



Soldiers Just Like You

Kelly J. O'Grady

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Author Kelly J. O'Grady puts faces and personalities to individual soldiers in this historical novel that is based on the true story of the 54th Massachusetts, the Union's first Negro unit of the Civil War.

On a stage in Charleston's Hibernian Hall, 101-year-old Reuben Jeffries, a 54th Massachusetts veteran and the only living survivor of the battle, shares his memories of those long-ago events with reporter Rory Ryan and the Irish-American audience.

The reader meets soldiers from both the North and the South as events and skirmishes lead up to the famous Battery Wagner battle in Charleston in July 1863. Whether it's the Irish Confederate Volunteers in Charleston, the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, President Lincoln's advisors or the military leaders, the author personalizes the war.

The stories are interwoven with battle scenes, strategies and historical figures. On all sides, the characters' dialogue gives the reader insight into their reasons for fighting. Crisp, believable dialogue paces the story, the progress of the war, and the political climate. O'Grady reveals men's character, their fears and hatreds, and their honor and bravery through their actions and dialogue.

When white attorney Nelson Mitchell stops to talk to Uncle "Unc" Silas, a black shoe-shine man, their conversation sums up the times. Nelson tells Unc he's defending a young man. Unc replies, "Unc likes how you say that so easy and kind... You called this Liberty Town niggah a man, just like that. I ain't never heard a white man refer to a Negro as a man."

The reader meets Harriet Tubman, Clara Barton, Frederick Douglass and President Lincoln, as well as other historical figures. O'Grady's authenticity of time and place, attention to detail, knowledge of weapons and battles, legal ramifications and courtroom procedures demonstrate a well-researched project.

After weeks of digging latrines for the white soldiers, the men of the 54th anxiously await orders to fight. When they charge the island, casualties are high. The 54th breaches the wall of the fort but loses Colonel Shaw in the battle. Reuben is among the sixty black men taken prisoner by members of the Irish brigade.

From jail to prison to the courtroom, four black soldiers face a decision that not only determines their fate; it will determine the future of the other black prisoners and black men in the military.

Author Kelly O'Grady is a native of Richmond, Virginia, and a historian. This is his second book about the Civil War.

Replete with the details of everyday life, the plot flows smoothly as history, war, and personal lives intertwine. O'Grady combines well-researched facts with storytelling to produce a historical novel that entertains and educates. PAT AVERY (February 1, 2011)

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