



BUFFALO

SOLDIERS

Formed 150 years ago at Fort Leavenworth and destined to fight for a nation that didn't want them, a group of soldiers left a legacy of courage, honor and contradictions

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Story by Melinda Briscoe
Timeline by Bianca Brown
Illustrations by Ted. S. Komala

Buffalo Soldiers

are part of America's lexicon and collective legend. Perhaps this is because of our love of anything "Wild West." Maybe, it is a little part hero worship. And of course, there's that Bob Marley song. But beyond the mystique, there are some core truths: Those who were originally known as the Buffalo Soldiers were the first all-black standing units of the United States military in 1866. One of the groups, the 10th Cavalry, was formed and based here in Kansas, at Fort Leavenworth. According to historian Robert Morris, the Buffalo Soldiers were recognized for their courage and discipline at a time when many white settlers on the frontier commonly thought black soldiers were disease carriers, cowards and likely deserters.

In fact, their courage may be why it is believed some of the Native Americans they encountered gave the cavalry soldiers of the 10th, and their counterparts in the 9th, the unique moniker. Comparing these soldiers to the buffalo—a creature

that fights fiercely even when wounded or cornered—would seem apropos. Of course, another story that the Indians thought the soldiers' thick hair resembled the curly tuft of fur on the buffalos' backs could be applicable as well. Either way, the animal would have been sacred to the Natives, and the soldiers came to wear the nickname with pride.

The Buffalo Soldiers rode out into a nation that was full of expansion and conflict. Excited to stake claim on their own piece of land and make a fresh start, Euro-American settlers had begun to pour into the frontier. The government, battered and exhausted from five years of the Civil War, turned to formerly enslaved persons as a new way to fill the army's ranks. For their part, the African-American men who joined the ranks had compelling reasons to enlist.

"One of the things that attracted African-American men to join the army is that they were surrounded by people just like

Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Leavenworth were told they had to put their housing in the lowest, swamiest areas. The result was sickness and death for some soldiers.

Even with these conditions, the Buffalo Soldiers were given some of the most difficult tasks: to remove Native Americans in the Great Plains and Southwest and relocate them to "Indian territory," which is now known as Oklahoma. It ended up being a three-decade-long campaign. They had been taught that Indians were "savages" who must be shown the "civilized" way of life.

Denise Low, a former poet laureate of Kansas who is part Lenape and Cherokee, notes that by riding out against the Native peoples, the Buffalo Soldiers achieved an unfortunate parity with the whites who marginalized them. She writes that by serving under the flag, the soldiers became "part of the forces that sought to eradicate the Indigenous way of life."

The journals and letters of the Buffalo Soldiers indicate that some of them were aware of this tragedy. "Every individual who put on the uniform had his own story, but many realized they were instruments of the government, helping to fight another group of people and aiding their own oppressors in displacing a people from their land," says Johnson.

Previous legacy

African-American men had faced dilemmas in serving in the U.S. military even before the Buffalo Soldiers had come along. The first American to die in the Revolutionary War was a former slave named Crispus Attucks. And in the Continental Army, 5,000 troops were black while thousands others fought with the British, who in notable cases advanced and protected their status as free men.

Black soldiers participated in 39 major battles and 410 lesser skirmishes during the Civil War. Fifteen states contributed

Buffalo Soldiers Timeline

July 1867

After more than two centuries of war between Native Americans and Euro-American settlers, the United States government creates the Indian Peace Commission to force Native Americans onto reservations away from settlers, roads and railroads. The new black regiments would become some of the first soldiers to enforce these policies.



1870–1889

Twelve of 25 black applicants are admitted into the United States Military Academy. Despite being subjected to vehement racism, three black cadets graduate during this period.

1875

Black Seminole scouts Sergeant John Ward, Private Pompey Factor, and Trumpeter Isaac Payne receive the Medal of Honor for saving their unit commander, Lieutenant John L. Bullis, in a battle with the Comanche near the Pecos River.

1877

Soldiers of the 9th forcibly relocate Apaches to the most inhospitable part of the San Carlos reservation. This military action is in response to Apache attacks on settlements as the Apaches—who never received food and resources that were promised through treaties and were near starving—fought for their survival.

1877–1878

In what becomes known as the Colfax County war and the Lincoln County war, soldiers from the 9th are sent in to evict white and Hispanic settlers from land claimed by a large company.

1881

Black Seminole scouts are evicted from Fort Clark and refused the land grants and rations they had been promised in return for their services to the military and government.

1886

Allen Allensworth begins his military service as a chaplain. A former slave, he creates educational systems and standards that are used by military personnel, their families and civilians.

1889

Charles Young becomes the third graduate from West Point. His career would span more than 30 years, and he would become the nation's first black officer to reach the rank of full colonel.



