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Negro Regulars in the American Army
An Indian War Combat Record

by
Don Ricky, Jr.



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The afternoon of May 13, 1965, a Veterans Administration official walked into a total-care ward at Wadsworth V.A. Hospital, Kansas, to convey official recognition of military campaign service to 103 year old Simpson Mann. Seventyfive years earlier, Mann had served in South Dakota. While a gathering of nurses, doctors, and other patients looked on, the official pinned an Indian Wars Campaign Medal on the terry-cloth robe worn by the thin, bronze-chocolate hued old cavalry veteran. Tears welled in his eyes, as the feeble old trooper replied, almost in a whisper, "I'm very proud to receive this medal". 1

Simpson Mann, Negro Indian Wars veteran, had waited almost seventyfive years for individual recognition. The Regular Army's Negro regiments effectiveness and contributions during the Indian Wars, from the time they were organized in 1866 to the last outbreak in 1898, have still not been accorded the importance and significance they deserve.

The Indian fighting record and effectiveness of the Negro Regulars provides an excellent example of the superiority of trained and disciplined Regular troops as against civilian groups in the Indian Wars following the Civil War, because they began as completely new organizations in 1866; composed of the least educated, least experienced, and most disadvantaged men the Regular Army had to work with and forge into efficient combat ready units for service in the West. The Indian campaigning efficiency and success achieved by Negro troops was due to the training, equipment, leadership, and experience provided by the Regular Army, and the grasping of an opportunity for self improvement by ambitious and often homeless Negro men.

Several Negro regiments, both state troops and U.S. Colored Volunteers, had served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Earlier, free Negroes had served in the army during the Revolutionary War, and a Negro regiment is recorded as having fought very well at Newport, Rhode Island, in 1778. 2 Before the 1840's, a few Negroes had served in the Regular Army as individuals, and continued to do so in the Navy until long after the middle of the last century. However, the recruiting, training, and campaign service use of all Negro regiments was considered very much an experiment by some high ranking officers when six such regiments, two of cavalry and four of infantry, were authorized by Act of Congress, July 28, 1866. 3

The authorizing act gave special attention to providing high caliber, experienced officers for the new Negro regiments; undoubtedly an important factor in getting them well launched and one that was to have a far ranging and lasting consequences. All the officers had to be whites though, as there were no Negroes having the stipulated experience. For the first time, all officers commissioned in the new regiment had to pass examination before a board of experienced officers convened by the Secretary of War. 4 First and second lieutenants were selected from applicants whose experience included at least two years service in the Union Volunteer regiments, and all officers ranking as captain or above had to have served as officers of volunteer cavalry or in the Regular Army. 5 To work closely with the enlisted men and help them adapt to their new living circumstances, each of the Negro regiments were also to include a commissioned Negro chaplain, among whose duties were "the instruction of the enlisted men in the common English branches." 6 The Army could prove to be a way up and out for thousands of totally uneducated, unskilled rootless Negro men.

Recruiting for the new regiments began in the fall of 1866, with considerable attention given to the types of men most wanted. Enlisted personnel of the Union Army infantry regiments of U.S. Colored Volunteers, regiments raised for wartime service, were canvassed first; those wishing to enlist in the Regulars receiving discharges on request. 7 Most of the recruiting was done by officers assigned to the new outfits, specially detailed to the assignment.

Intially, most recruits came from the ranks of the Colored Volunteers, the northern tier of southern states, the New Orleans area, and the Philadelphia area. Recruiting was apparently not carried on among the mass of former field slaves in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Such men had little or no experience of self-reliance, initiative, or exercise of judgement, and lacked the habitual self esteem that could be redirected by the Army into unit pride and high morale.

