

**INNOVATION AND STAGNATION: THE UNION ARMY IN THE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SOUTH**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

LANCE JETER

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ABSTRACT

Innovation and Stagnation: The Union Army in the Department of the South

Lance Jeter
Department of History
Texas A&M University

Research Faculty Advisor: Dr. Lorien Foote
Department of History
Texas A&M University

Despite the vast amounts of research done on the Civil War, the Department of the South, made up of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, and the operations within it are relatively understudied and not well understood. Although historians portray the department as a stagnant and unimportant section of the conflict, it was marked by innovation in military tactics, use of Black troops in combat, and the use of combined arms. The department is a case study of how military innovation can still lead to stagnation. General David Hunter, the first general to lead Union armies in the department, was a radical abolitionist who applied his belief to the way he fought the Confederates. When General Hunter began operations, he raised Black regiments such as the 1st South Carolina Volunteers under Col. T. W. Higginson, which immediately began raiding Rebel towns and freeing slaves up and down the coast. These men were trained to become formidable troopers, promised the pay of a white soldier, and were even given an education by the Union army. Innovative combined arms support with the Navy also occurred during the raids and expeditions. Gunboats and at times ironclads would accompany the raiding troops, sometimes with the vessels under the direct command of Army officers. However,

operations stagnated under Hunter as the troops only took part in some small battles which ended in defeat. The troops were then primarily relegated to raiding and digging earthworks. Because of this and the struggle for equal pay morale became an issue, with some of the men even deserting their posts. The Army and Navy also could never coordinate on a large enough scale to make a true difference, despite seeing great success on a small scale. The Department of the South is a case study that shows that an army with innovative ideas is not guaranteed success and can still stagnate when innovation is not applied properly and capitalized upon.

DEDICATION

To Lexi Younge, whose love and support always pushes me to be the best I can be.

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INTRODUCTION

Guns roared and cannon shells exploded all over Battery Wagner in preparation for the second attack made on the Confederate fortification. Brand new Monitor class ironclads alongside Army artillery blasted away, doing what they could to reduce the position so the infantry could drive out the embedded force of approximately 1,700 Rebels. Union infantry began to gather on the beach, the 54th Massachusetts regiment forming the vanguard of the assault. The 54th, led by Col. Robert Gould Shaw, was an exemplary regiment and one of the first of its kind, a unit recruited from the African American population of northeastern and midwestern states.

The 54th was the vanguard of an assault meant to be innovative in its execution. The infantry assault was to be preceded by a massed artillery barrage from the newest military hardware the Union could provide. New ironclad Monitors with the best naval guns ever fitted to a Union vessel, along with potent Army artillery was to reduce the Confederate position to nothing but smoking rubble. Anything left behind would be quickly taken by the infantry, led by the 54th. These men were to break the Confederates, motivated by their cause to free their enslaved brothers and sisters, along with the desire to prove to the United States that Black men could be effective soldiers, worthy of respect.

Just before the attack, Col. Shaw spoke openly with his troops, encouraging them, “Now boys I want you to be MEN.”¹ The men rallied behind him, and as the artillery fire let up in the

¹ Virginia M. Adams, *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front*, (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 51.

afternoon, the 54th began its assault. Led by its commander, the 54th charged with bayonets fixed and made its way all the way up to the trenches surrounding Wagner. The men fought savagely, and Col. Shaw managed to lead a small group of men forward onto the parapet. As he swung his sword, urging his men forward, he was shot down and fell into the fort. His men near him sprung after him, resulting in many of them being felled as well. Further motivated by their commander and his sacrifice, a few men of the 54th managed to fight their way into Wagner, but they were eventually pushed out and forced to retreat.² The charge proved that Black soldiers were brave and skilled fighters, and the nation saw what they accomplished. But for all of the bravery and innovation in the attack, the Union failed to adapt to the situation that presented itself. The attack was a failure, so Union commanders quickly went back to tactics they knew, resulting in a slow and painful siege.

The attack made by the 54th Massachusetts on Battery Wagner exemplified Union action in the Department of the South. It employed new ideas that promised success, yet the Union fell short, and became bogged down in stagnation and strategic failure. Union warships that promised to level the battery failed to do so, as their guns could not damage a sand fortification as they could against one made of masonry. The infantry assault also failed due to piecemeal implementation of the units involved. No amount of motivation, discipline, or training can overcome the inability to provide mutual support while assaulting a formidable position. Union forces failed to learn from their mistakes and adapt, and instead turned to outdated and time-consuming siege tactics that would define the remaining action against Rebel fortifications in the department.

² Stephen R. Wise, *Gate of Hell: Campaign for Charleston Harbor, 1863* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 104.

Made up of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, the Department of the South was a focal point of military innovation. New tactics and weapons, the revolutionary implementation of African American troops, and unique interservice cooperation all were present in the department. On the tactical level, the Union excelled and saw a lot of success. Raids, bombardments, and small-scale operations were carried out often and many times were successful because of innovative ideas. An example of this was General Hunter's raids around Charleston. Plantations and Rebel holdouts were burned, and cavalry charges were broken and driven off by the Union's powerful forces, supplemented by new technology and tactics. However, Rebel forces ultimately still held Charleston and no significant progress was made. Despite their small-scale achievement, the raids did not contribute to the strategic goal of taking Charleston.

