

Ladies and gentlemen, this month, we recognize and celebrate the accomplishments, contributions and history of African Americans. Throughout our country's history, black men and women have fought to form and preserve our Union and to promote the ideals of freedom, justice and security, even when their own nation denied them these privileges.

From the Revolutionary War, and every conflict since, black Soldiers not only answered the call to the flag, but lifted the star-spangled banner to such valorous heights that have inspired a nation to persevere toward victory. Sergeant William Harvey Carney who served with the Fifty-four Massachusetts regiment during the Civil War was one of these Soldiers.

The Fifty-fourth Massachusetts was one of the first official black units in the United States Army during the Civil War. Serving as a Union Soldier was a source of pride for many free black men. Many of the men in the unit, like Carney, had escaped slavery and saw fighting in the Union army as 'parallel to serving God and their oppressed brothers.'

On July 18, 1863, the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts led the charge on Fort Wagner, South Carolina. It was the Union's second assault on the fort, a week after Union forces lost more than thirteen hundred Soldiers attacking the Confederate stronghold.

The Union Army bombarded the fort for eight hours, but it did little to weaken the fort's defenses. At dusk Carney and the six hundred men of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts spearheaded the assault. During the two hours of intense fighting that followed, the regiment's commander was killed, and two hundred seventy-two other Massachusetts Soldiers were missing, wounded, or killed in the fight, and the Confederates still held the fort. The battle would have been a complete loss had it not been for the brave actions of Carney and the men of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts.

From the beginning of the Union advance, the Fifty-fourth was hit by a barrage of gunshots and shelling from the fort. A bullet struck the Fifty-fourth's flag bearer, and as the wounded man fell, Carney threw down his gun, seized the flag and moved to the front of the ranks.

Alone, on the fort's wall, with bodies of dead and wounded comrades all around him, Carney knelt down to gather himself for action, still firmly holding the flag, while bullets and shell fragments peppered the sand around him.

Enemy fire pinned him down. When Carney rose to get a better look, he was shot twice. Despite carrying two bullets in his body, Carney kept moving. He was shot a third time, but still he refused to give up the flag.

Carney struggled on. He did not get far before yet another bullet grazed him in the head. He finally managed to make it to the Union lines. Throughout his ordeal, he held on to the colors.

Cheers greeted him when Carney finally staggered into the ranks of the Fifty-fourth. Before collapsing, he said, "Boys, I only did my duty. The old flag never touched the ground!"

Carney and the Union flag survived that night, and for his actions Carney was awarded the Medal of Honor. Although a tactical defeat, the battle of Fort Wagner saw action for black troops in the Civil War, and it spurred additional recruitment that gave the Union Army a further numerical advantage in troops over the South.

The flag he saved, as Woodrow Wilson said, “had been created by the experience of a great people. It is the embodiment, not of a sentiment, but of a history.”

That flag was not a field of one color. Though the threads were made of the same cloths, different colors intertwined to create a bold, vibrant standard that is the inspiration of our life as a nation.

Our Army is much the same. The Army finds its strength not only in its diversity but in its ability to weave together people of different faiths, cultures and races that share common threads like duty, honor, selfless service, loyalty and respect.

African-Americans make up nearly twenty-one percent of the active duty force, and there are thirty-seven general officers in today's Army, including General Lloyd J. Austin, Commander of United States Forces – Iraq, and General William E. Ward, Commander of United States Africa Command.

Our Army has come a long way in the struggle for equality, and we owe our successes today to the black service members of the past who continued to step forward to willingly serve their country though their country often wasn't willing to defend their rights.

Inequality did not stop Medal of Honor recipients like Sergeant William Carney, First Sergeant Moses Williams, Corporal Freddie Stowers, Second Lieutenant Vernon Baker, Private First Class William Henry Thompson, and Specialist Fifth Class Clarence Sasser from risking their own lives above the call of duty to distinguish themselves through conspicuous actions of valor and bravery. The stars these first-class Soldiers earned on their Medals of Honor shine brightly and add to the history of the flag they defended.

Like the flag on the shoulder of every Soldier, today's Army brings together the strengths and experience of Soldiers of many races to create an enduring testament to hope, valor, service and liberty.

The flag that Sgt. Carney saved that night in eighteen sixty-three serves to inspire a people and instill hope throughout many generations that America will live up to its promise of equality for all people.

Our flag and our Army are the strongest in the world. Our Army, like our flag, is an embodiment of its history strengthened by the valor of Sgt. Carney, the dedication of the Buffalo Soldiers, the bravery of the Triple Nickels and the fighting spirit of the Seven sixty-first Tank Battalion.

We, as an Army, can learn much from the heroic actions of Sgt. Carney. Through adversity, he held fast to the flag and kept moving forward. Even after nearly ten years of conflict, we, too, will keep moving forward to modernize our force, adapt our institutions, and maintain our combat edge. We must look to the past and apply our lessons learned to increase our strength and resilience as we move into the future.

Thank you, again, for attending this observance that celebrates those whose noble and selfless actions have inspired generations not only to serve the flag but to lift it up in its darkest hour to keep moving forward to become the strength of our nation and our Army.