The 10th Cavalry's commander, Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson, of Civil War cavalry raid fame, was especially concerned with setting high standards for his recruits. Instead of ox strong but mentally stifled field hands, Grierson wanted the most alert, intelligent men he could find. He sent Captain Louis H. Carpenter to recruit Negro men whose wits, native intelligence, and living experience had been sharpened in the survival-of-the-fittest environment of the Philadelphia slums. A few moderately educated Negro men could also be found in the cities of the middle Atlantic states. Grierson ordered Carpenter "to recruit men...sufficiently educated to fill the positions of non-commissioned officers, clerks, and mechanics....You will use the greatest care in your selection...you will also enlist all superior men who will do credit to the regiment." 8

Writing of the ranks of the newly raised 9th Cavalry, an officer of the regiment explained his views on what the green outfits were like; "the men knew nothing, and the non-commissioned officers but little more. From the very circumstances of their preceding life it could not be otherwise. They had no independence, no self reliance, not a thought except for the present, and were filled with superstition. To make soldiers of such material, was, at that time, considered more of an experiment than a fixed principal. The Government depended on the officers...to solve the problem of the colored soldier...it took both time and patience to teach the men how to care for themselves...few indeed could read and scarcely any were able to write even their own names." 9 That the enlisted men responded to the leadership provided by the Regular Army is well demonstrated by the service records they accumulated. A very positive but hard to assess factor these regiments had in their favor was the fact that many Negro men who enlisted in them did so as an opportunity to make a place for themselves and gain acceptance and recognition of their individual rights and dignity, in a world where these were very difficult to achieve for Negroes and the opportunities for doing so was very limited.

From 1866 on, social and economic betterment was the motivation for nearly all Negro enlistments. Perry A. Hayman enlisted at age 20 in Philadelphia, January 6, 1874, and spent the next ten years in the Regulars. He had received some schooling, and sought opportunity in the army. Three months after enlisting he was appointed a corporal in the 10th Cavalry. 10 Horace W. Bivens, son of a free farmer born in Virginia, enlisted in 1887, because he liked the military life he had been exposed to as a student at Hampton School. 11 Enlisting in Annapolis, Maryland, in the 1880's Charles Creek said, I got "tired of looking mules in the face [?] from sunrise to sunset [on the farm, I] thought there must be a better livin' in this world. [So I] walked into Annapolis, to join up in the United States Cavalry." 12 After drudging for a farmer at .25 cents per day, 27 year old Simpson Mann made the same decision when he walked into a recruiting office in Cincinnati in 1888. 13

All through the winter and spring of 1866-67, intensive recruiting and trailing were carried on by the officers of the six new regiments. By the summer of 1867, orders were issued deploying the new outfits against Indian enemies from west Texas to Kansas and central Colorado. The time of testing was at hand. The combat effectiveness displayed by the new Negro Regulars would be the arbiter of how well the officers had achieved their aims and produced trained, disciplined soldiers from the unshaped human raw material of a few months before.

Returns began to come in almost immediately. Leading a small detachment of Company K, 38th Infantry, Corporal D. Turner fought his men so well at Wilson's Creek, Kansas, that a large war party of Indians were repulsed June 26, 1867, with the loss of five warriors killed. 14 Corporal Turner has shown the initiative and non-commissioned leadership that prejudiced detractors had prophesied would be lacking in Negroes. In September, 1867, Sergeant C.H. Davis, with only nine men of the 10th Cavalry, "were attacked by fifty or sixty Cheyennes. They drove the Indians off in confusion, losing one private wounded." 15 Here was another early instance of initiative, competence and bravery on the part of trained Negro Regulars.

Meanwhile, the controversial Captain George A. Armes was leading elements of the 10th Cavalry in hard fought little actions in western Kansas. Early in August, Armes commanded a force of two white officers and thirtyfour 10th Cavalrymen in a six hour fight against three hundred Indians -- withdrawing in good order, and losing only Sergeant W. Christy killed and himself wounded. 16 On the 21st of August, Armes again fought an Indian battle, this time with forty of his own 10th Cavalry and ninety white soldiers of the 18th Kansas Volunteer Cavalry, against about 500 Indians. This was a standup fight, in which one of the Negro soldiers was killed and scalped, and thirteen of them were wounded. Fifteen of the Kansas Volunteers and two guides were also wounded, but the Indians lost heavily and were forced to leave the area. 17

Still combatting Indians in the Colorado - Kansas border area, Company I, 10th Cavalry (maximum strength sixtyfour men) were attacked by "about one hundred Indians, and seven soldiers were wounded. Eleven Indians were reported killed and fourteen wounded." 18 Tenth Cavalry had again had a toe-to-toe fight with about double their own number, and out fought the hostiles until the Indians withdrew after dark.

