

July 18, 1863: Robert Gould Shaw's final letter to his wife Annie

Robert Gould Shaw began this letter to his wife on July 15, 1863, just after the 54th Massachusetts had fought its first engagement against Confederate troops on James Island. Shaw continued to work on the letter over the following days as the 54th drew nearer and nearer to the fortification known as Battery Wagner to the Confederates and Fort Wagner to the Union troops on Morris Island.

James' Island, S.C.

July 15, 1863

My Dearest Annie,

Your letters of June 3d, 14th, and 28th, and July 3d, 4th, and 5th, came to-day, and I felt horribly ashamed of myself for having blamed you for not taking care to post your letters. Do excuse it. It will show you how much I value your dear letters. You don't know what a fortunate day this has been for me and for us all, excepting some poor fellows who were killed and wounded. We have at last fought alongside of white troops. Two hundred of my men on picket this morning were attacked by five regiments of infantry, some cavalry, and a battery of artillery. The Tenth Connecticut (of Stevenson's Brigade) were on their left, and say they should have had a bad time, if the Fifty-fourth men had not stood so well. The whole Division was under arms in fifteen minutes, and after coming up close in front of us, the enemy, finding us so strong, fell back. The other regiments lost in all, three men wounded. We lost seven killed, twenty-one wounded, six missing, supposed killed, and nine unaccounted for. These last are probably killed or captured. All these belonged to the four companies which were on picket. The main body, excepting artillery, was not engaged at all.

All this is very gratifying to us personally, and a fine thing for the coloured troops. It is the first time they have been associated with white soldiers, this side of the Mississippi. To make my happiness and satisfaction complete, the afternoon brought your and Mother's letters. . . . I have just come in from the front with my regiment, where we were sent as soon as the Rebels retired. This shows that the events of the morning did not destroy the General's confidence in us.

We found some of our wounded, who say the Rebels treated them kindly. Other men report that some prisoners were shot. It is very common for frightened men to tell fearful stories of what they have seen; the first report comes from the wounded men themselves; the second from the stragglers. . . . Good bye, darling, for the night. I know this letter will give you pleasure, because what we have done to-day wipes out the remembrance of the Darien affair, which you could not but grieve over, though we were innocent participators. You will have some satisfaction in telling it to your father, your Uncle Charles, and Aunt Fanny, to all of whom please give my sincere regards. Whenever you see your grandfather and grandmother, do not forget to give them my respects. To our Mamma, and Clem. I needn't say I send my warmest love. I got my horse, India-rubber tube, and some clean clothes to-day.

Cole's Island (opposite Folly Island)

July 17th, 4 P.M.

James Island was evacuated last night by our forces. My regiment started first, at 9 1/2 P.M. Not a thing was moved until after dark, and the Rebels must have been astonished this morning. Terry went there originally only to create a diversion from Morris Island, and it was useless to stay and risk being driven off, after Morris was taken. It thundered and lightened, and rained hard all night, and it took us from 10 P.M. to 5 A.M. to come four miles. Most of the way we had to march in single file along the narrow paths through the swamps. For nearly half a mile we had to pass over a bridge of one, and in some places, two planks wide, without a railing, and slippery with rain— mud and water below several feet deep—and then over a narrow dike so slippery as to make it almost impossible to keep one's feet. It took my regiment alone nearly two hours to pass the bridge and dike. By the time we got over, it was nearly daylight, and the Brigade behind us had a pretty easy time. I never had such an extraordinary walk.

We are now lying on the beach opposite the southern point of Folly Island, and have been here since five this morning. When they can get boats, they will set us across, I suppose.

There is hardly any water to be got here, and the sun and sand are dazzling and roasting us. I shouldn't like you to see me as I am now; I haven't washed my face since day before yesterday. My conscience is perfectly easy about it, though, for it was an impossibility, and everyone is in the same condition. Open air dirt, i.e. mud, & is not like the indoor article. . . . I have had nothing but crackers and coffee these two days. It seems like old times in the army of the Potomac.

Good bye again, darling Annie.

Rob

July 18th. Morris Island—We are in General Strong's Brigade, and have left Montgomery, I hope for good. We came up here last night, and were out again all night in a very heavy rain. Fort Wagner is being very heavily bombarded. We are not far from it.