One of the most impactful ideas in the department was the deployment of African American units like the 54th, many of which were skilled and respected as some of the best regiments in the department. The officers of these regiments were intent on displaying their competence in battle and trained their men to be among the most disciplined and skilled in the entire Union army. The Navy was also heavily involved in offensive operations, and Union gunboats alongside small army detachments proved to be extremely effective. In many instances, the combined arms of the Navy and Army made the difference in the small clashes up and down the rivers of the department. Despite the successes on small tactical levels and on the social front, even these great improvements to the military were not enough to attain success strategically for the Union.

Compared to other areas of the Civil War, the Department of the South receives relatively little attention from scholars. The secondary sources available are excellent and go into depth about the operations and events in the department. These works tend to focus on specific aspects

of the department such as naval activity or view the department through different lenses such as retaliation or military actions in a specific year.³ These secondary sources do not view the department through the lens of innovation and stagnation, but all mention factors that influenced Union decision making and outcomes. In this thesis, I will address the specific innovations made in the department and why they did not deliver Union victory, despite their war-winning potential.

In order to provide consistency and continuity within this thesis, a few definitions for military and strategic terms need to be established. Innovation is described by military innovation scholar Adam Grissom as something that “changes the manner in which military formations function in the field,” “is significant in its scope and impact,” and “is tacitly equated with greater military effectiveness.”⁴ Innovation is usually done away from the battlefield and can be defined by new ideas that come into service with the military. An example of innovation in the Civil War is the Dahlgren naval gun, designed before the war to improve the effectiveness of warships. It added firepower to vessels that allowed them to take on ships and fortifications they could not before, and the guns proved themselves to be valuable assets. Adaptation is in turn the change in how a military fights based off its own battlefield experience and the challenges it faces. To achieve successful adaptation, a military must be able to change its tactics while staying focused “on the policy objective; respecting the role of the enemy in shaping the

³ Wise, *Gate of Hell*:

Lorien Foote, *Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); R.M.

Browning Jr., *Success Is All That Was Expected: The South Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War* (Washington D. C.: Potomac Books Inc, 2002); James M.

McPherson, *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); E.M. Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861-1865* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970).

⁴ Adam Grissom, “The Future of Military Innovation Studies.” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 29, Issue 5 (2006), 907.

polymorphous character of war.”⁵ This means being able to change how an army fights to defeat an enemy, while still maintaining the overall strategic goals in mind. Innovation and adaptation then can be used to achieve military success, which is the completion of a goal or the achievement of a stated objective. Success can be achieved on a small, tactical scale or it can be achieved on a wide, strategic scale. However, success on the tactical scale does not necessarily guarantee strategic success. The inability of Union commanders to understand and utilize these concepts is what ultimately produced the lackluster results in the Department of the South.

Innovation itself is not enough to propel an army to victory. New ideas and revolutionary assets are only effective if wielded properly, and the Union army failed to achieve that necessity. Union military activity became stagnant, and the Department of the South became a frustrating backwater for the majority of the conflict. A carousel of incompetent commanders and interservice conflict combined to nullify the forward development of the Union military efforts. The Department of the South is a case study that shows that an army with innovative ideas is not guaranteed success and can still stagnate when innovation is not applied properly and capitalized upon.

⁵ David J. Lonsdale, “Alexander the Great and the Art of Adaptation.” *Journal of Military History* Vol. 77, Issue 3 (2013), 819.

1. AFRICAN AMERICAN TROOPS

While the Department of the South was not the only area where African American troops saw action during the Civil War, it was one of the most important for the future of African Americans in the Army and in the United States. It was in this department that African American units would achieve fame for the first time and show the northern public that they could be just as good a soldier as any. The department was uniquely advantageous to Black units as many of the officers present were of abolitionist sentiment. Men like General David Hunter, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and others were adamant that African American men should be allowed to serve and fight in the Union Army. These men would put their reputations and lives on the line to ensure that African Americans got a chance to fight for their freedom. Each man would contribute some form of innovation alongside his African American troops, like Higginson's attitude towards military discipline, or Hunter's raising of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, a unit made of freed slaves. These innovations and their motivations helped mold their men into formidable warfighters and some of the best troops in the Department of the South.



Figure 1: Map of the entrance to Charleston Harbor with defenses marked, 1863, Library of Congress.

Progress for African American troops in the department began in 1862 after Brigadier General David Hunter took command. When the Union military began its blockade of Charleston Harbor and occupied the Sea Islands that dotted the entrance, they came across a population of freed slaves left behind in their masters' flight from Union forces. Hunter, described as an "active abolitionist," began making swift moves to use this population to his advantage.⁶ He began the organization of an African American regiment made up of freedmen in April 1862. This was an innovative idea, as no such regiment had been formed. The idea of forming it using previously enslaved men was particularly controversial for the time, but Hunter was unafraid of controversy and continued with the plan. However, recruitment was slow. The former slaves did not trust white men and hesitated to join an army that had not earned their faith. Hunter then attempted to make a decree on May 9, 1862, that declared all slaves in the territory under his

⁶ Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 45.

