

BUFFALO SOLDIERS

Honed and Sharpened in the West

By Michael N. "Cowboy Mike" Searles

Dustin Mitchell, of the Bexar County Buffalo Soldiers, at the San Antonio National Cemetery, where more than 280 Buffalo Soldiers are buried.
Johnny D. Boggs

A soldier with the 25th Infantry at Fort Custer, Montana, taken sometime between 1894 and 1890.
Library of Congress



Inset: 25th Infantry probably at Fort Custer, Montana, between 1884 and 1890. Library of Congress

[Editor's Note: This year's WWA convention in Lubbock, Texas (June 23-27) will include a panel on black soldiers in the West. To get things started, we asked historian "Cowboy Mike" Searles to provide an overview on history's legendary "buffalo soldiers."]

The African-American population historically has been located in the eastern part of the United States, mainly in the South. While the movement of blacks to the North occurred during a series of migrations from 1910 to 1970, the West lagged behind with less than 8 percent of blacks moving to that region. Black military participation, beginning with the American Revolution, drew upon the northern and southern freemen and slaves to fight the battles. Those battles were principally fought in areas outside of the West. It was not until the end of the Civil War that black soldiers would be welcomed into the Army and stationed in the American West.

Congressional authorization in 1866 that created six all-black regiments (later reduced to four) of the regular U.S. Army opened the door for black men to establish a more permanent footprint west of the Mississippi River.

African-Americans who signed up for a five-year Army enlistment came from northern and southern states with varied work experiences and backgrounds. Each segment of men who would become "buffalo soldiers" played a role in speeding the transition into Army life. About half of the men recruited had served in the Civil War. Their training allowed them to assist newly freed plantation slaves in quickly learning the expectations of military life.

In an army that required numerous reports, muster rolls and supply requests, literate recruits from northern cities served essential roles as clerks and noncommissioned officers. The newly freed slaves brought a pride and willingness to accept the isolation and hardships on frontier outposts that caused white soldiers to desert.

The 9th Cavalry was organized in New Orleans and the 10th Cavalry at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The 24th



Buffalo soldier statue at Fort Leavenworth.

Infantry was headquartered at Fort Clark, Texas, and the 25th Infantry at Jackson Barracks, Louisiana. The 24th would serve for a decade in West Texas at forts McKavett, Davis, Concho and Stockton, protecting settlers, fighting Indians and helping establish the rule of law in northwestern Texas. The 25th Infantry served for a similar amount of time in Texas, performing border security, fighting Indians and building roads and telegraph lines.

Texas tragedy

With long service in the Lone Star State, Lubbock was familiar territory to the buffalo soldiers of the 10th Cavalry. South of the city, a calamitous event cast a pall over the regiment. The event that gained national attention became known as the "Staked Plains Horror." The Staked Plains, a common name for the Llano Estacado geographical formation, was the site where the incident occurred. Paul H. Carlson, Texas Tech University professor emeritus, wrote extensively on this subject in his book *The Buffalo Soldier Tragedy of 1877*.

Buffalo soldiers traveled into the Llano Estacado pursuing a band of Kwahadi Comanches who were raiding local homesteads. A two-month pursuit of the Comanches by bison hunters and buffalo soldiers took its toll. Severe drought conditions during the summer of 1877 caused some of the soldiers to leave their ranks in search of water. The long absence of the soldiers produced rumors that

Indians had killed the two officers and 26 enlisted men.

