



The Slave Becomes a Man: United States Colored Troops in the American Civil War



Blacks Enter the War

By April 1862, as battle raged around Shiloh Meeting House, thousands of black men had attempted to enlist in the Union army, only to be turned away by the Lincoln administration. The political realities of widespread prejudice, plus concern that the remaining slave holding border states, such as Kentucky, might secede if blacks were accepted into the army, forced Lincoln to decline black enlistments. Most Americans felt that the conflict should not be an abolitionist war and that a white led slave revolt had no place in it.

In reality, hundreds of blacks were already in uniform. Some served as seamen aboard Union warships; a small number served as experimental Union soldiers in Kansas, Louisiana, and on the Carolina coast; other free blacks and slaves served in the Southern armies. But for the United States government to enlist tens-of-thousands of black men to use as land troops, to openly bear arms and fight against Southern whites, was considered dangerous and distasteful to white pride.

In fall of 1862, the problems of sustaining

public support for a prolonged war against a determined Confederacy forced Union war objectives to evolve from simple preservation of the Union to outright abolition of slavery. President Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, on January 1, 1863, forced the constitutional recognition of a black man's right to fight and contribute to the war effort. It was now possible for free blacks and contraband slaves to be legally recruited for military service, in both the North and the Union occupied areas of the Confederacy.

"...to arm the negros would turn 50,000 bayonets against us that were for us."

-A. Lincoln 1862

"...ordinarily to arm Negroes would be shocking to our sense of humanity for the reason that from history of slave insurrections we associate Negro warfare with the burning of houses and all scenes of desolation attendant upon savage warfare."

-Senator John Sherman of Ohio

Blacks Fight the War

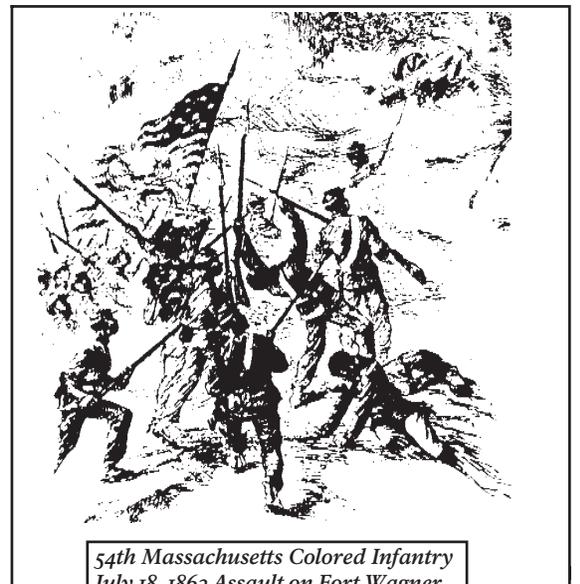
Serving in segregated units as United States Colored Troops, and commanded by white officers, black soldiers made a significant contribution to the overall strength of the Union armies. Over 180,000 blacks served in the National Army along with 29,000 in the U.S. Navy. Almost half the black men enlisted were ex-slaves from the south, which greatly assisted in depleting the Confederacy's labor force. By war's end, black soldiers made up 12 percent of the Union land forces. This number almost equaled the total number of effective Confederate soldiers still present for duty in April 1865.

Black Union regiments fought in 449 engagements and in every theatre of the war. A full third (68,178) died in service (2,751 killed in action and 65,427 succumbed to wounds or

"[The] charge was resisted by the Negro portion of the enemy's forces with considerable obstinacy... there were several instances... where the enemy crossed bayonets with us or were shot down at the muzzle of the musket."

*-Gen. H. E. McCulloch, C.S.A.
June 8, 1863 concerning
action at Milliken's Bend, LA*

diseases). The battlefields of Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend, Fort Wagner, Olustee, the Wilderness, Petersburg, and Nashville were all major actions where black troops contributed to final Union victory with steady devotion and valor. For their significant services in these battles, twenty-one black soldiers were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.



