How does Robert Gould Shaw's placing of duty above his own personal desires help us understand courage?

Courage is the capacity to overcome fear in order to do good.

In this lesson, students will explore Colonel Robert Gould Shaw's decision to take charge of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry regiment. Students will learn why it took courage for him to make the decision, its significance to the nation and the overall war effort, as well as how they can make similar courageous decisions in their own lives.

• Students will analyze Robert Gould Shaw's decision to take command of the 54th Massachusetts
• Students will understand how they can make courageous decisions
• Students will apply their knowledge of courage to their own lives.
Frederick Douglass wrote, “Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship.” Blacks had served in the U.S. military during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, even though a 1792 federal law had forbidden them from bearing arms for the United States. Whether blacks should be allowed to join the U.S. army during the Civil War was a controversial question as President Lincoln feared that allowing them to do so would push the loyal slave states to secede.

However, by 1862, an increasingly large number of former slaves had been freed as a result of Union victories. Additionally, fewer whites were volunteering to fight in the war. These factors led Congress in July of 1862 to enact the Second Confiscation and Militia Act, which freed slaves who had masters in the Confederate Army and allowed blacks to serve in the military. A few days later, Lincoln released a preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, which promised freedom to former slaves who served in the U.S. army.

Military service was something abolitionists in the North had been pushing for from the beginning of the conflict. However, just how these new “colored” units would be organized and how they would perform under the duress of combat was unknown. In March of 1863, John A. Andrew, the Governor of Massachusetts, commissioned the first of these new regiments. It would be designated the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment and be primarily made up of African-Americans. However, per the order of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, white officers would command it. The man called upon for this task of commanding the 54th was Robert Gould Shaw.
### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss the following questions with your students.
- What is the historical context of the narrative?
- What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
- How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
- How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
- How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
- What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
- Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
- How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Robert Gould Shaw was born in Boston in October 1837. He was the only son of a wealthy mercantile family who possessed radical abolitionist views. Shaw was a rebellious youth who often tested the patience of his parents and teachers. He found the worlds of college and business to be boring and longed for more. As the crisis deepened in the nation, Shaw volunteered his service part time with the 7th New York militia, a regiment made up mostly of boys from high society in New York City. After the election of Abraham Lincoln and the secession of the southern states, the men in the 7th were enlisted into the regular army for a period of thirty days.

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Life in the army was not easy or glamorous. The troops slept in the rain, wind, mud, freezing cold, and stifling heat. Disease ran rampant through camps and doctors only had rudimentary methods with which to comfort the soldiers under their care. Bouts of extreme boredom were only broken by the monotony of training drills.

Day after day, the men would be mustered out of their camps at dawn for roll call and march to and fro for hours on end in tedious preparation for contact with the enemy. Combat in the Civil War was gruesome and extremely dangerous. The soft lead .54 caliber minie balls used by the armies would shatter bones, causing serious injuries in what would otherwise be minor wounds.

Once his thirty-day enlistment came to an end, Shaw re-enlisted as a lieutenant in the 2nd Massachusetts Infantry. He served with this regiment for the first bloody two years of the war, taking part in combat in several major engagements, including the battles of Winchester and Cedar Mountain. In September 1862, Shaw found himself with his regiment at the horrific slaughter at the battle of Antietam.

It was after this narrow Union victory that Lincoln made his Emancipation Proclamation and, with it, the provision allowing African-Americans to serve in the Union Army. In early 1863, Shaw was approached by his father, who asked if he would take charge of a new colored regiment being formed, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment.

This decision was a difficult one for Shaw. He only had one year left to serve on his original enlistment, and had seen more than his fair share of carnage during the war. He had developed an interest in a woman, from whom he was separated because of the war. Additionally, he would be taking command of a new, untried, and controversial unit that would be under the microscope of public scrutiny. Finally, the Confederate government made a declaration on December 23rd, 1862, which stated, “Every white person being a commissioned officer or acting as such, who during the present war shall command Negroes or mulattoes in arms against the Confederate States, or who shall voluntarily aid Negroes or mulattoes in any military enterprise, attack or conflict in such service, shall be deemed as inciting servile insurrection, and shall if captured be put to death or be otherwise punished at the discretion of the court.”

Shaw struggled with this decision. He wondered if he could stand being in the army for another three years away from his love and his family. He also thought of duty, his country, and the cause for which he had engaged. In the end, the latter considerations won out. Robert Gould Shaw would become the colonel of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry regiment.

