

Black Soldiers in the Civil War

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African-American guards of the 107th United States Colored Troops pose outside a guard house at Fort Corcoran. It was built by the Union Army in northern Virginia as part of the defenses of Washington, D.C. during the American Civil War. Photo: Corbis Historical/Getty Images

The issues of emancipation and military service were intertwined from the beginning of the Civil War. News from Fort Sumter, where the first shots were fired, set off a rush by free black men to enlist in U.S. military units. They were turned away, however, because of a federal law dating from 1792 that barred African-Americans from bearing arms for the U.S. Army (although they had served in the American Revolution and in the War of 1812). In Boston, disappointed would-be volunteers met and passed a resolution requesting that the government modify its laws to allow their enlistment.

President Lincoln's administration wrestled with the idea of authorizing the recruitment of black troops. Some were concerned that such a move would prompt the border states to secede, or leave the Union. In 1861, General John C. Frémont issued a proclamation in Missouri emancipating the slaves in the region and allowing them to enlist. General David Hunter did the same in South Carolina the following year. Both were sternly criticized by their superiors, who revoked the orders. By mid-1862, however, the escalating number of former slaves, the declining number of white volunteers and the increasingly pressing needs of the Union Army pushed the government into reconsidering the ban.

Second Confiscation and Militia Act is passed

As a result, on July 17, 1862, Congress passed the Second Confiscation and Militia Act, freeing slaves who had masters in the Confederate Army. Two days later, slavery was abolished in the territories of the United States. After the Union Army turned back the Confederate invasion of the North at Antietam, Maryland, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. This executive order freed all of the slaves in the South. After it was announced, black recruitment was pursued in earnest. Volunteers from South Carolina, Tennessee and Massachusetts filled the first authorized black regiments. Recruitment was slow until black leaders such as Frederick Douglass encouraged black men to become soldiers to ensure eventual full citizenship. Two of Douglass' own sons contributed to the war effort, as well. Volunteers began to respond, and in May 1863 the government established the Bureau of Colored Troops to manage the growing numbers of black soldiers.

By the end of the Civil War, roughly 179,000 black men served as soldiers in the U.S. Army, making up 10 percent of the Union Army. Another 19,000 served in the Navy. Nearly 40,000 black soldiers died over the course of the war — 30,000 of infection or disease. Black soldiers served in artillery and infantry and performed the noncombat support functions that sustain an army, as well. Black carpenters, chaplains, cooks, guards, laborers, nurses, scouts, spies, steamboat pilots and surgeons also contributed to the war cause. There were nearly 80 black commissioned officers. Black women, who could not formally join the Army, nonetheless served as nurses, spies and scouts. The most famous among them was Underground Railroad leader Harriet Tubman.

Sixteen black soldiers awarded Medal of Honor

Because of prejudice against them, black units were not used in combat as extensively as they might have been. Nevertheless, the soldiers served with distinction in a number of battles in Louisiana, Virginia and Tennessee. In July 1863, the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers lost two-thirds of its officers and half of its troops in an assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina. The battle was memorably dramatized in the film "Glory." By war's end, 16 black soldiers had been awarded the Medal of Honor for their valor.

Black soldiers suffer from racial prejudice

In addition to the perils of war faced by all Civil War soldiers, black soldiers faced additional problems stemming from racial prejudice. Racial discrimination was widespread even in the North, and discriminatory practices permeated the U.S. military. Segregated units were formed with black enlisted men and typically commanded by white officers. The 54th Massachusetts was commanded by Robert Shaw and the 1st South Carolina by Thomas Wentworth Higginson — both white. Black soldiers were initially paid \$10 per month from which \$3 was automatically subtracted for clothing, resulting in a net pay of \$7.

In contrast, white soldiers received \$13 per month from which no clothing allowance was drawn. In June 1864, Congress granted equal pay to the U.S. Colored Troops and made the action retroactive. Black soldiers received the same rations and supplies. In addition, they received comparable medical care.

The black troops, however, faced greater peril than white troops when captured by the Confederate Army. In 1863 the Confederate Congress threatened to punish officers of black troops and to enslave black soldiers. As a result, President Lincoln threatened retaliation on Confederate prisoners of war. Although the threat generally restrained the Confederates, black captives were typically treated more harshly than white captives. In perhaps the most evil known example of abuse, Confederate soldiers shot to death black Union soldiers captured at Fort Pillow, Tennessee. Confederate General Nathan B. Forrest witnessed the massacre and did nothing to stop it.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the article.

Black soldiers were initially paid \$10 per month from which \$3 was automatically subtracted for clothing, resulting in a net pay of \$7. In contrast, white soldiers received \$13 per month from which no clothing allowance was drawn. In June 1864, Congress granted equal pay to the U.S. Colored Troops and made the action retroactive. Black soldiers received the same rations and supplies. In addition, they received comparable medical care.

Which of the following can be inferred from the selection above?

- (A) Black soldiers were treated extremely poorly by the Union Army.
 - (B) African-American soldiers were not paid a livable wage by the Union Army.
 - (C) Though discrimination existed in the Union Army, conditions did improve over time.
 - (D) By the end of the war, African-Americans received better treatment than white soldiers.
- 2 Which of the following options BEST supports the idea that the skills of African-Americans were not fully utilized during the Civil War?
- (A) They were turned away, however, because of a federal law dating from 1792 that barred African-Americans from bearing arms for the U.S. Army (although they had served in the American Revolution and in the War of 1812).
 - (B) By mid-1862, however, the escalating number of former slaves, the declining number of white volunteers and the increasingly pressing needs of the Union Army pushed the government into reconsidering the ban.
 - (C) Because of prejudice against them, black units were not used in combat as extensively as they might have been.
 - (D) Nevertheless, the soldiers served with distinction in a number of battles in Louisiana, Virginia and Tennessee.

- 3 The central idea of the article is developed by:
- (A) illustrating both the contributions of and challenges faced by African-American soldiers in the Union Army.
 - (B) giving descriptions of specific roles that African-Americans fulfilled for the Union Army during the Civil War.
 - (C) providing specific examples that demonstrate why it was so important for African-Americans to join the Union Army.
 - (D) arguing that the Civil War could not have been won without the essential contributions of African-Americans in the North.
- 4 Which of the following details from the article is MOST important to the development of the main idea?
- (A) News from Fort Sumter, where the first shots were fired, set off a rush by free black men to enlist in U.S. military units.
 - (B) In 1861, General John C. Frémont issued a proclamation in Missouri emancipating the slaves in the region and allowing them to enlist.
 - (C) As a result, on July 17, 1862, Congress passed the Second Confiscation and Militia Act, freeing slaves who had masters in the Confederate Army.
 - (D) By the end of the Civil War, roughly 179,000 black men served as soldiers in the U.S. Army, making up 10 percent of the Union Army.