command free, giving the freedmen something to fight for.⁷ For all his efforts, recruitment was still slow, and Hunter had to resort to conscripting men from nearby plantations. These men were formed into a 500-man regiment stationed at Hilton Head, South Carolina. Sadly, this regiment did not last long and was disbanded by order of President Lincoln, who was friends with Hunter. Lincoln was wary of the political retaliation that the unit would elicit from the Rebels and Union slaveholders, and did not want to suffer the backlash he knew he would receive. A singular company was allowed to remain, and it seemed the revolutionary idea was going to fade away, a minor footnote in the history of the Civil War. However, in August of 1862 under the orders of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, the regiment was allowed to be reborn officially as the 1st South Carolina Volunteers.⁸

The regiment was then put under the command of Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a “politically engaged intellectual and artist at the forefront of radical antislavery...causes.”⁹ Higginson had a history of passionately pursuing abolitionist causes, perhaps most infamously backing the John Brown raid on Harper’s Ferry, the only person to do so openly. Despite nervousness about his new command, Higginson was determined to pursue its success with zeal. His wartime journal reflects the importance he placed upon his leadership of the regiment, writing that raising an African American regiment was going to be “the most important service in the history of the War.”¹⁰ When Higginson arrived at his unit, he instantly was pleased with what he saw, aside from the peculiar red pants they wore. The men marched well, and some had already seen some sort of combat, taking part in small raids on Rebel

⁷ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 21.

⁸ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 43.

⁹ Christopher Looby, *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 13.

¹⁰ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 42.

plantations as part of General Hunter's department strategy.¹¹ Higginson instantly saw their potential as soldiers and wrote his wife that "they know what they are doing, I assure you."¹²

Higginson then eagerly set out to make his regiment the pride of the Union Army. He tightened discipline in his ranks, and drilled the men often to ensure they were well trained and ready for battle when the time came. He instructed his officers to be strict, but patient with the men, and successfully maintained a rigidly disciplined regiment while developing amiable relationships with his men.¹³ However, Higginson's greatest innovation with his men was the way he approached the discipline of his regiment. He was determined to empower the African Americans under his command instead of subjugating them, a progressive idea for the time. He did not want to run his regiment on the ideals that had enslaved these men before, instead Higginson sought to instill in his soldier's minds that they were free. When speaking to his men, Higginson went to great lengths to dissociate the discipline of a soldier from the obedience of a slave, telling them that they "do not obey officers because they are white, but because they are officers."¹⁴ When Higginson's regiment then marched in review for General Hunter, Hunter was impressed. Higginson believed he had formed one of the finest units in the entire army, and even went so far as to say multiple times that the 1st SC Vol regiment was better than the white regiments he had commanded in previously.¹⁵

The life of a soldier was not the only liberating factor the men of the 1st SC Vols experienced under Higginson. Their commander, along with many northern abolitionists who had travelled to the area, encouraged the men to obtain an education. Higginson and other

¹¹ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 45.

¹² Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 45.

¹³ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 67.

¹⁴ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 79.

¹⁵ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 88.

abolitionists saw education as a key to the freedmen's success after the war had been won. A schoolhouse was set up in the camp with the regiment, where a chaplain would "teach them as he gets opportunity."¹⁶ This was a popular endeavor amongst the men, who showed an eagerness to learn. In one journal entry, Higginson was delighted to see some of his men learning with a spelling book and described their love for the book as "perfectly inexhaustible."¹⁷ The unit became a symbol for African American advancement and was an example of what the Department of the South was capable of producing.

Although the 1st South Carolina Volunteers offered opportunities for equality, it also let the men in the regiment down in some critical areas. One of these deficiencies was the pay for the enlisted men. Initially the men were promised the regular army wage of \$13 a month, and signed on with the understanding that they would be paid just the same as a white soldier. However, this was not the case. For much of the war, pay issues would haunt the United States Colored Troops, or USCTs. As early as 1862, the 1st SC Vols struggled to receive pay at all, with Higginson claiming that "there are men here who have remained 8 months without pay."¹⁸ This made retention difficult, and some men in the regiment deserted, as they had wives and children relying on them to earn a living to provide food and shelter. When the men did receive pay, it was not the regular army wage, but instead a reduced \$10 a month. This was due to the policy from Washington that assumed African American men would be doing mainly garrison duty out of the line of fire, and therefor did not deserve the extra hazard pay. Because of the decreased pay the men came to distrust the US Army, leading even more to desert stating they "had not been treated fairly nor paid what was promised."¹⁹

¹⁶ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 65.

¹⁷ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 65.

¹⁸ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 55.

¹⁹ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 87.

As the war went on, things did not get better for the 1st SC Vols, and their pay was again cut to \$7 in April of 1864.²⁰ Only a third of the men took the pay, the rest refused to take the payment as a message to the government. The men were afraid that “they at first had \$13 then \$10 now \$7 & if they signed the rolls for this, perhaps next time there would only be \$4 paid to them and so on.”²¹ The enlisted African American men only grew to distrust the government and the Army more and more, with desertions being a commonality due to the lack of adequate pay. Those who stayed served admirably, but sarcastically sung songs like the one Colonel Higginson overheard one day in 1863:

“‘Ten dollars a month’!

‘Tree ob dat for clotting’!