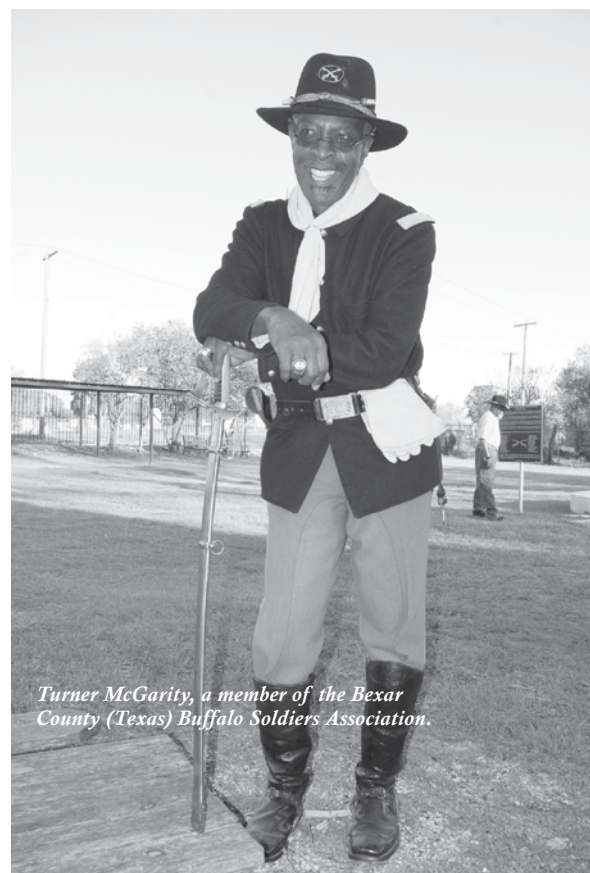
Actually, four died and some survived by drinking the blood of their dead horses. Their ultimate fate was not known for several days as a few soldiers began to make their way back to camp. When other survivors returned later, they faced court-martial charges for desertion. The failed expedition attracted national attention and much debate.

Devotion to duty

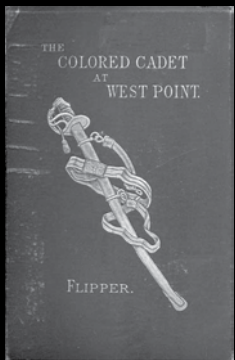
Black soldiers and white officers patrolled much of the Western frontier, facing dangers, hostilities and, occasionally, acceptance.

With few later exceptions, white officers commanded black troops. African-American chaplains were appointed to provide spiritual, moral and educational uplift to black soldiers. Five black chaplains served soldiers in the frontier Army from 1884 to 1906: Henry V. Plummer (9th Cavalry), Theophilus G. Steward (25th Infantry), George W. Preleau (9th Cavalry), William T. Anderson (10th Cavalry) and Allen Allensworth (24th Infantry).

Allensworth provided an educational experience to the buffalo soldiers that the Army would come to recognize. Allensworth's *Outline of Course of Study*



Turner McGarity, a member of the Bexar County (Texas) Buffalo Soldiers Association.



Flipper's memoir

Henry O. Flipper documented his experiences at the U.S. Military Academy in his memoir *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, which New York-based Homer Lee & Co. published

in 1878, a year after Flipper graduated 50th in a class of 76. The book remains in print today.

and the *Rules Governing Post Schools of Ft. Bayard, N.M.*, used to prepare black soldiers, were later adopted by the Army as the standard manuals on the education of enlisted personnel. Chaplain Allensworth was the first African-American to be promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Army life

Buffalo soldiers were stationed at forts across Texas, from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande. Texas was considered an ideal placement for blacks because some believed that racial factors made black soldiers better adapted to the hot climate.

While buffalo soldiers engaged in military campaigns against the Southern Plains Indians, they spent much of their time surveying and mapping the state. Forts had to be built or repaired, telegraph lines strung, stagecoaches and freight wagons escorted, and settlers protected in a social climate unfriendly to blacks.

Yet, while serving in hostile environments, on lonely and isolated posts, buffalo soldiers maintained a low desertion rate and an outstanding record of service. At Fort Niobrara, Nebraska, the 25th Infantry band entertained the citizens of Valentine and surrounding towns as they performed concerts featuring the operas *The Bohemian Girl* and



Flipper's Ditch

In 1878, 10th Cavalry Lieutenant Henry Flipper, a former slave from Georgia, oversaw construction of a drainage system to remove malarial ponds and swamps from Fort Sill. "Flipper's Ditch" still controls floodwaters and erosion at the Army base in Lawton, Oklahoma.

The Red Hussar. In communities where cultural expression was rarely available, buffalo soldier regimental bands were appreciated and lauded.

