

The contribution of
black soldiers
between 1861 1865
history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 1861 the cannons fired by the Confederates over Fort Sumter signalled the beginning of the bitter and bloody civil war. For the North the war was to fight to preserve the Union and for the South the issue was the right to preserve their way of life and keep slavery. However, for blacks it was an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty, courage and value to earn the chance of freedom. During the American Civil War approximately 180, 000 black soldiers served in the Union army, many were runaway slaves, others free African Americans. They made up of a total of 163 units in the Union army and many also played a major role in the Union navy. The Union navy had taken men from all colours and conditions from the very beginning. Blacks at sea served mainly as firemen, coal heavers, stewards and cooks however as early as August 1861 a group of contrabands served as gun crew on the U. S. S Minnesota. There were many differing attitudes to blacks during this period and the majority in the beginning were reluctant to use blacks in battle. Abolitionist Frederick Douglas said that ' The Negro is the key to the situation - the pivot upon which the whole rebellion turns'.[1]

1861 - 1863 Expectations of the Negro

The general attitude in 1861 that whites had towards the Negro was that they were inferior to them and lacked courage to fight well also a fair majority shared ambivalent views towards African-Americans. Many white Northern soldiers doubted the blacks' abilities to fight and protested against freeing and arming the slaves. They had long held fears about Negroes as soldiers as they felt that they lacked the qualities of a fighting man and believed they were not equal to white soldiers doing the job. The final fear which was deep but unspoken was that the arming of the Negro would lead

<https://assignbuster.com/the-contribution-of-black-soldiers-between-1861-1865-history-essay/>

to a change in the necessities of the status of American life. However near the end of 1862 it became obvious that the manpower necessities of the North had weakened and Lincoln's fears had dissolved towards arming the African Americans. Even so the majority of white soldiers were willing to sacrifice their lives to support Lincoln and to contain the rebellion but were not willing to fight alongside blacks with the aim of freedom in the beginning.

On July 17th 1862 Congress passed two acts allowing the enlistment of Negro soldiers however the official enrolment was Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862. After the Emancipation Proclamation was announced there was a huge influx of blacks into the Union Army and in Farmer's opinion Lincoln had acted at the right time as Northern opinion was the same as his. Due to the ever increasing casualty lists Farmer believed that there had been a great deal more support for black soldiers than there had been in 1861. The enlistment of Negro soldiers is of high importance, as they made up for the increasing number of deaths and gave the union army more troops thus more hope to defeat the Confederacy. Farmer agrees with historian Benjamin Quarles's view that Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation at the right time. He also discusses how the Union ranks were thinning, and with enlistments falling off the attitudes to Negroes was slackening off. Quarles emphasises that Lincoln was never one to leap before looking and he did indeed wait until he felt the North had faith in the Negroes and for when they would accept them.

Not surprisingly abolitionists, African Americans and others who wanted slavery to be banned welcomed Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

However many expressed disappointment to this and according to historian <https://assignbuster.com/the-contribution-of-black-soldiers-between-1861-1865-history-essay/>

Russell F. Weigely ' Lincoln freed only the slaves it was not in his power to free'[2]. Some strong abolitionists also agreed with this perception for example on September 25th 1862 William Lloyd Garrison remarked that ' the Presidents Proclamation is certainly a matter for great rejoicing, as far as it goes for the liberation of those in bondage, but it leaves slavery... still to exist in the so-called loyal slave states. What was wanted, what is still needed, is a proclamation, distinctively announcing the total abolition of slavery.'[3]The abolitionist Conway also agreed with this. Sergeant George E. Stephens of the all black 54th volunteers shared Conway's sceptical view regarding Lincoln's commitment to black freedom; however others felt that the Emancipation policies were a step too far. Lincoln could not afford to upset these slave states and so excluded them in his Proclamation. This shows that the whole issue of Negro participation in the North was a truly political issue what Lincoln was well aware of.

Abolitionist Frederick Douglas commented ' once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters of the US, let him get an edge on his buttons and musket on his soldier... and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the USA.'[4]These words spoken by Douglas were aimed at the politicians explaining how valuable a contribution the Negro could make. It also increased the amount of Negroes who enlisted in the Union army as his words touched many African Americans and gave them an urge to fight to save the Union and abolish slavery. Although the large amount of Negroes who enlisted did largely benefit the Union's successes, Quarles highlights that the Negro regiments did have their

deserters and approximately fifteen thousand coloured troops took leave during the civil war.