‘Gwine to Washington

‘To fight for Linkum’s darter’!”²²

Another let down for the 1st SC Vols was their implementation in the war effort. Despite being a skilled unit that was well drilled and disciplined, they never saw a major battle. It is hard to believe that Union commanders in the department did not use the unit to their potential, but each commander had his own reasons for doing so. Under General Hunter, the regiment was used primarily for raiding up and down the rivers of the department. The men would raid plantations and Rebel towns, destroying anything useful to the war effort and freeing slaves they came across. Hunter hoped that these raids would recruit even more men for the regiment along with putting a serious dent in the Confederate war effort. The men conducted these raids with professionalism and honor, even when face to face with Southerners who sought to incite them to

²⁰ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 217.

²¹ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 217.

²² Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 173.

violence.²³ Then when the men were met with resistance as they conducted the raids, they performed extremely well in battle, often driving off the enemy.²⁴ However, the problem that became apparent was the raids did not yield any permanent gains and there was no discernable impact on the Confederates in the region. The men never stayed and occupied the towns they entered, even large cities like Jacksonville were abandoned time and again. These areas were abandoned as fast as they were occupied, allowing the Rebel defenders to retake them without significant bloodshed. This was a frustrating strategy for the men who quickly lost trust in Hunter. Higginson described the regiment's sentiment towards the general by describing him and his flaws as "hopeless."²⁵ The military leadership in Washington agreed, and in 1863 they replaced General Hunter with Major General Quincy Gillmore.

When Gillmore took command, the way the war was conducted in the Department of the South radically changed. While Hunter was a more political general, Gillmore was a technician. He had graduated first in his class at West Point and was an engineering and artillery expert. He did not particularly care to further the cause of African Americans, and Colonel Shaw of the 54th Massachusetts summed up Gillmore best when he wrote "General Gilmore, I hear, is not a friend to black troops."²⁶ When he arrived in the department attacks on the fortifications around Charleston increased, along with concerted efforts to take Florida. Even with these major movements, Gillmore still did not employ the 1st SC Vols in major combat, and instead used them primarily for sentry duty and manual labor. The men marched and dug trench lines as the attacks on Charleston turned into a full-on siege, reaching true stagnation. The regiment was

²³ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 94.

²⁴ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 94.

²⁵ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 143.

²⁶ Russell Duncan, *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 350.

disappointed in its lack of use and was worked “unmercifully” in the hot sun outside Charleston.²⁷ The overwhelming and oppressive work of digging trenches and parallels under deadly fire and scorching heat caused discipline to break down. Higginson complained to his mother about the conditions having an effect on his men, writing that “It is hard to be show soldiers & real soldiers at the same time.”²⁸ For the rest of the war, the regiment did not see any major action under General Gillmore. Gillmore, more concerned with having hands for physical labor, did not employ one of his best units where it would be most effective and instead wore it down over time, reducing it from its status as a model regiment.

The tragedy of the 1st SC Vols is that it was never used to its fullest extent. It was a regiment filled with so much promise and innovative ideals led by radical abolitionists, yet neither commanding general took advantage of the excellent unit that had been cultivated in the South Carolina Sea Islands. The potential for the unit was great, not only for the impact on the war effort but also in the endeavor to empower African Americans who sought freedom in a new United States. These men were determined, well trained, and motivated. They sought education and economic advancement to further their families and themselves. They fought well whenever given the opportunity, showing their bravery in the daring raids they conducted and in the grueling work they did in sweltering trenches and sap lines. Despite all this, the innovative unit stagnated due to incompetent command and the failure to fulfill basic promises to the brave men of the regiment. Without a chance to prove its worth in a large-scale battle, and without proper pay to encourage the enlisted men to stay with the Army, it was impossible for the regiment to truly show what it was capable of.

²⁷ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 172.

²⁸ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 286.

The 1st South Carolina Volunteers were not the only African American regiment misused within the Department of the South. Regiments similar to the 1st SCV's flooded in from the North, bolstering the manpower under Gillmore's command. The most famous of these regiments was the 54th Massachusetts regiment, under the command of Robert Gould Shaw. The regiment was intended to be a model regiment, recruited in the North, mainly of northern-born free Black men, with a few runaway slaves in their ranks. The creation of the regiment was authorized by Congress after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation and was supported by major abolitionist political figures like Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts and Frederick Douglass. Colonel Shaw, a veteran from the 2nd Massachusetts infantry, was not as sanguine as Higginson about his new role. Shaw was pressured into the role by his parents, who had political sway due to their fervent abolitionism and their connections with Governor Andrew. Not a zealot like Higginson or Hunter, Shaw approached the role cautiously, but soon came to trust and love the men in the regiment. He quickly realized the potential of the men under his command, writing letters home saying, "I think we shall have some good soldiers."²⁹

Unlike the 1st SC Vols, the 54th Massachusetts would achieve progress for African Americans by participating in major battles, achieving fame for their brave exploits. The 54th began their service by raiding under Hunter, but Gillmore quickly sent the regiment into battle. This began with skirmishes along the South Carolina Sea islands culminating in the attack on Battery Wagner, which captured national attention.³⁰ The 54th had shown exceptional bravery and professionalism, even in the face of an attack that was doomed to fail. After the attack on Wagner, Corporal James Gooding of the 54th wrote that "Our men are highly spoken of by military men as showing great bravery," indicating that the African American troops were

²⁹ Duncan, *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune*, 304.