The first black officer

Until blacks were admitted to the U.S. Army Military Academy, all of the officers commanding black regiments were white. In 1877, Lieutenant Henry O. Flipper became the first African-American to graduate from West Point, followed by John Alexander and Charles Young. Flipper served with the 10th Cavalry in West Texas, where he was stationed at forts Elliott, Concho, Quitman and Davis.

While Flipper had many engineering accomplishments, he faced discrimination and hostilities. An incident while serving as quartermaster at Fort Davis

1863

After President Abraham Lincoln's early Emancipation Proclamation, blacks begin enlisting in the Army. More than 178,000 will serve for the Civil War's duration.

1866



Congressional legislation creates six all-black Army regiments: the 9th and 10th cavalry, and the 38th, 39th, 40th, and 41st infantry. The infantry

regiments will be consolidated into the 24th and 25th.

1868

September 25: 10th Cavalry troopers rescue Major George Forsyth's band of volunteer scouts after the fight at Beecher's Island, Colorado.

1869

February 26: Congress sends the 15th



Amendment, which guarantees black males the right to vote, to the states for approval. It is ratified the following year.

1870

June 28: 9th Cavalry Sergeant Emanuel Stance becomes the first black to earn the Medal of Honor.



1871

February: The Civil Rights Act of 1871, better known as the Ku Klux Klan Act, is passed.

1874

James W. Smith, the first black cadet admitted to the U.S. Military Academy, leaves without graduating.

1875

Oliver Lewis becomes the first black jockey to win the Kentucky Derby.

1877

June 14: Henry O. Flipper of Georgia becomes the first black graduate of West Point.

1880

April 5: Black West Point cadet Johnson C. Whittaker is found tied to his bed, unconscious and his hands and face cut by a razor. He says three cadets attacked him, but academy administrators accuse him of lying and he's expelled the following year.

led to court-martial proceedings and dismissal for “conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.” Flipper maintained his innocence and waged a lifelong but unsuccessful battle for reinstatement in the Army.

In 1999, President Bill Clinton pardoned Flipper, who had died in 1940.

Before the West

African-Americans did not begin their military experience on the American frontier. Blacks had a long history fighting for the United States prior to the nation’s formation. During the American Revolution, both slaves and free blacks fought to win America’s freedom with as many as 9,000 blacks engaged in that struggle.

Peter Salem and Salem Poor were recognized for their heroic action in the American cause. Nameless others participated in various military units – sometimes when they were officially banned from doing so. The tradition continued with black participation in the War of 1812, the Mexican War and the Civil War.

What is notable about the buffalo soldiers is their incorporation into the standing peacetime Army. While blacks participated in every American military conflict, previously they only could enter as volunteers.

Why ‘buffalo’?

The opportunity to join the Army carried great pride for the men who served and for the African-American community. The 10th Cavalry was the first unit called buffalo soldiers – a name that would generate great pride and some controversy.

Was the name associated with the buffalo coats they wore in winter, their fierce fighting ability or the texture of the black soldiers’ hair?

The prevailing opinion is aligned with the wooly, kinky hair of the black soldiers.

Heated debate also has surrounded the relationship between the black

soldiers and the Indians they fought. Did the Indians honor their ability as fighters and see them differently than white soldiers? Was there any camaraderie that existed between the red and black combatants? These questions and more are attached to the legacy of the buffalo soldiers.

Beyond the frontier

In 1898, America declared war on Spain, giving black soldiers another opportunity to defend American interests. While service in the American West had its difficulties, black units were well received in some communities.



Historian / reenactor Henry Crawford at Fort Griffin (Texas) State Historic Site. Candy Moulton

1881

9th Cavalry Sergeant Moses Williams takes part in two fights against Apaches in New Mexico for which he will receive the Medal of Honor.

1882

June 30: After failed appeals, Henry Flipper is dismissed from the Army with a dishonorable discharge.

1883

October 16: The Supreme Court invalidates the Civil Rights Act of 1875, declaring that the federal government cannot bar corporations or individuals from racial discrimination.



