Buffalo Soldiers
Play Key Role
By James P. Finley

The story of black Americans fighting under their nation's flag is older than the flag itself. First introduced as slaves by the British early in the 17th century, blacks served alongside their white masters in the first colonial militias organized to defend against Indian attacks.

By the time of the American Revolution, some freed slaves took a stand for independence along with the white colonists. A freeman named Crispus Attucks was among those 11 Americans gunned down in the Boston massacre of March 5, 1770, when they defied the British soldiery. When the war broke out, blacks like Peter Salem and Salem Poor were in the thick of the fighting. Salem was credited with showing the British commander at Bunker Hill and Poor was cited for gallantry. A number of other blacks were serving in New England militia units in 1775, but when the Continental Army was officially formed in that year, Congress bowed to the insistence of the Southern slaveholders and excluded blacks, free or slave, from service. These regulations were soon overridden by the necessities of the desperate fighting and the need for manpower. Black veterans were reenlisted and new recruits were accepted. To all, approximately 3,000 blacks served in the American Revolutionary War.

In the Civil War, black troops made up 12 percent of the Union Army, adding to its number 178,892 men, of which 7,000 were NCOs. They manned 176 infantry regiments, 2 heavy artillery regiments, 10 light artillery batteries, and seven cavalry regiments. More than one-third gave their lives. There were NCOs like SGT William H. Carney of the 54th Massachusetts, who, though severely wounded, carried the regimental colors to the breastworks at the battle of Charleston, SC. After the Civil War, where their military abilities were unquestionably established—blacks were accepted into the regular Army.

In 1866, the Army formed six black regular Army regiments. They were the 24th, 25th, 40th, and 41st Infantry and the 3rd and 5th Cavalry. Three years later, as part of a reduction in the size of the Army, the 8th and the 4th combined to form the 24th Infantry, and the 3rd and the 5th made up the 25th Infantry. The post-Civil War Army combined 10 regiments (the 5th and 25 regiments of infantry, a number that would be unchanged until the turn of the century). Four of those 15 combat arms regiments consisted of African Americans. Offered by whites,
these regiments went on to justify the belief in black leaders that men of their race could contribute mightily to the nation’s defense.

The 24th Infantry Regiment participated in the 1873 expedition against hostile Kiowas and Comanches in the Department of Texas. One of the engagements of this campaign saw a Lieutenant John Bullis and his Sealthie-Negro Indian scouts attack a 25-man war party on the Pesos River. SCT John Ward, Pvt. Pecapey Foster and Trumpeter Isaac Payne received the Medal of Honor for their exceptional bravery in this encounter.

The 25th Infantry Regiment spent its first 10 years in Texas and developing and equipping military posts, roads and telegraph lines; performing escort and guard duty, marching and counter-marching from post to post and scouting for Indians. In 1890, the regiment was at Fort Missoula, M.T. It participated in the Pine Ridge Campaign of 1890-91, the last stand of the Sioux, and quelled civil disorders in Missouri during the Northern Pacific Railroad strike in 1894.

In 1890, the Battle of Wounded Knee Creek; the last major fight of the Indian War, pitted the U.S. 7th Cavalry against Big Foot’s Sioux. The 9th Cavalry Regiment also took part in this campaign and played a dramatic role in the Battle of the Big Horn. Over 1,800 Sioux under Little Wound and Two Strike had encircled the battle weary 7th. The situation looked grave until the 9th Cavalry arrived on the field and drove off the Indian force with an attack on their rear. For conspicuous gallantry displayed on this occasion, CPL William O. Winton, Troop Y, 9th Cavalry, was granted the Medal of Honor.

1SG Vance Marchbanks: A Buffalo Soldier NCO

Students of American history easily recognize names like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and Mary McLeod Bethune. These men and women spoke out for the African-American cause at a time when they were needed leaders.

So did Vance Hunter Marchbanks, a trooper in the Buffalo Soldier regiment. He wrote a manuscript entitled "Forty Years in the Army," which, thanks to its son, has survived to relate his military experiences, most of which were as an NCO in the 9th Cavalry at Ft. Huachuca.

Marchbanks’ actual Army service was 43 years, nine months and 11 days by his own reckoning. He enlisted for the first time in 1890 and spent most of his Army career at Ft. Huachuca. In World War II he was commissioned a captain and after the war he rejoined the Regular Army as a major of first sergeant. His termination and his manuscript form the Ft. Huachuca Museum's plaque.

His service spans the periods from the Spanish-American War to the beginning of World War II. He was in a position to witness nearly half a century of the history of one of the Army’s most revered regiments and pass on an NCO’s perspective.

