NEGRO SOLDIERS' VALOROUS PART IN AMERICA'S WARS

They Have Been Eager Volunteers and Brave Fighters from the Revolution Until Today—Only Two Isolated Blots on Their Record Were the Outbreaks at Brownsville and Houston.

BY REMSEN CRAWFORD.

"YOU mout climb higher in der worl' dan I'll ever climb, an' you mout make mo' money dan I'll ever make; but, I'll boun' you dat when der time comes fer us ter die, so fur as jes natcherly doin' sump'n is concerned, I'll be done done mo' in my lifetime dan you."

"Good gracious, Andrew! Why you are the laziest nigger on this plantation."

"All dat mout be true. I knows I got der repertashun er bein' lazy. I knows dat Marse Nat calls me der mos' no 'count nigger on der place. But, wid all dat, um gwine ter jes natcherly do mo'n you 'fo' I die, an' all I ax is dat you'll jes live long enough fer ter see me do it."

It was a challenge. The terms were outlined with all the delicate evidences of friendly esteem commonly employed by modern diplomats when declaring war. My part seemed easy: just live long enough to see the other fellow win. Of course, I agreed.

Andrew Webb was just about half a shade lighter in color than the ace of spades, but I had no color line in the selection of my playmates, for the reason that there was no white family among the tenants on my father's cotton plantation.

The conversation quoted above is very fresh in my mind after all these years, for, empty and idle as it may seem, it has come back to me with dramatic force, and has moved me on several occasions to give deep study to a matter of nation-wide importance today. Andrew and I were lying full length beneath a cluster of wild plum trees on a sunny slope overlooking a brier swamp. We were supposed to be occupied with our daily task of finding the nests of guinea hens.

On that particular day the sun was beaming down like a peaceful benediction. The air was rich with the honey of flowers and Savannah River malaria. For me and my little black companion underneath the plum bushes the world had no temptations, no charms beyond the glittering air castles we were building. As a connoisseur of air castles I conscientiously award the blue ribbon to that variety whose domes are pillared on Savannah River malaria and blackberry blossoms.

The next few years passed rapidly. Several of them I spent in country schools. Then I was duly packed off to enter as freshman at the university for a full course of four years. Andrew remained in the cotton fields. From occasional references to him in letters from home I learned without surprise that he was growing lazier every day. The noontime hour he would spend sleeping like a lizard in the blistering rays of a relentless sun. His own mother had said she had some "notion uv when Christmas wuz comin', but King Solomon, der wisest uv men, couldn't tell when Andrew would git back fum der spring wid er bucket er water."

I heard nothing further about Andrew for a long time. His father took the family off the plantation and went somewhere near the City of Augusta to till some other man's land.

After a good number of years I found in my office mail one day a letter bearing the postmark of Augusta, Ga., but the handwriting was strange to me, and I opened it with more than ordinary curiosity. It proved to be from the widow of Andrew Webb, a woman apparently with more education than the average colored woman of the South. After relating the difficulties she had experienced in obtaining my address, the writer told me that Andrew had joined the United States Army several years before that time and had been shot in battle in the Philippines. He had left her with their only child, whom Andrew had named for me, and had died like a patriot in a faraway land. Lying in a field hospital and awaiting his last call, he managed to scrawl with a pencil his death message to his wife. This pitiful product of his meagre education the widow inclosed in her letter to me because it had a word or two for me also.

"If you ever see him in dis worl'," the dying soldier wrote, "jes tell him dat Andrew quit bein' lazy when he jined der army. Tell him dat Andrew died fer der blessed eagle bird, an' no man, white er black, can't do no mo'!"

Ever since the Americans grew careless about spilling tea at Boston the blood of black soldiers has been spilled for the eagle bird. It was Crispus Attucks, a mulatto and a fugitive slave, that led the patriot mob at the Boston massacre. It was Peter Salem, one of the enfranchised negroes who fought at Bunker Hill, that shot dead Major Pitcairn, leader of the British marines, as he leaped over the breastworks crying "The day is ours!" Sprinkled with the blue and the gray alike stood the soldier in black during the war between the States. The rattle of black musketry brought the white flag from the Spaniards on the summit of San Juan Hill which ended the war with Spain. It was a troop of black cavalry that penetrated the plains of Mexico and dealt havoc to Villa's band of guerrillas before being trapped and cut to pieces by a machine gun.

