

The heroric buffalo soldiers

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In the late 1800s there was no place that demanded dedication, determination, and hard work as much as the western frontier. It took those with a strong character to venture out that far. The Buffalo Soldiers, the black troopers of the United States Army, were beneficial to western expansion by preparing and acting as guardians of the western frontier for the settlers who lived there. The Buffalo Soldier's importance to western expansion will be better understood after an exploration of their character, their contributions, some of the iconic soldiers and their most important battles. The Buffalo Soldiers were the first all-black regiments of the United States. In the encyclopedia article, "Buffalo Soldier (United States Military)" it confirms that in 1866 a bill was passed that legalized the formation of four African American infantries and the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries.

The Ninth Cavalry was to be under the command of Colonel Edward Hatch (Buffalo Soldier United States Military). Meanwhile the Tenth Cavalry was to be commanded by Civil War veteran, Benjamin Grierson ("Buffalo Soldiers of the American West"). These men were commendable as they were honored to lead the men of their cavalries with strength and wit. The consequences of this law would be better than Congress could have ever expected. After all, these men were the best soldiers of the United States military as even their nickname helps to support. Buffalo Soldiers almost always had a strong character, and were even stronger in their many battles.

In accordance to Richard Slatta, the author of *The Mythical West*, the Native Americans may have given them the nickname, Buffalo Soldier, due to their brown skin and buffalo mane-like hair, or they were awed by the soldiers fighting. The Buffalo Soldier's fighting style reminded the Indians of "fierce"

and “ courageous” buffalos. This title was worn proudly as the troops knew that buffalo were sacred to the Indians. To add to the Indians’ respect the soldiers had the lowest amount of deserters and drunkards in comparison to the other troops (Buffalo Soldier (United States Military). Hatch and Grierson kept them fairly disciplined in spite of the racism that was still rampant in the United States. Despite the racism, they were never afraid to go into different towns, and had a great sense of patriotism Tracy Barnett, the author of *The Buffalo Soldiers* (14), confirms.

Of course, the Buffalo Soldiers had more than one reason to display all of these desirable traits. With the new law and the end of the Civil War, opportunity and what the Buffalo Soldiers thought would be an escape from racial tension awaited them. Even though the Union had been successful in the Civil War, black Americans had not been given full rights and respect that they deserved (Barnett 14). Coinciding with the thought to-be escape they could make about thirteen dollars a month if they enlisted for five years, which was more than they could make on average in civilian life, as mentioned in the encyclopedia article “ A Brief History of the Buffalo Soldier”. More importantly, they had a sense of adventure and were looking for honor in serving their country (Barnett 14).

Due to all of these impressive qualities, the Buffalo Soldiers were somewhat of the perfect soldier of their time. The Indians acknowledged their opponents strength which they gained from their commanders and sources of motivation. These men had something to prove and they achieved their goal in serving the United States’ vision of Manifest Destiny. Battling the Indians played a major part in this goal. The Buffalo Soldiers were in many

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skirmishes with the main opposition to western expansion: the Native Americans.

The Sioux, Comanche, and Kiowa were just some of the many different tribes that fought the brave warriors (Slatta 58). This list of Indian enemies includes the Cree, who were pushed into Canada after many battles with the different cavalries (Buffalo Soldier (United States Military)). One of the many stories that surrounds the troopers is the battle of Beecher's Island against the Cheyenne. This particular battle was fought by one of the infantry units under Captain Carpenter. After poorly organized attacks, a group of white soldiers found themselves surrounded and trapped on a small island in the Arickanee River.

Luckily, word about the distressed troopers found its way to Captain Carpenter, who immediately marched his troops over to the island and engaged the Cheyenne head-on. Defeating their current enemy, the soldiers brought rations to the weakened and starving white troopers, saving their lives (Barnett 6 and 11). Beecher's Island was just one of the many events that showed the Buffalo Soldier's worth in battle. It proved that skin color was not a factor in how skilled of a soldier one had the potential to be. Of course, they did more than fight off those who wished to harm settlers. The Buffalo Soldiers also did an immense amount of work on the land before the settlers arrived.

First off, they explored and mapped much of the West. Pre-settler jobs also included building and maintaining any buildings that the pioneers needed, along with setting up miles upon miles of telegraph lines (Slatta 58). In

accordance to Quintard Taylor, author of the article “ A View of The Buffalo Soldiers Through Indigenous Eyes”, “...

the primary assignment of these soldiers was to confront any persons who challenged the safety of the region’s inhabitants, and to maintain, and when necessary, restore civil order.” It was also part of the soldier’s duty to keep trains, stagecoaches, and pioneers of the West protected from Indian attacks (Slatta 58). Yet another task they faced was stopping all illegal weapon and liquor trading between the Native Americans and frontiersmen (Buffalo Soldier (United States Military)). The Buffalo Soldiers were not handed an easy task that could’ve been taken care of by anyone. These men were slapped with numerous amounts of grueling orders that many weren’t even grateful for. Racism, as mentioned earlier, had not even come close to being as absent from the population as it is today.

