The Black Regiments of Camp Meigs

Camp Meigs
Readville, Hyde Park

Sergeant-Major Lewis Douglass
54th Massachusetts Infantry
States Rights and Human Rights

As the Civil War progressed, the death struggle between a North fighting to preserve the national Union and a South fighting to protect its states rights was slowly augmented by issues of human rights and the abolition of slavery. By announcing that a highly controversial Emancipation Proclamation was planned to take effect on January 1, 1863, President Lincoln raised the war to a higher moral tone, while at the same time forestalling possible European intervention on the Confederacy's behalf.

Having finally reaffirmed an African-American's human right to freedom, Lincoln next endorsed his right to fight in the armies of the United States.

The Black Regiments of Massachusetts

Early in the war, the Commonwealth's Governor John Andrew had lobbied the War Department in vain to authorize Massachusetts' sponsorship of several black regiments. Given emancipation, and a shrinking pool of white volunteers, the Union War Department finally empowered Andrew to raise a single regiment of black infantry in early January 1863. Designated the 54th Infantry (Colored), Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, the unit was entrusted to a young abolitionist army captain, Robert Gould Shaw, and ordered to assemble at the Camp Meigs training rendezvous in the Readville section of Dedham, Massachusetts.
The MVM versus the USCT

While the federal army had enrolled several black combat units by mid-1862*, Readville's 54th MVM Infantry was the first black regiment recruited in the North. The pressures to succeed were substantial. Unlike most other states, the Commonwealth retained the state's Massachusetts Volunteer Militia (MVM) designation for the black troops credited to its personnel quota. Other northern states usually consigned their white-officered black units into the United States Colored Troops (USCT). By fielding and acknowledging the Readville-trained 54th and 55th MVM Infantry (Colored) and the 5th MVM Cavalry (Colored), the Commonwealth made both a political, and a moral, stand. Governor Andrew had strongly argued staffing his regiments with black officers, but with no effect.

Recruiting

Due to Massachusetts' relatively small black population, it proved necessary to supplement the local volunteer freemen from Boston, New Bedford and Gloucester by recruiting for the 54th in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and elsewhere throughout the Union and Canada. Many prominent African-Americans rallied to the 54th's recruitment effort, including two sons of the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Primarily filled by freedmen from a broad spectrum of occupations and trades, the response to man the 54th was so successful that it raised enough men to organize a second black infantry regiment, the 55th Infantry MVM.

* The earliest black federal combat units included the 1st Kansas Colored, 1st South Carolina Volunteers and 1st-3rd Louisiana Native Guards—all of whom were converted to USCT.
Camp Meigs at Readville

The recruits arrived by train at Readville and were assigned to their respective companies. Quartered in wooden barracks and issued blue federal uniforms, the men were drilled in the "School of the Soldier." This training in marching and musketry on the drill fields of Camp Meigs helped prepare and temper the troops for the skirmishes and battles to come.

By late May 1863, the 54th was considered ready for the front. On May 28, the regiment marched amid much fanfare through the streets of Boston prior to embarking by steamer for the Carolinas.

54th Infantry at the Front

Landing in the Carolinas, the 54th was first employed, much to the men's disgust, on minor raiding forays into South Carolina and Georgia. Finally, the 54th was transferred to the coastal siege lines south of Charleston. There, on the evening of July 18, 1863, the 54th performed with glory. Spearheading the federal assault on the Confederate's Fort Wagner, the regiment proved itself in the long charge up the beach and in the vicious hand-to-hand fighting on the fort's ramparts. The men fought, and many died, with valor. Of the 600 men of the 54th who charged the fort, the regiment's casualties totaled 272 killed, wounded and captured. Shaw and his dead comrades were buried in the fort's ditch. Although the regimental state colors were lost in the battle, the National Colors and the regiment's pride were retained in an honorable retreat.
Bloodied by July's unsuccessful surprise attack, federal troops resumed trenching their siegeworks slowly towards Fort Wagner in a laborious operation to which the 54th strongly contributed. On September 6, 1863, the night prior to another grand assault, Wagner's Confederate garrison quietly abandoned the fort. On the next morning without firing a shot, the 54th Mass occupied the grounds that they had so costly contested.

