



THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

Buffalo Soldiers: The African-American Contribution to Guarding the Frontier

On July 25, 1992, a monument of a soldier on horseback was dedicated at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. This would not seem to be an unusual event, except that the soldier was an African-American who symbolized thousands of black soldiers who suffered, fought and died for their country. For the most part, the historical record remains virtually blank in regard to the role played by African-Americans in the settlement of the western United States during the 19th century, and this is especially true of the Buffalo Soldiers.

During the American Civil War, over 186,000 African-Americans volunteered to fight, not only for the preservation of the Union, but also for their rights as human beings. With the end of the war in the spring of 1865, black troops were included in the force of 50,000 soldiers sent to Texas to reinforce a United States ultimatum to France's Napoleon III, demanding the withdrawal of his forces from Mexico. Twenty-five African-American regiments, including two of cavalry, served in Texas following the war.

On July 28, 1866, Congress established a peacetime army, drastically reducing the size of the force, and abolishing all the African-American units created during the Civil War. Four new cavalry regiments were created, however, including two "composed of colored men, having the same organization as is now provided by law for cavalry regiments." Four new "colored" infantry units were also created. The six new black units were the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st Infantry. (The infantry units were later

consolidated into the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments). Initial recruits were veterans of Civil War units, as well as recently liberated slaves. During and after the Civil War, African-American regiments were composed entirely of black troops, commanded exclusively by white officers. According to the cultural bias of the day, blacks were not educated or intelligent enough to rise above the rank of sergeant. There were three exceptions, however. In 1877, 2nd Lt. Henry O. Flipper, the first African-American graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, was assigned to the 10th Cavalry. Although there were several appointments of African-Americans to West Point during the 19th century, just three black cadets (Flipper, John H. Alexander, and Charles Young) graduated, and all were assigned to African-American units. There is evidence that these officers, especially Flipper and Alexander, were relieved of their duties due to trumped-up charges; they were the victims of racial prejudice at the hands of their fellow white officers.

Black troops who served in the West eventually acquired the nickname "Buffalo Soldiers." The origins of this name are obscure, and as yet have not been found in contemporary 19th century documents. Legend states that American Indians who encountered African-Americans in the West saw a similarity between the hair of the black soldiers and that of the buffalo. Since the buffalo was an important and revered animal to Native Americans, the term was thought to express the respect they held for the soldiers - who were

often their enemies. The four black regiments, two infantry and two cavalry, remained in the West until the Spanish-American War. During this period, the U.S. Army consisted of just 10 cavalry and 25 infantry regiments, meaning that one in five cavalry soldiers and one in eight infantry soldiers were black.

During their nearly three decades on the frontier, Buffalo Soldiers served at some of the worst, most isolated posts in America, performing their duties under unusually difficult circumstances. The Army often supplied inferior horses (often cast-offs from white regiments), and substandard food. Reality dictated that life at a frontier outpost was lonely, especially because Buffalo Soldiers were not always welcome in the towns neighboring their posts. Off-duty time might be passed in singing, accompanied by the mouth harp, card playing, wagering on dice, reading or writing letters home. Personal hygiene was also observed during these hours. Soldiers of the 19th Century were fond of tobacco and beer, which could be purchased from the post sutler. Photos of loved ones back home made the long years on the frontier seem less solitary.

Soldiers of the 1860s to 90s were issued two uniforms, one for dress and one for field use. The dress uniform was worn for parades, inspections and ceremonies. Uniforms, especially headgear, were influenced by Prussian styles during most of this era. While staying in a garrison or fort, a soldier was expected to keep his uniform and equipment in spotless condition. To improve their status and earn promotion, soldiers studied army manuals and handbooks, and practiced on the shooting range. Post schools and libraries offered many illiterate soldiers the opportunity to learn to read and write. Each of the black units was assigned a chaplain, whose duty was to look after the moral health of the men and promote literacy among them. Literacy also paved the road to a possible promotion, for non-commissioned officers were required to know how to read and write.

While on campaign, a soldier's uniform and equipment were modified for the extreme conditions of the American West. Personal

possessions were carried in a haversack, and included eating utensils, a mess tin, rations including hardtack (hard bread), coffee and salt pork, a tin cup, takedown tools for a rifle or carbine, and a "housewife" (sewing kit). Cavalry troopers carried their field equipment on horseback, but infantrymen, called "walk-a-heaps" by the plains Indians, carried their shelter half, blanket and poncho wrapped in a horseshoe-shaped blanket roll slung over their shoulders. In addition, the foot soldier had to carry a rifle with 100 rounds of ammunition, a bulging haversack, and a canteen full of water, adding up to about 50 pounds of equipment per man. Infantrymen could be expected to carry these loads twenty to thirty miles a day on a long campaign, which often involved passing through burning deserts and wind-swept plains, in the heat of summer and the intense cold of winter.

Despite such hardships, black soldiers performed splendidly. It is thought that more than 12,000 served during the late 19th century, most for the five years of the average enlistment. They garrisoned forts, protected settlers and railroad crews, guarded mail and stage routes, built roads and forts, strung telegraph lines, and generally kept the peace. African-American troops fought more than 125 engagements with American Indian tribes; the expeditions against the Apache leaders Victorio and Nana were conducted almost exclusively by black troopers. They also fought against Mexican outlaws and border desperadoes, and helped to control bandits, cattle thieves, and bootleggers in the sometimes lawless west. Their re-enlistment rate was higher than average, and measurably higher than their white counterparts in other regiments. Eighteen African-Americans were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for deeds of valor between 1866 and 1898, a very high percentage representing a legacy of courage and patriotism.

When war was declared with Spain in 1898, all four of the African-American army units were called eastward to fight in the Caribbean. When the Rough Riders made their famous charge up Kettle and San Juan Hills in Cuba, they were assisted by elements of the 9th and 10th Cavalry, whose contributions to the success of the charge

were acknowledged by Theodore Roosevelt after the battle. Five Medals of Honor were awarded to African-Americans during the Spanish-American War.

After the war, however, U.S. Army policy toward black soldiers changed. By the time of the First World War, blacks had become mere “hewers of wood and carriers of water.” Proportionately few African-Americans (with spectacular exceptions, such as the Tuskegee Airmen) saw combat in either World War. With the desegregation of the U.S. Army in 1948, the proud units of the Buffalo Soldiers were broken up. The 24th and 25th Infantry were deactivated, while the 9th and 10th Cavalry became the 509th and 510th Tank Battalions.

It is unfortunate that the image of the Buffalo Soldier has disappeared from the popular imagination. Few books have been written on the subject, and space in general histories of the west and the military has been limited. The African-American contribution to the settlement of the American West deserves recognition, as does the important service given by black soldiers to their country throughout its history, from Crispus Attacks in 1770s Boston Massacre to Colin Powell in the 1990 Gulf War. It was Gen. Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who dedicated the monument to the Buffalo Soldiers in 1992, saying that “the powerful purpose of this monument must be to motivate us to keep struggling until all Americans have an equal seat at our national table and all Americans enjoy every opportunity to excel -- every chance to achieve their dreams limited only by their imagination and abilities.” The 19th century Buffalo Soldiers certainly lived up to these ideals.

The Buffalo Soldiers are commemorated in the Museum of Westward Expansion below the Gateway Arch in photographs (in the soldiers section), the brick mural on photography (in the lobby), and in the Indian Peace Medal Exhibit, with a life-size animatronic figure and background mural. These exhibits call to mind the selfless service, rugged tenacity, and commendable valor of several thousand unsung heroes in the story of the American West.