

Unassuming Valor

Sergeant William H. Carney
and the
Awarding of the Medal of Honor

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Before the conclusion of the death and destruction of the Civil War, or the War Between the States depending on which side your loyalties lie, President Lincoln laid the cornerstone to end the era of African American slavery when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. With Lee's surrender more than two years later, the fate of that institution was sealed with the defeat of the Confederacy.

Prior to that fateful conflict free blacks living in the North and the handful living in the South experienced difficulty finding role models of their own race. There were very few successful blacks with national or regional prominence who former slaves could look to for an example. After the war there were far greater numbers of ex-slaves who had no one of their own color to offer them a pattern for their futures. Few blacks from either the North or the South stepped forward to provide any kind of guidance or open the door to the future for them.

Hundreds of thousands of blacks, free men and fugitive slaves, fought in the Union Army to free their brethren in the South. Thousands of them died in that quest. One of

those free men was the son of a former slave who lived in Massachusetts. He was an unassuming young man who answered his state's call for soldiers to fight to preserve the Union. He did so without the prospect of any kind of reward much less eternal glory. But William Harvey Carney would become one of the first bright and guiding lights for African Americans.

Although there might be some dispute because of the actual presentation date, Carney's valorous actions were the earliest to be recognized as those deserving the United States of America's highest military award, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Almost 179,000 black people served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Sixteen of those soldiers received the Medal of Honor for acts of heroism. Seven sailors in the Union Navy also received the medal. A total of 1,523 Medals of Honor were awarded during or shortly after the end of the war. More of the medals were awarded for valorous acts during that war than any military war or conflict since.

The first African American to actually receive the Medal of Honor was Robert Blake, a U. S. Navy Landsman, who was presented his award on April 16, 1864. On December 25, 1863 he was serving as a powder boy on the U. S. Steamer Marblehead when it engaged some Confederate gun batteries on the Stono River in South Carolina. His award citation states his

actions merited the admiration of his fellow shipmates when he displayed extraordinary courage, willingness and intelligence while performing his duties during the battle.¹

Although many books and official documents indicate Carney was the first Black Medal of Honor winner, he actually was the sixtieth. In reality, the date of Carney's actions, not his award presentation, makes him the first to be determined worthy of the highest medal for valor.

Sergeant Carney

William Harvey Carney was born in Norfork, Virginia in 1840. At the age of fourteen, he attended a private school held in secret by a Norfolk minister. When his master, Major Carney, died, all of the slaves belonging to him received their freedom. In 1865, William's father took his family to find a home where they could enjoy their freedom. They eventually settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts.²

William was a religious boy who worked odd jobs to earn money to become a Christian minister.³ He had become a Christian during his fifteenth year.⁴ He enlisted in the U.S. Army in New Bedford on February 17, 1863 and was mustered into Company C of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry (Colored) as a sergeant on March 30, 1863.⁵ At the time of his enlistment, he was 22 and listed his occupation as seaman and his marital status as single.⁶ Carney received an honorable discharge

from the U.S. Army on June 30, 1864 for medical reasons.⁷ His military separation occurred on Morris Island, and although the record does not so state, it may be concluded that his disability discharge was a result of the wounds he received in the Battle of Fort Wagner. There is no mention of the date of his death in the government' records or other documents.

In a December 18, 1865 letter to William Schouler, the Adjutant General of Massachusetts, Colonel E.N. Hallowell described Carney as a full-blooded African. He was very intelligent even though he had a limited education. He had a bright face, finely cut lips and nose and very dark skin. The soldier was about five-foot-eight and did not have a very athletic or muscular build.⁸

Prelude to Destiny

No man desires to be in a war and all soldiers do not rush to the battlefield. Soldiers spend their time training for war but do not look forward to the time they will be fighting in one. Combat can bring out the best or the worst in a man.

A soldier does not have the luxury of being able to select the location of the battlefield where he will fight. Someone else determines the time and place he will face combat. His opinions and choices have very little impact on the course he will follow.

Soldiers are not born heroes. They receive that label during the heat of battle because of an extraordinary action they perform. Such was the case with William H. Carney. At the time of his exceptionally meritorious action on July 18, 1863, he was a sergeant in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry (Colored). He was recognized for his actions then, and was presented with a medal by the general in command of the units involved in that battle. More than thirty-six years later that medal was upgraded by the U.S. government to the Medal of Honor. If he had been presented the medal shortly after the battle, he would have been the first black soldier to receive the nation's highest award for bravery.