In talking about the lessons of Army life, he says, "If they only taught one or two mottos, I would say the Army is not worthwhile. But one is taught citizenship, discipline, the power of organization, personal hygiene, and many other useful trades in the Army and Navy which prepare one for useful citizenship in any community."

In 1922, while he served at Ft. Huachuca, he was asked to speak at a convention of Sunday School teachers at McNary, AZ. The subject of his speech was to be “Reminiscences of a Trooper at Fort Apache in 1910.” After briefly talking on those experiences, Marchbanks spoke about patriotism, the contributions of the “colored soldier” to the nation and about racial injustice. He felt he had duties beyond the battlefield.

"While the primary object of the soldier is to prepare for war, he realizes very seriously that the new patriotism has other duties than those of armed conflict; duties less splendid, but no less brave, requiring a bravery of a greater order than shown upon a hundred battlefield of our World War."

The orderly soldier fought bravely in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War and the World War. But the Negro will not be given justice through the valor and bravery he displays in the war. It will be through the cooperative efforts of every member of the Negro Race intelligent-ely placing his case before the public, if you want equal rights in this country, write on your banner so that every political candidate can read it so that no matter how shortsighted he may be, he can't read it. "We Never Forget, We Never Forget, We Never Forget."

First Sergeant Vance Marchbanks was a believer in the instructive power of history and quoted Patrick Henry, "We have no way of judging the future except by the past." He was extremely knowledgeable about the history of black Americans serving their country and on the cooperation to transcribe his own military experience so that his life might become part of the flow of history.

Matchbanks’ writings about his Army experiences have done much to illuminate the soldier’s life at a time when America was largely estranged from its standing Army. He becomes a part of the Buffalo Soldier tradition about which he felt so strongly and his written record enables succeeding generations of American NCOs to join him in his invocation: "We Never Forget."
Grierson achieved his goal. In 1886, the so-called Buffalo Soldiers tracked Geronimo's renegades in the Pintos Mountains of Mexico and several months later ran down the last Apache holdout—Chief Mangas and his family.

Pima Indians gave the nickname "Buffalo Soldiers" to the men of the 10th Cavalry. It meant that their hair was cut like that of the buffalo. Over the years this name has been extended to include soldiers of all the original black regiments.

Raw recruits made up a large portion of enlisted strength of the four new regiments. To stiffen the mix, the Army bought NCOs who had seen service during the war with black volunteer units. The experience of these Civil War veterans would be invaluable in the hard work of training that lay ahead, but they did not always receive the credit. Lieutenant George Hatcher, adjutant of the 7th Cavalry, wrote 30 years after his regiment's organization that the officers aide took most of the arduous drill of the unit's 855 new troopers. He said, "The men knew nothing, and the Noncommissioned 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 superstitions. To make soldiers of such material was, at that time, considered more of an experiment than a trained principle. The government depended upon the officers of those early days to solve the problem of the colored soldier. For some years the NCOs, from lack of instruction, were much only in name, and the process of moulding them into a responsible and self-reliant class was a slow one. Troop officers were in fact squad commanders, and it took both time and patience to reach the men how to care for themselves.

Remington's "Saddles Up!"

any white officers did not wish to serve in black regiments, fearing it would harm their careers or simply because they carried a bias against black troops. One such officer was CPT RW Besteman who wrote that, "If I had only grown up 30 years ago, I could have gone into the 10th U.S. Cavalry as a junior, but I preferred a captaincy in the Seventh. Pete, however, after being a captain 15 years—there's no such thing as organization and courtesy, and being well off in this world's goods, and feeling it was not proper to remain with a race of troops that I could take no interest in—and this on account of their 'low down,' rainy character, there seemed nothing left for me to do but to resign..." And retire he did.

The service of the African-American NCO was not only measured by medals granted, a rare occurrence in the 19th-century Army. Some men achieved legendary status without ever being awarded a medal. IG Shepshire was shipped out in the early days at Ft. Leavenworth. His bravery was noted in orders after the action at the Wichita Agency in August 1874. But he was not better remembered for his actions in camp at Gainesville, NM, after a second lieutenant killed two of the troopers, for little apparent reason. A curious incident, Shepshire stepped in and coolly disarmed the lieutenant. He then turned the lieutenant over to the guard to await court-martial.

Despite the low opinion of some officers, the African-American regiments played a key role in the opening the American West and in all America's wars to follow. They quickly proved themselves on the plains of Texas, in the Apache strongholds of New Mexico and Arizona, and in the Sioux country of Montana and the Dakota. Eighteen Buffalo soldiers received the Medal of Honor during the Indian campaigns—26 earlobes and two amputations. Fourteen of these men were NCOs at the time of their action for which they were cited. They began a tradition for NCOs in these black regiments.

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