

# Looking Back Fondly on *Glory*: 20 years later

By Jay Wertz

**F**ar away from the bustle of Hollywood, Andre Braugher has been keeping a low profile in New Jersey lately, but he remains a busy man. The classically trained actor vaulted to fame as Thomas Searles, a free black living in Boston, in *Glory*, the 1989 film about the renowned 54th Massachusetts Regiment. He later starred as Detective Frank Pembleton in the NBC drama *Homicide: Life on the Street*. In private life, Braugher absorbs himself in history and current events. About once a year, he and a friend embark on a long bicycle journey, sometimes traveling along historic trails such as the C&O Canal. As the 20th anniversary of *Glory* approaches, Braugher looks back at how the film influenced his own view of history as well as how it changed the public's perception of African-American participants in the Civil War.

**How did you become involved with *Glory*?**

The casting call went out in the fall of 1988. I was just out of school and was doing *Coriolanus* down at the public theater. There were several auditions, and finally on my fifth audition they brought back groups of us to play together and had us do the tent scene;

they wanted to see how we would all interact together. By that fifth audition, I knew what I wanted to do with my character. We got word right around Christmas to report to Savannah to begin work on the film.

**The camp scenes do a good job of re-creating the bond between the unit's members. How did the actors bring that to life?**

I came from a theater background and hadn't had much experience in film. By the time we got to training camp [in Savannah], I had learned some of the rudiments, and Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman really taught me everything I needed to do. I felt I was prepared to do the tent scenes, which had a kind of intimacy and were of a sufficient length that made them feel like they were part of a play. I also had rehearsed and auditioned them five times already, so I was very familiar with the material, what I thought worked. And Morgan [Rawlins], Jihmi Kennedy [Sharts], Denzel Washington [Trip]—they are really fine actors, which made my job so much easier.

**Did the screen version deviate much from the written script?**

There was some deviation, mostly revolving around



Andre Braugher, one of *Glory's* men.

making it more specific. After training in Savannah, we had boot camp for 2½ weeks with an Irish master sergeant who taught us everything we needed to know about fighting in the Civil War. We had all the garb, the boots, the wool, and we just went out there and tried our best to really get involved with the training necessary to be these soldiers. Consequently most of the changes in the script were really about specific military stuff.

The script also deviated from history in that we're playing stock characters, and stock characters are what make war films go. There's the sharp-shootin' country boy; the guy with a chip on his shoulder, who rightfully wants revenge; the old wise head; the smarty-pants from the city. The real 54th Regiment was drawn from all over the Northeast, and its men

were quite well educated, healthy and successful in what they did in civilian life—meaning you had a very well-fed, well-educated and well-trained regiment, vastly superior to the one we put on the screen.

**Any memorable moments while filming the movie?**

I remember racing down the beach. I'd been wounded by a .58-caliber bullet in my shoulder. I'm carrying a rifle, and the special effects coordinator has all these bombs set, and there's a truck with a camera. I remember Denzel saying, "OK, we're gonna run together, right?" And then he says: "These things on each side are dangerous. You don't want to trip over them and get hurt." A lot of stunt actors were injured on this film, and I didn't want to be blown up by the special effects coordinator like the next guy. It's very much like the experience you have in war: You have confidence in the person right next to you, and with that kind of confidence you can do almost anything.

I also remember when we were doing the confrontation scene at the campfire, Denzel was giving me very good notes about how to act for the camera in a close-up. It's something that I simply didn't know—advice I've



Andre Braugher's Corporal Thomas Searles, front right, and the 54th make their heroic but futile charge against Battery Wagner on July 18, 1863. Filming the scene was one of Braugher's favorite memories from *Glory*.

passed on since then.

There were a lot of guys on that film, not all of whom are still with us, that I remember well. We shared a camaraderie that I still appreciate to this day.

How did *Glory* change public awareness of the role African Americans played in the Civil War? I think it might be the first film that really talks about the participation of the African-American soldier in American history. As a kid, I learned that Crispus Attucks was the first person to die in the Revolutionary War and was considered a martyr, but I never gained a real understanding of that.