When added to the earlier successes accomplished by federalized black troops during attacks along the Mississippi at Port Hudson and Millikens Bend, the 54th Massachusetts' gallant July assault at Fort Wagner conclusively justified the Union's then socially radical employment of black combat troops, marking a major milestone towards racial equality.

During the remainder of the war, the 54th rendered exemplary service along the southern seaboard. The regiment saved the day in February 1864 during the battle of Olustee, Florida and next returned to the Charleston siege that April. Shifted to Hilton Head in November, the regiment took part in the Battle of Honey Hill along with its sister regiment, the 55th Massachusetts. Finally entering Charleston in February 1865, the 54th ended its service by campaigning in and occupying parts of South Carolina until late August.
55th (Colored) Infantry, MVM

After completing its training at Camp Meigs in July 1863, the 55th Infantry was also assigned to the southern seaboard. Initially billeted to the Charleston theater, the 55th was then transferred to the forts of northern Florida, returning to Charleston in April 1864. The regiment was next sent to Hilton Head, performing creditably at the Battle of Honey Hill in November. A brief sojourn in Georgia in early 1865 was followed by more service in the Carolinas and included being among the first federal troops to enter Charleston following the Confederate forces' retreat from the city. The unit stayed in the Carolinas through August 1865.

5th (Colored) Cavalry, MVM

The black 5th Cavalry was organized at Camp Meigs from late 1863 through early 1864 and embarked for Washington in May 1864. First posted to City Point, Virginia the unit served in the Petersburg area until subsequently assigned to guard Confederate prisoners at the federal hospital and prison compound at Point Lookout, Maryland. Remounted as cavalry in early 1865 by Colonel Charles Francis Adams (future founding chairman of the Metropolitan Park Commission), the regiment was among the first federal troops to occupy the Confederate capital at Richmond in April 1865. The 5th was transferred to Texas in June 1865, remaining there on occupation duty until November.

Discharged

Although all three black regiments were mustered out of federal service in their respective theaters of operations, the units returned to Gallops Island in Boston Harbor for discharge from state service. Both the 54th and 55th disbanded in ceremonies on Boston Common, re-entering as civilians a society made better for their service.
During the Civil War, Readville supported three Massachusetts training camps and a large U.S. Army General Hospital. Best known as CAMP MEIGS, nearly 30,000 men in 55 military units prepared here for battle, including three of the Union's earliest black regiments.

In July 1861 two temporary regimental encampments, Camps Brigham and Massasoit, raised their tents on Dedham's Sprague Plain to prepare recruits for civil war. Previously an aboriginal campground and local militia drill field, the Readville site was perfect for military training: its flat river terrace suited infantry, cavalry or artillery maneuvers; its location astride two railroad lines insured transport; and its proximity to Sprague Pond and the Neponset River provided water for drinking and bathing. By September 1862, the Commonwealth erected a permanent cantonment replete with barracks, kitchens, officers quarters, parade grounds, stables, storehouses, laundry, chapel, and hospitals. Named for federal Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs, Camp Meigs proved the largest and longest lived of Massachusetts' 39 camps.* Bisected by Sprague Street, the camp finally encompassed 139 acres, stretching west from the Neponset to the New York & New England Railroad tracks, and south from Milton Street (now Neponset Valley Parkway) to the Norfolk County Fair Ground (now Stop & Shop).

In 1864 the military converted the easterly section of Camp Meigs into a General Hospital. The westerly sector remained in use to train troops for active service and for mustering out those men whose enlistments had expired. By 1866 military operations had ceased and the site was subsequently developed for residences and light industry. The current playground, situated on part of the camp's former parade ground, was dedicated as a park by the town of Hyde Park in 1903.

The Metropolitan District Commission assumed responsibility for the playground in 1958, installing a monument commemorating the black regiments in 1990.

*The MDC presently owns at least 8 properties related to these camps.
Associated with the Civil War Camps at Readville, both the Camp Meigs Playground and the Fowl Meadow Reservation exemplify the Metropolitan Park System's multifold mission to preserve natural, recreational and historical resources.

For more information about Camp Meigs please call the Blue Hills Reservation at (617) 698-1802.