The Plains Wars Era

July 28, 1866

After contentious debates, Congress passes the Army Reorganization Bill, which creates six black regiments. Two of these, the 9th and 10th, are cavalry units. The other four, the 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st, are infantry.

1867–1891

During the Cheyenne War, the name "Buffalo Soldiers" is given to the 10th cavalry. It is unknown who first used the term and why it was initially applied to the troops, though the term eventually was applied to all black regiments.

1869

The army is reorganized and consolidates the black infantries. The 38th and 41st become the 24th; the 39th and 40th become the 25th.

July 1870

A group of Mascogos (or Black Seminoles) enlists as scouts at Fort Duncan in Texas. They serve there and at Fort Clark, Texas.

1875

Private Adam Payne of the Black Seminoles is awarded the Medal of Honor for holding off Kiowa attackers and allowing his accompanying scouts to find safety during the Red River War.

The Border Wars Era

1877

Henry O. Flipper becomes the first black soldier to graduate from the United States Military Academy. He begins his career with the 10th and would serve until 1881, when he was court-martialed under questionable circumstances as part of an embezzlement hearing. The US Army reviewed this case in 1976, clearing Flipper's name and providing him an honorable discharge. President Bill Clinton signed a formal pardon in 1999, vindicating Flipper's short but distinguished career.

1880

Johnson Chestnut Whittaker, a black cadet at the United States Military Academy, is discovered "beaten, bloodied, and tied to his bunk." An inquiry concludes that he did these things to himself, for which Whittaker would be court-martialed and expelled in 1881. The court-martial was overturned in 1883.

1887

John Hanks Alexander becomes the second black officer to graduate from the USMA. He would serve with the 9th and became the first black officer to hold a regular command position.

1891

Black chaplain Theophilus G. Steward joins the 25th infantry. He would accompany the regiment to the Philippines and help the military establish schools for Filipino children.

1894

The 24th is brought in to break the Pullman Railways Strike in Los Angeles.

themselves," explains Shelton Johnson, who has done extensive research about Buffalo Soldiers as a park ranger with the Division of Interpretation and Education at Yosemite National Park. "Moving from the South saved many black people's lives back then. Some saw joining the army as a way to escape the oppression of civilian society. The original Buffalo Soldiers were men who literally could not be men in the South without being dead men. These men joined the army for a sanctuary. They would not have lasted long in the South immediately after the Civil War. They would have been lynched."

Barrie Thompkins, a Buffalo Soldier reenactor and member of the Nicodemus Buffalo Soldiers Association, Kent Cavalry Company F, believes the men's reasons were probably pretty practical. "Joining the army gave them a purpose," he says. "This

was at the end of slavery, so where else would they go and what else were they going to do? For many black men, it was a better option than sharecropping."

Glory and reality

Once they became soldiers, the men quickly realized the honor and glory would have to come after other things. Historian and filmmaker Kevin Willmott explains, "The Buffalo Soldiers were given the worst duties—things the white soldiers didn't want to do like digging ditches, latrines and graves. And it wasn't without harassment from white soldiers and settlers. That was an ongoing obstacle." The Buffalo Soldiers were given hand-me-down everything. From uniforms, to weapons and tools, even to horses. According to historian Tracy Barnett, the

volunteers to the United States Colored Troops (USCT), the official designation given to nearly all black formations in 1864. The 1st Kansas Colored Infantry and the 1st South Carolina Regiment were the first two black formations to be recruited and sent into combat.

Two Civil War heroes, Edward Hatch and Benjamin Grierson—both white—were the first colonels assigned to the 9th and 10th cavalries. "Hatch and Grierson were considered quite progressive back in that day, to head colored units," explains Johnson. "George Armstrong Custer was one of the first people offered those units and he turned it down. He thought being in charge of units of black soldiers would be bad for his career." Thompkins adds, "Custer said he did not 'want anything to do with those brunettes.'"

In that sense, says Johnson, the story of the Buffalo Soldiers was the story of all African-American men who fought for the United States. "They were fighting the same battles over and over again, fighting on two fronts: the enemies of the United States and the internalized racism that existed in the United States itself."

Riding out

Upon formation, the 9th Cavalry was assigned to the Texas area and fought in many campaigns of the "Indian Wars," including tracking down and capturing famous Apache military leaders like Geronimo and Victorio, a master strategist. The highly trained and experienced U.S. Army embarked on a year-long chase to find Victorio and his people. And just when they thought they had him, he would trick them and effectively

elude them. The Buffalo Soldiers were able to finally track him down. And once they did, “the Buffalo Soldiers and Victorio’s troops fought for so long, for over 14 days nonstop,” explains Thompkins. “They literally had to decide to take a time out because both sides were exhausted.”