³⁰ Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 93.

beginning to earn the trust of other white soldiers.³¹ Alongside other African American regiments that would continue to deploy as the war went on, the 54th and all the USCT regiments would prove to the public, through extensive newspaper coverage, that Black men were just as worthy of respect as anyone else. Shaw and the officers of the northern-raised African American regiments also pursued similar innovative policies for their troops like in the 1st SC Vols. Assistant surgeon for the 55th Massachusetts regiment, Burt Wilder, said in his diary that he liked teaching the men, and that he enjoyed seeing “their faces light up when they gain a new fact or comprehend a new idea.”³² These regiments, intended to give the soldiers a platform to fight for their own freedom, uplifted the men not only in public opinion, but helped prepare them to be successful in life after the war.

In order to maintain the good perception of the African American regiments, the officers in command were determined to maintain discipline within their ranks. The officers of these regiments knew that without proper discipline, the world would instantly blame the “inferiority” of the African American race, setting back progress for the men by many years. Col. Shaw and the other USCT officers then set out to make their men as disciplined and effective as white soldiers, an innovative idea. Shaw, “whose quick eye detects anything in a moment out of keeping with order or military discipline,” set the standard of discipline for these new regiments coming in from the North, leaving a strong impression upon all who encountered his unit.³³ The men in charge of these regiments were also swift in their punishment of deserters and criminals, as any smudge to the reputation of the USCTs could spell their downfall. Multiple times,

³¹ Adams, *On the Altar of Freedom*, 40.

³² Richard M. Reid, *Practicing Medicine in a Black Regiment: The Civil War Diary of Burt G. Wilder, 55th Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 110.

³³ Adams, *On the Altar of Freedom*, 15.

deserters and those accused of crimes were put to death, sometimes without court martial.³⁴ These punishments were used as a “warning to others” that crime and dishonor would not be acceptable in USCT units.³⁵ This discipline earned the regiments renown, and they developed positive reputations in the department and around the country.

While the African American units in the department were adept, Army commanders still managed to misuse them. Under General Hunter, the 54th Massachusetts was subject to mundane and ineffective raids. Colonel Shaw himself was displeased with the poor use of his troops, complaining in a letter that “these miserable expeditions are of no account at all; that is, as regards their effect on the war.”³⁶ Things did not improve under Gillmore’s command, even though the USCTs began to see major combat action. During the attack on Battery Wagner, the 54th was left alone on the parapet for some time, as reinforcing elements were slow to come up and into the battery. This resulted in over 1500 men of the 5000 who attacked Wagner to become casualties, over 30% of the assaulting force.³⁷ Gillmore began a stagnant siege against the battery that effectively stunted Union operations in the area. The Union regiments in the department were then subjected to months of digging trenches and parallels, wearing the men down while progressing at a snail’s pace. The siege did result in the capture of the battery, but the tactics employed were costly and slow. Gillmore, tired of the slogging operations around Charleston, decided to leave the capture of the city to the Navy. He then decided to focus his offensive strength towards a new expedition into Florida.³⁸

³⁴ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 158-9.

³⁵ Reid, *Burt G. Wilder*, 101.

³⁶ Duncan, *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune*, 351.

³⁷ Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 114.

³⁸ Browning Jr., *Success Is All That Was Expected*, 299.

Gillmore's expedition into Florida would turn out to be the worst case of mishandling the USCTs. In February of 1864, the Union Army landed in Jacksonville and headed west towards Olustee station. Three USCT regiments were present as part of the Union force, the 54th Massachusetts, the 1st North Carolina regiment, and the 8th USCT. The 54th was an experienced regiment, but the 8th USCT and the 1st NC were new to combat. Historian Lorien Foote describes the 1st NC as "untried in combat", and the 8th USCT as "brand new" from Philadelphia, and their inexperience would show in the battle to come.³⁹ When these units met Rebel forces at Olustee, it was a disaster. The general in charge was Brigadier General Truman Seymour, who threw his units haphazardly into the battle. This lack of coordination led to a massacre of his men, which subsequently caused a rout all the way back to Jacksonville. Numerous wounded were left behind, many of them African American. Rebels, enraged by the presence of African American troops, "killed some of them after they had fell in our hands wounded."⁴⁰ The units who suffered the most were the inexperienced USCTs, especially the 8th. Without proper preparation, they performed poorly and took heavy losses. According to a surgeon accompanying the 8th, only the brave action of the 54th Massachusetts regiment kept the disaster from becoming even worse. He stated in a letter after the battle that "had it not been for the 54th, which advanced in splendid order, they would undoubtedly have taken us all prisoners."⁴¹

The slaughter at Olustee ended the 1864 Union incursion into Florida and hurt the reputation of the USCTs. Incompetent commanders had once again inflicted heavy casualties upon their own force because they had not employed their units properly. The piecemeal fashion in which the African American troops were used became a hallmark of the Department of the

³⁹Foote, *Rites of Retaliation*, 113.

