



## THE BELL TOLLS

*A Call for Black Troops*

On July 6, 1863, three days after the terrible fighting at Gettysburg, Christian Fleetwood saw the gaunt, soiled faces of the defeated, walking as shattered men through his hometown of Baltimore. About nineteen thousand rebel prisoners were marched through the city's narrow cobblestone streets that day, the pain and horror of the war reflected in their drawn faces and unseeing eyes.

Horse-drawn ambulances carrying the wounded, some crying in pain, descended upon the town along with hundreds of grim-faced Union soldiers, many still in a state of shock. The ugly aftermath of the battle was evident everywhere as a dark gloom wrapped the city.

For Fleetwood and others in Baltimore, the war that once seemed so distant was suddenly too close to ignore. For months, Fleetwood weighed the decision of whether to join the fight; now that decision would be tempered by the stark reality of the scene unfolding before his eyes. Gone were any romantic notions of the war. The faces of the vanquished and victors

held no sign of glory, only the vestiges of a brutal struggle that left them somehow less human.

Gettysburg, like some grim reaper, had exacted its toll. The numbers were staggering. The Union army lost twenty-three thousand soldiers killed, wounded, or missing in the three days of fighting, the South another twenty thousand. News from the battlefield dominated the newspapers. War correspondents from all over the country were in Baltimore that day, relaying dispatches back to editors. They told their stories in bars and taverns. People strained to listen.

The reporters told of a mad, daring charge across an open plain by the Confederate army on the third and final day of the battle. They told of how Union soldiers waited until the enemy drew near, then unleashed deadly cannon and musket fire. Hundreds of the helpless rebels fell as the air filled with smoke, the acrid smell of gunpowder, and cries of death. But the fractured rebel lines kept charging, finally reaching the outer fringe of the Union army.

One eyewitness recounted the battle: "Men fire into each other's faces, not five feet apart. There are bayonet-thrusts, saber-strokes, pistol-shots . . . men going down on their hands and knees, spinning round like tops, throwing out their arms, gulping up blood, falling; legless, armless, headless. There are ghastly heaps of men."

The brutality of the slaughter, which ended with the retreat of Southern troops, was never equaled in the war. The North claimed victory, but there was hardly celebration.

As a clerk, Fleetwood knew what the loss of so many soldiers would ultimately mean. The ledgers would demand that the North put out a call for more troops to replace those who lay dead or wounded in Pennsylvania. The very complexion of the war was changing. It was no longer a white man's fight about

states' rights. The death rolls reached into every town and village, and now an invitation to join the carnage was being extended to black recruits. After two years of spurning black soldiers, the Union, Fleetwood knew, could no longer afford to turn them away.

Throughout that July day, the sobering news of Gettysburg was on everyone's lips in the city of 212,000. Residents stood stoically in line for broadsheets listing the dead. Shrieks of anguish reverberated through the shuttered streets as the names of loved ones were recognized, augmenting the pervasive air of sadness and melancholy that settled on the city. With no decisive victory for Union forces, the battle that so many in the North hoped would end the war merely made it more unbearable.

With Lee's army escaping south to the Potomac River en route to Virginia, it was clear the war was far from over. Now the gluttonous, unending conflict would demand more troops to replace the fallen.

Federal recruiters seeking to enlist blacks arrived in Fleetwood's hometown on July 6, the very day the wounded began arriving from Gettysburg. Strange as it would have seemed just a year earlier, the recruiters offered freedom to slaves, honor to free persons of color, and the possibility of limited advancement in the ranks of the Union army for all blacks.

But Fleetwood wasn't a slave; he never worked on a plantation or as a servant. He wasn't convinced that this was his fight. Besides, at five feet four inches and 125 pounds, the well-read, articulate, and cultured Fleetwood was an unlikely candidate for the rigors of military life. He had plans to travel to Liberia in the fall to join a colony of blacks who wanted to live free of racial prejudice. These plans had been given a new sense of urgency by President Lincoln's decision earlier in the year to

normalize diplomatic relations with Liberia and encourage blacks to migrate to the African country.