All this for the eagle bird—and more. When Congress called it war with Germany, patriotic negroes began holding mass meetings throughout the country, even though German spies or sympathizers were mailing letters to their leaders in the Southern States saying "This is a white man's war, and negroes would better go to Mexico and get higher wages." A colored regiment was quickly organized at Norfolk, Va., and offered its services to the President. More than 10,000 negroes were among the applicants to enlist with the expeditionary army proposed by Colonel Theodore Roosevelt. Although the raising of an army fell upon the United States in the early Springtime, when the negro population of the cotton belt is largely under contract to remain in the fields, many black soldiers enlisted along with their white fellow-countrymen.

Like a pathetic romance runs the story of our soldiers in black. Too little has been told about them by the writers of American history. Certainly too little has been taught about their activities in warfare from school histories. A better understanding between the races might have long ago materialized had a page or two here and there from the musty old Government reports and official war records, long buried in the dustiest corners of big libraries, been inserted in the textbooks on American history giving the negro's part in the nation's wars.

In the very first war for American independence and long before the negro knew for himself the meaning of the word "freedom" his finger got hungry for a trigger at the tap of a drum. In the war of the American Revolution and in the war of 1812 many negroes bought their individual freedom by fighting for the cause of the colonists. Others went to the front as substitutes for their masters and the sons of their masters. The present-day generation of Americans would probably not believe it, but official records make it true, nevertheless, that at one time right in New York State, now the Empire State of the country, negroes were put in the trenches to fight for American independence, and their pay as soldiers went to their masters in payment for their own individual freedom. This by legislative enactment, too. (Oct. 24, 1814.)

So eager were negroes to enlist in the war of the Revolution that laws had to be passed repeatedly by the States or colonies to prevent them from mustering into service. On May 20, 1775, the Revolutionary Committee on Safety found it desirable to rule that "only free negroes should be employed as soldiers;" whereupon many patriots freed their slaves. In the Continental Congress Edward Rutledge of South Carolina moved on Sept. 26, 1775, that all negro soldiers be dismissed from the Colonial Army. But there was strong opposition to this move and colored men were still received, often as substitutes for their white masters, who set them free on this condition.

The Congressional Committee of Conference with General Washington before Boston, headed by Benjamin Franklin, issued an order on Oct. 23, 1775, to the effect that negroes, "especially such as are slaves," should be no longer enlisted. This brought much dissatisfaction among the negroes who had already enlisted, and General Washington reported that he had cause to fear that those colored troops whose time had expired might show their resentment by deserting to the enemy. Congress permitted these to re-enlist (Jan. 16, 1776) and General Washington, who had great faith in the negro as a soldier, had the satisfaction of continuing his plan of using the black man in the trenches.

There were 775 negroes enrolled in the Continental Army on Aug. 24, 1778. Two days later the Rhode Island Legislature set free enough slaves to form a regiment on condition they would enlist with the State militia. The terms were gladly accepted by the slaves and they fought with conspicuous and commendable gallantry in the battle of Rhode Island. In his book, "The American Conflict," Horace Greeley wrote: "Had the Revolutionary war lasted a few years longer slavery would have been abolished throughout the country." It should be stated in reference to the battle of Rhode Island that Major Gen. Greene had three regiments—one of them the enlisted slaves—and they repulsed three vicious attacks intended to flank the American Army. The British thought the negroes were the weak spot in the line, but they found they were not.

One of the great disputes at home arising at the outset of the War of 1812 was whether the negroes should be used as soldiers or not. General Andrew Jackson issued a proclamation from Mobile, Ala., on Sept. 21, 1814, in which he bitterly denounced "the mistaken policy of excluding negroes from the army." He praised unstintingly those colored soldiers who had fought under him, and had no cause to regret his utterances shortly afterward in the defense of New Orleans when the negroes under his command fought bravely with the whites and succeeded in driving Pakenham and his trained British troops from behind the breastworks, (Jan. 8, 1815.)

Whether the service of the black man as a soldier in the wars for American independence was prompted by a selfish desire to gain his individual freedom from slavery, or whether it was due to a broader sense of patriotism is a matter for students of sociology to determine. In perfect candor it might be stated that many of the negroes in the Southern colonies repudiated the soil of their birth and went with Lord Cornwallis in his Southern campaign (1779) when he offered freedom to the negroes who would join the British forces. It was estimated that he gained 30,000 colored troops by this offer. Thomas Jefferson lost thirty of his own slaves to Lord Cornwallis on account of this temptation, but, he said, it was all right if Cornwallis was sincere.