*54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry
July 18, 1863 Assault on Fort Wagner
Morris Island, South Carolina*

Blacks as Soldiers

"...they will be at the mercy of any officer, from Colonel up, who chooses to vent his spite or air his prejudice on them."

*-Maj. G.L. Sterns
U.S.A., 1864*

"...to look at them as a unit, as a whole, as being all alike--the inferior specimens are selected as examples of all--How would the white race stand such a test?"

*-Maj. Gen. Daniel
Ullmann, U.S.A., 1868*

Like all soldiers, blacks often found that their military duties involved non-life threatening activities. They routinely guarded prisoners, prepared fortifications, escorted supply trains, drilled, labored, and like their white counterparts, generally did their best to fight the boredom which plagues a soldier's life. Unfortunately, due to racial prejudice within the officer corps of the U.S. Army, many of the black units were utilized more for hard labor than for actual combat. Routine and dirty labor, however, was typical of the wartime service required of all who fought in the Civil War, white or black, Union or Confederate.

Noticable differences existed in the black soldier's war experiences, when compared to a white soldier's. Black men responded to their nation's call at a time when war weariness and anti-black feelings plagued the Union. Blacks faced instances of illegal impressment into military service, endured discrimination in pay and duties, and encountered racial prejudice in their value as soldiers and men. Everyday they wore the blue uniform, blacks faced the

"Had the negro played a merely passive role as spectator during the Civil War, had he served only in his traditional menial capacity as cook and teamster and laborer, that national recognition of him as man and as citizen must have been postponed indefinitely. The Southern position that slaves could not bear arms was essentially correct: a slave was not a man. The war ended slavery. The Negro soldier proved that the slave could become a man."

-Dr. Dudley Taylor Cornish, 1956

threat of immediate death, or a return to slavery, should they be captured by southern whites. Until 1865 the Confederacy did not recognize Union black soldiers as legitimate prisoners of war. By Southern law, captured black troops and their white officers could be executed for conducting servile insurrection.

Despite the persistence of discrimination in the Federal army, black soldiers displayed an above average conviction of personal commitment to their military service. Only 14,887 went "over the hill", just 7 percent of the total Union desertions for the entire war. Instead of running, blacks retained a deep collective sense of duty to their people and country. As loyal and efficient soldiers they worked and fought very hard for final Union victory.



*Sergt. Major Christian A.
Fleetwood, 4th USCT
Congressional Medal of
Honor, Battle of Chaffin's
Farm, VA, Sept. 29-30, 1864.*

Blacks as Humans

Blacks were not perfect soldiers, but neither were they bad troops. Their on and off battlefield behavior equaled that of white soldiers on both sides. The blacks exhibited great respect for the orders of superiors and displayed high standards of discipline governing the regimented army life. But blacks also exhibited some basic common soldier weaknesses: the tendency to lie, steal, feign illness, and quarrel. They were, after all, human. As victims of constant discriminatory treatment throughout the war, however, the black soldier's performance in the Union army deserves commendation.

In their unwavering military service during a bitter civil war, black soldiers began to subdue their worst enemy--white prejudice. Fighting and dying as soldiers in the United States Army, black men proved their man-

hood and value as human beings. This war service set in motion their claim for equality in treatment and opportunity as citizens of this nation. Justly, they should not have had to prove anything, but that is the history of mankind and social prejudice.

"Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States."

--Frederick Douglass, 1863

"...the war, with all its bloodshed and sorrow, was an emancipating and uplifting national experience. Its most striking achievement was not its battle conquests on sea and land, but in the momentum it gave to the ideals of the freedom and dignity of man. It made easier every subsequent battle for human rights."

-Dr. Benjamin Quarles, 1953



*Major Martin R. Delany
104th United States Colored Troops
The first black soldier to achieve
high rank in the U.S. Army.*

"I can see again the scarlett flow of blood as it rolled over the black limbs beneath my hands, and the great heave of the human heart before it grew still."

-Clara Barton on the carnage of the 54th Mass. Infantry at Ft. Wagner, SC