At twenty-three, Fleetwood had a comfortable job as a clerk in a Baltimore shipyard. His circle of friends included influential, progressive-thinking blacks in Baltimore, the city where former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass had grown up a generation earlier. Fleetwood was a founding member of the first black journal in the Maryland region, the *Lyceum Observer*, a forum for black interests, including the advancement of black rights. He was also a regular contributor to the *Christian Recorder*, a newspaper published by the Episcopal Church.

Fleetwood and his friends had rigorous, heated debates—often into the wee hours of the morning—about religion, politics, physics, literature, civil rights, and the war. He felt at ease in intellectual circles. A musician, choirmaster, and singer in the church, he often dotted his letters with the French expressions and Latin phrases of the well educated. Soft-spoken and friendly, with curious eyes that lit up when he smiled, Fleetwood possessed a combination of affable traits that appealed to a wide circle of friends as well as his superiors and leaders in Baltimore. Clergy of the Episcopal Church in town considered him a leading candidate for a rectory.

But always, Fleetwood was reminded that the seeming normalcy of his life was an illusion. He was black, and that fact alone relegated him to a prison without walls that offered a confinement as sure as any four-by-four cell.

Fleetwood's driving ambition made it difficult for him to accept the stifling limitations of life for blacks in America. He had traveled abroad and was painfully aware that another world existed outside America where things were different. With each new racial insult, his sense of disillusionment with his homeland was heightened, as was his interest in moving to Africa.

His education began at the home of a wealthy sugar merchant, John C. Burns, and his wife, who were particularly fond of the engaging young man. It continued at the office of the secretary of the Maryland Colonization Society, an organization dedicated to ending slavery by repatriating blacks to Africa. At sixteen, Fleetwood had traveled to Liberia and Sierra Leone. In 1860, he graduated from the all-black Ashman Institute, later renamed Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania. As a black, he was automatically denied admission to most colleges in the state. Once again, Fleetwood experienced the keen impress of prejudice, standing by while far less talented whites entered universities whose doors remained firmly shut in his face.

He understood injustice in the intimate, personal way of the discriminated against. And while he struggled with his role in the war, there was no debate in his heart about the need to break through the barriers that not only prevented blacks from advancing, but kept many in physical bondage. This was especially true in his hometown of Baltimore.

Baltimore was a slave-owning town rife with prejudice. Sympathies lay as much with the South as the North. On April 19, 1861, in the opening days of the war, a large group of pro-Southern townsmen—some carrying Confederate flags—provoked an exchange of gunfire with the 6th Massachusetts Volunteers as they passed through the city on their way to Washington, D.C.

The ugly mob, throwing bricks, bottles, stones, and just about anything they could get their hands on, stormed the railway cars carrying the troops. Nine cars escaped, but the tenth was pushed off the tracks. With the situation becoming more explosive by the moment, the soldiers in the derailed car tried marching to the next station. The seething mob followed, pressing closer. Suddenly, several people in the crowd opened fire,

and within minutes four Union soldiers lay dead in the streets of Baltimore, another thirty-nine wounded. That evening, Fleetwood could see the billowing smoke and amber glow of fires around the city as residents burned bridges to prevent more soldiers from going through their town to Washington. A day later, President Lincoln suspended all troop movements through Baltimore. The 6th Massachusetts returned a few days later and occupied Federal Hill overlooking the city.

Now, two years after the riot, little had changed in Fleetwood's hometown, where residents were still as likely to cheer for the Confederate army as for the Union. Faced with this reality, Union troops treated Baltimore as an occupied city for the duration of the war.

With Baltimore now the site of active recruitment of blacks, one of the foremost questions on Fleetwood's mind was the role blacks would play in the Union army. One thing was clear: they would fight under white commanders. But would they be considered expendable and thrown into the heaviest fire?

Fleetwood, like other blacks, had been unable to enlist for much of the war. He had watched from the sidelines, wondering how the conflict would affect life for black Americans. Many blacks viewed the struggle with intellectual indifference, believing it had little to do with them. Indeed, until the conflict began to take a heavy toll in lives, the abolition of slavery was an underlying but not primary issue.

Nine months before Gettysburg, President Lincoln stated unequivocally that the war was not about the slavery issue. "My paramount aim in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery," the president wrote in an open letter to Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*. "If I could either save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would

do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.”