1889

Frederick Douglass becomes minister to Haiti.

1896

Eight 25th Infantry soldiers, under the command of Lieutenant James Moss, form the “Experimental Bicycle Corps” at Fort Missoula, Montana.

1898

April 21: The Spanish-American War begins. Of the 16 black volunteer regiments recruited, four will see combat in Cuba and the Philippines.



1903

Black soldiers begin patrolling national

parks in California, and Captain Charles Young, West Point’s third black graduate, is appointed acting superintendent of Sequoia National Park. Buffalo soldiers will patrol parks until the creation of the National Park Service in 1916.

1915

Black troops take part in General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing’s punitive expedition into Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa.

1940

May 3: Henry Flipper dies in Atlanta, Georgia, at age 84.

1947

April 15: 28-year-old Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers starts a major-league game, breaking baseball’s color barrier.

1948



July 26: President Harry S. Truman signs Executive Order 9981, which desegregates the Armed Forces.

Local newspapers sometimes recorded celebratory sendoffs and the expressed sadness of citizens with their departure. No such celebrations occurred when they arrived in the Tampa, Florida, area to prepare for war in Cuba. Racial attitudes that black civilians daily faced were extended to the buffalo soldiers. Many of the soldiers were happy to ship out, favoring bullets in Cuba over blatant discrimination in Florida.

Action in Cuba

The 9th and 10th cavalries were joined by the 24th and 25th infantries in the fighting in Cuba. The buffalo soldiers were

accustomed to the hot American Southwestern desert, if not the rain of Cuba.

Just as blacks were thought by white Americans to be especially well-suited to the hot climate of the American West, a similar belief arose when yellow fever erupted in army camps. Members of the 24th Infantry served as nurses and orderlies to white soldiers who contracted yellow fever due to the feeling that blacks were immune to malaria and yellow fever. This notion that blacks had a natural immunity was reflected in the Congressional decision to establish four all black immune regiments.

While white soldiers composed the

other six Immune Volunteer Regiments, they were not thought to have any natural protection. Historian and editor Bruce A. Glasrud in *Brother of the Buffalo Soldiers: Perspectives on the African American Militia and Volunteers, 1865-1917* included chapters highlighting the experience of black soldiers who provided medical assistance to yellow fever victims during the Spanish-American War.

All four buffalo soldier regiments would engage in military action on the battlefields of Las Guasimas, El Caney and San Juan Hill. Their previous wartime experience – long years of battling

Buffalo soldiers in the movies

By Johnny D. Boggs

With few exceptions, Hollywood has taken little interest in depicting buffalo soldiers on film.

Probably the most famous offering came in 1960 when John Ford directed *Sergeant Rutledge*, in which a white cavalry officer (Jeffrey Hunter) defends a black sergeant (Woody Strode) accused of raping and murdering a white woman – a controversial subject for a Western then and today.

Ford had multiple Oscars – though none for Westerns – and had directed his fabled “Cavalry Trilogy” starring John Wayne (*Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *Rio Grande*), but *Sergeant Rutledge* had no John Wayne.



Woody Strode

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“‘Sergeant Rutledge’ may not add up to Mr. Ford’s finest hour (and a half),” the *New York Times* opined, “but it certainly is Mr. Strode’s.”

Although the movie flopped at the box office, Strode was proud of what he had done. In 1971, he told the *New York Times*: “You never seen a Negro come off a mountain like John Wayne before. I had the greatest Glory Hallelujah ride across the Pecos River that any black man ever had on the screen. And I did it myself. I carried the whole black race across that river.”

Strode and *Sergeant Rutledge* also left an impact on actor Danny Glover, who grew up during a time when, as he said, “There weren’t black Westerns.”

Riding on his *Lethal Weapon* success – and with Hollywood finding an audience for films about blacks in the military (*Glory*, *A Soldier’s Story*) – *Buffalo Soldiers* became a mission for the actor. He served as star and executive producer.

“The choices I make are connected to what I consider to be important,” Glover said in an Associated Press interview to promote TNT’s airing of *Buffalo Soldiers* in December 1997.

