



## Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune

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In the film *GLORY*, Robert Gould Shaw was portrayed as a rather stuffy but dedicated and idealistic young officer who led his regiment of African-American soldiers to a magnificent death in an attempt to take the Confederate Fort Wagner off the coast of South Carolina. The real Shaw, as evidenced by this collection of letters written to his parents, siblings, friends, and fiancée, was a much more interesting personality. When Shaw joined the Seventh New York at the beginning of the War, he was certain the struggle would be quickly won and looked forward to proving himself in battle. After one of the first fights, he wrote to his mother, “I don’t know whether you will like to hear about these things or not for they are horrible to see or to think of — but such scenes show us, more than anything, what war really is.” Although Shaw never lost his sense of adventure and even of humor, his letters grew progressively serious and considered.

The son of wealthy abolitionists, Shaw himself was less convinced than his parents that blacks could serve as effective soldiers. While he certainly came to respect his men and took pride in their accomplishments, he was never convinced of the equality of the races. He had, by the time of his death, become a professional soldier, one who could admire his enemy and face calmly the possibility of his own death. His letters are a revealing and often moving account of a young man’s growth in a time of war.

## Sources for Further Study

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