The awesome display of courage exhibited by Carney and the 54th that summer night was tarnished by the defeat of the Union forces by the Confederate troops manning a small artillery battery. Some aspects of the Battle of Fort Wagner became factors which influenced subsequent events.

In fact, the outcome of the short-lived engagement may have had a tremendous impact on the eventual outcome of the bloody war. Several northern politicians and generals claimed it helped turn the tide of the war in favor of the North because it proved colored soldiers could and would fight.⁹ It was the first battle which pitted black soldiers recruited in the North against Confederate soldiers.¹⁰ Later in the war,

southern soldiers feared the north's black troops because of the fierce reputation they earned. The men in gray had heard that the black soldiers took no prisoners.¹¹

The emotional impact of the fighting at Fort Wagner received it impetus as a result of the initial assault on the small fort by the 54th Massachusetts Infantry. This military unit was the first northern unit which had its ranks filled by soldiers of color. Although all of its officers were white, all of the enlisted men and non-commissioned officers were black. The soldiers were eager to prove their mettle under fire and were given the post of honor by leading the assault. That position also meant the regiment would doubtlessly encounter the worst of the fighting and the most casualties. The 54th did not shrink from its duty. Its men fought bravely, not only to their own satisfaction but also in the eyes of the enemy and, just as importantly, to the amazement of their fellow Union soldiers.

Even though he was near death after the battle, Carney's actions during the charge on the earthen fort and his return of the U.S. colors to safety created such emotion that his fellow soldiers cheered his return to the rear. White officers, previously skeptical of the fortitude of black soldiers, praised him and singled him out for recognition.

The young soldier risked his life while staring death in the face, and he performed what has become typically labeled "above and beyond the call of duty." All he officially received from the U.S. Army at the time, however, was a thirty-day furlough to go home. More than one hundred and twenty-five years later a movie was made about his unit and the famous battle he fought.

As a result of doing what he saw as his duty by keeping the flag from touching the ground and performing that duty under murderous fire, Sergeant Carney not only became a hero, he became a role model to his fellow soldiers. They were amazed that he was able to do what he did with the wounds he had and applauded his efforts.

The Battle of Fort Wagner

Fort Wagner was an earthen Confederate artillery battery on Morris Island near the mouth of Charleston Harbor. It was one of the three forts which provided an insurmountable defense of the harbor. The forts had proven they were capable of showering Union ships with deadly and accurate fire. Thus, northern military forces were unable to attack the city without first conquering the forts. The other military installations forming the murderous triangle were Fort Sumter and Fort Gregg. The Union Navy was helpless because of the forts, so the Army was given the task of neutralizing the

defenses.

As preparations were being made to attack the small fort, Major General Quincy Adams Gillmore, commanding general of the Department of the South, decided to let General Truman Seymour command the attack. Seymour had boasted about being able to capture the Confederate stronghold with ease. Responding to a question about how he planned to organize his troops, Seymour reportedly said, "Well, I guess we'll let Strong lead and put those damned niggers from Massachusetts in the advance; we might as well get rid of them one time as another."¹² He was referring to the 54 Massachusetts Infantry, one of the regiments in Brigadier General George C. Strong's brigade. As a result of the generals' decisions, the black unit obtained its rendezvous with glory.

The soldiers of the 54th had been engaged in a skirmish on James Island two days earlier. To reach Morris Island to participate in the assault, they had to force march for two nights and a day. The soldiers accomplished that feat by marching in the rain and with very little to eat.¹³

A detailed account of the 54th's activities from the 16th through the 18th was given in a July 22, 1863 letter from Edward L. Pierce to Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew. When the black regiment reached General Strong's headquarters on Morris Island at about 6 or 6:30 p.m., he wrote that the

soldiers were obviously tired from the march. Hardtack and coffee were all they had to eat during the past two days. Even though Strong wanted to let them rest and eat, there was no time; the attack awaited. Because General Strong was impressed with the Massachusetts unit, he wanted to give them the most difficult position in the attack where they could receive the greatest honor.¹⁴