⁴⁰<https://battleofolustee.org/letters/jjordan.html>

⁴¹ https://battleofolustee.org/letters/surgeon_heichhold_8thusct_cr.html

South. These units were capable of creating victory for the Union cause. They possessed good leadership, motivated men, and units like the 54th were among the most experienced and proficient in the Department of the South. However, due to poor leadership on the command level they were subject to only bloodbaths and defeat. Stagnation once again set in as the Union continued its slow siege efforts in the department, unable to best its foe on the field of battle. Captain William Saxton from the 157th NY Vols explains the situation best in his diary after the battle of Olustee, writing “Most of Seymour’s men were colored troops. They fought well and had they been properly led would not have suffered this disastrous defeat.”⁴²

Compounding failures on the battlefield was the failure of the military to properly pay their troops. Pay was just as much an issue in Northern regiments as in the 1st SC Vols. Also promised the regular army wage of \$13 an hour, the men instead were often underpaid and paid late. This was such a common occurrence, that Burt Wilder of the 55th Massachusetts wrote “we begin to tremble for the future of this regiment. In various ways the men manifest distrust as to their ever getting their pay and suspect the officers in charge of complicity in the deception.”⁴³ Some men, like in the 1st SC Vols, deserted because of the lack of pay, but most stayed in and served admirably. And when the men received pay that was less than what they were promised, most opted not to take it. Seen as an affront to their status as soldiers, they refused to acknowledge the reduced pay. Cpl. Gooding described his motivations for not taking the pay, writing: “To say even, we were not soldiers and pay us \$20 would be injustice, for it would rob a whole race of their title to manhood, and even make them feel, no matter how faithful, how brave

⁴² William Saxton, *A Regiment Remembered: the 157th New York Volunteers, From the Diary of Capt. William Saxton* (Cortland, NY: Cortland County Historical Society, 1996), 97.

⁴³ Reid, *Burt G. Wilder*, 145.

they have been, that their mite towards founding liberty on a firm basis was spurned, and made mock of.”⁴⁴

The problem of pay would continue for almost the entire length of the war, marring the trust between the men of the regiments and their officers, along with stagnating one of the most forward-thinking concepts in the history of the US Army.

The Department of the South was a nexus of advancement for African Americans in the US Army. It was in this department that abolitionist officers led their men into combat, giving them a chance to fight for African American freedom and an end to the institution of slavery. These African American men that filled the USCT regiments, northern or southern, were among the best soldiers that the Union Army had in its rolls. They were motivated, well trained, disciplined, and aggressive. Officers in the field wanted to see the men succeed and went through great lengths to give their troops the best chance possible. Despite all this, incapable commanders wasted the USCT’s incredible potential as fighting units with the power to help bring about a Union victory. Underutilized and misused on the battlefield, their impact on the war was more ideological and political rather than practical. Ineffective leadership made the efforts of the USCTs futile, unable to break the stalemate in the department. This failure to win major battles alongside the inability to pay the troops slowed the progress that the USCTs could have potentially provided for the Union Army and the African Americans in the units. Instead, Army leadership turned the regiments into another stagnant feature of the Department of the South.

⁴⁴ Adams, *On the Altar of Freedom*, 83.

2. COMBINED ARMS

The Department of the South was a natural candidate for combined arms innovation. The Atlantic Ocean along with the numerous rivers and waterways that crisscrossed the landscape provided ample opportunities for the Navy to participate in Army operations, and vice versa. In fact, the terrain forced the two branches to work with each other in operations throughout the department. The Army required the Navy to get around, whether that be to different islands or up and down rivers. The Navy in turn needed the Army to take and hold the objectives they assaulted. Innovative tactics and ideas on combined warfare emerged in the Department of the South which proved to be extremely effective and had war-winning potential. However, like so many other things in the department these ideas and tactics were not taken advantage of, and the Union military failed to achieve its strategic goals, causing the Union to stagnate.

At the beginning of the Civil War, the commanders in the department were Admiral Samuel Du Pont and Brigadier General David Hunter. Du Pont, an old naval veteran, did what he could to assist Army efforts in the department. Up until July of 1863 the Army was mainly concerned with the conducting of raids up and down the rivers of South Carolina and Georgia. General Hunter sought to destroy Confederate resources and free slaves from plantations along the coastline. In order to conduct these raids, the Navy had to provide the Army with transport and gunboats to cover the landing of troops. The combined efforts were largely successful, with the land and naval elements working together to break any sort of Rebel resistance. The Army and Navy were working so closely that at times command of naval vessels was given to army officers on the ground. One example of an army commander in control of ships was when Col. Higginson of the 1st SC Vols was given control of three steamers and a gunboat for his landing at

Fernandina, Florida. Higginson described himself as commanding the vessels “with a mind of calm & serene,” successfully landing his troops and conducting a raid.⁴⁵ Higginson was not the only Army field officer which was friendly with the Navy. During the earlier years of the war, Army officers would frequently dine with naval officers, either on land or aboard their ships. Colonel Shaw of the 54th Massachusetts recorded one of these meals in a letter, saying “Yesterday I dined with Lawrence on board the ‘Pawnee,’ and met some very pleasant men among the officers.”⁴⁶ The men got along, and the commanders of both services rarely came into conflict, leaving the door open for potential large scale combined operations in the future.

