



The 54th Massachusetts and Battery Wagner



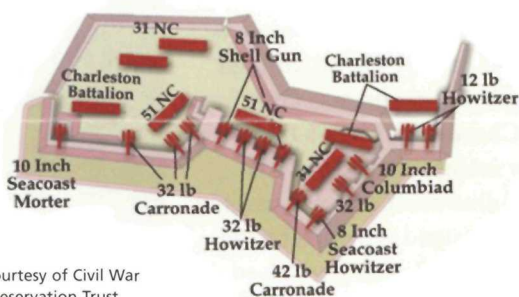
Battery Wagner

Battery Wagner, located on Morris Island in Charleston Harbor, bore witness to some of the fiercest fighting in the Civil War and to the courage of African-American soldiers in combat. A formidable earthwork designed by Confederate engineers, its capture was necessary in the Union plan to take Charleston. Although Wagner and all of Morris Island were in Federal hands by September 1863, Fort Sumter remained a Confederate stronghold and was believed to be the key to Charleston's defenses. Consequently, the Union army occupying Morris Island and the Union navy blockading the harbor mounted an 18 month artillery siege of Charleston that effectively closed the harbor as the Confederacy's principle blockade running port.

Plan of Attack

After the failed ironclad attack against Fort Sumter in April 1863, the U.S. War Department changed its strategy regarding the capture of Fort Sumter and Charleston Harbor. The new plan called for a joint operation between the army and navy. By seizing control of Morris Island, U.S. Major General Quincy A. Gillmore, commander of the Department of the South, believed he could force the surrender of Fort Sumter and then the Navy could fight its way into the harbor forcing the surrender of Charleston. On July 10, 1863, the first Union troops successfully landed on the southern end

of Morris Island, set up camp and set their eyes on Battery Wagner. The 600 foot long battery bisected the island from the marsh to the beach. Within it were wooden bombproof shelters and powder magazines covered with ten to twelve feet of sand. On the south facing side was a ditch that could be flooded at high tide. Eleven cannon and 1,600 men, mostly riflemen, stood ready to defend Battery Wagner.



courtesy of Civil War Preservation Trust



Initial Attack

The initial assault against Battery Wagner on July 11, 1863 resulted in Union defeat. Overconfidence had led to shoddy preparation with a lack of artillery support. In the wake of failure, Gillmore ordered more preparations before attempting another attack. Breastworks and siege batteries were constructed bringing Union guns closer to Wagner's walls. Simultaneously, the guns from the Union fleet under Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren

pounded the Confederate garrison in preparation for a massive assault. Throughout these bombardments, the men of Battery Wagner led by Brigadier General William Taliaferro held firm in part due to the protection of their bombproof shelters. On the evening of July 18th, believing the artillery barrage had ripped apart and demoralized the Southerners, Gillmore gave the order to attack.

The Fight for Wagner

Five thousand Federal troops began moving in the darkness toward Wagner, which stood eerily quiet in the distance. Leading this mass of blue were the men of the 54th Massachusetts regiment under the command of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Though many northern states were represented on the field, the 54th stood out as the first all black regiment to see major combat during the war. Ready to demonstrate their abilities as soldiers, they pushed on until coming within one hundred yards of the Confederate line, at which point the order was given to charge. Almost immediately Southern guns opened fire, tearing through the Union ranks with devastating effect. Temporarily halted by the intense fire, Shaw gathered his men and led them through the moat and up the slope. Upon reaching the top Confederate soldiers engaged them in hand to hand combat. At this climactic moment, Shaw was killed by a hail of bullets; the men of the 54th however, kept up the fight even amid heavy casualties. Behind them, Federal troops from New York, Connecticut, New

Hampshire, Maine and Pennsylvania pressed forward in an attempt to capitalize on the efforts of the 54th. Severe fighting continued for several hours, each side trying to gain the upper hand. Union troops at one point were able to briefly penetrate into Wagner itself, but could not exploit the breakthrough due to Confederate counterattacks and sweeping artillery fire. Finally around 1:00 A.M. on July 19, Union troops withdrew and the fierce battle came to an end.



Significance

The assault resulted in an extremely high number of casualties, especially in the Federal ranks. For several regiments, including the 54th, over forty percent of their men were killed, wounded or captured. However, due to the 54th's courage in combat, the Federal government increased the number of black enlistments so that by 1865 almost two hundred thousand served in the Union army. For the Union commanders, overconfidence and poor preparation had led to the disaster at Wagner. Though the campaign for

Charleston continued, Gillmore ultimately failed in his attempt to seize Charleston. Determined Confederate forces held onto Fort Sumter and Charleston until February 17, 1865 when they were forced to evacuate. In 1866 the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops mustered out of the US Army on Morris Island. Lt. Col. Trowbridge addressed the significance of the battlefield: "...where in the future your children's children will come on pilgrimages to do homage to the ashes of those who fell in this glorious struggle."

Sergeant William Carney



Sergeant William Carney of the 54th Massachusetts earned the Medal of Honor May 23, 1900 for heroism during the attack nearly 37 years earlier. In the heat of battle, the color sergeant fell but before the flag touched the ground, Carney threw down his weapon and saved it. Then he valiantly continued on to place the flag on the parapet of Wagner. Carney was severely wounded twice under fierce fighting but protected the flag until safely back behind Union lines. Today, Carney is remembered for his gallant act of heroism.

Morris Island Today

Today, nothing remains of Battery Wagner and Morris Island itself has been partially reclaimed by the sea. Despite this lack of physical evidence, the memory of the events of 1863 live on through living history and interpretive programs. Only five miles from the city of Charleston, Morris Island remains one of the few undeveloped barrier islands on the South Carolina coast and is accessible only by boat. Most of the island is owned by the state. In 2008 the City of Charleston purchased the northern tip, Cummings Point, from a private developer. Today's challenge is the preservation of the island's ecosystem and interpretation of its historical significance.



About Your Visit

Fort Sumter National Monument is administered by the National Park Service. For additional information, write to: Superintendent, Fort Sumter National Monument, 1214 Middle Street, Sullivan's Island, SC 29482.

Additionally, you can call (843) 883-3123 or visit Fort Sumter on the World Wide Web:

www.nps.gov/fosu