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BR, Joe Glattharr, Forged in Battle: CW Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers[1990]

2. The White Man's War

He notes that the most visible, although smallest, group to later command black troops were abolitionists or scions of abolitionist families.

Wm. Birney

Charles Francis Adams, Jr.

James Chaplin Beecher--son of Lyman Beecher, half brother of author Harriet Beecher Stowe

Robert Gould Shaw.

Another factor was education. Most of the officers were men of higher education. As they were also Republicans.

Before these white men entered the USCT, nearly four out of five had been in battle or "seen the elephant." Well over 40% had been in more than two battles, and over 20% had seen action in five or more engagements prior to serving in black units.

Most of them also were in agreement with the idea of a total war. This was generally the dynamic of the war in any case. As the war went on troops respected the needs and property of the Southern people less and less. More and more Feds considered it outrageous that their govt. allocated manpower and occasionally risked lives to protect the property of people who were in rebellion against the government. Also as the war dragged on, fighting men in the South became more aware of the role that slaves played in the CSA war effort and realized what use these slaves could be to the Northern war effort.

For the first time many of these Feds came in contact with the institution of slavery and the black race and this exposure helped convince them of the justice of the Emancipation Proclamation and the concept of black military service. . . . They saw firsthand the whipping posts, slave pens, and racially mixed offspring and heard stories from former slaves of the cruelties of slavery.

A strong determiner was when they saw black troops in battle.

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Any massive attachment to the idea of black troops was not to come automatically. There were early problems. There was also the residue of white racism that had to be dealt with. Many Union soldiers did not want to serve with blacks. After all it had just been a few years earlier when John Brown had armed blacks to fight for their freedom at Harper's Ferry much to shock and condemnation of both Northern and Southern populations. Recruiting officers for black units was not to be easy.

3. Recruiting the Officers

The usual suspicions: would blacks fight? Would they be under control in battle or would they go into a frenzy especially when they went up against their former white masters, etc.

For a host of reasons the War Department policy was to only assign white officers to black units. Recruitment started under the Bureau of Colored Troops. The policy was to recruit only intelligent whites with high morals. A set of examinations were established to screen for the men with the "right stuff." The stiff exams gave a sense of elitism to commissioned white officers. But the prestige was not the only attraction for applying for a commission w/ USCT.

Serving w/ black units gave opportunity to elevate them in the service by conferring a higher rank and better salary than they could make in white volunteer units. It was a matter of mobility and better income for some. A noncommissioned officer w/ white volunteers might make \$13 a month but \$120 with black units.

The examination or screening was two fold: the candidate needed to provide letters of recommendation about moral fitness and then (2) prepare to take a stiff set of exams on tactics, army regulations, general military knowledge, arithmetic, history, and geography. Nearly 50% of those tested failed.

This was the first time in the history of the nation that the govt. screened candidates for officers' commissions in volunteer units during wartime. It was for racial reasons. . . But the upshot was that the officer corps of the USCT was superior to the white volunteer units. The system did not allow blacks to gain commands but it was a genuine attempt to prevent careless abuses in black units and secure for them the best qualified white officers.

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4. Filling the Ranks

Thousands of blacks joined the Union army without having to be recruited. But the supply was neither large nor consistent enough to sustain the formation of black troops. Recruitment became necessary.

Pressure to recruit came from the highest levels of government and industry. Men were needed by the third year of the war. Volunteering was slackening off and conscription was not a popular political alternative. Cries from industry in the North that they did not want to give up their white work force to the war.

Pay for all black enlistees was \$7 per month and \$3 for clothing. Hardly an incentive. Bounties provided for white recruits were not made available for blacks for the most part. In the South a slave received his freedom upon enlisting. . .and the bounty would most usually go to his former master. Blacks held back because there were no financial provisions for their families if they went off to war.

Blacks had faced harsh treatment in the early stages of the war when they were "contrabands." They were assigned the worse kind of labor in the army and were mistreated in other ways. This was common knowledge among blacks in the South.

Blacks in the South who tried to enlist and white southerners found out might be subject to violence. Rebel guerrillas in parts of the South were practitioners of violence against black enlistees. They were particularly savage against black recruitment in Missouri and Tennessee.

