

“Boys, Save the Colors!”

Sgt. Alfred Hilton’s Medal of Honor Moment

Analyzing A Primary Source Activity

Veterans Legacy Program

National Cemetery Administration

Department of Veterans Affairs





Framing Question:
**What can one act of
valor by a Black
Union soldier teach us
about the American
Civil War?**



Understanding: Black Union soldiers played a vital role in the military defeat of the Confederate States of America despite the racist attitudes and mistrust that many Northern citizens and soldiers harbored. To prove themselves worthy of citizenship and equal rights, these soldiers knew they had to prove themselves on the battlefield.

Background



In January of 1863, President Abraham Lincoln shocked the world when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Taking the radical step of declaring enslaved Blacks in the southern Confederacy “forever free,” Lincoln took an additional measure, stating:

“I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.”



Just five years prior to this, the highest court in the land had declared that Blacks “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Now these same men were being accepted into the United States military for armed service. Starting in May of 1863 they were recruited into segregated regiments known as United States Colored Troops (USCTs) and by war’s end nearly 200,000 of these Black soldiers would be in the field — fully 10% of the entire US Army.

The year 1864 marked the first time USCTs saw battle in large numbers, and there were many negative reactions to their usage in both the North and the South. Confederates viewed Black troops as nothing more than rebelling slaves and said any Black man captured wearing a blue uniform would be immediately placed back into slavery (even if they were born free men in the North) — white officers caught leading USCTs into battle would be executed for inciting this slave rebellion in the first place.



Oftentimes the mere *sight* of a Black man in uniform would send Confederate soldiers into a murderous rage, causing them to commit atrocities against USCTs who tried to surrender after defeat in battle.

Many Northerners also had low opinions of Black soldiers, thinking them inferior to whites and believing them to be poor soldiers.