The general was concerned about the well-being of the 54th's men because of the journey they had just completed. Before finalizing his battle plans he went to meet with the black soldiers shortly after they arrived at the battle's assembly area. He asked if they wanted to lead the attack which would begin soon. "A cheer went up from six hundred throats."¹⁵ His decision was made.¹⁶

As the 54th readied for the impending fight, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the regiment's commanding officer, spoke to his men as he walked through the ranks urging them to prove themselves.¹⁷ The emotion of the event was approaching its peak and would continue to grow as the soldiers marched closer to battle. Since the time they had arrived in South Carolina, the soldiers had wanted to do more than menial duty. They desired an opportunity to prove they were a fighting infantry unit. They now had their chance and were ready to prove it. They wanted to refute charges that "The Negro was too grossly

ignorant to perform the duties of a soldier intelligently, and that blacks were not fit to wear a military uniform because they belonged to a degraded, inferior race, lacking in manly qualities."¹⁸

A thunder storm delayed the naval and artillery bombardment which preceded the infantry assault.¹⁹ When the storm ended, an afternoon of shelling rained down on the small fort. Then the infantry soldiers moved into position for the ground attack.

The charge of the 54th began at about 7:30 or 7:45. Within a few minutes, the troops were about a hundred yards from the fort. Suddenly, deadly fire spewed forth from the fort's defenders, and the ranks of the Union soldiers broke, but then rallied as they charged over a ditch and up a parapet where the United States flag was planted. "Here they melted away before the enemy's fire," and the soldier's bodies rolled down a bank and into the ditch.²⁰ Colonel Shaw, in an uncharacteristic show of leadership for a person of his rank, lead his troops in the charge across the beach leading to the fort. The intense fire from the fort hit the advancing soldiers when they were about one hundred yards from the outer defenses. Colonel Shaw sprang forward to rally his men. He waved his sword and yelled, "Forward, my brave boys!" With him in front, the first rank cheered and charged across a

ditch and up a parapet.²¹ As he reached the top of an earthen mound in front of the stronghold, he was shot and died on the spot. Metal projectiles speeding toward the eagerly charging soldiers cut down three flag bearers. Each time one fell, another soldier would grab Old Glory and leap forward. The last of the standard bearers was Sergeant William H. Carney who survived the slaughter and gallantly carried the colors off the bloodied battlefield.²²

On October 15, 1863, Colonel M.S. Littlefield, who had become commanding officer of the 54th, wrote a letter to Colonel A. G. Brown, Jr., Military Secretary to Governor Andrew. He gave an account of the battle and told of the exploits of Sergeant Carney. He had obtained the details of Carney's actions by talking with the color bearer and with an officer who witnessed the soldier's gallantry. Littlefield related that the soldier received the colors at a point about 100 yards from the fort and charged forward with Colonel Shaw. Carney related to Littlefield that the lead ranks were full as they approached and climbed an earthen wall in front of the fort. When they reached the top, a murderous onslaught of enemy fire quickly cut them down. "He received a severe wound in the thigh, but fell only upon his knees. Of him as a man and soldier, I can speak in the highest term of praise."²³

After the 54th was relieved of its duty at the brigade's front at about 2 a.m. the next morning, Colonel Nathan P. Hallowell, who succeeded Colonel Shaw as commander of the 54th at the time, spoke of the efforts of the regiment. "So many of the officers behaved with marked coolness and bravery, I cannot mention any above the others. It is due, however, to the following named enlisted men that they be recorded above their fellows for special merit." He gave the names of four soldiers one of whom was Sergeant Carney. In addition to the praise of their new commanding officer, General Gillmore awarded them medals.²⁴ (The Gillmore Medal was not an authorized or approved award by the U.S. Army and, therefore, not considered an official award.)