√ Worse than these efforts to block recruitment of blacks was the retribution levelled against the families of those blacks who joined the Union. Many families of black recruits were abused. Then there were the threats to sell off the wives and children of black recruits to slave traders and to slave dealers in other states.

Despite all these hazards blacks entered the Union ranks. One of the most successful recruitment tools was the use of black troops in the area.

√ Recruitment of blacks in the North was not a difficult chore. They came readily. More than 34,000 Northern blacks served in the Union Army, or over 15% of the entire free black population in 1860; an extremely high rate.

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Use of black troops was a successful device. Recruitment officers were able to get over southern blacks suspicion of whites by parading black men in uniforms and armed, etc. and felt more secure with fellow blacks.

One of the biggest drags on recruitment was the freedman's concern about leaving his family to go and fight. When Union recruitment officers could secure the families in safe areas their jobs were easier.

5. Coping With Racism

6. Training and Discipline

7. Proving Their Valor

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Notes on Emancipation Proclamation
(Source: Gatthaar, Forged in Battle)

The Sable Arm: Blacks in the Military

Due to the Northern white scepticism the early actions of black regiments drew a great deal of attention from the Northern press. The Northern white public wanted to see how black troopers would handle themselves in combat before the Government would commit itself to general enlistment and the use of black soldiers.

By July 1863 there was ample evidence to think about:

In the West there was an ongoing campaign by Grant to take Vicksburg and General Banks was to seize the only other CSA fort on the Mississippi, Port Hudson, Louisiana. In May '63 two black regiments were part of the assault on Port Hudson. They were repelled by withering fire but acquitted themselves handsomely. Port Hudson would fall but not before a six-weeks siege by Union forces under Banks' command. Most of the black troops were former bondsmen and did not have superior training. But all judged their efforts to be praiseworthy under fire.

Ten days after the assault on Port Hudson a battle at Milliken's Bend in Mississippi. This was one of the most vicious engagements in the war. The battle involved vicious hand-to-hand combat with bayonets and rifle butts. Black casualties were extremely high. Some 35% of the black units involved were either killed or wounded. The 5th US Colored Heavy Artillery lost nearly 45% of its manpower (KIA or mortally wounded). This was highest loss rate in the entire Civil War.

There were still those who were prejudiced and uncertain about the use of black troops in combat situations. It took the July 18 assault on Ft. Wagner in So. Carolina to convince the large contingent of skeptics that Afro-Americans were a powerful weapon in the hands of the Federal government.

Characteristically blacks were used as an assault force against the formidable Southern fortification. Well over 40% of the men of the 54th Massachusetts were casualties in that engagement.

8. Leaving Their Mark on the Battlefield

Discusses the reason why black troops were mostly used for assault on Confederate fortifications rather than as a defensive force. It was a combination of racial stereotyping and the fact that black

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Re: BR, Glatthaar, Forged in Battle

troops were not as well trained as white union forces.

"Black Flag"

"Special treatment" from the Rebels. Wartime efforts to intimidate black soldiers by acts of barbarism and atrocities were commonplace. Examples such as mutilation of their corpses and by killing of captured black soldiers and their white officers.

Reports:

Milliken's Bend--some black troops were hung after capture

Poison Springs, Arkansas(1864)--Black POWs were murdered on the spot.

Battle of the Crater--blacks were bayoneted by Rebels while they lay on the ground wounded.

Saltville, Virginia(1864) reports that wounded black POWs were killed while in the hospital having their wounds attended.

The most notorious incident of atrocities in this case was Ft. Pillow massacre in April 1864. A Congressional Committee investigated this incident after the war and concluded that Bedford Forrest's men had butchered black troops after they surrendered. Some claim as many as several hundred were murdered. There is some indication that General Forrest encouraged or connived in the massacre to "teach blacks a lesson" etc.

Events like Ft. Pillow only hardened attitudes within black units toward the Confederacy. At times they fought under the black flag to warn Rebs that they would take no prisoners. Blacks matched Confederate atrocities with atrocities of their own w/ the cry of "Remember Ft. Pillow."