The made-for-TV *Buffalo Soldiers* starred Glover as Sergeant Washington Wyatt, who fights his own conscience, Texas Rangers, racist soldiers and Victorio’s

Apaches in 1860s New Mexico Territory.

As Glover pointed out, those black soldiers in the West did their duty “in services to their country, and in spite of their country.”

Like *Sergeant Rutledge*, *Buffalo Soldiers’* success proved moderate.

“The film is high-minded and unusual in its grasp of the ironies and complexities of race in the West,” the *New York Times* noted. “But it also comes wrapped in a familiar action-adventure package that ultimately prevents it from being great.”

Other appearances of buffalo soldiers in film have come in supporting or cameo roles.

Professional baseball legend Leroy “Satchel” Paige played a black trooper in *The Wonderful Country* (1959), starring Robert Mitchum. NFL star Jim Brown was a black



“Satchel” Paige in *The Wonderful Country*.

soldier joining up with a cavalry officer (Stuart Whitman) and a racist Texan (Richard Boone) to track down stolen rifles in *Rio Conchos* (1964), based on a Clair Huffaker novel.

Maybe one day Hollywood will try again.

“It’s a tragedy in this country’s history that people don’t know who these men were,” Glover told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.



outlaws, Indians, whiskey peddlers and hostile citizens – gave them an advantage over the volunteers recruited for a grand adventure.

White and black American soldiers fought side by side in these battles – something that would not occur as a matter of policy until the Korean War. Several white officers cited the bravery of the black soldiers, and four 10th Cavalry soldiers received the Medal of Honor: Sergeant Major Edward Lee Baker Jr. and privates Dennis Bell, Fitz Lee and William H. Thompkins.

While praise was effusive immediately after the battle, the nation was not inclined to celebrate heroism of black men. Theodore Roosevelt, who initially lauded the men of the 9th Cavalry, later retracted his words, stating that they were shirkers and incapable of advancing in battle unless led by white officers.

While Roosevelt's praise was faint at best, a number of newspapers and magazines presented the public with a positive image of black men serving their country on the battlefield. With little else to celebrate, the black community enshrined the buffalo soldiers in a racial mantle of heroism. Practically every form of print media was used to honor and validate their service.

Lasting legacy

The buffalo soldiers' service to the nation did not end in Cuba.

They later fought in the Philippines and continued their service until the end of World War II.

The legacy of the buffalo soldier continues to this day in books, movies, plays, re-enactments and songs. While the fame of the buffalo soldier has spread around the world, it was sharpened and honed in the American West.



7th Cavalry connections

George Armstrong Custer turned down a lieutenant colonel's commission in a black regiment, and Captain Frederick Benteen rejected a major's commission in the 9th Cavalry.



A CAMPFIRE SKETCH.

An artist's words

From Staff Reports

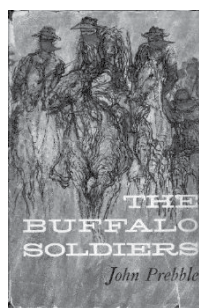
In the 1880s, artist/journalist Frederic Remington journeyed to the “disagreeably hot climate” of Arizona Territory, where he caught up with the 10th Cavalry.

Fascinated by (and an admirer of) the black troopers, Remington – whose illustrations appeared in 1886-87 issues of *Outing: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Recreation* and *Harper's Weekly* – wrote and drew about his experiences for *The Century*, which in April 1889 published his “A Scout with the Buffalo Soldiers,” about a two-week scout in 1888 from Fort Grant “up the San Carlos way.”

An excerpt:

“They may be tired and they may be hungry, but they do not see fit to augment their misery by finding fault with everybody and everything. In this particular they are charming men with whom to serve. Officers have often confessed to me that when they are on long and monotonous field service and are troubled with a depression of spirits, they have only to go about the campfires of the Negro soldier in order to be amused and cheered by the clever absurdities of the men. ... As to their bravery: ‘Will they fight?’ That is easily answered. They have fought many, many times.”

