

AMERICANS HISTORY BOOKS FORGOT

68,178 Negroes Killed in Union Army

*(Fifth of 10 Articles)*By **BETTY DeBOLD**
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Picture, if you can, the ludicrous spectacle of black body servants following Confederate gentry around battlefields in the early stages of the Civil War: tucking the blankets around "marse's" cot at night, stealing chickens for him to eat, brushing his uniform and polishing his sword before battle — then taking cover, when the shells fell, to shouts of: "Get behind the trees, all you \$3000 niggers!"

This was an "elite" situation among Southern Negroes during the war, one that involved affection and instances of touching personal loyalties, for many of these body servants and their masters literally had grown up together.

But the vast majority of slaves, the hundreds of thousands of other Negroes remaining in the South, were force-serving the Confederacy with their sweat even harder than before. They were "impressed" by the Confederate government as "military laborers" (ditch-diggers, etc.), and those left at home tended to fields converted from cotton to desperately needed food.

¶ Fled North

Those who could manage, fled North in increasing numbers, tho some stayed in the area to serve as spies and scouts for the Union, risking death if caught. The rest had no choice but to work and wait for "de day ob jubilo" (liberation), when Yankees swept in to lift their burdens — and often the meager goods right out of their cabins. Slave quarters were often rifled alongside the plantations.

Superimpose on this the picture of 178,975 males — ex-slaves and freedmen — who were finally "allowed" to fight for the Union 18 months after the war began.

Placed in segregated regiments, they got "special" treatment — like lower pay, longer periods of enlistment and less chance of advancement to officer than white soldiers. Despite this, they fought in more than 499 military engagements, racking up a grim 37 per cent death toll: 68,178.



Negro body servants, like this one presiding over the cook pots, accompanied Confederate officers to the battlefields to tend to their personal needs.

¶ Natural Scouts

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, colonel of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers (all Negro regiments had white officers) reported in his "Army Life in a Black Regiment" that these men were "natural scouts and rangers . . . they had the 2 o'clock in the morning courage which Napoleon thought so rare." The worst problem Col. Higginson found was that "inexperienced officers often assumed that, because these men had been slaves before enlistment, they would bear to be treated as such afterwards. Experience proved contrary."

Negroes also performed exceptionally well in the Navy. Twenty-nine thousand of them were accepted there from the beginning of the war, four eventually winning the Navy Medal of Honor. Best known of these was Joachim Pease, No. 1 gunner on the Kearsarge, who spearheaded a historic sea duel with the Confederate raider Alabama.

These things comprise the bare outlines of the peculiar situation the American Negro occupied during the Civil War: he was the focal point of the issue that divided the nation, yet he was used and misused by both sides of the "House Divided."

Even Abraham Lincoln — the "Mars Linkum" and "Father Abraham" who was equated with Christ in most Negro minds at the time — was less interested in gaining their freedom than preserving the Union initially.

¶ Human Liberty

However, the great man grew with the task he assumed. As Leslie Fishel and Benjamin Quarles point out in "The Negro American," between the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all slaves Jan. 1, 1863, and the Gettysburg Address, when he urged America to "a new birth of freedom," Mr. Lincoln "fully grasped . . . that the war had become not an effort to restore the Union as it was, but a crusade to reconstitute America on a broadened base of human liberty."

That "day ob jubilo" arrived.

"Lord, lord," recalled a 90-year-old ex-slave named Jenny Proctor in "Lay My Burden Down," "it seemed impossible any of us ever lived to see that day of freedom, but thank God we did."

In the Alabama cotton patch where she was working, "Old Master come down. He say, 'I hates to tell you, but I knows I got to — you is free, as free as me or anybody else what's white.' We didn't hardly know what he meant. I remember we just sort of huddle round together like scared rabbits, but after we knowed what he mean, didn't many of us go, 'cause we didn't know where to of went."

"Old Master he say he give us the woods land and half of what we make on it, and we could clear it and work it or starve Well, we didn't hardly know what to do. He just gives us some old dull hoes and axes to work with, but we all went to work, cut down the trees and the poles.

"He tells us to build the fence round the field and we did . . . then we plants the

corn and the cotton, all the fence corners full. I never seen so much stuff grow in all my born days. Didn't take long 'fore we could buy some hosses, mules and good hogs. Them mangy hogs what master give us the first year was plumb good after we grease them and scrub them with lye soap. He give us the ones he thought was sure to die, but we was a-getting going now, and 'fore long we was a-building better houses and feeling kind of happy-like."

New hardships accompanied freedom too. Those Negroes who could find work drew wages, but many more were thrust into a hostile environment for which they were unprepared educationally or emotionally. And the Negro was still denied the first right of a citizen: the right to vote.

¶ Snail's Pace

But progress had begun, albeit at a snail's pace . . . paid for in blood and suffering which has never been surpassed in this nation's history.

The Negro began not only to learn to read and write, but to speak up, to "git along." Seeing slits of light at the door of American life, he now asked — even demanded that it be opened to him all the way.

"It is often asked when and where will the demands of the reformers of this and coming ages end? I will answer," said the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet to the House of Representatives in 1865. "When ALL unjust and heavy burdens shall be removed from every man in the land. When ALL distinctions shall be blotted out from our laws . . . emancipation followed by enfranchisement . . . and there is no more trouble concerning the black man and his rights than there is in regard to other American citizens. When, in every respect, he shall be equal before the law, and in the social walks of life. We ask no favors but justice. This nation has begun its exodus from worse than Egyptian bondage, and I beseech you . . . let us not pause . . . and thus prove to mankind the superiority of our Democratic, Republican Government."

(NEXT: "Negroes in the American West.")