

Blacks in the Military

BLACK HISTORY MONTH SPECIAL SECTION, PART III

“Our Blood Runs Deep”

The Civil War

At the end of the Seminole Wars, blacks who had served as volunteers were released from the service with none of the rights of the regulars. In addition, the states that had allowed blacks to join the militia wrote exclusionary clauses into the Black Codes.

Although there were a number of individuals and abolitionist organizations that campaigned against slavery on moral grounds, there was a basic indifference throughout the North as to what the South did with its slaves. The South, of course, was attached to its way of life, and felt that its wealth could only be maintained through slavery.

The North and West had had a large influx of European immigrants who were easily assimilable into the mainstream without the inherent fear of rebellion in their ranks. Therefore, the North and West were vehemently opposed to slavery, not on moral grounds, but for the same reason that the South was for it: i.e., economics.

The southern states refused to be dictated to, and the fear that the abolitionists would have their way led to secession. The fact that the Federal government, under Lincoln, removed the entitlement that the South had had to Federal forts, post offices and land created the final catalyst for a divisive confrontation.

When the call was issued by Lincoln for 75,000 volunteers, Frederick Douglass warned that “the side which first summons the Negro to its aid will conquer”. His words were to haunt the Union.

Individual commanders remembered black participation in past wars and pressed for their mobilization. Others took it upon themselves to utilize blacks in non-combat roles, i.e., road-

building, teamster work and the like. General Benjamin Butler was the first of the union officers to employ runaways to construct fortifications and other work details.

Blacks from every station in life responded to the call for volunteers. Ploski and Kaiser state that, “Black frontiersman Jacob Dodson (offered) to raise 300 black volunteers to defend Washington, D.C.” Wilberforce students were also among the first to volunteer; however, as in the past, all were summarily refused.

Although Union forces were superior in materiel, the cavalier attitude with which they approached the war was almost their undoing. Believing passionately in its cause, and with the slaves left to “mind the store”, the South was determined to win.

With a carnival air, the North responded to the South’s aggressive seizure of 29 Federal bases. As the Army of the Potomac advanced southward in the summer of 1861, no shots were fired and the Union soldiers dreamed of being home in ninety days.

Then came the Battles of Bull Run (Manassas), Wilson’s Creek, Ball’s Bluff and the Second Bull Run; all in Virginia, and all disastrous for the Union forces.

So, too, came a rush of runaway slaves to the Union lines. General David Hunter, in command of the Army of the South, declared slaves free throughout his dominion, as did General John C. Fremont in Missouri; Lincoln countermanded these orders. Thus, the conflict between political strategy and military reality see-sawed throughout 1861 and early 1862.

William Tillman was a cook aboard the S.J. Waring when it was captured by the Confederates. One week later he killed the captain and first mate in their sleep. The second mate, who was at the wheel, was similarly dealt with. The balance of the Confederate crew surrendered and Tillman sailed for New York. There, the ship’s owners rewarded him with \$6,000.

As in every war, spies and scouts were essential. Blacks, the “invisible men”, proved their worth countless times. John Scobell and Furney Bryant each directed organizations of spies and funneled the information to the Union commanders. Harriet Tubman, about whom much has been written, is perhaps the most well-known spy. With a reward of \$12,000 offered for her capture, she gave incalculable amounts of information and aid to Union forces in the South.

It is impossible to determine the value of information from an individual spy’s accounts; but one who acquired information from “the source” was Jefferson Davis’ coachman William Jackson. Privy to all that was said in his hearing, he reported directly to Lincoln on the Confederate Army in Virginia.

Of the few blacks who were commissioned officers, three were surgeons: Martin Delaney (the first black field officer), Charles Purvis and A.T. Augusta; and two were chaplains: Henry Turner



Furney Bryant led a corps of Intelligence Agents

and Samuel Harrison. Initially, Augusta was placed in charge of a field hospital, but when white doctors refused to serve under him, he was transferred to a detail where he gave physicals to recruits.