Fleetwood was among those who cheered when Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves in the rebel states in January 1863. But his heart sank when that freedom wasn’t extended to the states under Lincoln’s and the Union’s control. Maryland remained a slave state—Lincoln didn’t dare offend pro-Union slave states by setting blacks free in their territories. Fleetwood, seeing the shackles of his brethren in his own town, questioned why should he fight to preserve a union that would not guarantee the freedom of all blacks. Finding no suitable answer, the military seemed an illogical vocation. With a heavy heart, his thoughts remained fixed on Liberia.

To attract blacks the military began placing recruitment posters in Baltimore and other cities. The large, bold print was disturbingly reminiscent of notices for slave auctions: “Men of Color, To Arms! To Arms! Now or Never. Three Year’s Service. Battles of Liberty and the Union. Fail Now & Our Race is Doomed.”

With a number of slaves enlisting in hopes of obtaining their freedom, some posters addressed free blacks with a nagging question: “Are Freemen less Brave than Slaves?”

Fleetwood felt that doubts and disparaging comments about the courage of blacks were unfair. Blacks had shown a willingness to fight, but were rebuffed by the stubbornness of the Union to accept black soldiers. Fleetwood would later tell friends, “The North came slowly and reluctantly to recognize the Negro as a factor for good in the war. ‘This is a white man’s war’ met the Negroes at every step of their first efforts to gain admission to the armies of the Union.”

The willingness of blacks to fight was evidenced early in the war. But it was the South, not the North, that first enlisted

them, a fact that deeply disturbed Fleetwood. Although the Confederacy enlisted blacks for support detail, not as armed combatants, the irony was not wasted on him.

Two weeks after the fall of Fort Sumter in April 1861, at the very start of the war, the *Charleston Mercury* had reported the passing through Augusta, Georgia, of several companies of rebel troops, including the 3rd and 4th Georgia regiments, fifteen other white companies, and one Negro company from Nashville, Tennessee. And a telegram from New Orleans dated November 23, 1861, noted the review by Governor Thomas Moore of more than 28,000 troops, including one regiment comprised of "1,400 colored men." Some Southern newspapers even praised the black soldiers. The *New Orleans Picayune*, referring to a military review held February 9, 1862, stated, "We must also pay a deserved compliment to the companies of free colored men, all very well drilled and comfortably equipped."

Yet it did not escape Fleetwood that during the evacuation of New Orleans two months later, all of the Southern troops succeeded in getting away except the black troops. "They got left," he noted sarcastically.

The attitude toward enlisting blacks was rapidly changing in the North. Just days after Gettysburg, at a recruiting station in Baltimore, Union major general Robert Schenck received a dispatch from Washington ordering him to start recruiting blacks. The notice, from Secretary of War Edward M. Stanton, read, "The chief of Bureau for Organizing Colored Troops will issue an order for organizing a regiment in your department, and Colonel Birney has been directed to report to you immediately for that duty. The chief of the Bureau will furnish instructions."

The Union's decision to enlist blacks raised a critical question: should runaway slaves from the South be allowed to join Union forces?



In the early months of the war, the Union leaders wanted to turn away escaped slaves. General Benjamin Butler, fighting near Fort Monroe in Virginia, disagreed. He believed the Union should deprive the South of any manpower at its disposal, including slaves. The Confederate commander opposing Butler's troops was using slaves to help build fortifications. Butler wrote President Lincoln that escaped slaves should be treated the same as any other property taken from the Confederate army.

"Twelve of these Negroes have escaped from the erection of batteries on Sewall's point, which this morning fired upon my expedition as it passed by out of range. As a means of offense therefore in the enemy's hands these Negroes are of importance. Without them, the batteries could not have been erected at least for many weeks. It would seem to be a measure of necessity to deprive their masters of their services."

Butler declared escaped slaves as "contrabands of war," or riches over which slave owners lost claim when they rebelled. Lincoln approved of this policy, maintaining that it was not a policy toward abolition but a tactic of war to save lives of Northern soldiers.

Frederick Douglass, a former slave himself, objected to the term as bitterly distasteful. "Contraband sounds more like a pistol than a human being." But the policy changed the underlying meaning of the war. Suddenly the fight was helping thousands of blacks gain freedom. Escaped slaves began showing up at Union camps referring to themselves as "contraband."

Butler's decision aside, no man in Fleetwood's eyes was more responsible for changing public opinion in the North about black troops than Union general David Hunter. Hunter's effort to form a black regiment in South Carolina in the spring of 1862 was well-known.

