

# African american soldiers during the civil war history essay



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I would like to begin my project with the famous quotation that will direct my research into a proper way. Captain M. M. Miller said that “ I never more wish to hear the expression, ‘ The niggers wont fight.’ Come with me 100 yards from where I sit and I can show you the wounds that cover the bodies of 16 as brave, loyal, and patriotic soldiers as ever drew bead on a rebel.

The American Civil War (1861 - 1865) also known as the War between States was the important step on the way to American independence and prosperity that we can see today. Many people paid with their lives. Not only white people took part in the Civil War. From the very first step the new open country became a motherland and home for people of different nations, origins and colors. For this reason, there were not just white people who were fighting in the war. There were also many black people called African Americans.

It was President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation that allowed African Americans to become soldiers of the Union Army. It happened in the year 1862. Before that date, many colored people wanted to become a part of the Union Army but they were prohibited from it by the federal law. This law dated back to the year 1792 and was lasting for 70 years. The same President Lincoln was afraid that if he would authorize black people recruitment, then many of Border States could start separating themselves from the Union. By the time when Civil War finished almost 180, 000 African American soldiers became a part of the Union Army and fought together with white people.

It is natural that during any war people are facing many problems and difficulties. All soldiers faced a lot of various problems during the American Civil War but African American soldiers were struggling additional problems that were created by racial prejudice. Racial discrimination of black American soldiers was especially prevalent also in the North of the country. The saddest fact is that all those discriminatory practices took its place also among United States Military. There were even segregates units that consisted of black soldiers. Typically those units were commanded white officers and some of black officers that were non-commissioned. For example, well known 54-th Massachusetts was commanded by Robert Shaw; 1-st South Carolina was commanded by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Both of those people were white Americans.

In the year 1863 the Confederate congress wanted to give punishment to some officers of black troops and turn black American soldiers in to slavers. This incident resulted in to the General Order 233 (issued by President Abraham Lincoln. The Order proclaimed reprisal on Confederate prisoners of war (POWs) for any kind of mistreatment of black troops. Moreover, that threat subdued the Confederates. Typically, black soldiers that became captives were treated much more sharply than the white ones. The history of the Civil War remembers the most depraved know example of abuse for black soldiers: at the Fort Pillow (T N) Confederate soldiers were shooting to death black American Union soldiers that were captured by them. Confederate General Nathan B. Forrest was present at that bloody game and he did not do anything to stop the action.

However, many of black people were serving in the infantry and artillery there were a great deal of discriminatory practice. This fact cause a numbers of African American soldiers being assigned to perform non-combat and serve in duties, cooks, teamsters instead. The fact of discrimination was showing in the salary differences between white people and African Americans. Black soldiers were paid \$ 10 per month. \$ 3 was removed from that fee for clothing. How much were white soldiers paid? Their salary made \$ 13 per month and no clothing allowance was deducted from it.

Nevertheless, African American soldiers who were captured by the Confederate Army were treated much better than white people captured by the same Army. During the War many good and outstanding qualities of black people were shown; so, in June, year 1864 congress finally granted the equal payment for the United States Colored Troops. The action was made retroactive. Since that time, African American soldiers started receiving the same rations and supplies with white soldiers of the United Army. Moreover, black American military citizens started getting comparable medical care.

Black American citizens served in infantry and artillery; they fulfilled all non-combat support functions that uphold the Union Army. There were many black chaplains, nurses, carpenters, guards, laborers, surgeons, spies, scouts, steamboat pilots, teamsters. They contributed a lot to the war cause too. The Unite Army had around 80 African American commissioned officers. African American women could not officially join the Union Army.

Nevertheless, those women found the way to serve the Army: they worked as nurses, scouts and spies. Harriet Tubman was one of the most famous girl - scout who served for the 2-nd South Carolina Volunteers.

Black American were great and brave soldiers. They served the Union Army well and took an outstanding part in many battles in spite of great difficulties they were facing. I want to give a quote of Frederic Douglass' words that he said about black people's service to the American Nation: " 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 pockets, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States." [2]

Black American fighters made about 10 % of the Union Army. Probably one-third of all black American soldiers that enlisted are died in battles. The whole number of those black people who died during the Civil War is around 40, 000 and almost 30, 000 of them were died because of different diseases and infections.