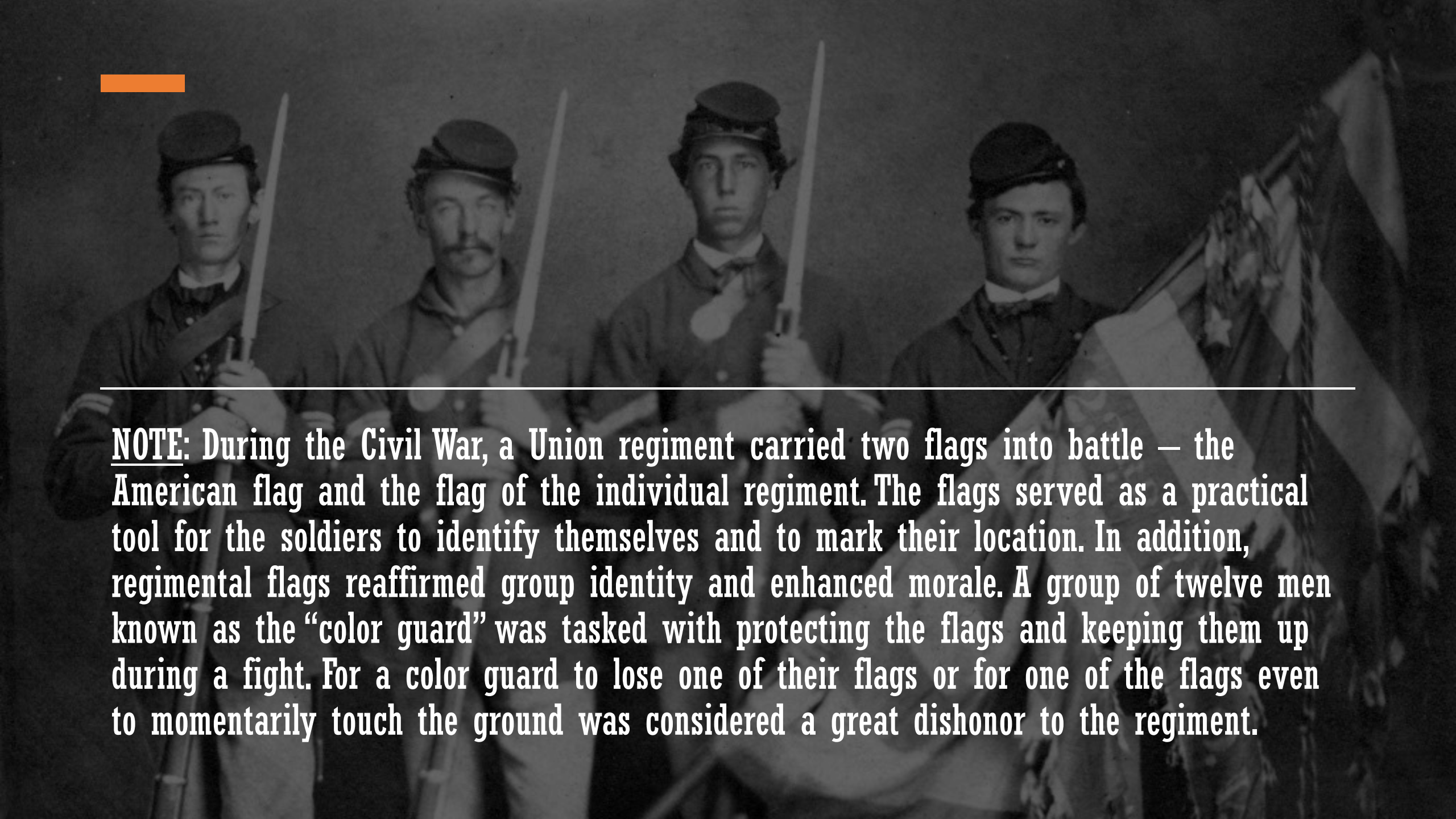




The commander of this army, Major General Benjamin F. Butler, purposely placed all of his Black troops in the vanguard of the attack so that they could prove themselves. This attack, now known as **Battle of New Market Heights**, saw a USCT victory that came at a terrible cost in terms of loss of life. The valor displayed by Butler's troops resulted in fourteen Black soldiers and two white USCT officers receiving the nation's highest award for valor — the Medal of Honor.

Hampton National Cemetery in Virginia provides the final resting places for two of those Medal of Honor recipients. One of them, Sgt. Alfred B. Hilton, did not live to receive his medal in person. He died as a result of the grievous wounds he sustained during the attack on New Market Heights. Thankfully, those who were witnesses to his bravery left us their testimonies so that we can appreciate the sacrifice that Sgt. Hilton was willing to make to advance the cause of liberty.





NOTE: During the Civil War, a Union regiment carried two flags into battle — the American flag and the flag of the individual regiment. The flags served as a practical tool for the soldiers to identify themselves and to mark their location. In addition, regimental flags reaffirmed group identity and enhanced morale. A group of twelve men known as the “color guard” was tasked with protecting the flags and keeping them up during a fight. For a color guard to lose one of their flags or for one of the flags even to momentarily touch the ground was considered a great dishonor to the regiment.

Primary Source Activity

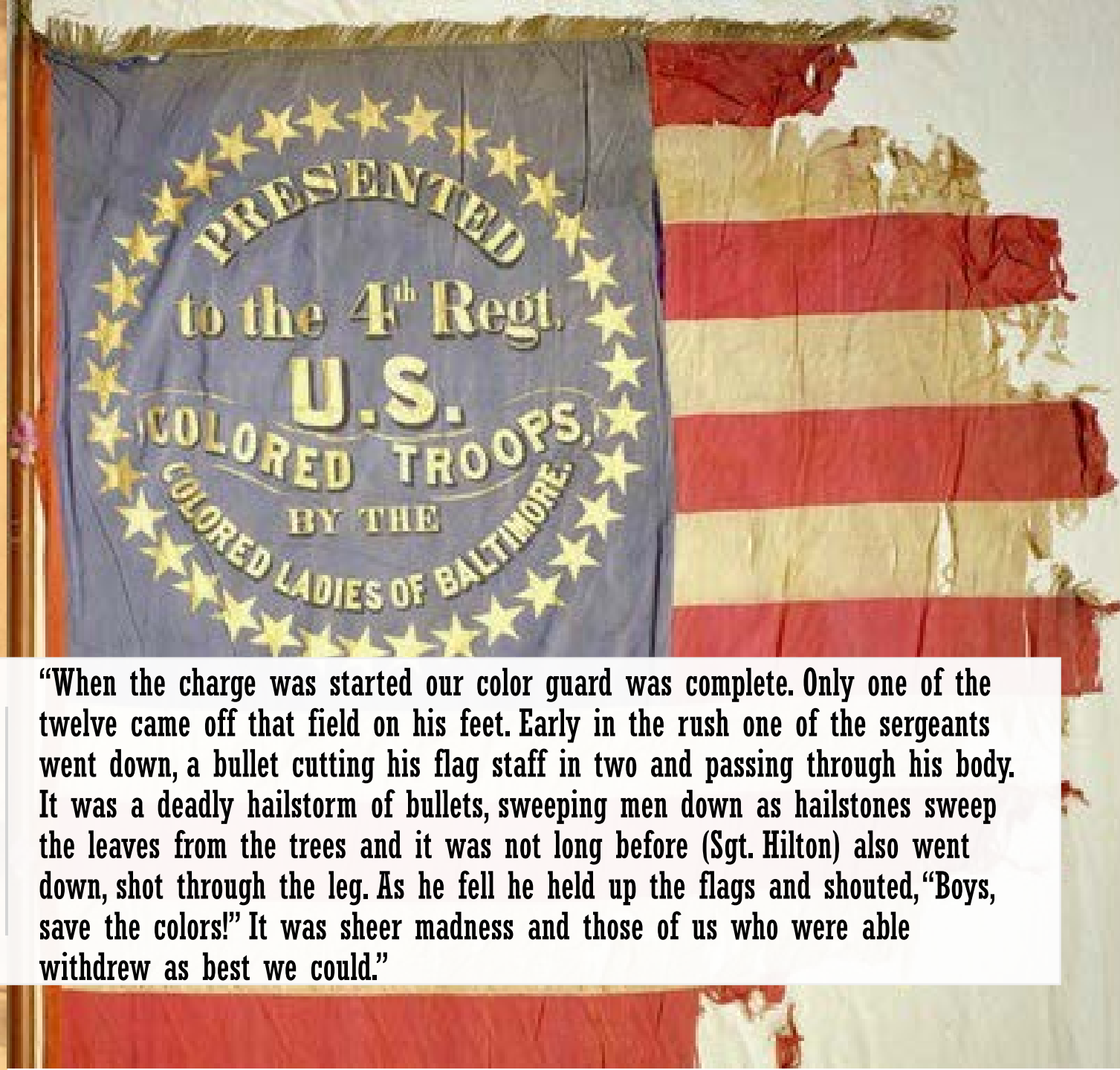
You will now examine three primary source accounts relating the story of Sgt. Alfred Hilton at the Battle of New Market Heights. As you read these three accounts, keep the following questions in mind:

- 1.) What kind of text are we dealing with?
- 2.) When was it written?
- 3.) Who wrote it?
- 4.) For what audience was it intended?
- 5.) For what purpose was it written?





Eyewitness Testimony of Sgt. Maj. Christian Fleetwood, a USCT soldier who was with Sgt. Hilton during the attack:



"When the charge was started our color guard was complete. Only one of the twelve came off that field on his feet. Early in the rush one of the sergeants went down, a bullet cutting his flag staff in two and passing through his body. It was a deadly hailstorm of bullets, sweeping men down as hailstones sweep the leaves from the trees and it was not long before (Sgt. Hilton) also went down, shot through the leg. As he fell he held up the flags and shouted, "Boys, save the colors!" It was sheer madness and those of us who were able withdrew as best we could."



Questions

1. What do you think compelled men like Sgt. Hilton to keep moving forward when so many men around them had already been killed or wounded?
2. What was Sgt. Hilton's primary concern after he was wounded?



Eyewitness Testimony of 1st Lt. Joseph Goulding, a white officer who was in the same attack as Hilton:

“Going over the field after the fight, we found the color sergeant of the 4th [Hilton] with both legs shattered by a round shot. He had crawled twenty yards to get out of the way of the rebs as they sprang over upon our wounded.

His first question was ‘Have we taken the works?’

‘Yes, sergeant, we have.’

He raised himself to a sitting position while his mangled limbs hung by shreds of flesh, swung his hat over his head, gave a cheer for the colored brigade, and fell back gasping upon the turf.

Tenderly laying him in the shade, we revived him with a little water, and after an inquiry as to whether he could live, which was answered doubtfully, he said faintly, ‘Well, I carried my colors up to the works, and I did my duty, didn’t I?’”