Even though there was immense potential, there would be no large-scale combined arms operations under Du Pont and Hunter. Each worked in their own sphere of influence when it came to major action. Hunter was more interested in his raiding operations instead of traditional battles with the Rebels. Du Pont on the other hand was interested in large-scale operations but was under pressure from the Naval Department to make an attack an all-naval affair. This failure to capitalize upon a successful tactic to achieve a unified strategic goal resulted in a lack of progress for Union military forces across the department. The raids conducted by Hunter were of no real military significance. Col. Shaw criticized the raids in a letter home, saying they only “serve to keep up the spirits of our men.”⁴⁷

The Navy also suffered failures in its attack against Fort Sumter on April 7, 1863. The ironclads sent against the fort were not enough to break the defenses, and the attack turned into a massive public relations disaster. This was a stunning defeat, as the Monitor class ironclads and the USS *Ironsides* were the newest and most potent warships the Navy had to offer. The

⁴⁵ Looby, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 93.

⁴⁶ Duncan, *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune*, 381.

⁴⁷ Duncan, *Blue Eyed Child of Fortune*, 351.

Monitors were particularly innovative, being the first warships ever to mount a rotating turret with some of the largest naval rifles put to sea at that time. It was thought by the naval department that these ships could reduce the defenses around Charleston and force their way into the harbor itself. The warships subsequently attacked alone with no assistance from the army and floundered in its assault.⁴⁸

While the ships contained massive naval rifles, their rate of fire was too slow to put an effective weight of fire upon the fort. To make matters worse, the 15-inch Dahlgren gun muzzle did not fit outside the turret, spewing smoke into the interior every time it was fired. To clear the interior, special fans were fitted to the turret to blow out the smoke. However, this took power away from propulsion, leaving the ironclads dead in the water. The armor also proved to be imperfect, because while it was extremely strong on some parts of the ship, it was woefully deficient in others. The turret traverse was vulnerable, getting jammed anytime shrapnel entered the exposed mechanism.⁴⁹ The decks were also especially thin, which made the Monitors vulnerable to plunging fire. Because of these issues, numerous modifications were made to the ships, including building shields for the turret traverse, up armoring the decks with steel plate or improvised methods like sandbags.⁵⁰ These fixes, however, only marginally improved performance, forcing future ironclad designs to address these flaws.

The innovative designs of the warships and their immense firepower were not enough to take Charleston by themselves, and it would take adaptation and a change in tactics by Union command to take advantage of these iron beasts. However, a change of command along with fear

⁴⁸ Browning Jr., *Success Is All That Was Expected*, 180.

⁴⁹ Browning Jr., *Success Is All That Was Expected*, 176.

⁵⁰ Browning Jr., *Success Is All That Was Expected*, 259.

of another failure eliminated any chance of the Ironclad flotilla sortieing against the harbor defenses in a grand attack again.

Due to his lack of progress in the department, General Hunter was soon replaced with Major General Quincy Gillmore. It was hoped that Gillmore would move more aggressively to defeat the Rebels in the department. Dejected and under attack from the US Navy for his failed ironclad assault, Du Pont resigned soon after and was replaced by Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren, a naval gunnery expert. With new leadership in place, Union military officials hoped the war in the Department of the South would take a more positive turn.

Initially, things did go well, and combined arms showed their worth in the first attack on Battery Wagner. Dahlgren and Gillmore worked together to create a plan to drive the Confederates off Morris Island in Charleston Harbor, getting them one step closer to capturing the city. In their way on the island were smaller defensive lines, along with the imposing Battery Wagner. Army artillery and naval gunfire worked together to drive out the enemy farther up Morris Island, sending the Rebels into a retreat towards Wagner. The combined arms attack on July 8, 1863, was described by historian Robert Browning Jr. as being “nearly flawless” with Union forces capturing nearly three quarters of the island, only stopping due to the exhaustion of the men.⁵¹ Sadly, from then on combined arms operations were limited in their scope and success. The next day Gillmore ordered an attack on Battery Wagner without alerting the Navy, and the soldiers were slaughtered without the assistance of the Navy. In future charges against Wagner, Naval support would be present, but the Navy failed to significantly damage the enemy position. The innovative Dahlgren naval guns carried by Union warships, designed before the war by Admiral Dahlgren to give his ships firepower before unseen were optimized to attack

⁵¹ Browning Jr., *Success Is All That Was Expected*, 223.

other ships or forts made of stone masonry, not the sand fortification that was Battery Wagner. The shells from the powerful ironclads and gunboats would impact Wagner and explode, but the sand absorbed most of the blast preventing major structural damage. Any damage done was quickly repaired by defenders at night, eliminating the effectiveness of the state-of-the-art warships and guns.⁵² Instead of changing tactics and adapting to help increase the effectiveness of the Union warships, Union command instead decided to settle into siege tactics on the battery. As interservice cooperation then deteriorated, the Army and Navy would not coordinate again to the same extent against Wagner, giving the Rebels time to reinforce the fortification and further delay the Union advance.

Combined operations became even more strained and rare as relationships between the General and Admiral soured. It all began with a plan to attack Fort Sumter by boat, and unbeknownst by either commander, they had both planned a similar attack for the same night. Gillmore found out about the naval plan and requested that all of Dahlgren's forces for the attack be placed under Army command. Dahlgren refused, unwilling to put his men under the command of an Army officer. The attack still went forward at night and was a horrific failure. The naval element touched down and was instantly taken under fire by the fort's defenders. The Rebels knew the attack was coming and annihilated the navy attackers on the shore. The Army forces, however, were nowhere to be seen. They were under orders from Gillmore stating that if the Navy initiated the attack, they were to abort their assault. This order infuriated Dahlgren, who did not know why the Army did not attack in support of his men. He saw the failure of the Army to attack as a betrayal by Gillmore, writing after the war that Gillmore had failed to "assault with

⁵² Wise, *Gate of Hell*, 129.

me as he had promised to do.”⁵³ From then on, neither officer got along, and combined operations broke down almost entirely. Both officers felt that the other was out to get them, and the trust that had led to success earlier in the war had been destroyed.

