A History of the 110th and 111th Regiments United States Colored Troops (USCT)

Although African-American men began enlisting in the Union Army early in the Civil War, most efforts to attract black recruits in Middle Tennessee were frustrated by either the political power of Unionist slaveholders or the labor policies of the Federal army until the latter months of 1863. When two regiments of black troops were initially organized at Pulaski, Tennessee between late November 1863 and the middle of January 1864, they were known as the 2nd and 3rd Alabama Infantry Volunteers (African Descent). Following an army-wide reorganization of the "colored" troops, the units' names were changed to the 110th and 111th Regiments, respectively, United States Colored Troops (USCT) on June 25, 1864.

Before joining the Federal army, most of the men that mustered-in at Pulaski had been enslaved field hands in northern Alabama and Mississippi. After leaving their plantations one way or another, they made their way to the contraband camps behind the Union lines and sought work in any capacity. Many also brought their wives and families with them to the encampments for protection and other benefits. A large number of the USCT enlistees were recruited in these camps; in fact, the first companies created in the black Tennessee regiments formerly had served in labor battalions.

After signing up for three years, the volunteers received uniforms, rations, and a regular paycheck. Arming former slaves to fight white men was not viewed favorably by all Federal army officers, however, and some commanding generals refused to include black regiments in their combat armies, preferring to utilize these men as garrison troops, wagon train guards, bridge builders, and other low-prestige jobs. Nevertheless, the vast majority of these new enlistees proved themselves to be loyal and steadfast soldiers.

After intense training at Pulaski for several months, the companies of the 110th Regiment received their first assignments and marched out of their bivouac in April 1864. Throughout that summer and fall three companies (A, B, and C) served in the Pioneer Corps and company G and parts of companies D and E served as teamsters or quartermasters during Major General William T. Sherman's relentless Atlanta campaign. The rest of the regiment were armed and posted for duty along the tracks of the Nashville & Decatur Railroad at the fort and blockhouses in and around Athens, Alabama, as well as other nearby places.

The regularity of garrison life was shattered in late September when a large body of Confederate cavalry under Major General Nathan B. Forrest attacked numerous detached Federal positions guarding the railroads in northern Alabama and southern Middle Tennessee. The Confederate troopers had left their base at Tupelo, Mississippi that autumn, hoping to disrupt the extended Union lines of supply and communication north of the Tennessee River. Dispatching additional men to protect these railroads would weaken Sherman's army and thereby reduce the pressure on Georgia and South Carolina.

The Federal garrison at Athens was Forrest's first target. After suffering almost 100 casualties from several unsuccessful charges, he used a combination of guile, deception, and psychology to bluff the vacillating Union commander out of a nearly impregnable position. Despite the vociferous protests of most of the officers and soldiers whose spirits remained high, their irresolute leader, Colonel Wallace Campbell, surrendered the fort and all its defenders on September 24. The white officers were taken to Enterprise, Mississippi, and held until they were paroled and then later exchanged.

After thoroughly searching the African-American prisoners-of-war and confiscating their belongings, the victorious southerners marched the 110th Regiment's enlisted men to Mobile and made them work on the city's earthen fortifications until it surrendered to Union forces in April 1865. These captured Federal soldiers took the place of local slaves who had been impressed earlier to perform this exhausting work. The hostile guards whipped and abused the military prisoners whenever they lagged or faltered, while only providing minimal fare for sustenance. Most of these captives were never heard from again.

Although detachments of the regiment were on duty as guards and riflemen during the Battle of Nashville in December and a portion of Company E saw action near Scottsboro, Alabama in January 1865, the unfortunate circumstances that befell many of the men and the scattered locations of the remaining companies prevented the 110th from having an official reorganization. The parts of the regiment that had gone with Sherman's army returned by train to Gallatin and guarded the railroad there until the end of the war. The unit's remaining soldiers were mustered out of Federal service on February 6, 1866.

In similar fashion, the 111th Regiment also saw severe action in September 1864. All the men from Company G and others surrendered with their comrades from the 110th at Athens on the 25th. The next day, after being surrounded at the regimental headquarters at Sulphur Trestle, Alabama, the Union forces there capitulated following a violent struggle during which their gallant colonel, William H. Lathrop, was killed and their ammunition was virtually exhausted. After the surrender, hundreds of black enlisted personnel were led away into captivity. Forrest's small army suffered over 100 irreplaceable casualties.