It is pity but the prejudice against African Americans did not let black people to serve in combat as extensively as they wish to; but anyway they made their serve with distinction in a great number of battles. Black American infantrymen were fighting gallantly at Port Hudson (L A), Petersburg (V A), Milliken's Bend (L A) and Nashville (T N). In July year 1863, Fort Wagner (S C) was assaulted. During those battle one-third officers of the 54-th Requirement of Massachusetts Volunteers'; also the half of their troops was lost. Those sad events were memorably dramatized in the well-known film " Glory". By the time when The Civil War was finished future United States of America had 16 African American soldiers who were awarded the Medal of Honor for the outstanding bravery and valor they showed during the War fighting.

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Let us come back to the beginning of the American Civil War and see how colored troops started having place in the Union Army. Historians know that the very first methodical attempts to organize colored troops since the War of rebellion started were so called " Hunter Regiment". Sergeant C. T. Trowbridge was the officer of the New York Volunteer Engineers (Colonel Serrell) who originally detailed the recruiting for that purpose. The detail is dated by May 7, year 1862 (special order 84 Department of the South)

We can see that African American citizens became brilliant soldiers who fought for their new motherland. In spite of abusive, unjust and often even cruel narrow mindedness and discrimination they served the Union Army well. Nowadays, passing over numerous equally shaking events that mark the outstanding career of the regiment, we can review for a minute the attack on the Black River Bridge that for the heroic bravery stays incomparable in the war history. According to Major-General Camby, we see that: " The Major-General commanding the District of West Tennessee and Vicksburg, styles this affair as one of the most daring and heroic of the war".

[3]Two previous operations failed to displace the enemy and the bridge. Those missions were well organized. " That these assaults had been desperately maintained and that the bridge had been heroically defended, its blackened and bullet-torn timbers attested".[4]This story happened at the time when the rioter General Hood was focusing his army to make an attack on the army of General Thomas at Nashville. His ways of organizing supports and reinforcements should be cut off and the rail road bridge over the Big Black should be broken at any price. There were some previous unavailing attempts to displace the enemy from its strong position at the bridge. The

attempt is well known to the District Commander. Those times the bridge can be only taken because of outstanding bravery and it costed the army a lot of lives. This case should be taken as a highest compliment to the commanders and officers of the 3-rd United States Colored Cavalry. It was the African American soldiers who were selected especially to lead the attack. The target of fighting - the bridge - was situated in a very much impassable swamp. The only accessible place was situated near the restricted rail road bed. In addition, that only place was broken at some intervals by trestle work.

The soldiers of the insurgents' infantry secured the bridge. The forces of the rebels were posted in very invulnerable positions. The army of the enemy was well protected with the strong stockade that was placed on the opposite side of the river. From those sides they were able to concentrate a mortal fire on the bridge without putting themselves in danger.

Into the flaming jaws of this battle, the army sent the regiment. In November 27, year 1864, that regiment won the inviolable and outstanding fame. It was complimented in the highest terms from the War Office in Washington and also Department Commander marked the regiment as a brilliant and valuable for the Army.

One officer told about it: " You who passed through that crucial test can never forget the experience. It is so indelibly impressed on our minds that looking back even from this distance, we shudder at the picture memory retains".[5]He remembers black troops in Mississippi swamp. Black American soldiers played a really great role in that operation. The same officer saying

again: “ In the hard-set faces and stern commands of the officers, we read a determination that foreshadowed victory. It was understood by all that when the bugle sounded the charge, there must be no faltering, no matter what might betide”[6].

Many of historians agreed that that battle was the supreme moment for the 3-rd Cavalry. It is even right to say that it was crucial test for African American soldiers. It was the opportunity to change the attitude toward to all black soldiers and all black people in future for ever; and we can see that black soldiers used that chance in a right way. Black troops showed us the great results. They understood that much depended on the results of that battle. Much was expected of the black troops that time. We can read the remembrances and see the way they sustained and see the performance of their high reputation and gallantry.

“ Into the flaming crucible they plunged. The swamp resounds with the rattle of musketry and as they meet volley upon volley, their lines tremble and sway like a young forest swept by a cyclone”.[7]They did not feel doubts; they were not confused; they were not scared. Those yesterday slaves, those people who were abused by white people for many times turned to be noble enough to forget all bad treatment and injustice and start fighting for the prosperity of their new born country. They were fighting abreast with white soldiers. They were fighting not just for the United Army victory. There was one more thing they were fighting for. Black people were slavers before. They became Americans just recently and they wanted to stop all prejudice and all superstition. They wanted to show that they are also Americans and



they are ready to give their lives for the country and for its citizens no matter if they black or white.