Lincoln had many problems in using Negro Labour and had faced strong pressure on the question of whether to enlist blacks in the Union Army. He was very anxious to preserve Northern unity and to begin with was strongly against black recruitment; however this did not stop efforts to recruit black soldiers. For example General Hunter raised a regiment of black volunteers on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina at the start of 1862. However the War Department refused to give any financial aid whatsoever that he was forced to disband his regiment. The Confiscation Act of 1862 enabled Lincoln to use ex-slaves as a military force but Lincoln took this as blacks simply being employed as labourers and not fighting as front-line troops. There were differing views to Lincoln in his cabinet. Stanton, secretary of war, authorised the creation of a regiment of five thousand black troops to be recruited from Louisiana, and surprisingly Lincoln did not object. In September the first official black regiment was created. Lincoln's authorisation on January 1st 1863 of the enrolment of freed slaves in the army or navy tagged to the Emancipation Proclamation about army the Negro was because the need for enlisting Negroes in the Union forces became so compelling. In Lincoln's opinion a black soldier was 'as good as any'[5]. Quarles discusses that the main issue of war was now no longer limited to preserving the Union, and as Lincoln put it 'a perplexing compound- Union and slavery'[6]. Lincoln saw that the exerting pressure meant he had to broaden the base of the war. This meant that the Negro soldier was now fighting for a country in which freedom would no longer just

be a dream. The Negro was fighting for his future generations to have greater responsibilities and freedoms, for a new dignity and self-respect. They volunteered because the army had something to offer them, a chance to be literate, move up the social scale, and most importantly as Quarles puts it for a ' pathway to citizenship'[7]All these factors kept black recruits morale high, and increased black confidence and pride, given them courage and bravery to fight strongly and contribute to a greater extent than had initially been thought of.

1863 - 1865 Limitations of the Negro Soldier

Northern Negroes were much less eager to enlist in the army than they had been at the outbreak of the war in 1863 because the war economy meant full employment for them and also prosperity. There were hints from Confederate sources that black troops wouldn't be treated as ordinary prisoners of war and would be sold in to slavery, or even brutally murdered. McPherson discusses how black recruits hesitated naturally until the Union Government created measures to protect them. Even during this the blacks still fought as hard as ever even with the chance of being captured, highlighting the extent of their passion to their cause and illustrating because they felt so strongly they fought well for the North and became a great asset to Union forces. Furthermore Andrew wanted to give promotions however Stanton and Lincoln feared the effect this would have on the Northern public. Frederick Douglas privately said ' little cruel to say to the black soldier that he shall not rise to be an officer... but I see coupled with this disadvantage coloured men should hail the opportunity of getting on in the United States Uniform as a great advance'[8]. The importance of this <https://assignbuster.com/the-contribution-of-black-soldiers-between-1861-1865-history-essay/>

opportunity alone for blacks to become soldiers gave them a chance to prove themselves as men, and equals. With this they could demand their liberty whilst abolishing slavery. Their contribution to the civil war would be of high importance to achieve freedom and a different way of life for blacks which urged them to fight on even after the injustices.

In the South there was a different situation than in the North. In general most black slaves remained slaves throughout the war. Given that they made up more than a third of the Confederacy's population they made a major contribution to its war effort. They worked in factories and mines, maintaining the railway and helped to grow crops. Many Southern states passed laws which enabled them to conscript slaves for military labour. In 1863 the Confederate Congress passed general impressments of law. The utilisation of slave labour enabled the south to fight on longer than would have otherwise been possible. The idea of arming slaves for the use of soldiers was thought about but not seriously considered by Davis or any others in his administration. As the Union saw victories in the fall of 1862 and the spring of 1863 the need for more man power was desperately needed for the Confederacy and they saw this as conscripting white men and putting black slaves into labourer positions.

Contribution in Battle 1863-1865:

The most widely known battle fought by African Americans was the assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, by the 54th Massachusetts on July 18th 1863. It was a Confederate stronghold guarding the entrance to Charleston Harbour. The 54th volunteered to lead the assault on the strongly fortified

Confederate positions. Across the sand the Negro regiment led by the youthful Colonel Robert Shaw stood ready to fight, while the Confederates opened a murderous fire. The soldiers on the 54th scaled the forts parapet, and were only driven back after brutal hand-to hand combat. Although this battle was a failure in the sense of military success McPherson believes it was a ' significant triumph'[9]. It showed once again that Negro soldiers had courage, determination to fight for the freedom of their race. Even in the face of heavy odds black troops still fought well and this has to be admired. It demonstrated the manhood and courage of the race to millions of whites North and South who had doubted whether the black man would stand in combat against soldiers of the self-styled race. It ensured the permanence of the policy of enlisting blacks which had then been regarded as a dubious experiment.

