

## Yankees and Rebels, Blue and Gray

“Yankee” and “Rebel” are nicknames that the Northerners and Southerners gave each other shortly after the start of the Civil War. The Northerners were called “Yankees” and the Southerners, “Rebels.” Sometimes these nicknames were shortened even further to “Yanks” and “Rebs.”

At the beginning of the war, each soldier wore whatever uniform he had from his state’s militia, so soldiers were wearing uniforms that didn’t match. For example, some uniforms were blue or gray, while others were black or red. As the war dragged on, that changed. The soldiers of the Union Army wore blue uniforms and the soldiers of the Confederate Army wore gray. Today, that’s how many people remember the two sides—the North wore blue, and the South wore gray.

## 54th Massachusetts Regiment

When the Civil War began, there was no thought given to enlisting free African Americans. However, after a string of Union losses in 1862, Congress passed a law allowing African Americans—freemen and escaped slaves—to become soldiers in the Union army. By war's end, 186,000 African Americans had

served in 150 all-black regiments and 30,000 more African Americans had seen service in the navy. The first African-American regiment was led by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. All told, about 13 percent of the Union army was composed of men of color. This number does not count the African-American men and women who served as cooks, laborers, and carpenters for the army. Some 37,000 African-American soldiers died for the Union during the war. Twenty African-American soldiers were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, and between 75 and 100 were commissioned as officers.

One of the most notable of the African-American regiments was the 54th Massachusetts under Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, a white officer. White officers commanded units of African-American soldiers. The 54th led the assault on Fort Wagner at Charleston, South Carolina in 1863. According to one account,

Advancing through the cover of darkness along a narrow strip of beach, they [the 54th] were raked by ferocious rifle and cannon fire from the fort. They pressed on and scaled the parapets in desperate hand-to-hand fighting. White regiments arrived to bolster the Union force, but the men were too few and the enemy fire too fierce.

The assault failed, and 300 soldiers of the 54th died in the attack. Four soldiers were awarded medals for their bravery, including the first Congressional Medal of Honor awarded to an African American.