

Introduction

Contributions made by Black NCOs from the American Revolution to the Civil War.

The First Rhode Island regiment

The First Rhode Island regiment was the first all-Black unit in America. The regiment assembled into service in July of that year they numbered 197 Black enlisted men commanded by white officers. The regiment saw further service, including Yorktown. At Yorktown, on the night of October 14, 1781, they took part in the assault and capture of Redoubt 10. The First Rhode Island was disbanded in 1783 when Congress decided to consolidate all regiments with less than 500 men and the state refused to spend additional recruiting money. Unfortunately, unlike their white counterparts, these Black American soldiers did not receive any compensation for their service after the war. Some Americans realized the irony of enslaved Blacks fighting under the banner of the Declaration of Independence. As Henry Laurens of South Carolina stated, "I am not one of those who dare trust in Providence for defense and security of their own liberty while they enslave and wish to continue in slavery thousands who are as well entitled to freedom as themselves."

In 1778, the Black elite First Rhode Island defeated three assaults by British troops at the battle of Rhode Island Newport.

War of 1812

The majority of the Blacks who participated on either side during the War of 1812 did so as sailors rather than soldiers. Both the British and American armies had regulations that barred Blacks from service.

These Blacks were promised their freedom in return for joining British naval campaigns. It is known that more than 200 such Black marines participated in the battles in Bladensburg, Washington, and Baltimore. Unfortunately, the British were as bad as the white American administration at keeping promises. Many of the men were sold back into slavery in the West Indies after the war. However, the British did relocate a significant number of Black Americans and their families to Canada where slavery had been abolished under British law. Nova Scotia in particular would become the new home for a large number of the Blacks.

Their participation in many lake battles, such as the one on Lake Erie in 1813, has been well documented. In addition, many Black seamen escaped the harsh conditions of the British navy, opting instead to fight with the growing number of Blacks in the U.S. Navy.

Many Blacks in the U.S. also participated in the war effort by helping fortifying cities that were deemed possible targets for British invasion. The most notable incident of such an event occurred after the British occupation of Washington which prompted more than 2500 free Blacks to work for days in order to fortify the city of Philadelphia.

Along with Louisiana's two regiments of "Free Men of Color", General Andrew Jackson employed a number of Black men from the South's extensive slave population in repulsing the British invasion in late 1814. When he declared a state of martial law in New Orleans in mid-

December 1814, Jackson “invited” a number of the local plantation owners to volunteer their slaves to build defenses for the city. As many as 900 Blacks dug a large trench and constructed a massive earthen barricade that became the backbone of Andrew Jackson’s defense at the Rodriguez Canal. It appears that in the weeks leading up to his arrival Jackson was in such need of men, that he appealed to slaves in the neighboring states to enlist in return for their freedom. James Roberts responded to Andrew Jackson’s call for volunteers in the fall of 1814. He was a slave who soon found himself enlisted in the Tennessee militia. Roberts fought in New Orleans and claimed that as many as 50 Blacks were killed during the battle, a fact that was omitted from Jackson’s official report. In the end, Jackson did not grant the men the freedom he had promised. Of this betrayal Roberts wrote, “Such monstrous deception and villainy could not, of course, be allowed to disgrace the pages of history, and blacken the character of a man who wanted the applause and approbation of his country.

The Buffalo Soldiers

The 9th and 10th Cavalries' service in subduing Mexican revolutionaries, hostile Native Americans, outlaws, comancheros, and rustlers was as invaluable as it was unrecognized. It was also accomplished over some of the most rugged and inhospitable country in North America. A list of their adversaries - Geronimo, Sitting Bull, Victorio, Lone Wolf, Billy the Kid, and Poncho Villa - reads like a "Who's Who" of the American West.

Without the protection provided by the 9th and 10th Cavalries, crews building the ever expanding railroads were at the mercy of outlaws and hostile Indians. The Buffalo Soldiers consistently received some of the worst assignments the Army had to offer. They also faced fierce prejudice for both the colors of their Union uniforms well as the color of their skin by

many of the citizens of the post-war frontier towns. Despite this, the troopers of the 9th and 10th Cavalries developed into two of the most distinguished fighting units in the Army.

Daily life for the troopers of the 9th and 10th Cavalries was harsh, but for the most part, it was similar to that of their White counterparts. During the 1860s and 70s, the frontier forts resembled little more than rundown villages, and the enlisted men's barracks were often poorly ventilated, vermin infested hovels. The only bathing facilities usually consisted of the local creek. As a result, diseases such as dysentery, diarrhea, bronchitis, and tuberculosis were a common problems. Rations throughout the Indian campaigns consisted mainly of beef, bacon, potatoes, beans, fresh vegetables from the post garden, and sometimes fruit and jam. All work weeks were seven days, with the exception of the fourth of July and Christmas. Monthly pay for a private was a meager \$13 (reduced from \$16 in 1871).

