

History of the NCO Brief

Buffalo Soldiers

I. INTRODUCTION:

- A. **Greetings:** Good Morning. I am CSM Daniel Jennings
- B. **Classification:** I will be presenting a 15 minute unclassified briefing on the History of the NCO, more specifically, the Buffalo Soldiers.
- C. **Purpose:** The purpose of this brief is to give you a brief overview of the history and contribution of the Buffalo Soldier as it relates to today's NCO Corps.

II. BODY:

- A. **History:** Black soldiers have been part of US Military since Continental Army days, fighting along side George Washington and Andrew Jackson. In June 1866 an act of Congress created 2 CAV Regiments (9th & 10th) and 4 INF Regiments, with all enlisted being Afro-Americans.
- B. **Structure:** CAV Regiments had a total of 12 Troops. Squadrons had a HQs Troop plus 2 line Troops. Regiments were commanded by Colonels, Squadrons commanded by Majors and Troops commanded by Captains or First Lieutenants.
- C. **Leadership Positions:** The NCO rank structure consisted of:
 - 1. Corporal: assigned to squad level
 - 2. Sergeant: assigned to platoon level
 - 3. Ordnance SGT: (8 years in army plus proficiency in weapons repair)
 - 4. First Sergeant: senior enlisted in Troops
 - 5. Quartermaster SGT: (normally soldier who was not selected as SGM and was assigned to staff positions controlling equipment and supplies.
 - 6. Sergeant Major: Regimental level
- D. **Weapons:** Assigned various arms used during the history of the 9th & 10 CAV
 - i. Sharps 1859 model which was .45-70 caliber
 - ii. Breechloader model which was .50-80 caliber
 - iii. Trapdoor Springfield which was .45-70 caliber
 - iv. Colt Model 1860 .44 caliber pistol
 - v. Saber which was normally only issued to Corporals and above

E. NCO Duties: NCO duties included:

- i. training
- ii. supervision
- iii. carrying out orders
- iv. “unofficial” punishment for lower enlisted

E. Medal of Honor awards: During 1865-1899 the Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to 417 soldiers who served on the frontier fighting the American Indians.

- i. 18 were awarded to enlisted soldiers who were Afro-American
- ii. 11 presented to soldiers of the 9th CAV and 1 to a soldier of the 10th CAV

III. Summary: I have covered the history of the Buffalo soldiers to include the composition of their units, the type weapons issued, the NCO duties and specific awards. I have also covered the tremendous sacrifice and contribution these soldiers have made to today’s NCO Corps. What are your questions for me concerning this brief?

III. Concluding Statement: This brief regarding the Buffalo Soldiers will give you some insight into the structure of the CAV units these soldiers were part of and the role they played in making the NCO Corps what it is today

THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS

African American soldiers have been apart of the Military as early as the Continental Army. They fought with General George Washington's Continental Army during the War of Independence, in addition to serving with General Andrew Jackson in 1815 at New Orleans. In 1861 Col Thomas Wentworth Higginson assumed command of the 1st Infantry Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers, which was the first African American regiment in the service of the United States. ¹

Congress passed legislation in June 1866 to establish two Cavalry regiments the 9th and 10th, along with four Infantry regiments, the 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st to be made up of African American soldiers. In 1869, the four infantry regiments were consolidated into two regiments which consisted of the 24th and 25th Infantry. The new regiments as well as the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments were transferred to the western states and territories for service on the American frontier. During this time troops were paid thirteen dollars per month, to include clothing, room and board. Their enlistment period was a five year term. ²

In 1866 the US Army Cavalry organizations consisted of 10 Cavalry Regiments. These Regiments were composed of twelve companies each. These companies were lettered in alphabetical order with the letter "J" omitted. Regimental Commanders were the rank of Colonel and each regimental commander had a LTC as his second in command or Dupty Commander as we call them today. Although Colonels commanded on paper many regiments never saw their commanding officers in the field. Cavalry companies were designated as troops. These troops were normally composed of platoons (about 50 strong) commanded by a Captain or sometimes a senior First Lieutenant.

Cavalry squadrons consisted of a headquarters troop and two other troops normally commanded by a Major. The NCO rank structure was composed of Corporal, Sergeant, Ordnance Sergeant (Ordnance sergeant had to have eight years in the army and show proficiency in repairing various types of weapons), First Sergeant, Quartermaster Sergeant (Quartermaster Sergeants were those NCOs not selected for Sergeant Major and were assigned to a staff job maintaining equipment and supplies), and Sergeant Major. The rank of Sergeants Major was not normally assigned below the level of squadron.

Corporals and Sergeants were normally assigned as squad leaders or more commonly known as section leaders. Sergeants were normally assigned to a platoon, which consisted of two to four sections which was commanded by a first or second lieutenant. As with today, the First Sergeant was the senior enlisted soldier in a troop consisting of two to three platoons, which was commanded by a Captain or senior First Lieutenant. The Regiment was assigned a Sergeant Major, which consisted of twelve troops and was commanded by a senior Major or Lieutenant Colonel. In many instances a portion of the regiment would man a post away from the main body and act as a separate unit for all intents and purposes.