In the civil war things were quite different. It was natural to suppose that, since the ultimate result of the war between the States involved, one way or another, the freedom of the colored population of the country, negroes would flock to the Union side, leaving the plantations of the South and deserting their masters. But this did not happen. While many negroes fought on the Union side, many also fought in the trenches with their masters, and many more remained at home to till the soil of their masters and protect the homes of the whites they loved so well. Such a condition has no parallel in history. While some of the negroes were leaving the South to join the forces of the North, quite as many were asking their masters to send them to the trenches of the Confederate Army. Breastworks around most of the Southern cities were built by loyal slaves with an utter disregard of their freedom as an issue of the war.

President Jefferson Davis of the Confederate States issued a proclamation that all negroes who deserted their masters and joined the Union Army, if captured by the Confederates, should be treated as felons and shot; but no one was ever executed under these orders. In truth, the military leaders of the Northern army were, themselves, very cautious about taking too many negroes into the Union lines until their capacity and courage as soldiers had been tested. Not until July 16, 1862, did Congress pass an act authorizing the President to accept negroes as soldiers "for any war service for which they may be found capable." On Jan. 27, 1863, Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania introduced a bill in the House of Representatives providing for the enlistment of 150,000 negroes with the same pay as white soldiers. This brought on a bitter debate in Congress. The House passed the bill by a vote of 83 to 54, but the Senate turned it down.

President Lincoln was strongly in favor of employing negro soldiers, as may be seen from the following utterance made by him in a letter to Governor Andrew Johnson of Tennessee on March 26, 1863:

"The bare sight of 50,000 armed and drilled black soldiers upon the banks of the Mississippi would end the rebellion at once, and who doubts that we can present that sight if we but take hold in earnest? If you have been thinking of it, please do not dismiss the thought." (From "Great Debates in American History," edited by Marion Mills Miller, Litt. D.—Current Literature Publishing Company.)

In a report made to the Secretary of War (Edwin M. Stanton) on June 23, 1862, General David Hunter gave testimony of the negro's efficiency as a soldier.

So, according to the best military authorities, the negro made good as a soldier. Can there be any wonder that he has been making good in Uncle Sam's battles since the civil war—since he was emancipated and came into the enjoyment of individual freedom, which was before then denied him?

When alarmists under the cloak of racio-sociology have done their worst; when scientists have been silenced and doctrinaires have been subdued; refreshing, indeed, will it be for future generations of Americans to read with calmness what the impartial, unprejudiced historian will have to say about the part the negro soldiers of the United States army played in the war with Spain.

Things that are too raw to state publicly now—facts that, perchance, bring embarrassment now—may be accepted with grace a few decades from now. The official report of General Kent, for instance, now a part of the records of the army at Washington, telling how he led the Twenty-fourth Infantry, (a negro regiment,) over "prostrate forms" of panic-stricken white soldiers in the Cuban campaign—such official documents some day may be taken less sensitively by Americans than they now are, or recently have been. One of these days such documents may be accepted earnestly, seriously as a means of arriving accurately at the negro's comparative merits as a soldier.

In the regular army there is another regiment of colored infantry—the Twenty-fifth—and two of cavalry—the Ninth and Tenth. All of these did good service in the war with Spain. After the declaration of war the Twenty-fifth was the first regiment to encamp. It was with the first expedition to Cuba, and was the second regiment to land on Cuban soil, and had the "honor," as one of them put it, of digging the entrenchments nearest to the enemy's lines. It gives one a pretty fair mental picture of the Twenty-fifth to know that in physique the men were large and so sound of body that only one man from its ranks died in the Cuban campaign from climatic disease, and only two from diseases of any kind.

The Twenty-fifth, according to Colonel Daggett's report, occupied the right of a short, reconstructed line in the battle of San Juan Hill, with the Fourth Infantry on its left. To the right of the Twenty-fifth were about fifty Cubans, who took little or no part in the fighting. The Twenty-fifth's firing line consisted of two companies—H and G. Company D was ordered to deploy as flankers on the right. The firing line battalion was under the command of Captain W. S. Scott, and advanced in line with the Fourth Infantry, all being under fire until they reached a point about 500 yards from the fort. Here the line found cover, halted and delivered effective fire. But at this point the Fourth Infantry was blocked by natural obstacles, according to official reports, and could make no further advance. Nevertheless, it continued to scatter destructive bullets on the enemy. Colonel Daggett ordered an advance, which was quickly made by the negro soldiers of the Twenty-fifth, but in doing so it broke away from the Fourth, which was halted on its left. This separated the Twenty-fifth from the brigade and exposed its left to a severe oblique, or nearly cross fire, from the village and blockhouses, which were on the left and a little in front of El Caney. Company C was then ordered to reinforce the left of the line, and Lieutenant Kinson's company was called from the reserve to replace Company C in the line of support, thus making five companies in action. The battalion in this formation proceeded to within fifty yards of the fort, and fifteen or twenty minutes before any other troops came up the enemy put out the white flag.

