

from Gary McCarthy's

OUR AMERICAN WEST

The Buffalo Soldiers

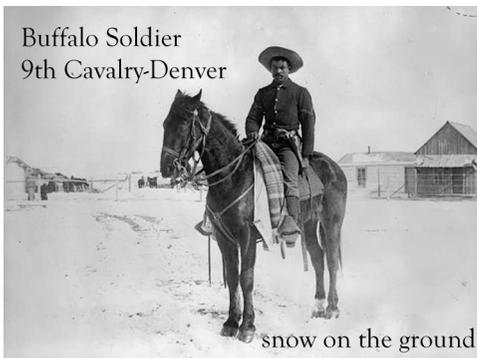
It was during the Civil War that black soldiers first dispelled the myth that they would not stand and fight courageously in battle. Before the Civil War ended, more than 200,000 of them served primarily the Union Army and 33,000 of them died on the battlefield. After the war's conclusion, General Ulysses Grant and the Union generals looked to the West realizing that the frontier settlements were under a virtual state of siege by Native Americans fighting to hold on to their land and traditional way of life. From the fierce Apache in the Southwest to the Northern Plains where the Cheyenne and Sioux ruled supreme on their swift horses, fear reigned among isolated white settlers and homesteaders. The Indians well understood that with the Civil War raging, many of the best frontier fight men had left their settlements, farms and ranches unprotected.

General Grant faced a problem in rebuilding the size of the army out on the vast frontier. American men were sick of fighting and those who survived the Civil War were not eager to risk their scalps to the fearsome and cunning Indians. Furthermore, it was very obvious that army life on the lonely and isolated outposts was almost a condition of last resort suited mainly for misfits, drunks and worse. A private in the army was paid only thirteen dollars a month and most of them were always in debt to the commissary or their superior officers. Army post food was terrible; the day-in-day-out monotony of army life was broken only by occasional

skirmishes and forays where the soldier's life was always in peril. Most of the commissioned officers were uninspired and the army's chaste system was so rigid that a commanding officer rarely even deigned to speak to an enlisted man, but did so through either a junior officer or sergeant. The wives and children of enlisted men were not even allowed to socialize with those of an officer and thus their children were treated much the same way that black children had been treated on Southern plantations before the Civil War. Contrary to the illusion that Hollywood gave us, the typical soldier was ill-trained and primarily concerned with survival. Mostly, they were men that had no other options in their lives or were running from the law or creditors.

General Grant realized that with the Civil War's end, many former black Union soldiers who now found themselves with sudden freedom could be induced into the frontier army to the great benefit of everyone. He hoped and believed that the top quality all-black cavalry regiments might set a fighting standard that the whites would strive to equal. In 1866, he persuaded Congress to authorize two black regiments and chose a pair of his best officers to command them. Grant's bold and innovative decision was not well received by most white officers or enlisted men in the army. General George Custer, for example, flatly refused to have anything to do with blacks and demanded that he completely distance himself from them. Custer got his wish and we all know that his decision making was fatally flawed. Many other army officers felt the same prejudices and had to be forced under orders to command the first black companies. No doubt, they felt as if they were doing some kind of penance and in their bitterness were unfair and unkind to their new black recruits. But this attitude quickly changed as the black soldiers were trained and equipped then began to prove themselves worthy soldiers. By June of 1878, two cavalry units, the Ninth and the Tenth, along with two infantry units, the Twenty-fourth and the Twenty-fifth, were sent to the West. Both cavalry units quickly distinguished themselves in battle. The Tenth took stations along the Smoky Hill River and the Santa Fe trails where they were constantly attacked by Comanche and Kiowa. In August of that first year

out in the field, F Company was engaged by a greatly superior force of Indians along the Saline River in Central Kansas. For six hours, less than forty black troopers fought a desperate battle to keep from being overrun and when they were almost out of ammunition their commanding officer gave the order to mount up, draw sabers and charge to the sound of bugles. The Indians greatly feared and respected the cavalry saber for they had nothing like it and, in close quarters, the sound and sight of flashing steel was unnerving. The black soldiers proved themselves to be admirable fighters and the skirmish raged until the Indians finally withdrew. That day a sergeant named William Cristy was the first black soldier to die on the western frontier.



Native Americans called blacks “Buffalo Soldiers” because the texture and color of their hair was similar to that of the buffalo. Since the buffalo were considered to be sacred, many scholars believe that the term was one given to honor the black soldiers. Others have cited evidence that says that the Indian did not scalp Buffalo Soldiers and held them in the highest regard as fighting men. But it would be years before the Buffalo Soldiers gained recognition among white civilians for their ability to fight. Typical was the incidence where a wagon train of Missourians crossing Kansas was under attack and a small detail of wood-cutting black soldiers came to their rescue. The leader of the wagon train demanded to know where their white superior officer was and when told that a black sergeant named Jim Adcock was in charge, he angrily cursed then dismissed the troopers as being worthless. But as Adcock prepared to leave, the women of the wagon train pleaded for their husbands to forget color and to ask the soldiers to help them stave almost certain future attacks and inevitable death. There were only nine Buffalo Soldiers to protect the wagontrain, but they proved themselves so effective in battle

that they were able to escort the wagon train to the safety of a fort and earn the undying appreciation of the westward bound settlers. When Sergeant Adcock and his Buffalo Soldiers were brought before the commanding officer of the post to receive the outpouring of praise and gratitude which he and his men so richly deserved, the commanding officer told everyone that such fine conduct was typical for those men and that they were among the best soldiers that he'd ever had the honor of commanding.

Buffalo Soldiers fought for over a quarter of a century against the fierce Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, Apache, Ute, Sioux as well as outlaws and Mexican bandits. The campaigns against the Apache chiefs Victoria and Nana were largely successful because of black scouts that had relocated in the vast and rugged country of Northern Mexico. Between 1870 and 1890, fourteen Buffalo Soldiers were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. It would seem that General Ulysses Grant had made a wise decision to give the black soldiers a fighting chance to finally gain their long overdue dignity and honor on the dangerous American frontier.



Gary McCarthy is a national award-winning western and historical novelist who welcomes comments about this column and can be reached through his website:

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