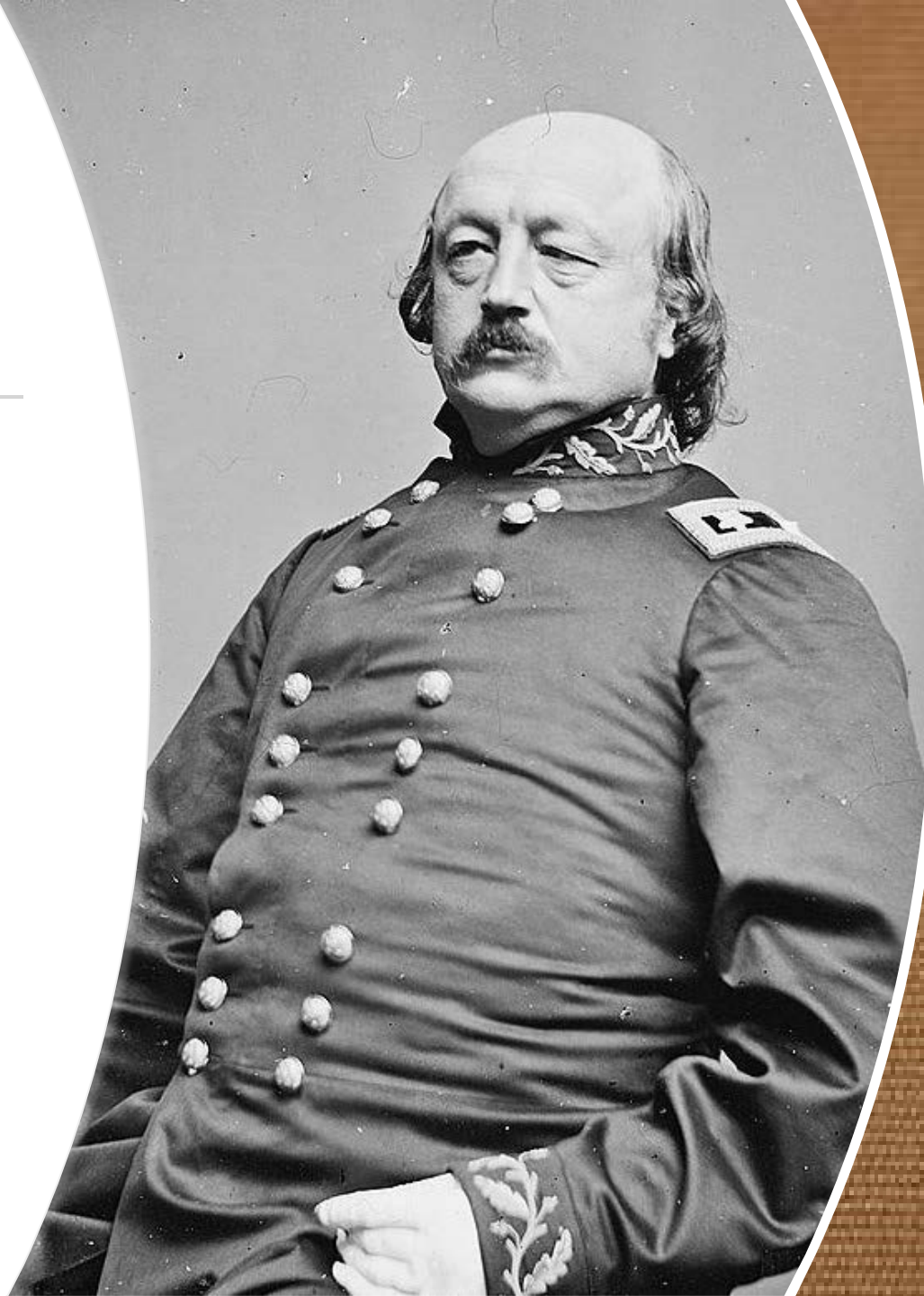


Questions

3. What does Lt. Goulding mean when he says Confederate soldiers “sprang over upon” wounded Black soldiers?
4. What does Sgt. Hilton’s first question to Lt. Goulding reveal about his priorities?
5. Lt. Goulding mentions asking whether Sgt. Hilton would survive, which was “answered doubtfully” (he survived three more weeks before succumbing to his wounds.) Why do you think Hilton was willing to sacrifice his own life for a country that had treated him so poorly?

Army Order from Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler, dated 11 October 1864:

“Alfred B. Hilton, color-sergeant,
Fourth U.S. Colored Troops, the
bearer of the national colors,
when the color-sergeant with
the regimental standard fell
beside him, seized the standard,
and struggled forward with
both colors, until disabled by a
severe wound at the enemy's
inner line of abatis, and when
on the ground he showed that
his thoughts were for the colors
and not for himself. He has a
special medal for gallantry...”



Questions:

6. Go to [this link](#) and read about the Butler Medal (the medal referred to in the text.) What does it say about General Butler that he was willing to pay out of his own pocket for a medal for his soldiers?

7. Many Civil War Medal of Honor recipients are well-known even today, but Sgt. Hilton has been almost unknown until recent decades. Why do you think that is?



Glossary



Abatis - an obstacle formed of the branches of trees laid in a row, with the sharpened tops directed outwards, towards the enemy. The trees are usually interlaced like barbed wire.

Palisade — a fence or defensive wall made from iron or wooden stakes, or tree trunks, and used as a defensive structure or enclosure

Round Shot — a type of cannon ball.



Sources:

Fleetwood's Eyewitness Account: Beyer, Walter F. and Keydel, Oscar F. *Deeds of Valor: How America's Heroes Won the Medal of Honor*, Vol. 1, pp. 434-435.

Goulding Account: "The Colored Troops in the War of the Rebellion."
Proceedings of the Reunion Society of Vermont Officers, Vol. 2, pp. 137-154.

Butler Order: *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*