Under protection of the rifles of the negro regiment, a delegation from the Twelfth Infantry went forward and took the emblem of surrender from the Spaniards; but, not to be outdone in the celebration of so joyous an occasion, and hungry for the trophies of the fray, two negroes from the Twenty-fifth rushed upon the scene and began tearing the Spanish standard to pieces for souvenirs.

"General Orders," published near Santiago on Aug. 11, 1898, contained the following words direct to the Twenty-fifth:

"Seldom have troops been called upon to face a severer fire, and never have they acquitted themselves better."

The late General Joseph Wheeler, ex-Confederate, one of the commanders in the Cuban campaign, in writing an introduction for Herschel V. Cashin's book, "Under Fire with the Tenth United States Cavalry," paid this tribute to the negro soldiers who took part in the battle of San Juan Hill:

"With unfaltering courage and devotion they took part in the heroic charge of the cavalry at Las Guasimas, and after that gallant fight moved steadily forward with the cavalry division, forded the San Juan River, and captured the formidable intrenchments of the Spaniards, driving back the astonished enemy, fighting by day and working by night until glorious victory crowned their efforts, and peace once more dawned upon our beloved country."

Thus runs the story of our soldiers in black—praised for their bravery by General George Washington, General Andrew Jackson and General Benjamin Lincoln in the first conflicts with a foreign foe; honored for their loyalty and intrepid valor by President Abraham Lincoln in the fight for the preservation of the Union, and at the same time blessed by their masters for their unfailing service on the Southern side; and, finally, in our war with Spain in 1898 credited equally with their white comrades for their unwavering courage under a murderous fire.

There was, until the recent outbreak at Houston, only one black spot on their record—Brownsville. For more than a century the historian and the military critic had looked in vain for any stain on the history of Uncle Sam's colored soldiers. But on Dec. 19, 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt dismissed nearly all members of Companies B, C, and D of the Twenty-fifth Infantry without honor.

On Aug. 13, 1906, about midnight, not more than twenty soldiers of the Twenty-fifth Infantry, which was then stationed at Brownsville, Texas, leaped over the walls of the barracks and began a mysterious fusillade upon the town. Bullets flew in every direction. A Lieutenant of Police was wounded in the arm, which had to be amputated. A children's party was rudely broken up by rifle balls, which put out the lights. Many homes were riddled with bullets while the inmates slept. It was clearly established that the missiles came from the guns used by the army, and the affair soon sifted down to the simple question, "Who were the guilty members of the Twenty-fifth Regiment?" To solve this puzzling question, President Roosevelt went to extremes. He sent a commission consisting of Brig. Gen. Ernest A. Garlington of South Carolina, Lieut. Col. Leonard A. Lovering of New Hampshire, and Major Augustus P. Blocksom of Ohio to Brownsville, instructing them to apprehend the guilty members of the colored regiment and bring them to justice through a speedy court-martial. In this the officers were balked by an apparent effort on the part of every member of the colored regiment to shield the violators. President Roosevelt was criticised in some quarters, the charge being made that he had acted upon the findings of the Inspector General of the Army, (Garlington,) who was a Southern man, and, therefore, prejudiced against the negroes. To this President Roosevelt, in a message to the Senate, replied in his own peculiar way as follows:

"As it happens, the disclosure of the guilt of the troops was made in the report of the officer who comes from Ohio, and the efforts of the officer who comes from South Carolina were confined to an endeavor to shield the innocent men of the companies in question, if any such there were, by securing information which would enable us adequately to punish the guilty. But I wish it distinctly understood that the fact of the birthplace of either officer is one which I absolutely refuse to consider. The standard of professional honor and loyalty to the flag and the service is the same for all officers and all enlisted men of the United States Army, and I resent with keenest indignation any effort to draw any line among them based upon birthplace, creed, or any other consideration of the kind."

President Roosevelt said he had exhausted every effort to ascertain who were the guilty members of the colored regiment, but finding that they were being protected by their fellows in arms, he would, himself, have been guilty of retaining in the service "a body of mutineers and murderers" had he not dismissed the companies in question from the army. He said he recognized the great service the negro soldiers had rendered the country in the past, but he wanted to impress upon negro soldiers in the future the lesson of upholding at all times the honor of the army.

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