During the battle, 1, 194 men were killed, wounded, captured or reported missing. Of the six regiments involved in the deadly assault, the 54th Massachusetts suffered the most casualties with 34 dead, 146 wounded and 92 captured or missing.²⁵ It began the assault with about 600 officers and enlisted men.²⁶

From a military standpoint, the 54th was incapacitated. Even so, in its first battle it had proven its ability and willingness to fight, and in doing so, it proved to the skeptics that black soldiers could be counted on to perform their duty and fight in the face of death. The day after the

battle, General Strong was quoted in the *New York Evening Post* as saying, ". . . in all these severe tests, which would have tried even veteran troops, they fully met my expectations . . ." ²⁷

The Battle of Fort Wagner was not only a devastating defeat for the 54th Massachusetts Infantry but for the Union Army as well. In the end, however, the Confederates abandoned the fort and Morris Island about a month and a half later during the night of September 6 and 7.²⁸ Charleston was evacuated seventeen months later, and a detachment of the black regiment was among the first Union soldiers to march into the city. It was a very emotional event for the soldiers. Most of the white residents who did not leave stayed in their homes alarmed and indignant at the sight of the armed African American troops. The former slaves living in the city lined the street and greeted the soldiers with cheers, prayers, and songs.²⁹

This exposition of black pride probably was one of the first ever exhibited by Charleston African Americans. The 54th received another post of honor because of their display of courage when they lead the assault on Fort Wagner. The efforts of those soldiers in battle and their appearance at the head of the column of blue-clad soldiers was the reason for this emotional display of pride. A transfer of those

feelings to the soldiers would be natural. They had helped accomplish what many of them had enlisted in the army to do-free those enslaved in the South.

The Medal of Honor

On January 15, 1900, Christian A. Fleetwood sent a letter to the secretary of war requesting the presentation of a Medal of Honor to Carney.³⁰ Fleetwood was a sergeant major in the 4th United States Colored Troops who received a Medal of Honor on April 6, 1865. He was awarded the medal for seizing the American flag after its second color bearer was shot, and carrying it through the battle. The action occurred during an engagement related to the Battle of Petersburg.³¹ His heroic actions were very similar to those of Carney which occurred almost two years earlier.

In his letter, Fleetwood described Carney's actions. He stated Carney was a file closer in Company C of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. (A file closer is an officer or non-commissioned officer who is positioned in the rear or on the flank of a column of soldiers with the duty of supervising the men in the ranks).³² During the initial charge toward Fort Wagner, Carney saw the regimental color sergeant fall. He threw his rifle away, grabbed the flag and led the charge up a hill to the fort. He impaled the flag staff in the ground on top of the earthen mound and took cover. The

soldier lay there for more than thirty minutes until he realized no one else was nearby. Pulling the flag staff from the ground he retreated to the Union lines under a hail of gun fire receiving three wounds.

Fleetwood stated Carney was weak from a loss of blood, but he refused treatment for his wounds and refused to turn over the flag until he was reunited with members of his regiment. He was carried to a hospital where some of the battle's survivors were being treated. When his fellow soldiers saw him with the flag, they cheered him. According to Fleetwood, "He simply said, 'Boys, I only did my duty. The old flag never touched the ground.'"³³

General Gillmore, the commander of the Department of the South, had issued a medal of honor (the Gillmore Medal) to Carney, Fleetwood wrote, but the situation never received any attention from the War Department.³⁴

It should be noted that prior to the Civil War, only one official and authorized medal existed which recognized and rewarded a soldier for heroism. General George Washington created the Purple Heart on August 7, 1782. A Certificate of Merit was authorized in 1847, but the Purple Heart was the only medal until December 21, 1861. President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation on that date establishing the Medal of Honor for enlisted men in the Navy. He approved a Medal of

Honor for Army enlisted soldiers on July 12, 1862. An act approved on March 3, 1863 amended the Army's legislation to make officers eligible for the medal.³⁵ These were the only official medals approved and authorized by the Army, but several generals, early in the war, instituted their own methods of decorating the soldiers in their commands.