One of the early instances of Negro Regulars proving their campaign and combat value occurred in mid-October, 1868. General Eugene A. Carr, commander of the 5th Cavalry, left Fort Wallace, Kansas, escorted by two companies of the 10th Cavalry, October 14, en route to rejoin his regiment. For three days the little column of soldiers and wagons moved across northwestern Kansas, until the morning of the 18th, when a large war party of between four and five hundred warriors attacked them on Beaver Creek. The wagons were quickly corralled, while the two companies of soldiers deployed outside the corral -- driving back the warriors with disciplined, crashing volleys from their Spencer carbines. 19

Realizing their numerical advantage, the Indians pounded down on the corral in a whooping, firing charge to "within fifty yards of our breastworks," said 10th Cavalryman R. Waller. 20 After the fighting ended, the Indians having recovered their reachable dead and wounded, "three dead warriors lay within fifty yards of the wagons," wrote Lieutenant Bigelow. 21 General Carr had used a carbine along with the other soldiers, loading and firing in earnest. Despite his many years of combat experience and noted coolness under fire, Carr believed he might well be engaged in his last battle. "I really did not expect...to get out of that fix," said Carr. 22 After the demoralized Indians decided to leave this group of soldiers very much alone, Private Waller explained that "General Carr said to us that he had never seen such superior marksmanship among soldiers, in all his military experience. He said "Men, you have surely gained this day." We said among ourselves, "Yes, General Carr, and we have also saved your scalp," a belief that Carr's statement seems to fully bear out. 23 Carr's 5th Cavalry was one of the best old line regiments in the Regular Army, and his praise of the Negro cavalrymen's effectiveness is significant evidence of their Indian fighting prowess.

For the next twentytwo years, Negro Regulars repeatedly demonstrated their combat and campaign effectiveness in the West. Kiowa and Commanche warriors, estimated at about 500 - strong, sought to wipe out the Witchita Indian Agency in late August, 1869. Four companies of the 10th Cavalry from repeated attempts to drive them out and burn the Agency around their ears. The decisive element in the fighting was a charge by Captain Carpenter's company against 150 warriors, forcing the hostiles to abandon the assault. 24 In May, 1870, at Kickapoo Springs, Texas, Sergeant Emanuel Stance, with only five other men of his company, surprised and attacked a small hostile camp, wounding four of them and recapturing two small white boys and fifteen horses from the fleeing warriors. 25 The Comanches quickly came to recognize and respect the fighting qualities of these soldiers they called tu-eksapan, or "black red - front." 26 The first soldiers they had encountered had been Spaniards in red trimmed uniforms. Their word for soldier from then on had been "red-front," or eksapana.

When trouble errupted at the Cheyenne Agency, in what is now western Oklahoma, in April, 1875, Provate Perry A. Hayman was on hand as a member of M Company, 10th Cavalry. Fleeing the Agency, the Chyenne crossed the Canadian River and took up defensive positions on the far side. Company M was ordered forward. "As the first set of fours crossed the river," wrote Hayman, "the Indians opened up on us, and Corporal George Berry was wounded. After being ordered to dismount and advance as skirmishers, Private Hayman continued, "we charged them and dislodged them. While rolling around on the ground, my rifle got some sand in the breech. I had to get a stick to clean it out, and in doing so I got in full view of the Indians. It was here that I got shot in the right side. I laid down behind a stump, and again these Indians fired a number of shots, but none of them hit me. Some [bullets] came so close to me that they threw sand in my face. I stayed there until dark, and then I managed to crawl away from my hiding place." 27 Early the next morning, the company saddled up to pursue the Indians, who had escaped during the night. I crawled out of my tent," said Private Hayman, "and wanted to saddle my horse, but the Captain made me go to the hospital." 28 Expectation of anymore, from any soldier, would have been ridiculus exaggeration.

