 6, the 54th Massachusetts regiment arrived at Charleston where they performed garrison duty for the remainder of their time in the army.

Writing to the War Department from Beaufort on May 6, General Potter paid a glowing tribute to his army. He said: “I cannot too highly praise the conduct of officers and men during this expedition. They bore with cheerfulness the fatigue of a long and toilsome march...and in our frequent encounters with the enemy displayed great dash and courage.”⁴⁶ Colonel Hallowell in his official report of the expedition recorded that “the troops were in perfectly good spirits, and both officers and enlisted men carried out instructions with energy and cheerfulness.”⁴⁷

Once the march had ended, Potter recounted the amount of damage he had inflicted on the enemy and the number of men he had lost. He reported the destruction of thirty-two locomotives, 250 cars, several miles of track, 5,000 bales of cotton, a large amount of other supplies and materials, and the capture of sixty-five prisoners. His casualty list tallied ten killed, seventy-two wounded, and one missing.⁴⁸ Of these numbers, the 54th Massachusetts lost three killed and twenty wounded. The real significance of Potter’s raid must be measured in the number of bondsmen he rescued from plantations in the “state where the slave-holder’s rebellion was hatched.”⁴⁹ According to Captain Frank Goodwin, Assistant Provost Marshal of the Provisional Division, more than 6,000 Negroes joined Potter’s army during the expedition. In addition to freeing slaves, capturing prisoners, and destroying southern property, Potter’s raid “asserted Federal authority in the state that had

⁴⁵ Edward N. Hallowell to William J. Dale, May 1, 1865, Records of the Fifty-fourth, M1659, roll 1, NA.

⁴⁶ *Official Records*, series 1, part 1, vol. 47, 1031.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1037.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1031.

⁴⁹ “The First Recognition of Colored Troops,” Box #11, Scrapbooks 1861-1875, John Emory Bryant Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

started the Civil War.”⁵⁰ The freeing of slaves was especially satisfying to Colonel Norwood P. Hallowell. In a letter to William M. Trotter on March 1, 1910, Hallowell revealed that he had enlisted in the Union army “simply to give a death-blow to slavery and for no other purpose.”⁵¹

The 54th Massachusetts was mustered out of the army on August 16, 1865, after twenty-six months of service. On September 2, the men paraded through the streets of Boston, enjoying the adoration of the crowd. Once on the Boston Common, Brevet Brigadier General Edward N. Hallowell delivered a farewell speech to the men of the 54th, thanking them for their bravery during the war. Following the brief ceremony, the famous unit was officially disbanded.

Black soldiers represented both their country and their race with a sense of loyalty and dignity. Those black warriors of the Civil War fought against not only the enemy but also prejudice that “was as deeply entrenched as the Confederate positions they attacked.”⁵² James I. Robertson, Jr. concludes that despite being the “victims of discriminatory treatment throughout most of the war, the Negroes’ over-all performance is deserving of high commendation.”⁵³

When viewing the role of the 54th in the context of the phenomenon that was the Civil War, it emerges as one of many regiments that made valuable contributions to the United States Army during that tumultuous period. Assuredly, the men of that unit could take comfort in knowing that their participation in the revolution had helped to free the slaves. As the men of the 54th Massachusetts regiment looked through the telescope of retrospect, they no doubt took pride in the role they had played in Potter’s raid.

⁵⁰ Edwin S. Redkey, ed., *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 32.

⁵¹ N. P. Hallowell, *Selected Letters and Papers of N. P. Hallowell* (Peterborough, NH: The Richard R. Smith Co., Inc., 1963), 85.

⁵² Charles E. Heller, “Between Two Fires: The 54th Massachusetts,” *Civil War Times Illustrated*, vol. 11, no. 1, (April 1972), 40.

⁵³ James I. Robertson, Jr., “Negro Soldiers in the Civil War,” *Civil War Times Illustrated*, vol. 7, no. 6, (October 1968), 32.