Hunter's arming of blacks, many of them runaway slaves, sent political shock waves through the North, especially in Congress, where critics of the general's policy existed on both sides of the aisle. The Lincoln administration, Fleetwood noted, stayed out of the fray and let the general handle his critics. He proved quite capable.

Congressman Charles A. Wickliffe of Kentucky issued a resolution before the House asking that Hunter answer for his actions. "Resolved, That the Secretary of War be directed to inform this House if General Hunter, of the department of South Carolina, has organized a regiment of South Carolina volunteers for the defense of the Union, composed of black men [fugitive slaves], and appointed the colonel and other officers to command them." Wickliffe argued that Hunter had no authority to enlist black soldiers or give them arms, clothing, and equipment. House members approved the resolution on June 9, 1862.

Secretary of War Stanton disavowed any involvement or knowledge of Hunter's actions. That might have put the matter to rest. But General Hunter was not easily cornered. He wrote back to Stanton, who eagerly passed the reply on to the House, where Hunter's critics lay in wait. Congressman Samuel Cox was looking for a campaign issue for the upcoming election. A speech, he believed, railing against the threat of armed black troops would provide him with "first-rate Democratic thunder." As the clerk of the House rose to announce the letter, Cox caught the Speaker's eye and signaled that he wanted to be booked for the first speech against what was being called "The Negro Experiment."

Hunter's letter began politely enough by repeating the questions addressed to him. Had he organized a regiment of fugitive slaves? Did he have the authority to do so? Had he furnished them with arms, clothing, and equipment?

Cox rubbed his hands in anticipation, nodding knowingly to a supporter. The clerk continued reading.

“Only having received the letter conveying the inquiries at a late hour on Saturday night, I urge forward my answer in time for the steamer sailing today [Monday], this haste preventing me from entering as minutely as I could wish upon many points of detail, such as the paramount importance of the subject calls for.”

Cox listened intently, leaning forward to catch each word. The clerk went on: “But in view of the near termination of the present session of Congress, and the widespread interest which must have been awakened by Mr. Wickliffe’s resolution, I prefer sending even this imperfect answer to waiting the period necessary for the collection of fuller and more comprehensive data.”

A brief smile played across Cox’s face, expiring before reaching his eyes. If Hunter planned to try to weasel out of an indefensible position, Cox had no intention of letting him. But the crafty general had no such plans, as Cox was about to discover.

Hunter explained that he hadn’t raised any regiment of “fugitive slaves.” More precisely, “There is, however, a fine regiment of persons whose late masters are ‘fugitive rebels,’ men who everywhere fly before the appearance of the national flag, leaving their servants behind them to shift as best they can for themselves. So far, indeed, are the loyal persons composing this regiment from seeking to avoid the presence of their late owners that they are now, one and all, working with remarkable industry to place themselves in a position to go in full and effective pursuit of their fugacious and traitorous proprietors.”

Cox shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Things weren’t going according to plan. Over applause and laughter, the clerk carried on, his voice growing louder over the din.

Hunter believed he was authorized to enlist “fugitive slaves”

as soldiers. But he couldn't find anyone of that description. "No such characters have, however, yet appeared within our most advanced pickets, the loyal slaves everywhere remaining on their plantations to welcome us, and supply us with food, labor and information. It is the masters who have, in every instance, been the 'fugitives'—running away from loyal slaves as well as loyal soldiers, and whom we have only partially been able to see—chiefly their heads over ramparts, or, rifle in hand, dodging behind trees, in the extreme distance."

By now, the mood on the floor was one of levity and outright hilarity, with the exception of Representative Wickliffe. Even Cox found himself unable to hold back a smile.

Hunter's words continued:

"In the absence of any 'fugitive master' law, the deserted slaves would be wholly without remedy, had not the crime of treason given them the right to pursue, capture, and bring back those persons of whose protection they have been thus suddenly bereft."

As to the question of whether Hunter issued clothes, uniforms, arms, equipment, etc., such authority is implied, he said. "Neither have I had any specific authority for supplying these persons with shovels, spades and pickaxes when employing them as laborers, nor with boats and oars when using them as lighter men; but these are not points included in [the House's] resolution. To me it seemed that liberty to employ men in any particular capacity implied with it liberty also to supply them with the necessary tools; and acting under this faith I have clothed, equipped and armed the only loyal regiment yet raised in South Carolina."

