At the start of the Civil War African Americans were not allowed to serve in the U.S. Army. By the end of the war more than 180,000 had enlisted (about ten percent of all Union troops). Through their service these “United States Colored Troops” [USCT] changed minds and helped ignite the first American civil rights movement.

The USCT had a hard job. Battle was dangerous and capture often meant enslavement or death. Service wasn’t easy in their own army either. They frequently got the worst equipment, the lowest pay, and no chance of promotion as an officer. Despite this they persevered, helping to end slavery and change who was seen as an American, a citizen, and a human.
The USCT were slaveholder’s worst nightmare. For 300 years the “masters” had dreaded just this moment. Armed and organized men fighting to free themselves.

The USCT was a problem for the North too. Many were hesitant about arming African Americans and wanted to control the process. In the end neither the North nor South was able to fight the war as they wished and the USCT had their say. The capture of Richmond (the Confederate capitol) by USCT troops was seen as proof of how much the world had changed.

“We are fighting for the Union, we are fighting for the law
We can hit a rebel further than a white man ever saw
As we go marching on. Glory, glory, hallelujah.”

- Marching song of the First Arkansas Infantry Regiment

Let Soldiers In War Be Citizens In Peace
Flag of the 24th USCT
(Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-11274)

The Fall of Richmond
African American troops were the first to enter the Confederate capitol after its fall.

Marching Song of the 1st Arkansas USCT
This song, to the tune of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”, clearly stated the USCT’s mind set.
(Library of Congress Civil War Songs Sheets, Series 1, Volume 3)
The Douglass Sons at War

Charles Douglass was 19 when he enlisted with the 54th Massachusetts. He became ill and was granted a rare transfer to the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry. He served in the campaigns around Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia in the spring of 1864. While on guard duty near Petersburg one night he personally captured a Confederate soldier. He survived the war.

Lewis Douglass, 22, joined the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in April of 1863. Eventually he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant Major. Lewis fought in the bloody Battle of Fort Wagner. He survived the battle and the war, but not unscathed. A disease he contracted lingered for the rest of his life.

“I hope I fall with my face to the foe.”
- Lewis Douglass
July 20, 1863
Frederick Douglass saw the Civil War as America’s chance to end slavery. Douglass pushed African Americans to join the USCT, seeing their service as the key to victory both on the battlefield and at home.

Throughout, he was the nation’s conscience, arguing that the war was about more than union and state’s rights. It was, he said, about a new birth of freedom. A great step towards the nation promised in the Declaration of Independence. He visited Abraham Lincoln at the White House to argue this. Douglass’ influence was crucial to Lincoln’s evolution as a thinker. Listen to Lincoln’s Second Inaugural speech or his Gettysburg Address and you will hear Douglass’s deep voice, rumbling in the background.

“Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pockets, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.”

-Frederick Douglass

Abraham Lincoln

John H. Littlefield

Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass met three times. Douglass pushed Lincoln to pay African American troops equal to white soldiers. He also asked Lincoln to retaliate for USCT prisoners killed or sold into slavery. Lincoln did not always move fast enough for Douglass or do all that he wished. In the end though Douglass was pleased with Lincoln. Years later he wrote, “...we came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln.”

(Frederick Douglass National Historic Site FRDO-181)

Men of Color to Arms!

A recruiting poster signed by Frederick Douglass. The poster calls on African American men to disprove racist views with their actions on the field.

(Library of Congress (lxbscm scsm0556)
Since the Civil War’s start in April 1861, the city of Charleston, South Carolina had been the symbolic heart of the rebellion in the eyes of Northerners and Southerners alike. Additionally, its bustling port and railroad network provided much needed supplies to the South. Union capture of Charleston would be a significant victory.

Intent on taking the city, Northern troops under General Quincy Gillmore landed on nearby Morris Island in the summer of 1863. Union forces attacked Fort Wagner on July 11 but were repulsed. A second, larger attack occurred the following week with the 54th Massachusetts leading the assault.
On the evening of July 18, 1863, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts lead an assault on Fort Wagner. They landed and led 5,000 federal troops up a narrow beach toward the sand and log fort. When the 54th was 200 yards from the fort the Confederates unleashed a barrage of cannon and musket fire on them. The 54th pressed forward under the withering fire, ascended the parapet of the fort and engaged in hand to hand combat with the defenders.

Col. Shaw was killed on the parapet, and the 54th fell back, having lost more than 40% of its men, killed, wounded, and captured. Nine other Federal regiments followed the 54th, each being bloodily repulsed. The Confederates won the battle, but eventually evacuated the fort in August of 1863.
After the War

Even though the Civil War ended slavery, the battle for civil rights was just beginning. USCT veterans became community leaders and used organizations like the Grand Army of the Republic to continue the fight for full equality in the postwar years. Both Lewis and Charles Douglass were active members of the GAR and served in a number of capacities. There was even a GAR post in Washington, DC named after their father, Frederick Douglass.

The military experience of the USCT was often important as well. In the Jim Crow South veterans found themselves needing to take up arms to defend homes, friends and families. Their training was often the only protection communities had from terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan.
At the end of the Civil War a fierce debate over the memory and meaning of the war began. In many histories slavery was downplayed as a cause of the war, while the role of the USCT was often left out entirely. The image of heroic African Americans acting as men and citizens did not fit in segregated America. The USCT began to fade from the national memory with only a few memorials, such as the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts memorial in Boston, to remind the country of their service.

Their legacy, however, proved too strong and never entirely faded. In 1989 the film Glory brought widespread recognition to the USCT and was a turning point for their memory. Public interest in the USCT soared, and numerous tributes and monuments, such as the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, DC, were created.