A hundred or so additional USCT infantrymen, mostly from Company K who were posted nearby at Low Trestle and the supporting blockhouses, also yielded to superior numbers. The remaining soldiers of the engaged units slowly fell back to the fortifications at Pulaski, constantly skirmishing with the enemy and taking fire at every turn. By then Forrest's cavalrymen had destroyed every bridge and trestle along a 30 mile stretch of the railroad and also had torn up several miles of track.

On September 27, after breaking up a contraband camp full of more than 2000 women and children on Brown's plantation, the Confederate forces headed toward the defenses at Pulaski and attempted to overrun the stronghold there in an all day general engagement. The opposing Federals contested every inch of ground along the pikes leading to the town and inflicted more than 200 casualties on the grey-clad attackers before retreating to the safety of the fortifications.

Crack Union riflemen posted on College Hill, at the courthouse, and other strategic points faced down the enemy and kept them at bay. The besieged black infantrymen swore to their officers that they would never yield their position and made good on that promise with a minimal loss of life to themselves. According to a Union colonel's post-war reminiscences, Forrest "did not ask about the color of the skin, but after testing our line, and finding it unyielding, turned to the east, and struck toward Murfreesboro."

The Confederate raiders chose to bypass the stubborn defenders and moved on the next day, creating more havoc along the vulnerable railroads as far as Fayetteville and Spring Hill. It would take the USCT carpenters and laborers almost six weeks to repair the damage and reopen the strategic line between southern Tennessee and northern Alabama, mainly on account of the destruction of the Elk River bridge and the huge 90 foot tall, 1100 foot long wooden trestle, the largest in the vicinity.

For most of the next two months Federal recruiters sought additional men from the environs of Pulaski and the surrounding area to take the places of the captured soldiers. Some of these replacements included men from other companies in the regiment who had either avoided capture or had escaped somehow. One of these fortunate ex-prisoners was Joseph Howard, a private in Company F of the 110th, who after slipping away had managed to steal a skiff, receive assistance from a Federal gunboat in Mobile Bay, and make it back to Union lines.

After the surviving companies of the 110th and 111th had bolstered their depleted numbers, they were ordered to report to Nashville by Major General George H. Thomas. Led by Captain Daniel McTaggart, a company commander who had escaped soon after being captured at Athens, the remaining members of the two battered regiments marched out of Pulaski on November 22. They arrived at the state capital on the 28th, in time to play a role in the final battle in the western theater the following month. These battle-tested veterans served as reserves in the rifle pits along the rear and second line defenses of the city, allowing fresh black troops to lead the offensive against General John B. Hood's depleted Army of Tennessee.

Beginning in January 1865 through the end of hostilities in the spring, the 111th guarded bridges along the Nashville & Northwestern Railroad. From July 1865 until the following year, the soldiers of this regiment traveled along the railroad corridors performing the grisly but honorable duty of disinterring the hastily-buried bodies of fallen Federal soldiers, transporting the remains to Murfreesboro, and re-interring them in the Stones River National Cemetery under the direction of Union Chaplain William Earnshaw. Upon completion of this final task, the 111th Regiment was mustered out of service on April 30, 1866.

Former prisoner-of-war Sergeant William Holland may have had the most unique wartime experience of any soldier in the 111th Regiment. After being captured at Sulphur Trestle, Holland was assigned to the chief surgeon of Forrest's command, Dr. James B. Cowan, as his personal servant. Sergeant Holland unwillingly "rode with Forrest" for almost three months until he was able

to make his escape near Pulaski as Forrest's ragged men covered the retreat of the freezing survivors of Hood's shattered army.

Holland rejoined his unit, took part in their activities, and was mustered-out of service with the rest of the 111th Regiment. Following his army career, Holland stayed on as a laborer at the National Cemetery until he was injured while performing his duties there. He retired to his small farm near the cemetery where he resided until his death in 1909. A small stone in the family graveyard, just outside the roughly hewn walls of the Hazen Brigade Monument, marks the old soldier's final resting place.

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