Hunter apologized profusely to the House that demands on his time allowed him to raise only one such regiment instead of five. "The experiment of arming the blacks, so far as I have

made it, has been a complete and even marvelous success. They are sober, docile, attentive, and enthusiastic, displaying great natural capacities for acquiring the duties of a soldier. They are eager beyond all things to take the field and be led into action; and it is the unanimous opinion of the officers who have had charge of them, that in the peculiarities of this climate and country, they will prove invaluable auxiliaries, fully equal to the similar regiments so long and successfully used by the British authorities in the West Indies."

Cox and Wickliffe had been outflanked. "I tell you that letter from Hunter spoiled the prettiest speech I had ever thought of making," Cox said afterward. "Well you see, man proposes, but Providence orders otherwise."

Cox canceled his speech. "Before the document was concluded, I motioned to the Speaker that he might give the floor to whom he pleased, as my desire to distinguish myself in that particular tilt was over."

Hunter's brilliant argument, dripping with sarcasm, allowed him to avoid a carefully laid trap by savvy political enemies and press forward with the enlistment of blacks. In his cause, the general found an unlikely ally in a rough-spoken white soldier by the name of Colonel "Miles O'Reilly" Halpine, of the old 10th Army Corps. Fleetwood credited a popular ditty written by Halpine with helping end reservations in the North over the use of black soldiers. The coarse ditty, reflecting the vulgar prejudices of the time, summed up the sentiments of many whites:

Some say it is a burning shame to make the Naygurs fight,  
An' that the trade o' being kilt belongs but to the white:  
But as for me, upon me sowl, so liberal are we here,  
I'll let Sambo be murdered, in place of meself, on every day  
of the year.

On every day of the year, boys, and every hour in the day,  
The right to be kilt I'll divide wid him, and divil a word I'll  
say.

In battles wild commotion I shouldn't at all object,  
If Sambo's body should stop a ball that was coming for me  
direct,

An' the prod of a southern bayonet, so liberal are we here,  
I'll resign and let Sambo take it, on every day in the year.

On every day in the year, boys, an' wid none of your nasty  
pride,

All right in a southern bagnet prod, wid Sambo I'll divide.

The men who object to Sambo, should take his place and  
fight,

An' it is better to have a Naygur's hue, than a liver that's  
weak an' white.

Though Sambo's black as the ace of spades, his finger a  
thryger can pull,

An' his eye runs straight on the barrel sight from under its  
thatch of wool.

So hear me all, boys, darlin, don't think I'm tipping you  
chaff,

The right to be kilt, I'll divide with him, an' give him the  
largest half.

By the summer of 1863, black soldiers were marching in the streets of several cities, something that would have been unheard of just a short time before. And a War Department order offering freedom to all slaves who enlisted opened a flood-gate of blacks willing to take up arms and fight for the Union.

Fleetwood had no illusions. The black enlistments were driven by political necessity, not a newfound sense of racial sensitivity or political conscience.

Frederick Douglass used his influence as a famous black orator on a recruiting tour of Northern cities in March to get blacks to enlist in the U.S. Army. Both of his sons, Charles and Lewis, enlisted in the 54th U.S. Colored Infantry.

“Who would be free themselves must strike the blow,” Douglass told his fellow blacks. “I urge you to fly to arms and smite to death the power that would bury the Government and your liberty in the same hopeless grave. This is your golden opportunity.”

Douglass instinctively felt that military service would change the status of blacks. He had argued since the beginning of the war for the use of black regiments. “Once you let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship.” He disagreed with President Lincoln that blacks should return to Africa and colonize Liberia. “The colored race can never be respected until they are respected in America.”

Douglass’s arguments for enlistment gave Fleetwood a new perspective on the war. If Douglass was right, blacks could earn rights on the battlefield that had been denied them by legislatures across the country.

But while Douglass articulated intellectual reasons for blacks to join the war, the conflict was losing support among whites, who were fleeing the horrors of the battlefield and deserting at the rate of 152 a day. There was even open opposition to a federal draft.