This began in the Fall of 1862 when General Stephen W. Kearny gave his men a red, diamond-shaped patch to wear on their caps. Other generals carried Kearny's methods of recognition a step further to award their men medals. In June 1863 Major General Nathaniel Banks said volunteers should receive medals for their success in the campaign to free Mississippi. Secretary of War Stanton authorized a medal for soldiers who re-enlisted when their terms of service expired. "Medals of Honor" were created by Major General James B. McPherson and Major General Quincy A. Gillmore in October 1863.³⁶ From that standpoint it can be said Carney was the first black soldier to receive a medal of honor even though he did not officially receive the award until many years later. The practice of issuing unofficial medals ended in January 1865.³⁷

Fleetwood indicated he was bringing the matter of Carney's medal to the attention of the government because he wanted to see justice done for a personal friend.³⁸ He submitted

documentation to support his petition for the medal in the form of citations in three books and affidavits from three soldiers in Carney's unit.³⁹

On May 9, 1900, an assistant secretary of war signed a letter addressed to Carney awarding him a Congressional Medal of Honor. The statement of service stated, "This soldier, then a sergeant, Company C, 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, seized the colors of the regiment and advanced with them after the color sergeant was shot."⁴⁰ The statement was not published in official books containing Army orders recognizing winners of awards and explaining their exploits in various amounts of detail. Earlier orders awarding Medals of Honor were published in books containing military orders.

Carney sent an emotional letter dated, May 26, 1900, acknowledging receipt of the medal stating, "I assure you I will prize it very highly."⁴¹

The letter from the War Department was preceded by an investigation by the adjustment general's office. A memorandum from the War Department's Record and Pension Office dated March 23, 1900 stated Carney's case appeared to be a good one. It also noted that a brief prepared earlier in the lengthy investigation should have contained extracts from the books Fleetwood mentioned in his letter and the affidavits should have been verified. A different typewriter was used

to make a second entry on the document. It states an extract from *A History of the Negro Race in America* was added but the other book Fleetwood referred to was unavailable in the War Department's library because someone had it checked out. The memo also indicated that nothing of special note had been found in military records of the battle except an extract of a report made by Colonel Norwood P. Hallowell.⁴² That officer had been the deputy commanding officer of the 54th and assumed command of the remnants upon the death of Colonel Shaw.

The three sworn statements referred to by Fleetwood in his letter of petition were from other members of the 54th who were at the Battle of Fort Wagner.

An affidavit signed by Brigadier General John W. M. Appleton on December 26, 1899 was the earliest of the three attachments forwarded by Fleetwood. At the time he submitted his affidavit, Appleton was the adjutant general for the state of West Virginia, the highest position in the state's militia. When the 54th was organized, he was a recruiting officer, and during the Wagner attack, he was a captain commanding Company A.

In his description of the assault, Appleton stated he was informed afterwards that the color sergeant fell as they fought through some palisading and charged over some rifle pits. He stated Carney retrieved the American flag and

carried it during the charge on the fort. Appleton wrote that he was with the colors as his men crossed the fort's moat and saw the flag planted on top of a curtain between two bastions. Even though he was involved in fierce fighting, he could see the colors rising and falling during a fight around them. "Once I thought they were taken, but Carney hung on to them and finally, to my great relief, I saw them slowly go down the exterior slope of the rampart and cross the moat" He said Carney was wounded three times during the engagement. After retreating from the fort, Appleton wrote that Carney found what was left of the regiment, and he presented the colors to the officer in charge. He described Carney's actions during the engagement as heroic and believed the soldier deserved a medal for his actions.⁴³

On January 8, 1900, Charles H. Harrison had a justice of the peace write a statement for him attesting to Carney's actions. He stated that he was a private in Company C and was in the front line as the attack began. He described the assault and stated the soldiers cheered and yelled as they ran through the palisades of the fort and over some rifle pits containing enemy soldiers. He saw the color bearer fall and watched Carney pick up the colors and carry them in the charge across a ditch in front of the fort and across the curtain of the fort. He later saw the soldier wounded and heard him make

his comment about keeping the flag off the ground. He requested Carney be awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor.⁴⁴

The third statement supporting Fleetwood's contention and describing Carney's actions was dated January 15, 1900. It was written by Lewis H. Douglass who was a sergeant major in the regiment and a son of Frederick Douglass. Douglass stated that he certified the affidavits of Harrison and Appleton were true, which means he had access to them prior to preparing his own statement. He further stated that his position was on the left of the line during the charge. He wrote that he saw Carney after he came to the rear and witnessed the cheers of his comrades for his actions ". . . in keeping the colors from trailing in the dirt (sic)."⁴⁵

In his first letter, Fleetwood indicated he discovered what he called an oversight regarding Carney's medal while preparing data for an exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. In a second letter dated February 26, he stated he was working on an exhibit of African American Medal of Honor winners. Because of the shortness of time before the exposition was to open, he requested special consideration so Carney could be awarded the medal and be included in the exhibit.⁴⁶