Private Hayman had more than proved himself a good soldier. The Corporal Berry he mentioned stayed in the army for many years, and distinguished himself at the Battle of San Juan Hill in 1898, when he was one of the first men to enter the Spanish trenches in the famous charge, planting the American colors for the others behind him to see.

The peak of soldierly qualities was shown in action by three Negro 24th Infantrymen and a white officer on April 26, 1875. Lieutenant Bullis and the three soldiers surprised and attached about twentyfive Comanches on the Pecos River -- killed three warriors and wounded one in breaking up the war party. Sergeant John Ward, Trumpeter Issac Payne, and Private Pompey Factor were all recommended for and received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The following year, a band of Kickapoo and Lipan raiders, whom had long been a thorn to the Texas Rangers, were rooted out in northern Mexico. Lieutenant Evans, with twenty picked men of Company B, 10th Cavalry, and twenty Seminole scouts, led by Lieutenant Bullis, 24th Infantry, marched 110 miles in twentyfive hours and surprised the hostile camp of twentythree lodges near Saragossa, Mexico. Ten hostiles were killed, four were captured, the village was destroyed, and 100 horses were captured. 29

Outstanding initiative was shown by Sergeant Henry Johnson, 9th Cavalry, at the Battle of Milk River, Colorado, against the Utes, October 2, 1879. Having heard that Major Thornburgh's command had been ambushed and pinned down by the Utes, Captain Dodge and his thirtyfive Negro troopers had made a night march to relieve the beleaguered command. Fighting their way through the Utes, Dodge's men tipped the balance away from total disaster. The night of October 2nd, Sergeant Johnson, "voluntarily left a sheltered position, and under heavy fire at close range made the rounds of the [rifle] pits to instruct the guards; and also, on the next night fought his way to the river and back to bring water for the wounded." 30 Johnson was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

All through the Apache campaigns Negro cavalrymen time and again showed their Indian fighting capabilities. August 19, 1881, Lieutenant George W. Smith, a few citizens, and twenty men of the 9th Cavalry were ambushed by Apaches in New Mexico. Smith fell at the first fire, and the soldiers suffered twentyfive per cent casualties, but Sergeant Brent Woods took command and drove off the Apaches. 31 Years later Lieutenant Smith's widow lauded the Negro troopers, writing that after Smith fell, they "continued to fight without a [commissioned] commander and by their bravery (God bless them) saved the body....a braver set of men never lived." 32 Reciprocal concern and bravery, on the part of a white officer for one of his men, won Lieutenant Powhatan H. Clark a Medal of Honor in 1886. Engaged with Geronimo's warriors in the Pinito Mountains of northern Mexico, Clark "dashed among the howling Apaches and snatched from them a corporal who had been wounded and fallen into their hands well in advance of his troopers." 33

The effectiveness of United States Regulars in Indian campaigning was well proven by the history of the Indian Wars, including the last uprising of any consequence, the Sioux Campaign of 1890 - 1891. That the regiments of Negro Regulars played important roles in these campaigns - creating law and order required for settlement and development by civilians - likewise cannot be denied, though the fact has often been overlooked. When the Ghost Dance disturbance in the Dakotas led frenzied officials to call for troops at the Sioux agencies, the 9th Cavalry, based at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, "was first in the field in November," wrote Lieutenant Hutcheson, "and the last to leave in the following March, after spending the winter, the latter part of which was terrible in its severity, under canvas." 34 Private Charles Creek recalled that winter very well. "You laid out in the cold like a dog, not in a tent, because the Indians gonna sneak up on you. It was so cold the [tobacco] spit froze when it left your mouth." 35

This last Indian War again put the Negro cavalry in the limelight as combat effective soldiers. Not present at the tragic December 29, 1890, holocaust at Wounded Knee - where Sioux desperation resulted in a deadly pitched battle with companies of the 7th Cavalry and a light battery of artillery - the 9th Cavalry was called upon to retrieve the 7th Cavalry from a cul-de-sac position the next day at White Clay Creek, or Drexel Mission. Pinned down on three sides by Sioux riflemen, elements of the 7th were in a precarious position until the 9th Cavalry arrived. Corporal William O. Wilson, Troop I, 9th Cavalry, earned a Medal of Honor there "for bravery and gallantry." 36