When I was a kid, the

survey courses of American history were a mile wide and an inch deep. I'm well educated, but I don't think I learned anything in-depth about the Civil War: why it was fought, how it was fought, what its points and purposes were. Broad themes were thrown up, but nothing was really taught about how the war affected its participants, how the Union was threatened with disunion, what motivated the South. I think this is true for most of the kids educated in the United States.

In retrospect, I think those broad themes were misleading. For example, the idea that it was altruistic of the North to take up arms against the South for

the benefit of enslaved Africans is a red herring.

This movie was my first experience with concrete reenactments of history where I began to feel the kind of dimension to the characters that allowed me to understand the politics, economic and social issues of that time in greater detail. Since then, I've made it a point to participate in as many historical documentaries, films or TV movies as I can that broaden our understanding of African-American contributions to history: *The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson* and documentaries on the 54th and the Tuskegee Airmen, or the documentary about the 761st Tank Battalion and

the Battle of the Bulge—these are all interesting to me because they give me a real clear understanding of African-American contributions to American history, which were pretty much relegated to “Lincoln freed the slaves,” “Crispus Attucks was the first African-American man killed in the Revolutionary War,” and Martin Luther King when I was a kid.

Movies that bring this kind of dimension to American viewers are important, because it's easy to forget the sacrifices of previous generations and to rest on our laurels. We have to realize that the best way to successfully re-create our history is to understand where it came from.

Did you feel that *Glory* was going to be something special while you were filming it?

I was a kid, so I didn't see the perspective on these things. I was trying to keep my head above water professionally and personally. I was told we were breaking ground, but when you haven't seen the ground unbroken, you don't realize the importance of what's going on. Today I do, but not back then. **CWT**

For a transcript of the complete interview go to [www.historynet.com](http://www.historynet.com).



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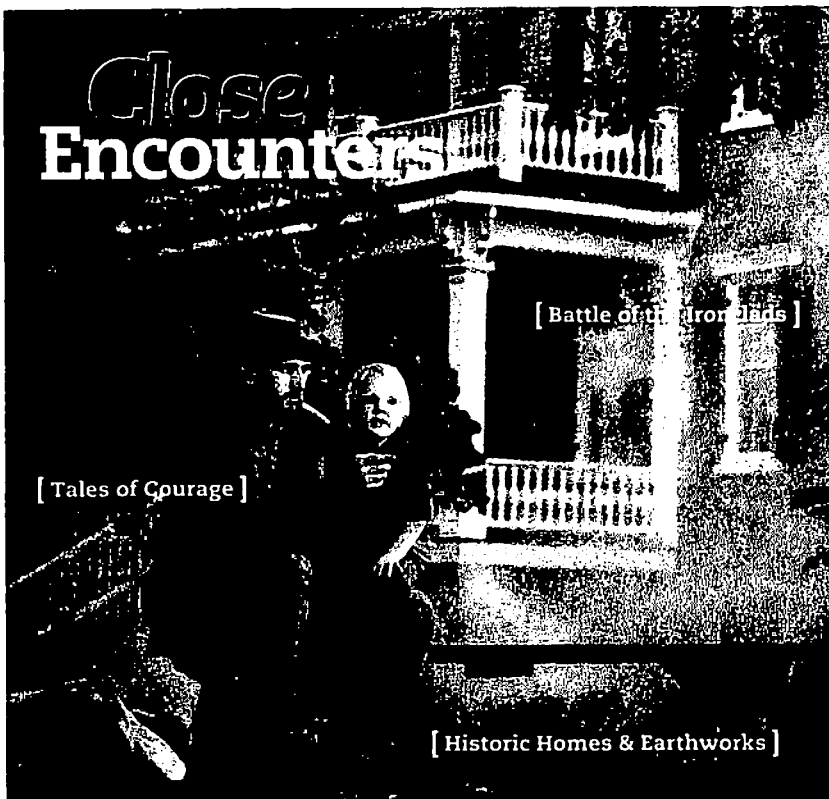
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