

Opening the West...

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

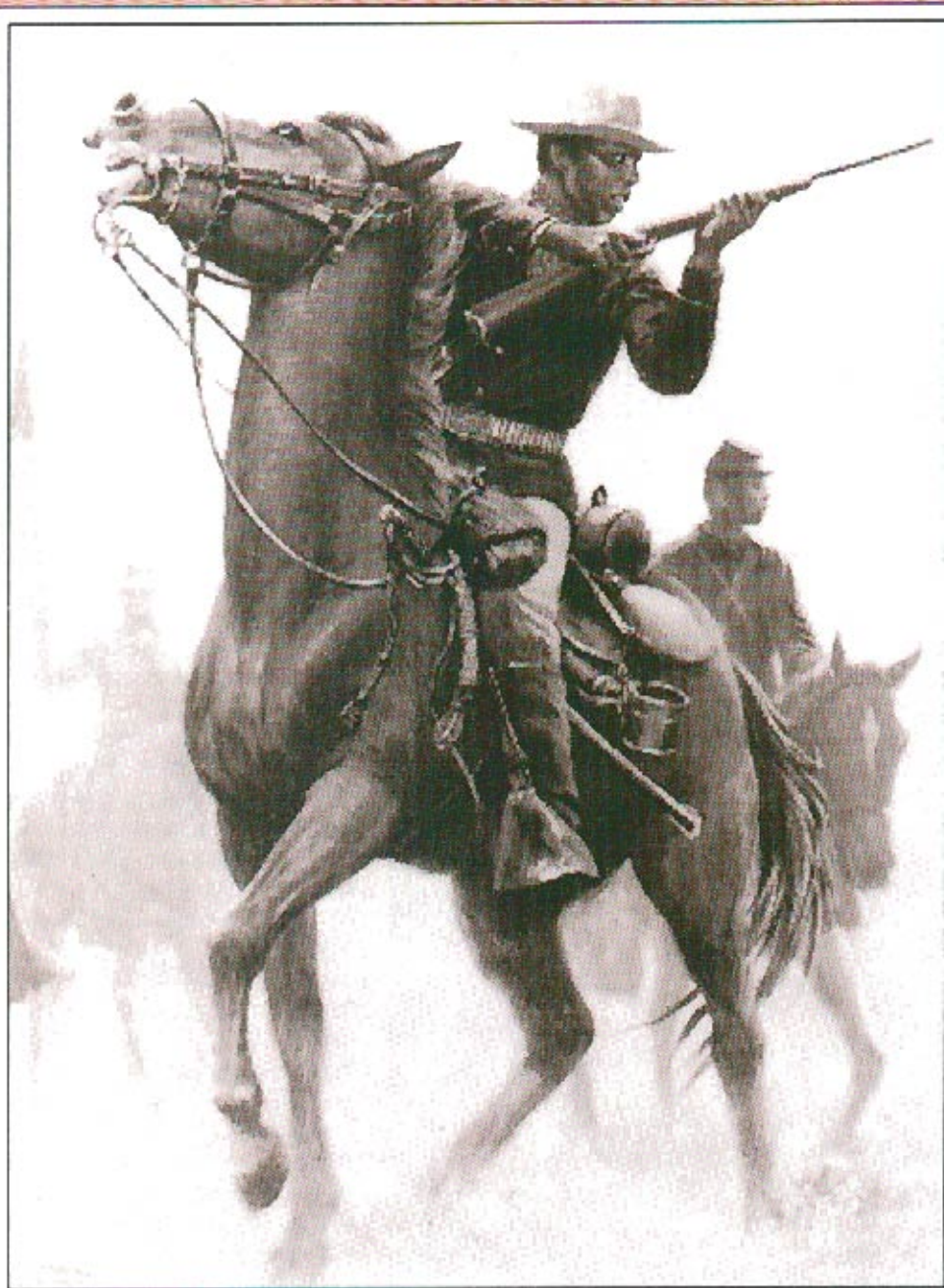
masters in the first colonial militias organized to defend against Indian attacks.

By the time of the American Revolution, some freed slaves took a stand for independence along with the white colonists. A freedman 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 Poore were in the thick of the fighting. Salem was credited with shooting the British commander at Bunker Hill and Poore 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 slave holders and ex-

cluded 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 retained and new recruits were accepted. In all, approximately 5,000 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 120 infantry regiments, 12 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 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st Infantry and the 9th and 10th Cavalry. Three years later, as part of a reduction in the size of the Army, the 38th and the 41st combined to form the 24th Infantry, and the 39th and the 40th made up the 25th Infantry. The post-Civil War Army combined 10 regiments of cavalry and 25 regiments of infantry, a number that would be unchanged until the turn of the century. Four of these 35 combat arms regiments consisted of African-Americans. Officerred by whites,



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these regiments went on to justify the belief by black leaders that men of their race could contribute mightily to the nation's defense.