Buffalo Soldiers in fiction

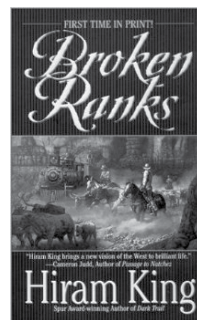


John Prebble. *The Buffalo Soldiers* (Harcourt, Brace, 1959). White officer is put in charge of black soldiers escorting a Comanche band on its last buffalo hunt. Spur Award winner.



Elmer Kelton. *The Wolf and the Buffalo* (Doubleday, 1980). Parallel narrative about a young black recruit stationed at Fort Concho and a Comanche warrior.

Tom Willard. *Buffalo Soldiers* (Forge, 1996). *Publishers' Weekly* called it “a compelling and action-packed story filled with historical personages and a proud sense of national redemption.”



Hiram King. *Broken Ranks* (Leisure, 2001). Black gun-fighter is hired to help guide new 10th Cavalry recruits to Fort Leavenworth.

Johnny D. Boggs. *Lonely Trumpet* (Five Star, 2002). Historical novel about Henry Flipper, the first black graduate of West Point.

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Where to visit



Buffalo Soldiers museum, Houston.

Buffalo Soldiers National Museum (Houston, Texas): The only museum dedicated to preserving the history of America's black soldiers – from all wars, not just the West's buffalo soldiers.

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Where the 10th Cavalry was formed. Check out Buffalo Soldier Memorial Park and the Frontier Army Museum.

Fort Concho National Historic Landmark (San Angelo, Texas): Elements of all four buffalo soldier regiments served here, where 23 structures are preserved.



Edward Hatch, 9th Cavalry commander. Library of Congress

Fort Davis National Historic Site (Texas): Where Henry Flipper, West Point's first black graduate, was court-martialed. Considered among the



Fort Davis, Texas.

best preserved Southwestern frontier posts.

Fort Huachuca Museum (Sierra Vista, Arizona): The white 6th Cavalry established this fort in 1877, but the

10th Cavalry arrived in 1913 and stayed here for almost 20 years. Excellent museum.

Fort McKavett (Texas) State Historic Site: Home to the 9th Cavalry and 24th Infantry – and called “the prettiest post in Texas” by William T. Sherman. Contains ruins and 19 restored build-



Fort Selden, New Mexico.

ings near Menard.

Fort Selden State Monument (Radium Springs, New Mexico): Established in 1865, units of the 9th Cavalry (1876-77, 1881) and 24th Infantry (1881-91) were stationed here. Crumbling adobe walls are about all that's left of the fort, but the park features a great visitors center.

Fort Sill National Landmark Museum (Lawton, Oklahoma): 10th Cavalry home includes 26 historic structures, including cavalry barracks, the post guardhouse and the Warrior's Journey Exhibit Gallery.

San Antonio National Cemetery: Home of “To the Unknown Dead” memorial and the final resting place of Seminole-Negro scout commander John Bullis and more than 280 buffalo soldiers.

NOTE: Leavenworth, Sill and Huachuca are active military installations. U.S. citizens are granted access – security can be tight – but photo IDs are required for anyone over 16 years old.

—Johnny D. Boggs

Recommended nonfiction reading list

Art T. Burton. *Black, Buckskin, and Blue: African-American Scouts and Soldiers on the Western Frontier.* Austin, Texas: Eakin Press, 1999.

Garna L. Christian. *Black Soldiers in Jim Crow Texas, 1899-1917.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995.

Arlen L. Fowler. *The Black Infantry in the West, 1869-1891.* Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood

Press, 1971.

Bruce A. Glasrud and Michael N. Searles, editors. *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007.

William H. Leckie and Shirley A. Leckie. *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Black Cavalry in the West,* Revised edition. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.

Charles M. Robinson III. *The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Henry Flipper.* El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1994.

Brian G. Shel-lum. *Black Officer in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment: The Military Career of Charles Young.* Lincoln: Bison Books, University of Nebraska Press, 2010.

Frank N. Shubert. *On the Trail of the Buffalo Soldier: Biographies of African-Americans in the U.S. Army, 1866-1917.* Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1994.

— Cowboy Mike