At the war’s end, the prior practice of returning the “volunteers” to civilian life finally came to an end. In 1866, an Act of Congress formed the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments, and the 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st Infantry Regiments. In 1869, reorganization, allowing for four regiments of black regulars, found the consolidation of the 38th and 41st units into the 24th, All Negro Infantry Regiment; and the 39th and 40th units into the 25th All Negro Infantry Regiment. The 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments remained the same. All were staffed with white officers.

Blacks were appointed to the United States Military Academy; 22 between 1870 and 1889. Of the twelve that passed the entrance examination, only three finished the grueling isolation and other forms of discrimination. Henry Flipper was the first to graduate in 1877, John Alexander in 1887, and Charles Young in 1889. There was not to be another black graduate until 1936 when Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., completed his studies. Flipper was assigned to the 10th Cavalry but was court-martialed for alleged fraud in his record-keeping. Alexander died while on duty in 1894, and Young was assigned as a military instructor at Wilberforce University.

During the period between the Civil and Spanish-

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General Benjamin Butler recruiting slaves in Louisiana

Major General Benjamin Butler, now in Louisiana, actively recruited blacks in New Orleans and formed the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Native Guards (renamed the Corps D’Afrique) who were the first black combat troops. However, the distinction of being the first official black regiment goes to the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers. They were also the first regiment of blacks raised in a free state, and the first blacks in actual combat. Activated after Congress passed the enlistment Act in July, 1862, they led the way for the mobilization of black troops.

Brigadier General R. Saxon was authorized to organize 50,000 slaves for assignment to the Quartermaster Department and eventual assignment on labor details. The 54th Massachusetts Regiment, led by Col. Robert Shaw of Boston was formed (Shaw University bears his name). Among the volunteers in the regiment were Frederick Douglass’ two sons. Soon after came regiments from Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina and Tennessee. Eventually, all of the free state recruited volunteers for the United States Colored Troops (USCT). At the war’s end, the total black troops numbered more than 186,000; 93,000 from the South; 40,000 from the Border States; and 53,000 from the North. There were 161 regiments in all; 141 infantry, 7 cavalry, 12 heavy artillery, and one light artillery. They had fought in every theater of operation (over 200 battles), and were decimated by some 38,000; more than forty per cent greater than their white counterparts.

The bloodiest battles that blacks engaged in were Milliken’s Bend, Miss., Fort Hudson, Fort Wagner, S.C. (when Shaw led the 54th Mass. Reg. and died), Petersburg, Va., Fort Pillow, Tenn., Olustee, Fla., and Chapin’s Farm near Richmond, Va. Here, thirteen blacks received the Medal of Honor.

Basically, black soldiers were lauded for their performance in all engagements, and few disciplinary problems existed. It was generally due to the strong feelings that some white officers and men had against fighting with black troops.

The worst incident of savagery against black troops was at Fort Pillow, Tenn., in 1864. The Confederate leader, Gen. Nathan Forrest (who later was instrumental in forming the Ku Klux Klan), ordered the massacre of over one hundred captured black troops. The obvious hatred felt by the whites was evident in the way wounded soldiers were burned alive, impaled on trees and clubbed or stabbed to death in their hospital beds. Women and children suffered the same fate. Although the Federal government condemned the act, nothing else was done to penalize those responsible. Throughout the war, any black unfortunate enough to fall behind Confederate lines often met the same fate.

Blacks in the Navy fared better than many soldiers. When enlistments in the army were forbidden, blacks swarmed to the navy. Here, segregation was minimal, and they served in all capacities. Almost 25 per cent of all enlistees were black; and five members of the service received the Medal of Honor.

The Confederates were not above impressing blacks into service aboard their ships. One such impressment involved the slave Robert Smalls. On May 13, 1862, while his officers were ashore, Smalls piloted the warship, The Planter, to Union lines. Aboard were seven other slaves and their families. He then safely piloted The Planter and a Union

warship, The Onward, through mined waters to Charleston Harbor. Commissioned a Captain in the Union Navy, he commanded The Planter for the balance of the war. After the war, he was elected to Congress from South Carolina.



Prince an ex-slave who piloted Union Ships

Prince, another ex-slave was also well acquainted with coastal waters and piloted the Navy’s flagship, The Ottawa.



Robert Smalls stole the Planter from The Confederate navy and later served as its Union captain



Henry Flipper the first black graduate of West Point

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