

Buffalo Soldiers

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Presidio of San Francisco
Golden Gate National Recreation Area



Painting courtesy Arthur Shilstone

Origins of the Buffalo Soldiers

In 1866, Congress established six all-Black regiments, each of about 1000 soldiers, to help rebuild the country after the Civil War and to patrol the remote western frontier. These regiments were the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 38th, 39th, 40th, and 41st Infantry. The four infantry regiments reorganized to form the 24th and 25th Infantry in 1869. Although the pay was low for the time, only \$13 a month, many African Americans enlisted because they could make more in the military than elsewhere, and it offered more dignity than typically could be attained in civilian life.

How the Buffalo Soldiers Got Their Name

According to legend, Native Americans called the Black cavalry troops “buffalo soldiers” because of their dark curly hair, which resembled a buffalo’s coat. Aware of the buffalo’s

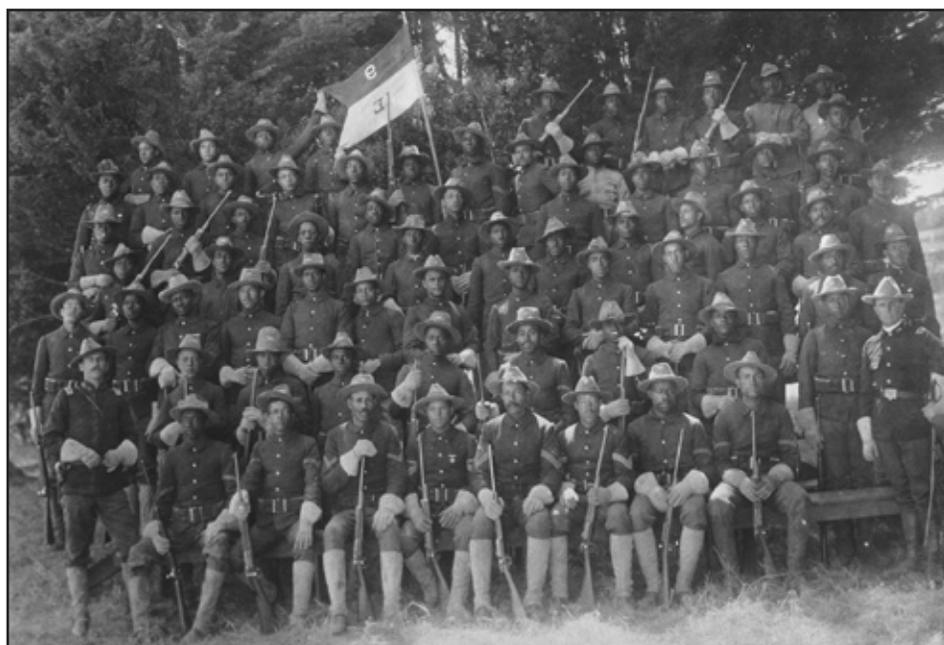
fierce bravery and fighting spirit, the African American troops accepted the name with pride and honor.

On the “Western Frontier”

Buffalo Soldiers played an important role in protecting settlers, building forts and roads, and mapping the wilderness as the U.S. settled and developed the West. Although the Buffalo Soldiers are best known for engaging conflicts with the region’s native people, they also fought Mexican and Anglo bandits, escorted stage coaches and paymasters, and on one occasion, stood between Indian peoples and Texas militia.

By the 1890s, Black soldiers comprised 20 percent of America’s frontier cavalry and performed exemplary service within a military that remained segregated until President Harry S. Truman finally ordered it integrated in 1948. By the end of the Indian Wars, 18 Medals of Honor and 12 Certificates of Merit were awarded to Buffalo Soldiers for their valor, endurance, and courage. African American units had the lowest desertion rate in the Army.

Remember the Maine!



Troop E, 9th Cavalry at the Presidio before embarking for the Philippines, 1899.
U.S. Army Military History Institute

By the end of the 19th century, the Spanish empire was crumbling as two of its island colonies, Cuba and the Philippines, struggled for independence. After the U.S. battleship Maine mysteriously exploded in Cuba’s Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898, the U.S. President and Congress yielded to popular sentiment and declared war on Spain. Military campaigns soon began on both islands.

Seasoned troops of the 9th Cavalry were among the first to arrive in Cuba, where they and the 10th Cavalry fought beside Theodore Roosevelt’s volunteer “Rough Riders,” helping them to storm San Juan Hill. During the seven-month war, five Buffalo Soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor and 28 received Certificates of Merit. While these men fought colonialism overseas, their families at home suffered from racial discrimination, lynchings, and riots.



Troop C, 9th Cavalry at Camp Lawton, Seattle, 1900, preparing to embark to the Boxer Rebellion in China. The conflict in China was resolved before the company arrived, and Troop C was then diverted to the Philippine War.

T. Preiser, Special Collections, Suzzallo Library, University of Washington.

War in the Philippines

After the Philippines became a U.S. possession, following the American defeat of Spain in 1898, Filipino nationalists began a campaign for independence against their former allies. Buffalo Soldiers were now called to action against Filipino forces during the bloody three-year war that ensued. In 1899, companies from all four African

American regiments reported to the Presidio of San Francisco to embark for the Philippines. While in the Philippines Black troopers trekked over mountains and through jungles to track and fight elusive nationalists, to guard communication lines and to escort supply trains.

9th Cavalry at the Presidio

Buffalo Soldiers began returning from the Philippines in 1902, passing through the Presidio on their way to new assignments. Four troops of the 9th Cavalry remained at the Presidio until 1904; the first African American units posted on regular garrison

duty at the post. During this period, 9th Cavalry soldiers served as presidential Escort of Honor for Theodore Roosevelt when he visited San Francisco in 1903. This was the first time African American troops were given this honorable role.

Patrolling the National Parks



Members of the 24th Infantry on mounted patrol, Yosemite National Park, 1899.

NPS, Yosemite Research Library

The first national parks were patrolled by Army cavalry troops before there was a National Park Service. In May 1903, Captain Charles Young led 9th Cavalry troops from the Presidio to Yosemite, Sequoia, and General Grant (Kings Can-yon) national parks. These were the first Black units to patrol the parks for an entire season, and the first time a Black officer served as acting superintendent of a national park. Under Young's command, troops at Sequoia accomplished more work than in the last three years combined, extending roads into the Great Forest to open the area to visitors for the first time.

Legacy at the Presidio

Today, overlooking the Golden Gate—shaded by Cypress and washed by fog—are the headstones of 450 Black soldiers of the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry. Among them is William Thompkins, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for bravery and valor in the Spanish American War. These headstones are quiet reminders of the sacrifice and lasting contributions made by African Americans, both to the Presidio and to American History.



San Francisco National Cemetery.



NPS, Sequoia National Park Archives

Charles Young (1868–1922) was the third African American to graduate from West Point. During his long and prestigious career, he commanded 9th and 10th Cavalry companies and served as a military attaché.

Contesting his medical retirement at the onset of World War I, Young proved his fitness by riding his horse 500 miles from his home in Ohio to Washington, D.C. As a result, he was reinstated, promoted to full Colonel, and continued as military attaché to Liberia.