We can see that African American soldiers won many things for themselves. As I was writing above, they started being paid the same salary with white soldiers; they had many different awards; they were believed to be a brave and important part of the United Army. Returning to the results of the battle for the bridge we can see that “ the enemy, in terror, flees to the shelter of the swamp. The victory is complete. The Third Cavalry has written its name high up on the roll of fame. It has passed through the crucial test emerging as tempered steel”.[8]

During most fights great part of the black infantry was not trained good before the battle (like for example during the cruelest and hot battle of the Civil War that was happened in Milliken’s Bend, Louisiana, between black soldiers of the Union Army and Confederate troops). In addition to minimal training black soldiers were outnumbered by enemy and also they were ill-equipped. In spite of all that suffering African Americans routed the enemy in close hand - to - hand battle. Due to their bravery, they won respect of those people who previously denied black people. It was white people from both sides of conflagration. By their numerous victories over Confederate soldiers (and especially by the battle at Milliken’s Bend) African American soldiers proved the President Abraham Lincoln that they are he would never be disappointed in the new citizens of United States of America. Afterward, a great deal of barriers to effective deployment and to the enlistment of African American recruits were removed in pursuit of the last Union victory.

It is an interesting fact that among more than 180, 000 African Americans (including 163 units) who served in the Union Army were not just only free black soldiers. Both free and much more African runaway slaves joined the battles.

Let us in the end of the project look briefly through the most important fights of the Civil War and see the great achievements of African Americans.

After July 17, year 1862 when Congress passed two acts of the law that allowed enlisting African Americans to the Union Army; official enrollment came by September of the same year. In October of the same year 1-st Kansas Colored Volunteers was formed. The bravery, firmness and fearless of the black soldiers that was showed at the battle of Island Mound (Missouri) silenced all their critics. By August, year 1863, 14 Negro Regiments were in the action and ready to take part in battles. On May 27, the same year, the black American soldiers bravely moved over open ground in front of mortal artillery fire. However the battle failed, black Americans showed their ability to withstand the heat of the attack.

Later, on July 17, year 1863, the 1-st Kansas Colored were fighting with outstanding brave again at Honey Spring (Indian Territory that is presently Oklahoma). The troops of the Union Army under General James Blunt ran in to a strong force of the Confederate Army that was under General Douglas Cooper. The bloody engagement was lasting for the two hours and finally the soldiers of Douglas Cooper retreated. The 1-st Kansas Colored was holding the center of the Union Army line. The African American soldiers of that troop moved forward within fifty steps of the Confederate Army's line and had

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been exchanging fire for the almost twenty minutes when the Confederate soldiers ran. Let us see what General Blunt who was impressed with the bravery of the African Americans wrote after the battle: “ I never saw such fighting as was done by the Negro regiment.... The question that negroes will fight is settled; besides they make better solders in every respect than any troops I have ever had under my command.”[9]

And the last battle I want to mention here is the most widely known attack that was fought by African America soldiers. This battle happened on Fort Wagner (South Carolina). The 54-th Massachusetts took part in this battle on July 18, year 1863. The 54-th volunteered to lead the battle on the fortified Confederate placements. The African American soldiers of the 54-th scaled the fort's parapet. They draw back after brutal hand - to - hand battle only.

The battles I mentioned here are just few battles from among the great number of battles in which black Americans took their outstanding part: Fort Pillow (April 12, 1864), New Market Heights (Virginia, September 29, 1864) etc.

In January of the year 1864 General Patrick Cleburne with some other officers of the Confederate Army suggested to use black slavers as soldiers because the Union Army using African Americans. However the suggestion was refused the conception have been discussing for some time after. Finally on March 13 of the next year Confederate Congress passed General Order14. The order was outlet on March 23 of the same year.

Taking into consideration above stated information we can conclude that all those people who saw African Americans in action were impressed very  
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much. The United States of America of the present day remembers the great deed of the black soldiers and appreciates them as the respectable citizens of the country that they were protecting with the price of their lives.