

THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS



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The origin of the term “Buffalo Soldier” is uncertain. The common explanation is that Native Americans saw similarity between the hair of the African-American soldier and that of a buffalo, and due to their fearlessness in battle. The buffalo was a sacred animal to the Native American that he would so name an enemy if respect were lacking. It is a fair guess to say that the African-American trooper understood this and willingly accepted the title. This title was first given to the 10th Cavalry by the Comanche on the Central Plains in 1867 after a battle.

Over 180,000 African-Americans served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Of these, more than 33,000 died. After the war, the future of the African-Americans in the U.S. Army was in doubt. In July, 1866, however, Congressional legislation established two cavalry and four infantry regiments (later consolidated to two) whose enlisted composition was made up of African-Americans. The majority of the new recruits had served in all-Black units during the Civil War. The mounted regiments were the 9th and 10th Cavalries, soon nicknamed Buffalo Soldiers by the Cheyenne and Comanche. Until the early 1890s, the two regiments constituted twenty percent (20%) of all cavalry forces on the American frontier.

The 9th and 10th Cavalries' service in subduing Mexican revolutionaries, hostile Native Americans, outlaws, comancheros, and rustlers was as invaluable as it was unrecognized. It was also accomplished over some of the most rugged and inhospitable country in North America. A list of the adversaries - Geronimo, Sitting Bull, Victorio, Lone Wolf, Billy the Kid, and Pancho Villa - reads like a “Who’s Who” of the American West.

Lesser known, but equally important, the Buffalo Soldiers explored/scouted 34,420 miles of uncharted terrain, opened more than 300 miles of new roads and laid over 200 miles of telegraph lines. The scouting activities took the troops through some of the harshest and most desolated terrain in the nation. These excursions allowed the preparation of excellent maps detailing scarce water holes, mountain passes, and grazing lands that would later allow for the settlement of the area.

They built and repaired frontier outposts around which future towns and cities sprang to life. Without the protection provided by the 10th Cavalry troopers, crews building the ever-expanding railroads were at the mercy of outlaws and hostile Indians. The Buffalo Soldiers consistently received some of the worst assignments that the Army had to offer. They also faced fierce prejudice, against both the color of their skin and the Union uniforms they wore, by many of the citizens of the post-war frontier towns.

Despite this, the troopers of the 9th and 10th Cavalries developed into two of the most distinguished fighting units in the Army. Besides the special name “Buffalo Soldiers,” African-American fighting men also were singled out for commendations. The four African-American units combined, having served during the period 1870-1890, received fourteen Medals of Honor during campaigns against various Native American nations. Twelve of the Medals of Honor were received by troopers of the 9th and 10th Cavalries and by two soldiers of the 24th U.S. Infantry. On August 16, 1881 near Cuchillo Negro, New Mexico, Trooper Augustus Walley, Company 1 of the North Cavalry, a native of Reisterstown, Maryland became one of those who earned the Medal of Honor.