Shaw had to fight hard every step of the way to ensure equal treatment for his troops. Through his efforts, he secured good uniforms and equal pay for his soldiers. He went South with his regiment as ordered, hoping to test them in the crucible of battle. On July 18, 1863, while leading his men in a gallant charge against Fort Wagner outside of Charleston,
NARRATIVE

South Carolina, Robert Gould Shaw was killed. 54 members of the 54th were killed, 67 went missing, and a further 149 were wounded. However, the bravery they displayed proved that black soldiers were the equal of their white comrades.

In what they thought would be a final act of disgrace, the Confederate soldiers dumped Shaw’s body in a mass grave along with many of his black soldiers. After the fort fell in September 1863, the Shaw family was contacted to see if they would like to retrieve the body of their son. They declined the offer, knowing that Robert would rather spend eternity with his men.
Stafford Court-House, Va.
February 4th, 1863
My Dear Annie

Your two letters, of the 25th and 29th of January, have reached me at last, and I was glad enough to get them. By this time you are on your way to New York, where you will find my last letter. I sent it to Father, thinking that you were going to Susie’s.

I did not read General Hitchcock’s testimony in McDowell’s case. Holt’s summing up of the testimony for and against Porter, seemed to me very poor, for a man of his ability; and if I could persuade myself that the court (composed as it was, of officers of honorable standing) could be dishonest, I should think there had been foul play. Several officers have been dismissed for uttering like sentiments; so I think I had better keep my opinion to myself. I was much surprised to hear, the other day, from a regular officer in Porter’s Corps, that, though they considered the latter a fine officer, he was not personally liked. I have hitherto heard just the contrary.

We are tolerably comfortable here now, as our long huts are going up again, and we have come across a sutler who furnishes the officers with means to keep a very good mess.

Father has just left here. He came down yesterday, and brought me an offer from Governor Andrew of the Colonelcy of his new black regiment. The Governor considers it a most important command; and I could not help feeling, from the tone of his letter, that he did me a great honour in offering it to me. My Father will tell you some of the reasons why I thought I ought not to accept it. If I had taken it, it would only have been from a sense of duty; for it would have been anything but an agreeable task. Please tell me, without reserve, what you think about it. For I am very anxious to know. I should have decided much sooner than I did, if I had known before. I am afraid Mother will think I am shirking my duty; but I had some good practical reasons for it, besides the desire to be at liberty to decide what to do when my three years have expired.
February 8th, 1863

Dear Annie,

You know by this time perhaps, that I have changed my mind about the black regiment. After Father left, I began to think I had made a mistake in refusing Governor Andrew’s offer. Mother has telegraphed to me that you would not disapprove of it, and that makes me feel much more easy about having taken it. Going for another three years is not nearly so bad a thing for a colonel as a captain; as former can much more easily get a furlough. Then, after I have undertaken this work, I shall feel that what I have to do is to prove that a negro can be made a good soldier, and, that being established, it will not be a point of honor with me to see the war through, unless I really occupied a position of importance in the army. Hundreds of men might leave the army, you know, without injuring the service in the slightest degree.

Last night I received your letter of last Sunday, February 1st. You must be at Susie’s house now, -- at least I judge so from Mother’s telegram. As I may not receive my order to leave here for some days, do promise to stay there until I get to New York. You do not know how I shall feel if I find you are gone.

It is needless for me to overwhelm you with a quantity of arguments in favor of the negro troops; because you are with ‘Mother, the warmest advocate the cause can have. I am inclined to think that the undertaking will not meet with so much opposition as was at first supposed. All sensible men in the army, of all parties, after a little thought, say that it is the best thing that can be done; and surely those at home, who are not brave or patriotic enough to enlist, should not ridicule, or throw obstacles in the way of men who are going to fight for them. There is a great prejudice against it; but now that it has become a government matter, that will probably wear away. At any rate, I shan’t be frightened out of it by its unpopularity; and I hope you won’t care if it is made fun of.

Dear Annie, the first thing I thought of, in connection with it, was how you would feel and I trust, now I have taken hold of it, I shall find you agree with me and all our family, in thinking I was right. You know how many eminent men consider a negro army of the greatest importance to our country at this time. If it turns out to be so, how fully repaid the pioneers in the movement will be, for what they may have to go through! And at any rate I feel convinced I shall never regret having taken this step, as far as I myself am concerned; for while I was undecided I felt ashamed of myself, as if I were cowardly.

Good bye, dear Annie. I hope that when I arrive at Sue’s door you will not be very far off.

With a great deal of love, (more every day) your

Rob