What began as a slow, smoldering anger against the draft exploded into violence one week after Gettysburg when the names of the first federal draftees were drawn in New York and published in newspapers across the country. The draft struck a

raw nerve in America's grandest city, especially over the provision that allowed a draftee to buy an exemption or have someone else do his military duty. It was "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight," protesters cried. Politicians who didn't support the war stoked the discontent by railing against the draft.

On July 13, two days after the first names were drawn, many of those drafted arrived in New York with their families and friends. They gathered in vacant lots, carrying weapons, clubs, cart rungs, pieces of iron. The swelling crowd moved to Central Park and then headed for the draft offices. As the drawing of names continued, the mob closed in. Within minutes of their gathering, a full-scale riot developed. The draft headquarters was stormed and residences raided. Vandals looted businesses. The angry crowd overpowered police, firemen, and soldiers. The carnage spread throughout the city. A black church and orphanage were burned. The unrest continued for three days.

A *New York Times* report on the third day captured the chaos: "The ravages of the mob which commenced its diabolical career on Monday are not ended, and it is impossible to say at the hour of going to press this morning whether the worst has yet been seen. All through Tuesday night marauding bands of plunderers continued to commit their depredations in various parts of the city, but at daylight yesterday morning they had generally dispersed and there was a fair prospect of a speedy restoration of quiet and order. The authorities both state and military, appeared to consider the riot as substantially subdued."

Blacks, the city's most defenseless residents, bore the brunt of the attacks. The *Times* reported, "At a late hour on Tuesday night the mob made an attack upon the tenement houses, occupied by colored people, in Sullivan and Thompson streets. For three hours, and up to two o'clock yesterday morning there was what may be truly said to be a 'reign of terror' throughout all



that portion of the city. Several buildings were fired, and a large number of colored persons were beaten so badly that they lay insensible in the street for hours after. Two colored children at No. 59 Thompson Street were shot and instantly killed."

Secretary of War Stanton sent a dispatch to New York City mayor George Updike pledging help. "Five regiments are under orders to return to New York. The retreat of Lee [at Gettysburg], having now become a rout, with his army broken and much heavier loss of killed and wounded than was supposed, will relieve a larger force for the restoration of order in New York."

As disheartening as Fleetwood found the attacks on blacks during the New York riots, he was about to get another dose of bad news. This time it would involve a significant loss of life among one of the North's most vaunted black regiments.

A week after the New York riots, Union soldiers, headed by the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry, made an unsuccessful attack on Fort Wagner in South Carolina. The black regiment was assigned to lead the attack. As the Union troops formed on the beach, ready for the assault, the order to advance was withheld until the 54th could march by and take position at the head of the column. The regiment charged the embankment around the fort, unshielded from rebel fire. Hundreds of soldiers were killed. But Colonel Shaw, the white commander of the regiment, and several of his men were able to breach the parapet before falling dead. Of 650 soldiers in the regiment, 279 were lost.

The news sent shock waves through black communities across the country. Many, Fleetwood included, felt the regiment had been honored to lead the battle. Their sacrifice to their country and the Union cause was beyond question. But the battle also touched an underlying fear that black troops would be placed in the most dangerous situations where commanders wouldn't order white troops to go.

On July 21, three days after the battle, President Lincoln ordered recruiters to step up the enlistment of black soldiers. And even in the wake of the tragedy at Fort Wagner, blacks continued to answer the call and line up for service.

As Fleetwood contemplated recent events, fate was about to intervene in his life. The war disrupted trade with Liberia, ending his hope of traveling there in the near future. His options suddenly curtailed, he reconsidered the military. He mulled over the arguments of Douglass and others on why blacks should enlist, spending many evenings in deep soul-searching. Invariably, his thoughts returned to the shuffling, broken men he witnessed returning from Gettysburg. He had seen the casualties of war, knew that glory was sometimes won with limb or life, yet he was now more certain than ever of what he had to do. Some things, he concluded, were worth dying for.

On a humid morning in August 1863, with the sweltering breath of summer cascading beads of sweat down his face and open shirt, Christian Fleetwood walked into an army recruiting center in Baltimore. Drawn by high ideals, he had come to fight, and possibly die, for the Union and his race. He had no way to foretell the future. But long before the bloody conflict ended, the shipping clerk from Baltimore would find his courage and mettle tested beyond his most terrifying imaginings.