During the period of 1866 to 1883 the 9th and 10th Cavalry units were issued and carried several different types and versions of firearms and weapons. Among those weapons was the cavalry saber. Despite the Hollywood portrayal normally only corporals and above were assigned the saber. The initial issues of this weapon were not sharpened and were only intended to be used during the mounted charge as a weapon to impale and/or dislodge his opponent from his mount. During the civil war many units took to sharpening the cutting edge of these sabers using them as a slashing weapon during

mounted and dismounted battles. The first rifles mentioned that were assigned to the 9th and 10th Cavalry units was the Sharps Carbine 1859 model rifle. This rifle was followed by a breechloader using the .50-80 cartridge between 1866 and 1873. In 1873 the trapdoor Springfield was adopted using the .45-70 cartridge. ³ Most of the weapons assigned to the 9th and 10th Cavalry were of the carbine version to facilitate ease of use for a horse-mounted trooper. In addition to the rifle each cavalry trooper was issued the Colt Army Model 1861 pistol. ⁴

The soldiers, who held the rank of Corporal thru Sergeant Major would lead, supervise, train and insured the men of their respective sections carried out the orders of those officers appointed over them. As in the present day military these soldiers did not warrant a salute or coming to attention in their presence. Disobeying one of these leaders was entirely different than disobeying an officer. Disobeying an NCO could lead to official troop punishment of cleaning out the horse barracks, extra guard duty or confinement in the post stockade. However most of these cases resulted in a beating doled out by their sergeant or a group of sergeants. Most punishment of this nature was “unofficial” and normally took care of the discipline problem. These Corporals and Sergeants were also charged with the responsibility of teaching weapons familiarization and marksmanship to their troopers. Additionally these leaders were responsible for insuring their troopers exhibited good moral military bearing and discipline.

The troopers of the 9th and 10th Cavalry spent much of their time scouting and patrolling the open range, which included large areas of what can only be described as challenging terrain. Other duties assigned to these soldiers were providing security for settlers, escorting stagecoaches, building roads and stringing telegraph wire for new

settlements and camps. These black soldiers were nicknamed Buffalo soldiers by the Indians they fought. Some say the name was given due to the resemblance of the soldiers hair to that of the buffalo the Indians hunted, with others believing the name was given by the Indians out of respect for the bravery and valor these soldiers exhibited during battles. These soldiers also spent endless hours, as all soldiers do, on the necessary military tasks of mounted and dismounted drills, inspections, parades and the care and maintenance of their mounts and associated equipment. The 9th and 10th Cavalry fought in more than one hundred twenty-five engagements in campaigns against American Indians, including the Cheyenne, Apache, Kiowa, Ute, Comanche and Sioux.

A large number of the enlisted soldiers that comprised the 9th and 10th Cavalry were born into slavery. Some of these enlisted members were Seminole Negroes, whose ancestors had fled slavery and joined the Seminole Indian tribes in Florida. Taking part in battles involving Native Americans created feelings of moral dilemma for many of these soldiers. Several of these soldiers had enlisted into the Union Army during the Civil war and fought by the side of their white counterparts until the end of that war. Unable to find work and with no homes to return to many, after their discharge from the army, took necessary steps to re-enlist into the newly formed all black units.⁵

As with all units the all black units were formed following the current day Table of Organizations. These units were formed with approximately 1000 soldiers. In all instances all were commanded by white officers. Some of the white officers initially slated for command of these units refused the assignment and were only allowed to serve at lower ranks in the next white unit they were assigned. The enlisted leadership of these units were primarily all black soldiers. When the recruiting efforts for these units begin,

those responsible for the recruitment of soldiers to fill the units had little regard as to the moral character and quality of the soldiers they signed on.

As the units were being formed and the immediate need for NCO leadership became apparent recruits with previous military experience were elevated to the rank of Corporal or Sergeant. These men were charged with the responsibility of teaching horsemanship to those non-riders who had joined and to teach those soldiers the mounted drills required to be an effective fighting force.

Between the years of 1865 and 1899, the Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to 417 men who served on the frontier Indian wars. Eighteen of these men were enlisted men of African American descent. Eleven were presented to enlisted men of the 9th Cavalry and one to a member of the 10th Cavalry. In each case the citation read “for courage under fire” or “bravery”.⁶

Much has been written concerning the 9th and 10th Cavalry units, most of it dealt with the officers that were assigned to command these units. This is true even today as most news stories are very quick to point out who the Commanding General of this Task Force or that command is, never much more than a small blurb in passing concerning the NCOs who carry out the orders of these officers. Those soldiers who quietly pass into history with little recognition for turning a group of mostly untrained men into a cohesive fighting force aren't normally remembered for their tremendous contributions associated with the never ending quest for democracy and freedom.

It was Rudyard Kipling who coined the phrase that the NCO was the backbone of the Army, a statement that is today part of the NCO creed. The Sergeants of the Buffalo soldiers certainly did their part in a harsh environment and difficult times, when

most odds were against their success, in insuring this phrase was just as true during that time as it is today. I believe the people of this nation are only today realizing what a great sacrifice, not only by NCOs, but all soldiers have made to insure that citizens of this country and other countries have made over the years to attain and continue the great American tradition of freedom for all.

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