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Buffalo Soldiers

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ALONZO SCOTT, 10TH CAVALRY 1908

Buffalo Soldiers



The period from the end of the Civil War until the entry of the United States into World War I was almost a “golden era” for African-Americans in the US military. For the first time, African-Americans could serve in the regular military in peacetime.

While white prejudice was still the order of the day, the profound transition from slavery to the right to bear arms in the service of their nation was not lost on most African-Americans. Though Jim Crow laws began to appear in the South during the 1880s, there was arguably still more freedom for African-Americans during this era than there would be during the period from 1917 to 1948.

After the Civil War Congress increased the size of the peacetime US Army. As part of that increase, Congress authorized the formation of two African-American cavalry

regiments: the 9th and 10th Cavalry and two African-American infantry regiments: the 24th and 25th Infantry. Those regiments selectively recruited African-American enlisted men and noncommissioned officers, many of whom were veterans of the Civil War. Command of the regiments, however, continued to be assigned to white officers with the notable exceptions of three West Point graduates, Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander, and Charles Young.

From 1866 to 1890, the four regiments spent most of their time in the West

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policing various North American Indian tribes. During this period African-Americans acquired the nickname “Buffalo Soldiers” from the North American Indians. The nickname was considered a badge of honor by the soldiers themselves and also became popular among the general populace. Two primary explanations exist for the origins of the nickname. Some historians argue that the North American Indians thought that the African-Americans’ hair had the same texture as the coat of a buffalo. Others believe that the nickname referred to the buffalo-hide coats issued to soldiers during

the severe winters on the Western Plains. During this period fourteen African-American soldiers received the Medal of Honor for valor in action. In addition to combat, African-American soldiers engaged in a number of other responsibilities, including building roads, guarding the national parks, and protecting the US Postal Service.

Also during this period, all four regiments served in Kansas and in the Flint Hills at various times. At the height of the Army’s presence, Kansas was host to nine different Army posts. Seven of these posts, which all housed African-American soldiers from time to time, were abandoned between 1869 and 1889. These soldiers served at the remote outposts for a mere \$13 per month with poor rations and little contact with the outside world.

The oldest continually occupied post west of the Mississippi River is Fort Leavenworth, which included African-American troops until World War II. Fort Riley, which remains a



LIEUTENANT W. B. BARNES, 1919



SERGEANT HAMILTON, 1923

*All photographs in this article are studio portraits of Fort Riley Soldiers by
J.J. Pennell
Pennell Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas*

large Army post to this day, was home to some of the last segregated Army units after World War II.

After the closing of the frontier and the conclusion of the “Indian Wars,” African-American soldiers fought in the Spanish-American War of 1898. During that short conflict, five members of the 10th Cavalry Regiment received the Medal of Honor for their actions in Cuba. Three infantry regiments of African-American volunteers (the 8th Illinois, 9th US, and 23rd Kansas) also participated in the occupation of Cuba after the end of combat. All four original African-American regular Army regiments served in the Philippines during the Philippine Insurrection of 1899-1903. During the Mexican Punitive Expedition in 1916-17, the 10th Cavalry Regiment and the 24th Infantry Regiment were members of the small American force that unsuccessfully attempted to capture Francisco “Pancho” Villa.

On 23 March, 1907, a detachment from the 9th Cavalry Regiment was sent to the US Military Academy at

West Point to instruct white cadets in horsemanship. This detachment would eventually grow to become a squadron, but these soldiers remained responsible for teaching future white officers until 1947. It is no small irony that between 1865 and 1917, while African-American soldiers valiantly served their nation in both wartime and peacetime, they endured prejudice and contempt from the very people they swore to protect. This animosity even led to a small number of race riots directed against them. Nevertheless, African-Americans continued to serve their country in the hope that their service would eventually guarantee their broader civil rights.

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