The 24th Infantry Regiment participated in the 1875 expedition against hostile Kiowas and Comanches in the Department of Texas. One of the engagements of this campaign saw a Lieutenant John Bullis and three Seminole-Negro Indian scouts attack a 25-man war party on the Pecos River. SGT John Ward, PVT Pompey Factor 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 building and repairing military posts, roads and telegraph lines; performing escort and guard duty; marching and counter-marching from post to post and scouting for Indians. In 1880, the regiment was at Ft. Missoula, MT. It participated in the Pine Ridge Campaign of 1890-91, the last stand of the Sioux, and quelled civil disorders in Missoula during the Northern Pacific Railroad strike in 1894.

In 1890, the Battle of Wounded Knee Creek, the last major fight of the Indian Wars, 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 part in the Battle of Clay Creek Mission. 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. Wilson, Troop I, 9th Cavalry, was granted the Medal of Honor.

The 10th Cavalry Regiment is probably the most renowned of the black regiments. At its inception, the commander, COL Benjamin H. Grierson, sought to fill the ranks only with men of the highest quality. Orders went out to recruit none but "superior men...who would do credit to the regiment." The 10th's record in several Indian War campaigns attests to the fact that

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 most 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 his son, has survived to relate his military experiences, most of which were as an NCO in the 10th Cavalry at Ft. Huachuca.

Marchbanks' actual Army service was 43 years, nine months and 13 days by his own reckoning. He enlisted for the first time in 1895 and spent most of his Army career at Fort Huachuca. In World War II he was commissioned a captain and after the war he rejoined the Regular Army at his old rank of first sergeant. His reminiscences are in manuscript form in the Ft. Huachuca Museum files.

His service spans the period 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 renowned regiments and pass on an NCO's perspective.

In talking about the lessons of Army life, he says, "If they only taught one to shoot a gun 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 prepares one for useful citizenship in any community." In 1927, while he served at Ft. Huachuca, he was asked to speak to 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 1900." 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 battlefields of our World War.

"...The colored 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 intelligently pleading his case before the public...if you want equal rights in this country...write on your banner so that every political trimmer can read it so that...no matter how short-sighted he may be he can 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 felt the compulsion to transcribe his own military experience so that his life might become a part of the flow of history.

Marchbanks' writings about his Army experiences have done much to illuminate the soldier's life at a time when America was largely estranged from its tiny standing Army. He becomes a part of the Buffalo Soldier tradition about which he felt so strongly and his sincere 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 Pinito Mountains of Mexico and several months later ran down the last Apache holdout—Chief Mangas and his band.

Plains Indians gave the nickname "Buffalo Soldiers" to the men of the 10th Cavalry. Indians likened their hair to that of the buffalo. Over the years this name has been extended by veterans 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 sought NCOs who had seen service during the war with black volunteer units. The experience of these Civil War veterans would be indispensable in the hard work of training that lay ahead, but they did not always receive the credit. Lieutenant Grote Hutcheson, adjutant of the 9th Cavalry, wrote 20 years after his regiment's organization that the officers undertook most of the arduous drill of the unit's 885 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 superstition. To make soldiers of such material was, at that time, considered more of an experiment than a fixed 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 education, were such only in name, and the process of molding 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 teach the men how to care for themselves.

Many white officers did not wish to serve in black regiments, fearing it would hurt their careers or simply because they carried a bias against black troops. One such officer was CPT F.W. Benteen who wrote that, "In 1866 I could have gone into the 10th U.S. Cavalry as a major, but I preferred a captaincy in the Seventh. Fate, however, after being a captain 17 years—'threw' me into an organization of cavalry anyhow; 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,' rascally character, ...there seemed nothing left for me to do but...[retire]." 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. 1SG Shelving Shropshire was one of the original members of C Company from its early days at Ft. Leavenworth. His bravery was noted in orders after the action at the Wichita Agency in August 1874. But he was better remembered for his actions in camp at Galesteo, NM, after a second lieutenant killed two men of the troop for little apparent reason. A mutiny seemed imminent when Shropshire 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 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 Dakotas. Eighteen Buffalo soldiers received the Medal of Honor during the Indian campaigns—16 cavalrymen and two infantrymen. Fourteen of these men were NCOs at the time of the action for which they were cited. They began a tradition for NCOs in these black regiments.

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