The 1890 - 1891 Sioux outbreak witnessed the last action between U.S. Regulars and the courageous Indians of the West. Regulars did most of the fighting all through the Indian Wars, and Negro Regulars did more than their percentage of the share. By 1898, the Negro regiments were counted among the best in the United States Army, serving conspicuously in the Spanish-American War in Cuba. In recent years much more attention has been given to the history of the Negro soldiers in the West - and there will long remain room for much more. Perhaps we should ask the old story tellers of the Comanches, Cheyennes, Sioux and Apaches; ask the surviving Rough Riders who stormed up San Juan Hill shoulder to shoulder with the Negro Regulars in 1898; and most certainly "ask" the records of these now vanished regiments that for so long remained unrecognized.

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Footnotes

1. "Medal is Awarded Indian Wars Veteran, 103," in, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 13, 1965, 20A.
2. William A. Ganoe, The History of the Army of the United States, 64.
3. Lt. Grote Hutcheson, "The Ninth Regiment of Cavalry," in, Rodenbough and Haskin (eds.), The Army of the United States (1896), 280.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Lt. John Bigelow, "The Tenth Regiment of Cavalry," in, The Army of the United States (1896), 288.
7. Hutcheson, "The Ninth Regiment of Cavalry," 281.
8. Bigelow, "The Tenth Regiment of Cavalry," 290.
9. Hutcheson, "The Ninth Regiment of Cavalry," 282.
10. Perry A. Hayman, 10th Cavalry, 1874, "Ten Years of Exciting Experiences and Hard Service in . . .," in, Winners of the West, March, 1925, 2 - 3.
11. Herschel V. Cashin, et al., Under Fire With the Tenth U.S. Cavalry (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1902), 58.
12. "Annapolis Centenarian Recalls Last Stand of Sioux," newspaper clipping; no name, place, of date of publication - April, 1963.
13. Simpson Mann, 9th Cavalry, 1888 - 92, interview with author, February 22, 1965. Died June 14, 1965.
14. George W. Webb, Chronological List of Engagements Between the Regular Army of the United States and Various Tribes of Hostile Indians, which Occurred During the Years 1790 to 1898, Inclusive (St. Joseph, Missouri: Wing Printing and Publishing Company, 1939), 31.
15. Bigelow, "The Tenth Regiment of Cavalry," 291.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. U.S. Army, Record of Engagements With Hostile Indians Within the Military Division of the Missouri, From 1866 to 1882 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882), 11.
19. Bigelow, "The Tenth Regiment of Cavalry," 291.

20. R.Waller, 10th Cavalry, 1868, "The Fighting Tenth Whipped the Indians at Beaver Creek," in, Winners of the West, October, 1924, 3.
21. Bigelow, "The Tenth Regiment of Cavalry," 292.
22. James T. King, War Eagle, A Life of General E.A. Carr (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 83.
23. Waller, "The Fighting Tenth...."
24. Bigelow, "The Tenth Regiment of Cavalry," 293.
25. Hutcheson, "The Ninth Regiment of Cavalry," 285.
26. The old Comanche word for soldier was eksapana, as explained: interview with Mrs. Sarah Pohocsacut, Lawton, Oklahoma, June, 1954.
27. Hayman, "Ten Years of Exciting Experiences...."
28. Ibid.
29. Bigelow, "The Tenth Regiment of Cavalry," 295.
30. W.F. Beyer and O.F. Keydel (eds.), Deeds of Valor (Detroit: The Perrier - Keydel Company, 1905), II, 255 - 59.
31. Ibid., 281
32. Mrs. G.W. Smith, "Captain Geo. W. Smith," in, Proceedings of the Army of the Cumberland, 14th Corps, 1894, 1895, 1896, 1897 (Columbus, Ohio: Press of John L. Trauger, 1898). 125.
33. Deeds of Valor, II, 296f.
34. Hutcheson, "The Ninth Regiment of Cavalry," 287.
35. "Annapolis Centenarian...."
36. Deeds of Valor, II, 326.