As a part of the investigation preceding the award's presentation, a supplement report of the Chief of the Record and Pension Office of the War Department, dated January 24,

1900, contained statements of the military records of the four former soldiers making statements regarding Carney's valor. The typed report included the complete statements of each person submitting affidavits. It noted that Fleetwood entered the service after the Battle of Fort Wagner, so he was not a witness to the event. Appleton was wounded at Fort Wagner and was an eyewitness to the act of bravery. Harrison was in the 54th Massachusetts prior to and after the engagement, and he declared he witnessed the heroic action. Followed by a typed account of Douglass' testimony was a statement indicating he was in Company F of the 54th before and after its involvement at Fort Wagner. It also noted that even though Douglass was not an eyewitness of the gallantry, he had observed the situation when Carney returned to his fellow soldiers following the retreat. The report also contains mention of Carney's record which indicates he was a member of Company C of the 54th, and that he suffered wounds to the hip and head during the Wagner assault. Near the end of the report was an extract of Hallowell's November 7, 1863 report to the assault.⁴⁷

Another supplemental report was issued by the same office on April 17, 1900. It contains a lengthy quote from *A History of the Negro Race in America*, Volume 2, pages 330-331. This was one of the books referred to by Fleetwood and the one

available in the War Department library. It quotes a letter dated October 15, 1863 from Colonel Littlefield, commanding officer of the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers, to the military secretary of Governor Andrew. It states previous mention had been made regarding Carney's actions at Fort Wagner and goes on to state facts Littlefield obtained from talking with Carney and an officer who was an eyewitness. This appears to be the only official recorded account of Carney's participation in the battle.

The young soldier told the colonel that he received the colors about 100 yards from the fort "and pressed forward to the front rank, near the colonel, who was leading the men over the ditch. He says, as they ascended the wall of the fort, the ranks were full, but as soon as they reached the top, 'they melted away' before the enemy's fire 'almost instantly.' He received a severe wound in the thigh, but fell only upon his knees." After planting the flag on the parapet, he laid on the outer slope where he remained for the remainder of the first assault and for the duration of the second assault. "When our forces retired, he followed, creeping on one knee, still holding up the flag. It was thus that Sergeant Carney came from the field, having held the emblem of liberty over the walls of Fort Wagner during the sanguinary conflict of the two brigades, and having two very severe wounds, one in the

thigh and one in the head.⁴⁸ Still he refused to give up his sacred trust until he found an officer of his regiment.⁴⁹

The case for Carney receiving a Medal of Honor came to a conclusion on May 9, 1900 when a recommendation was made by G.D. Meiklejoin, assistant secretary of war. In a statement worded like a typical government memorandum, not like that of the presentation of a high award, Carney was awarded the Medal of Honor as of that date.⁵⁰

Even though it took more than thirty-six years for him to receive an officially authorized decoration from the government he almost died for, an elderly William Harvey Carney expressed his appreciation in a brief thank you note. He had devoted a short period of his life to fight for a cause he strongly believed in and, along with the other members of the first black regiment, proved that African Americans could be more than slaves. They could be Americans.

Black Pride

Not long after the battle, the actions of Carney and the men of the 54th received public attention. Republican newspaper and magazines expressed the moral that "black men who fought for the Union deserved more respect than white men who fought against it."⁵¹ The *Atlantic Monthly* wrote "Through the cannon smoke of that dark night, the manhood of the colored race shines before many eyes that would not see." The

New York Tribune, characterized Fort Wagner as having become to blacks what Bunker Hill had been to whites.⁵² A month after the Morris Island fighting the Judge Advocate General of the Army, Joseph Holt, wrote a letter to the Secretary of War stating, "The tenacious and brilliant valor displayed by troops of this race . . . has sufficiently demonstrated to the President and the country the character of the service of which they are capable"⁵³

Lincoln revealed his thoughts in an August 26 letter to Democrats. "You are dissatisfied with me about the negro. Some of the commanders of our armies in the field who have given us our most important success, believe the emancipation policy, and the use of colored troops, constitute the heaviest blow yet dealt to the rebellion." He was referring to General Ulysses S. Grant who wrote to the president three days earlier that "by arming the negro we have added a powerful ally . . . This, with the emancipation of the negro, is the heaviest blow yet given the Confederacy They will make good soldiers"⁵⁴

Although neither the president or the generals mentioned Carney or the 54th by name, it could be concluded that the voracious courage of the black soldiers during the Battle of Fort Wagner a month earlier influenced their comments and may have been the reason for them.