The notion that blacks weren’t equal to white men was still lodged in many minds. Even the settlers, who it was the Buffalo Soldier’s main goal to protect, weren’t afraid to show how they really felt. The troopers were constantly harassed and threatened by the frontiersmen. Outrageously, there were two separate accounts of murder in Texas and Nebraska, yet neither assailant was arrested. In both cases, Medal of Honor recipients were at the wrong end of the barrel (Barnett, 18).

It’s unfathomable how someone could’ve killed those who sought to protect them, yet the troopers continued to take pride in their work and carried on. It is hard not to have the utmost respect for them. The racism doesn’t stop there however. When serving with white troops for an extended period of

time, the black troopers would get the short end of the stick. They were assigned all of the challenging manual labor (Barnett 18). They weren't even privileged to somewhat decent living quarters.

At one point, the Tenth Cavalry were forced to set up camp in a disease-ridden swamp despite their pleas to the presiding officer of the white troops. Meanwhile the Ninth Cavalry lost almost thirty men from being confined in a cramped, abandoned, and loathsome factory (Barnett 22). In other cases, when the black soldiers camped with the white soldiers, the officers requested that they remain a certain distance from their own troopers (Barnett 24). On top of it all, they were often requested to extend their stay longer than the white troops would have to stay stationed at a post, " just in case" (Barnett 49). Unfortunately, these are only a few of the accounts of pervasive discrimination at the camps of racially-mixed cavalries. Even still, the Buffalo Soldiers showed self-control and respect to their fellow soldiers.

Although, the Buffalo Soldiers didn't receive everything they deserved from the government. In the mindset that blacks weren't as good as whites, the Buffalo Soldiers never obtained their fair share. More often than not they were provided with horses past their prime along with old, Civil War issued weapons that still had bayonets. Enough ammunition to supply these " deteriorating" weapons wasn't even bestowed upon the troopers (Slatta 58). Furthermore, the government also refused to pay the soldiers their pensions after the war.

Two Medal of Honor awarded Buffalo Soldiers struggled in a different kind of battle with their government to receive even a portion of what they deserved

(Barnett 37). They raised the stakes even higher with faulty equipment and old, slow horses, yet the troopers came out on top time and time again. The fact that their pensions were unjustly revoked is infuriating more so in that the time period allowed it to occur without much question from those who weren't directly involved. They had spent so much time in some of the roughest environments that the United States had to offer. Besides their direct enemies, the Buffalo Soldiers faced many different obstacles.

They were often plagued with different many outbreaks of various diseases which included cholera and pneumonia (Barnett 22). According to the account of one Buffalo Soldier, recorded in the book “ African American Frontiers” on page 457, ticks were a major problem and caused many different cases of Lyme disease. Cholera was mainly caused by the poor hygienic condition the soldiers were kept in. The only bathroom they had most of the time were streams that happened to be around their camps. Rations such as bacon, potatoes, and other vegetables were often cooked over an open fire which didn't help fight the diseases. (Slatta 58).

In addition to their immune systems' constant battles they had to ride miles on long hot nights and faced frigid freezing nights (Barnett 27). An artist once traveled with the soldiers and was quoted saying, “ The great clouds of dust choke you and settle over horse, soldier, and accountants until all local color is lost and black man and white man wear a common hue...and cavalry soldiers never ease themselves in the saddle” (Slatta 58).

The Buffalo Soldiers heroically persevered through all of these challenges and accomplished their goal. Although there were two iconic soldiers in

particular helped out with these goals. Emanuel Stance was representative for the Buffalo Soldiers and everything he accomplished. At the considerably young age of nineteen, Stance was one of the earliest recruits of the Ninth Cavalry (Barnett, 28). On one particular scouting mission, the young soldier took ten men in search of Apaches, and what would become his fifth major success against Native Americans in less than two years. When they found the Apaches, they were leading nine horses stolen from the soldiers, for which the troopers battled the Apache group to regain the horses.

Then, on the return trip the scouts encountered yet another group of Apaches, this time about to attack and rob a train. Once again, the scouts charged and chased the Indians away. Stance and his men obtained another five horses (Barnett 29). The current commanding officer, Henry Carroll, was so impressed that he recommended Stance for the Medal of Honor, which he was awarded with (Barnett 29). The Christmas of 1887, Stance was shot and murdered, presumably by his own men who were sick of his cruelty (Barnett 28).

Emanuel Stance had a faulty character which caused his life to end, but only after immensely helping the advancement of his comrades. He was a noteworthy Buffalo Soldiers, yet another man was even more beneficial. Henry Ossian Flipper was a bright and brilliant addition to the Buffalo Soldiers. He was a business owner for some time along with having an education at Atlantic University, an article titled “ Flipper, Henry Ossian (1856-1940)” mentions. Flipper was then transferred to West Point Academy by a Congressman from Georgia where he was constantly harassed by the

white cadets there. Enduring all of his classmate's torture proved worthwhile, as he was the first black cadet to graduate from West Point.