Beyond the Plains

After the frontier battles, the Buffalo Soldiers were sent to various places, for a variety of campaigns—both major and minor.

The 9th and 10th cavalries were sent to Cuba in 1898 to fight in the Spanish-American War. And even there, they continued to face prejudice. Signs in certain businesses told the black soldiers to stay away. They were instructed by their superiors to stay on the docked ship they arrived on while their white counterparts were allowed to leave the boat and travel

about as they pleased. In the tropical Cuban climate they were not given lightweight uniforms to wear. Instead, they were expected to continue donning their heavy woolen uniforms.

At the time, future president Theodore Roosevelt was second in command of the armed forces in Cuba. The famous “Rough Riders” he headed were in quite a jam when they lost their weapons and found themselves surrounded by heavily armed Spanish fighters.

“When the movies have depicted that battle, you rarely if ever see portrayals of the Buffalo Soldiers. When, in fact, they saved the day,” says Johnson.

Willmott elaborates, “Roosevelt admitted that the Buffalo Soldiers saved his troops and helped win that battle. He made the famous statement of ‘they can drink from our canteens’, which at that time really meant something.”

Five black cavalymen won the Congressional Medal of

parks started because once those areas were designated as national parks, the people who at one time chopped down trees to build their houses and killed deer to feed their families had to be removed,” explains Johnson. “The army was already set up to enforce law and order in the Wild West. The military brought a sense of safety and security to the newly formed National Parks. In 1903 the Buffalo Soldiers built the first trails on top of Mt. Whitney, which at that time was the highest peak in America. They also built the first usable wagon road through Giant Forest in the Sequoia National Park, and in 1904 they created a nature trail in Yosemite, which is considered the first in the National Park system.”

Johnson notes the soldiers would go on to serve at locations that were or would become national parks and sites across the United States: the Klondike Gold Rush National

Historic Site in Alaska, the Haleakalā National Park and Hawaii Volcanoes National Park in Hawaii and Glacier National Park in Montana. In a sense, any visitor to these locations owes a debt of gratitude to the Buffalo Soldiers.

“The way I see it is when someone does a good job, they deserve to hear a thank you,” continues Johnson. “Part of my job as a ranger and educator is to make sure that their contributions are not forgotten.”

Legacy

After President Truman desegregated the U.S. military in 1948, the Buffalo Soldiers’ days were numbered, and the all-black units were disbanded between 1951 and 1953. However, their legacy endures.

Barrie Thompkins wants people to know the soldiers



Summer

1903

Charles Young is made acting superintendent of Sequoia National Park. Young and his troops built the roads at the Sequoia more efficiently than any previous acting superintendent and troops.

March

1916

The 10th joins the command of General John J. Pershing in the Punitive Expedition, a cross-border raid into Mexican territory.

October

1917

The all-black 92nd Infantry Division is formed. The soldiers call themselves the “Buffalo Division.”

1918

Henry Johnson, private in the 369th Infantry Regiment of the 93rd Division, is awarded the French Croix de Guerre. Armed only with a knife, Johnson held back a night raid of 12 German soldiers and saved the life of his fellow sentry.

1937

Europe descends into war and black civilians and soldiers argue for complete racial integration in the military in order to boost the fighting capacity of the United States. These calls are ignored.

1940

The army expands the scope of all-black units, including the traditional approach of non-combat support units such as engineering and transportation units, but also an artillery and chemical unit.

June 1941

The Fair Employment Act makes racial discrimination in the government and defense industry illegal. The act, however, is widely ignored and unenforced.

December 1943

The all-black 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion is formed. The battalion was deployed in a secret mission along the Northwest coast, fighting forest fires and in position to respond to Japan’s launching of some 9,000 air balloons loaded with bombs.

1944

Fighting along the Italian front, Buffalo Soldiers of the 92nd are placed in frontal assaults repeatedly by an openly anti-black commander. Historians regard his decision as an intentional move to inflict the most casualties possible on his own men.

1948

President Harry S. Truman orders the official desegregation of the United States military.

1953

Ninety percent of black servicemen in the United States military serve in integrated units.

October 2000

Junction City dedicates a memorial to the Buffalo Soldiers of the 9th and 10th divisions who were stationed nearby at Fort Riley. The organization for creating and funding the monument was spearheaded by a group of veteran Buffalo Soldiers, including Tural Covington Jr., Albert Curley, Fredrick T. Donlan, Samuel G. Kimble and Jay P. Meigs Jr.

The Spanish-American War Era

World War I Era

World War II Era

The End of the Buffalo Soldiers

June 1899

Buffalo regiments are deployed to the Philippines, the first time that black regiments are sent overseas by the United States.

1907

Allen Allensworth and Theophilus G. Steward retire.