This annihilation of trust was devastating to the Union war effort in the Department of the South. It prevented the Army and Navy from effectively planning operations together, sometimes even seemingly trying to foil each other’s efforts rather than the Confederates. This was good for the Rebels, allowing them to strengthen their defenses and dig in on the islands outside Charleston Harbor. The Rebels still respected and feared the Union forces, but they knew about the schism between the two Union commanders and took full advantage of it. In Sgt. Augustine Smythe’s letters, he records the effect of the Union leadership fallout on the Confederates defending the harbor. He wrote that reports indicated “that Gillmore & Dahlgren have fallen out & are now at loggerheads & therefore the attack is not resumed.”⁵⁴ And whereas before the Rebels had been receiving heavy combined shelling from Army and Navy guns, Smythe reported that “everything now is very quiet with the exception of a little shelling now & then.”⁵⁵ This pause in the action allowed Rebel defenders to repair their positions and prepare for the next Union assault.

This was a colossal missed opportunity for the Union, as they had all the tools they needed to advance on Charleston. Monitor class warships alongside the ironclad USS *New Ironsides* represented the state of the art in naval warship design. Each packed a punch, carrying heavy cannon to reduce Confederate positions. The *New Ironsides* in particular was feared by the

⁵³ Peter C. Luebke, *The Autobiography of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren* (Washington D.C.: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2018), 95.

⁵⁴ W. Eric Emerson & Karen Stokes, *Days of Destruction: Augustine Thomas Smythe and the Civil War Siege of Charleston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 50.

⁵⁵ Emerson & Stokes, *Days of Destruction*, 50.

Rebels due to her destructive capability, and they went to great lengths to sink her during the war.⁵⁶ The Army artillery was also formidable and innovative, using precision and revolutionary engineering to lob artillery shells into Charleston at ranges that had never been achieved before. Combined with the exceptional infantry possessed by Gillmore, the Union army could have achieved so much more on the Sea Islands outside Charleston. But instead, the commanders of the Union forces in the department chose to prioritize their grievances with each other over the war effort, so these war-winning assets never got to show their full potential.

Combined arms had the potential to turn the fortunes of war in favor of the Union in the Department of the South. Amiable relationships between officers of both services along with potent tactics and technology combined to create an imposing force. However, this force was never used to its full potential, a running theme for the Department of the South. Initially there was no combined strategic vision, leading to inefficient and ineffective use of the men and machines of the department in pointless raids and expeditions. Then as the war went on, the lack of strategic vision was compounded by conflict between the services, further impeding the ability of combined arms operations to turn the tide in favor of the Union war effort. Lack of strategic unity and interservice cooperation caused the Union war effort in the department to stagnate, stuck resorting to siege tactics and futile, bloody attacks that resulted in failure. The potential of the department to generate success was great, but thanks to incompetent command and poor strategy, the Union efforts in the department became a bloody footnote in the history of the American Civil War.

⁵⁶ Browning Jr., *Success Is All That Was Expected*, 271.

CONCLUSION

The Department of the South is a textbook example of how innovation and progressive ideals do not guarantee success to a military. Innovation is an important factor that can contribute to military success, but innovation alone is not enough to carry a military to victory. The Union Army innovated in new ways within its African American regiments, allowing freed slaves to fight for their own freedom. The regiments were disciplined and extremely motivated in their fight for their respect in the eyes of their own nation. Although these units were highly innovative in their recruiting and training, on the field they were squandered by incompetent commanders. The USCT regiments were some of the best the Department of the South had to offer but they alone were not enough to overcome a command that rarely used them in major battles, and when they did the regiments were decimated due to poor battlefield tactics and command. They ultimately were not able to push the Army over the top in achieving its strategic objectives, and in turn the Army failed to succeed in following through on the promises made to the men of the USCTs. Innovation itself in the Army was not enough to secure success.

The Navy also possessed innovative and new tools of war, ironclad warships armored and armed like no ship had been before. These ships were the best the world had seen at the time and proved effective against masonry fortifications and enemy infantry in the field. However, they too failed to achieve strategic success on their own. Even against targets they were designed to handle, alone they did not possess the ability to reduce enemy positions and force surrender in Charleston. They required infantry support to carry well-constructed and manned Rebel positions. Even when they were combined with infantry they still did not live up to expectations, especially against sand fortifications they were not designed to reduce. The Naval command

then, instead of adapting its tactics and working with the Army to harness the power of their warships, fell into conflict with the Army and settled for maintaining the blockade and helping with the Army's outdated siege tactics. Innovation will not always carry a military to victory, and adaptation in the field along with interservice cooperation is required to harness the innovations provided, therefore creating success on the battlefield. Union commanders continually misused assets and refused to adapt to the situation that presented itself to them. It is because of command incompetence that the Union in the Department of the South stagnated despite its great innovations, making Union accomplishments in the department some of the most disappointing and lackluster of the entire war.

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