Another of the field commanders Lincoln may have been referring to was Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler. On October 11, 1863 after the Battle of New Market, General Butler wrote "better men were never better led, better officers never led better men." He went on to state if black soldiers continued to exhibit such gallantry that commanding them would become a "post of honor" for an officer. Their displays of courage and determination in battle have quieted the doubting voices of their fighting abilities and received the admiration of those on the opposing side of the battlefield, he concluded.⁵⁵

One of the Rebel officers in Fort Wagner wrote after the battle that the African American soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment "fought gallantly."⁵⁶

Contemporary historians have written that in the summer of 1863 black soldiers displayed the attributes that made them important factors in the conflict ⁵⁷ and, that the 54th "fixed beyond recall the Negro's right to the title of citizen-soldier."⁵⁸

Not only did the nation's press write about the exploits of Sergeant Carney and the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, numerous authors and historians wrote about the events that occurred at Fort Wagner. Carney's name became as prominent as, and in some cases, more prominent than soldiers of much

greater rank. He became one of the most well-known soldiers of the era and the most well-known black soldier. Many books featured photographs of him. One of the first books to be written after the war, *The Negro in the American Rebellion, His Heroism and His Fighting* by William Wells Brown, was published in Boston in 1867. It had chapters on the 54th and Fort Wagner and described Carney's actions. Other books published accounts of the July 18, 1863 battle in various amounts of detail. One was a history of the regiment which was published in 1894. It was written by Luis F. Emilio, who was one of the white officers who survived the battle and the war.

The only official reward Carney received from the Army within a relatively short time following the battle, besides the Gillmore Medal, was a thirty-day pass. Massachusetts Governor Andrew wrote to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton requesting the furlough as a tribute to the brave soldier, so he could visit his family and friends at home. "Can any higher praise be bestowed upon this brave man, than a recital of his noble conduct in the assault upon Fort Wagner?" the governor asked the secretary.⁵⁹ On November 13, 1863, Stanton authorized Carney to receive a leave from his military duties.⁶⁰

While he was at home Carney obviously would have had a tremendous impact on the black community in and around New Bedford and Boston.⁶¹ The role as a model for his fellow African Americans was thrust upon him. How he handled that avocation is not clear but, it could be concluded, that it probably was not a role he desired because of his religious background. Regardless, it was a role he could not avoid. He did not do what he did that night in the bloodied sand of Fort Wagner to obtain the praise of his fellow man and a place in history. He did it because it seemed like the proper thing to do at the time. He was a soldier and he performed his duty as he saw it.

His action, the press coverage of the battle and the comments of the white military and political leadership of the country put him and the 54th in the spotlight. Willingly or not, William Harvey Carney became a bright and shining light to guide his fellows on the recently opened road to an unshackled future and hopes of success.

Many years later when he received the Medal of Honor, the award legitimized his role and put it on a higher plain. In what was left of his lifetime and after his death, he became the ultimate example for others who sought success and creditable life in military service. The military helped give African Americans their freedom. Many blacks probably wanted

to offer some sort of repayment with their service. Some may have seen their future in the military. Carney and his award proved to them there was recognition available and also that whites could accept them for what they were--human beings. In subsequent wars and military actions, thousands of African Americans served proudly and valiantly in their country's armed forces.

It took the white-led government more than thirty-six years to finally recognize what was almost common knowledge--that Carney was a hero worthy of official government recognition. It was the persistent efforts of Christian Fleetwood, another Medal of Honor winner, that forced the U.S. War Department to investigate Carney's heroics.

With unassuming valor, a young soldier did his duty and met his destiny in the sand that was Fort Wagner. The battle was short-lived, the divisive war ended and the former soldier's life came to an end. But, the guiding light that Carney lit on the evening of July 18, 1863 continues to glow in the hearts and minds of many.