April 1917

The United States formally enters World War I. In all, some 400,000 black soldiers would serve the United States during WWI. Of these, 200,000 would serve in Europe (160,000 of them as labor and road-clearing units and 40,000 of them as part of the 92nd and 93rd infantry divisions).

June 1917

Colonel Charles Young is removed from active duty after protests that his rise in the ranks would put him in command of white soldiers. Officially, the War Department claims Young has high blood pressure and this is the cause for removal.

Summer 1919

Returning from World War I as military victors and heroes, black soldiers face unwavering prejudice and hostility at home. In what would be known as “Red Summer,” 78 black veterans are lynched and 14 are burned alive—many while wearing their uniforms.

1939

The United States Army creates the 47th and 48th all-black units as quartermaster regiments.

June 1943

The 332nd fighter group, famously known as the Tuskegee Airmen, see their first battle. They would serve until October 1945.

1944

The 9th and 10th cavalry regiments are added to the 2nd Cavalry Division. The division is quickly disbanded, and the black soldiers are refused combat under the notion that the reconnaissance missions of their units are unnecessary for modern warfare.

June 1950

Though officially integrated, the US Army continued *de facto* segregation for many units and forms the all-black Second Ranger Infantry (Airborne), who take the name of the Buffalo Rangers.

July 1992

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, dedicates a monument to Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Leavenworth.

August 26–27 2016

Buffalo Soldiers ride again! Hundreds of members of the Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club gather in Kansas City before riding to Fort Leavenworth in honor of the 150th anniversary of the Buffalo Soldiers.

—Timeline compiled and written by Bianca Brown.

Honor for their bravery during that campaign. Unfortunately, Roosevelt’s gratitude didn’t last. He later told newspaper reporters that the Buffalo Soldiers had been slow and cowardly. The record, however, belies his words.

Other officers, however, became advocates for the Buffalo Soldiers. One of these was General John Pershing, who went on to command American forces during World War I. As a first lieutenant in 1895, he took command of the 10th Cavalry to help find and apprehend the famous Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa. He personally chose the 10th for this assignment. Though they were unsuccessful, Pershing never forgot the tenacity and work ethic of his soldiers. Years later, General Pershing would be instrumental in having the all-black 92nd and 93rd infantry divisions fight in WW I, but under French command (because

of newly enacted Jim Crow laws the soldiers were, in effect, shut out from fighting for America). They were the first Americans to fight in France in WW I and would continue to fight in that country for the duration of the war. Due to his association with the Buffalo Soldiers, Pershing was given the name of “Black Jack.” Although it was meant as a slight on his character, he liked it and kept the nickname.

National Park Service

Americans love their national parks; so do visitors from other countries. But how many people are aware that the Buffalo Soldiers were among the first park rangers? In 1899 and then in 1903–1904, the soldiers worked in both Yosemite and Sequoia National Park. “The military stewardship of the

were men of many talents. “Some say all the Buffalo Soldiers did was build forts and roads. In all, there were 23 who received the Congressional Medal of Honor. They’re the highest decorated cavalry regiment in all of U.S. military history, so how can anyone say all they did was build roads?” says Thompkins. “They helped settle the West. They strung telegraph lines. They delivered the mail when Pony Express ended. Their contributions are numerous and great.”

“Their spirit lives on in various forms of the civil rights movement,” says Johnson. “Whether it was W. E. B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington, or Malcolm X, the soldiers’ courageous spirit is seen in them. The Buffalo Soldiers had to keep fighting the same battle over and over again. That battle was to prove that they could fight.”

“It’s a complicated legacy,” says Willmott. “Their challenge was that they were second-class citizens at best. The reality was that they were fighting for white society against another people of color. They were in challenging racial and ethical situations, but they thought if they succeeded, that would push civil rights along. They felt they were fighting for a bigger cause even though they were fighting for a nation that didn’t want them.” **KM**

SOURCES: Sheffer, Debra. *The Buffalo Soldiers: Their Epic Story and Major Campaigns*. Praeger, 2015. Print; Rawn, James. *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America’s Military*. Bloomsbury Press, 2013; National Park Service brochures; *Greenville Online*, “Buffalo Soldier Laid to Rest,” local news section from February 19, 2016, accessed May 02, 2016; Biggs, Bradley. *The Triple Nickels: America’s First All-Black Paratroop Unit*. Gazelle Book Services, 1986; Coen, Ross. *Fu-Go: The Curious History of Japan’s Balloon Bomb Attack on America*, University of Nebraska Press, 2014; United States Army. *army.mil/medallofonor/Johnson*, accessed May 10, 2016; U.S. Army garrisonleavenworth.army.mil “Buffalo Soldier Memorial Park” accessed May 10, 2016; interview with Jack McDonald, May 12, 2016