On February 14th, 1863 Seaman James Henry Gooding volunteered to serve the 54th Massachusetts Regiment at age 26. He posted a series of significant letters from the front to his hometown newspaper, the abolitionist New Bedford Mercury. His letter written at the time of the attack on Charleston Harbour in 1863 portrays the huge amount of bravery of the black soldier. Gooding writes ' At last we have something stirring to record. The 54th, the past week has proved itself twice in battle'[10]proving how black soldiers were good soldiers who fought courageously. He mentions how the Confederacy's army had underestimated the strength of the 54th and thus resulted in them making a mistake at James River. The most significant comment from Gooding is ' The men of the 54th behaved gallantly on the occasion - so the Generals say. It is not for us to blow our horn; but when a

regiment of white men gave us three cheers as we were passing them, it shows that we did our duty as men should.'[11]This emphasises how black soldiers' bravery and military success had enabled them to be regarded highly by white soldiers who did not believe that they were fit to fight in the beginning. They now praised them and accepted the black soldier which was a very important factor in blacks' goal of freedom, and highlights the importance of the contributions black troops had on the civil war.

Colonel Higgison's regiment had fought well in minor skirmishes, but as yet no Negro troops had been engaged in a major battle. This changed however and in 1863 on the 27th May. Two regiments participated in an assault on Port Hudson, both New Orleans free Negroes and Louisiana ex-slaves. The attack failed however they fought heroically and advanced over open ground in the face of deadly artillery fire. William Wells Brown commented ' the self forgetfulness, the undaunted heroism, and the great endurance they exhibited that day, created a new chapter in American history for the coloured man'[12]. McPherson discusses how the performance of Negro soldiers on the front lines in the South helped to make things easier for the black civilians in the North. He further emphasises how part of the Negro soldier's desperate courage came from his realisation that he was fighting for the freedom of his race. It has to be noted that the sheer passion and determination to fight for freedom affected their performance greatly of the African-American, proving them to be as courageous as the white soldier. This enabled the North and Lincoln to see their full capacity to being equal whilst also being grateful they were fighting to preserve the Union. Their

contribution and bravery undoubtedly helped the attitudes whites had towards them and by doing this took them a step closer to their destiny.

Despite the courage and contribution of Negro soldiers, the black troops were subjected to many indignities and injustices. As late as 1864 off-duty Negro soldiers were sometimes assaulted by white bullies and mobs. They were also assigned to enormous amounts of heavy labour and fatigue duty. This stemmed from the governments original plan to use black troops mainly as garrison troops and labour battalions in order to release white troops in combat. McPherson believes that after Negro soldiers proved themselves in battle such a policy made no sense. The South Carolina and Massachusetts regiments had enlisted under a War Department promise that they would receive the same pay as white soldiers; however Stanton had no legal authority to make such a promise. The only law that applied specifically to black soldiers was the militia act of July 17th 1862 which gave the Negroes \$10 per month. However white privates received \$13 plus a \$3. 50 clothes allowance per month. All Negroes were disheartened and angered at this decision. A private in the 54th wrote to his sister: ' why are we not worth as much as white soldiers? We do this same work they do, and do what they cannot. We fight as well as they do...'[13]In June 15th 1864 Congress finally enacted legislation granting equal pay to Negro soldiers. Many Negro soldiers and their families suffered severe hardships because of discrimination in their wages. Now they heard this act they celebrated, danced and sang as they finally received their full pay back. This was a step forward to being treated with equality to the white soldier. It emphasises how their successful war effort had an effect on the way they were being

treated and showed if they continued fighting like this it would leave them to their goal of freedom.

Negro soldiers took part in every major battle in 1864-1865 except for Sherman's Atlanta Campaign which took place in Georgia. The Union Government extended its recruiting activities to the Border States in 1863-1864 and although there was some brutality by recruiters the majority volunteered. McPherson believes that it required a lot more courage for Negroes than whites to become soldiers because the Confederacy still captured and brutally punished Negroes. The Richmond Government never officially enforced this policy against this however some rebel soldiers or officers were murdered in cold blood after capture.

The year 1864 was very eventful for black troops on April 12th 1864 at the Battle of Fort Pillow, Tennessee; Confederate General Forrest led his two thousand five hundred men against the Union held forts. Forrest's men attacked the fort with small difficulty and drove the Confederates down the river's bluff in a deadly fight, and crossfire. Casualties were extremely high and many accused the Federals of perpetrating a massacre of black troops, which many reports prove. 'Fort Pillow Massacre'[14] was the most notable instance of the murder of Negro prisoners after capture. At least three hundred Union troops were massacred. McPherson emphasises that after Fort Pillow it made the Negro fight more desperately as they feared the consequences of being captured by the Confederates. The battle cry thus became 'Remember Fort Pillow!'[15] This battle emphasised the sheer courage that Negro soldiers had, they still fought on to win their freedom even after this horrible massacre. It proved the extent of their willingness to

<https://assignbuster.com/the-contribution-of-black-soldiers-between-1861-1865-history-essay/>

fight for a cause and their contribution in battles is of high importance to the Union. Lincoln had perhaps correctly gambled that.