In 1878, at the age of 21, he started his journey with the Tenth Cavalry at Fort Sill in Indian Territory. His official title was that of a Signal Officer, but there came a time when he acted in place for one of the captains for months. During this time period he became known for his great Indian removal tactics especially with the Comanche and Kiowa. Although that wasn't the only accomplishment he was known for. He also had two works of literature published.

One of which was called *The Colored Cadet at West Point* and was one of the first African American biographies and the “most detailed account of life at West Point” (Flipper, Henry Ossian (1856-1940)). His other work was a memoir he wrote after being transferred from Fort Sill to Fort Elliott. It was insight into the life at the fort and is “the only authenticated frontier memoir by an African American to be discovered” (Flipper, Henry Ossian (1856-1940)). These accomplishments made Henry Flipper a very respected man, and very beneficial to western expansion. The gears in Flipper's head never stopped turning as he seemed to find a solution for everything.

Flipper was able to succeed where his white commanding officers failed. The first account was at Fort Sill where many of the troops were contracting Malaria due to the poor hygiene. (Flipper, Henry Ossian (1856-1940)). A few tried to produce a solution, but it was Flipper who designed the drainage system for the filthy water. Even now, it still controls erosion. He was also

able to devise a way to effectively and cheaply connect a telegraph line from Fort Supply, Indiana to Fort Elliott (Flipper, Henry Ossian (1856-1940).

He made use of his time at Atlantic University and saved an immense number of lives. He was at the time a modern day hero, and would've been remembered as such if not for one incident. Despite his great achievements, he would be dishonorably discharged from the military. This time he was moved to Fort Davis and appointed to take care of all commissary tasks. He was discovered for not reporting a deficiency in the amount of money left in the post commissary officer's fund. Flipper was convicted of conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentlemen.

After taking a blow like this, it was impossible to continue with his military career. He kept up a busy life afterwards becoming a mining engineer and senate consultant. Flipper even helped develop the Alaskan Railway and was pardoned by President Bill Clinton in 1999 (Flipper, Henry Ossian (1856-1940). Had it not been for this mishap, he would've had a good chance at receiving the Medal of Honor. He had the most contributions of any single Buffalo Soldier, even including the lesser known Seminole Buffalo Soldiers. These soldiers were a mix between Seminole Indians and African Americans.

Usually a runaway slave would marry a Seminole Indian and they would have a child. Barnett stated (31), " They were black as their African ancestors, yet gifted with the wilderness skills of their Seminole forbears." They started in the United States, moved to Mexico, but when news of the end of the Civil War reached them, many moved back to the United States and struck up a deal with the Twenty-fifth Infantry. (Barnett 33). Despite how much they

respected and got along with John Bullis, the leader of this group, they never officially enlisted.

The deal was that they got to live on base and in exchange they would offer their tracking skills (Barnett 32). In 1874, these skills were put to the test in the Red River War which was started when Native Americans began openly attacking settlers. Captain Mackenzie led the Seminole Soldiers and sent scouts out to look for the Indian Tribes that had banded together. The group included Adam Payne who was said to have taken on six Native Americans at once when the group came across a band of twenty-five warriors. Later on, the group found the Indians secret hide-out at Palo Duro Canyon where the Indians had their supplies settled.

Mackenzie ordered an attack and the battle was successful as they took 1400 horses as well as the Indian's supplies. Adam Payne ended up being the first Seminole to be awarded the Medal of Honor (Barnett 33, 35). Also as mentioned in the article " The Red River War of 1874" the Seminoles received a small portion of land in Indian Territory before the government cleaned its hands of them. The Seminoles showed great strength and national pride even after only being back in the country for a small amount of time before going into war. They showed great character, but there was one battle that had more significance than the Red River War. What may be considered the most important showdown between the Buffalo Soldiers and the Indians in the fight of western expansion started in 1879.

An Apache leader named Victorio had started a rebellion and finally the Buffalo Soldiers were ready to face it head-on, but Victorio constantly

crossed the border of Mexico, and evaded the soldiers who were not to step one foot across it (Barnett 39 and 41). The Ninth and Tenth Cavalries eventually joined together to finally track and put an end to Victorio and his men. In just one year they had gone nine thousand miles in search of him, on various numbers of Hail Mary searches (Barnett 41). Then one night while the Ninth Cavalry was camped at Eagle Springs, Henry Flipper, who had rode through the night, showed up, exhausted, with the message that Victorio had been spotted crossing back into the United States (Barnett 41). Grierson immediately rallied up his troops and through many battles finally weakened Victorio's forces enough to drive them out of the states one last final time (Barnett 43).

With the defeat of Victorio the number of the attacks on the settlers reduced drastically, and saved many lives. It was one of the greatest achievements of the Buffalo Soldier, and had a great affect on the frontier in favor of the United States. The ordeals Buffalo Soldiers faced during western expansion were incredible. They had such a strong character that many men single handedly made giant impacts, did more than they were required to and drove out the major Indian rebellions. No other men of the time had as much determination and dedication as the Buffalo Soldiers.

That is what made them great, not only to western expansion, but to the United States civilization itself.