The most serious problem faced by the Army during the Indian War period was desertion. In 1868, the desertion rate for enlisted personnel was approximately 25 percent. Desertions among White regiments were roughly three times greater than those among Black units. In addition, the Black cavalry and infantry regiments had lower rates of alcoholism than their White counterparts, While in the field, both the troops and their horses faced not only hostile Indians and outlaws, but also extended patrols of up to six months and covering more than 1,000 miles. Adding to their ordeal was the scarcity of water and the extremes of weather common to the Southwest.

On August 3, 1866, General Phillip Sheridan, commander of the Military Division of the Gulf, was authorized to raise one regiment of "colored" cavalry that was to be designated the 9th Regiment. A recruiting office was established in New Orleans, Louisiana and, a second office

was opened in Louisville, Kentucky. Of the original recruits, the majority came from these two states and was veterans of the Civil War. They incurred an enlistment of five years, with recruits receiving thirteen dollars a month, plus room, board, and clothing.

Colonel (COL) Edward Hatch was selected to command the new regiment. Hatch, who was a brevet Major General by the close of the Civil War, was an able and ambitious officer. He served admirably in this position until his death in 1889.

The 9th Cavalry received orders for Texas in June of 1867. Their assignment was to protect stage and mail routes, building and maintaining forts, and establishing law and order in a vast area full of outlaws, Mexican revolutionaries, and raiding Comanches, Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Apaches. To compound their problems, many Texans felt subjected to a particularly harsh form of post-war reconstruction. Most saw the assignment of the Black troops as a deliberate attempt by the Union to humiliate them. As such, the relationship between the troops and locals was often at or near the boiling point. Despite prejudice and the almost impossible task of maintaining some semblance of order from the Staked Plains to El Paso to Brownsville, the 9th established themselves as one of the most effective fighting forces in the Army.

The 9th was transferred to the District of New Mexico during the winter and spring of 1875 and 76. Over the next six years they were thrust into what had been a 300-year struggle to subdue the fiercely independent Apaches. In 1874 - sparked by pressure from greedy contractors supplying the reservations, and by cattlemen, lumber men, and settlers hungry for Apache land - Washington approved a policy of concentrating the Apaches on a select few reservation.

In 1891, the 9th was called on to assist in subduing the Sioux in what became known as the Ghost Dance Campaign. Once rulers of the northern plains, the Sioux were desolate and poverty stricken on their North and South Dakota reservations. In 1889 word spread of a messiah - a Paiute named Wovoka - who had seen through a vision that the ghosts of Plains Indians would return, bringing with them the buffalo herds slaughtered by the whites. By the end of November, half of the U.S. Army was concentrated on or near the reservations. The Army's show of force was intended to scare the Sioux into submission. However, many Indians, fearing a massacre, bolted from the reservations and fled into the Badlands. The subsequent actions of the Army to pacify and return the Sioux to their reservations culminated in the massacre of 146 men, women, and children at Wounded Knee on December 29th. The 9th played no role in the slaughter. This was to be their last campaign on the frontier.

The 10th Cavalry was formed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in 1866. The regiment's commander and Civil War hero Benjamin, Grierson, set very high standards of recruitment. As a result, recruitment and organization of the unit required slightly over one year. By the end of July 1867, eight companies of enlisted men, recruited from the Departments of Missouri, Arkansas, and the Platte.

Life at Leavenworth was not pleasant for the 10th. The Fort's commander, who was admittedly opposed to Blacks serving in the regular army, made life as difficult as he could on the new troops. Grierson sought to have his regiment transferred, and subsequently received orders moving the regiment to Fort Riley, Kansas later that summer. Within two months of the transfer, the final four companies were in place.

The 10th Cavalry played an important role in the 1879-80 campaign against Chief Victorio and his renegade band of Apaches. Victorio and his followers escaped from their New Mexico reservation and wreaked havoc throughout the southwest on their way to Mexico. COL Grierson and the 10th attempted to prevent Victorio's return to the U.S., and particularly his reaching New Mexico where he could cause additional problems with the Apaches still on the reservations. Grierson, realizing the importance of water in the harsh region, decided the best way to intercept Victorio was to take control of potential water holes along his route.

The campaign called for the biggest military concentration ever assembled in the Trans-Pecos area. Six troops of the 10th Cavalry patrolled the area from the Van Horn Mountains west to the Quitman Mountains, and north to the Sierra Diablo and Delaware Mountains. Encounters with the Indians usually resulted in skirmishes, however the 10th engaged in major confrontations at Tinaja de las Palmas (a water hole south of Sierra Blanca) and at Rattlesnake Springs (north of Van Horn). These two engagements halted Victorio and forced him to retreat to Mexico. Although Victorio and his band avoided capture, the campaign conducted by the 10th was successful in preventing them from reaching New Mexico. The 10th's efforts at containment exhausted the Apaches. Soon after they crossed the border, Victorio and many of his warriors were killed by Mexican troops on October 14, 1880.

Conclusion

After twenty years of service in some of the most undesirable posts in the southwest the Black Regiments, served at various posts in the southwest.

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