McPherson thought that although the reports on Fort Pillow were probably exaggerated, it is true that in the last year of war black troops fought in greater numbers with greater efficiency than ever before. Negro troops played a vital role in the fighting around Petersburg, Virginia, in June 1864. Black regiments successfully managed to capture an important rebel entrenchment near the city. Secretary of War Stanton said to a newspaper that ' the hardest fighting was done by black troops. The forts they stormed were the worst of all.'[16]Also an officer of the 22nd US coloured Infantry wrote enthusiastically to a Philadelphia newspaper: ' The problem is solved. The negro is a man, a soldier, a hero.' McPherson emphasises the growing respect for African American troops and this is also reflected in Steadman's reports. The whites had changed and were still changing their opinion on the Negro. The importance of the Negro troops hard and often successful fighting affected white's opinions. It changed them to a more positive respectful outlook on the black man, bringing them close to becoming accepted into American Society.

The fact that blacks had fought for freedom boosted black confidence and pride, the military service also carried with it an assumption of US citizenship. Farmer believes that the impact of black soldiers on the outcome of the war shouldn't be exaggerated. Of the 37, 000 black soldiers who were killed fighting, the vast majority died of disease. Nevertheless he does feel that black troops did help the Union war effort at a critical time when

Northern whites were increasingly reluctant to fight. In September 1864
<https://assignbuster.com/the-contribution-of-black-soldiers-between-1861-1865-history-essay/>

Lincoln wrote; ' Any different policy in regard to the coloured man deprives us of his help and this is more than we can bear... This is not a question of sentiment or taste but one of a physical force which can be measured and estimated as horse power and steam power... Keep it up and you can save the Union. Throw it away and the union goes down with it.'[17]By 1865 there were nearly as many black soldiers in arms as there were white soldiers defending it. Their numbers boosted the moral of Union soldiers to a great extent and their determination made them great soldiers and gave the union a better chance of victory.

Although the contribution of the role of blacks was vital it was only more recently recognised. Blacks alone did not win the war, but their contribution, especially during the grim months of the summer of 1864 might have made the difference between victory and stalemate.

Joseph Glatthaar has argued that the decision of the federal government to hire blacks for wages meant that their deployment in other areas could no longer be denied (blacks did indeed serve in the Union navy throughout the war). McPherson also argues that the Emancipation deprived the Confederacy of a great resource at the same time converting it in to one for the Union. In addition, with the reduction of black labour in the South due to the absence of effective overseers this also contributed significantly to Southern defeat. As Lincoln wrote in August 1863; ' There can be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue and clenched teeth and steady eye and well posed bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation.'[18]

In January 1864, General Patrick Cleburne and several other Confederate officers in the army of Tennessee proposed using slaves as soldiers since the Union was using slaves as soldiers since the Union was using black troops. General Cleburne suggested offering slaves their freedom if they fought and survived it. Nevertheless President Jefferson Davis refused to consider his proposal and forbade future discussion of that idea. The concept however did not die. Near the end of 1864, the South was losing more ground, and some influential Southerners were arguing in arming slaves to fight for the confederacy. However most Southerners opposed the idea; ' whenever we establish the fact that we are a military race we destroy our whole theory that they are unfit to be free'[19]said Governor Brown of Georgia. However In February 1865 Robert E. Lee, who was desperately short of men came out in supporting arming slaves and in the month to follow this announcement the Confederate Congress passed a law providing 300, 000 slaves. This illustrates how effective black soldiers were in the union, that now even the Confederacy was desperately needing their help. However this came far too late and only a few black regiments were raised but not in time to fight. Some historians believe that if only this measure was issued sooner to recruit slaves they might have won the war. Nevertheless whether the black slaves would have fought loyally for the Confederates cause, even if they had been offered liberty, you will never know.

Conclusion

Few Americans in 1861 not even leading abolitionist Frederick Douglass could have envisioned the broad assistance that Lincoln's black soldiers in blue made to the Union war effort. The USCT (US Coloured Troops) showed <https://assignbuster.com/the-contribution-of-black-soldiers-between-1861-1865-history-essay/>

astonishing courage, sacrifice and toughness. Although they were subject to a massive amount of discrimination The USCT nonetheless preserved overcoming indignities with endurance, determination and pride. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the extraordinary effort from the black military service changed slavery for good, by freeing over four million slaves and gave determination to Negroes to fight new battles in the future for their absolute freedom. 'Blacks alone did not win the war'[20]Glatthaar emphasises, but 'timely and extensive support from them contributed significantly and may have made the difference between stalemate, defeat and a Union success.'[21]Scholars today commonly agree that Negroes 'tipped the delicate balance of power squarely in favour of the North'[22]according to Glatthaar. African Americans involved in the civil war period understood what the historians of today understand now that the emancipation and the use of Negroes as armed troops were 'defining moments in the history of the race'[23]as well as it could be argued, the Civil War.