

# Buffalo Soldiers: Myths and Realities

by  
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There has been a growing interest in and awareness of buffalo soldiers and their role in American history since the 1960s. And the evidence of this interest, as I will show in a moment or two, is all around us. The process started during the period of the civil rights revolution, with John Ford's 1960 film "Sergeant Rutledge," and Bill Leckie's 1967 book, *The Buffalo Soldiers*, an engaging campaign narrative which has been through at least 20 printings. This awareness is probably sufficiently pervasive by this point that it is not necessary to explain who Buffalo Soldiers were, that they were in fact black soldiers who served in the Regular Army during the half-century between the Civil War and World War I. This awareness is a very good thing, it seems to me, and carries the essential central message that black people, African Americans, participated in mainstream American processes, that what we are dealing with here is not just black history, but American history.

Just how far the Buffalo Soldier has penetrated the public awareness and the popular culture is pretty easy to demonstrate with some old-fashioned show-and-tell. First—always first, even here at the Museum of American History—is the printed word: Bruce Glasrud's bibliography on Blacks in the West lists 330+ citations to printed works on Buffalo Soldiers through 1997. And the books keep coming, including another one from me in 2003, assuming that I can survive another 2.5 years of commuting by bicycle among the friendly motorists of suburban Washington. Then there is the "stuff," objects of various kinds that depict Buffalo Soldiers and buffalo-soldier themes, sometimes with references to other depictions of Buffalo Soldiers and buffalo-soldier themes.

1. Figurines, small and large (and the large one shows Rose Murray's statue of Emmett, who has stood

watch today at the front gate of Fort Huachuca since 1974). "Emmett," incidentally has been joined by at least three monuments dedicated in the 1990s. The others are at Forts Leavenworth, Kansas, and Forts Bayard and Selden in New Mexico.

2. A couple of refrigerator magnets that I have found.

3. A stamp, 29-cents worth, issued in 1994, that once mailed a first-class letter, showing a Mort Kunstler painting, and that also touched off an angry response from native Americans.

4. A jigsaw puzzle, showing a picture by Don Stivers of Sergeant Emanuel Stance, based on no visual evidence of what Stance might have actually looked like. Stivers may be the best known of the many who paint buffalo soldiers. The puzzle was made in Germany.

5. Tee-shirts.

a. One bearing the image of the Buffalo Soldier monument at Fort Leavenworth done by Eddie Dixon and dedicated by Colin Powell in the summer of 1992 to national media fanfare.

b. Another featuring "To the rescue," the refrain of a Quincy Jones tune that mentions Buffalo Soldiers.

6. A necktie. At least I thought I had one, but it doesn't seem to be in the bag. Perhaps I forgot it. (It, by the way, was purchased through the catalog of an avant garde fashion house by the name of J. C. Penney and was made in China, hopefully not by Chinese Prison industries.)

Plainly, the Buffalo Soldier has made his way firmly into American culture. The image of this trooper is everywhere, and he may even be challenging George Custer as the dominant current image of the frontier

army, although he still has a way to go before he actually takes over this position. Custer, after all, has had more than 40 movies made of his career, and there is still but a handful about the buffalo soldier. Although I should note that the Custerites are feeling the heat. The Indians have lobbied successfully to change the name of Custer Battlefield to Little Big Horn Battlefield, and the buffalo soldiers are receiving much of the attention once reserved for the Boy General and the Seventh Cavalry. One of the most recent books about the fair-haired one, by a collateral descendent, almost seems like part of a rear guard defense. It is called *The Sacrificial Lion George Armstrong Custer, from American Hero to Media Villain*. There will be some more ink spilled before this one is over.

Despite the rise of the Buffalo Soldier to national prominence, the notions that they are “forgotten heroes” and that their role in the West represents an “untold story” have taken hold and seem strongly resistant to contrary evidence. Examples abound, but two very recent ones should suffice. During African American History month in Baltimore last year, a church service listened raptly to reenactors discuss the troopers. Afterward, a descendent of 9th Cavalry Medal of Honor recipient Augustus Walley, perhaps failing to recall the 1996 memorial service at Walley’s grave, along with the Medal of Honor tombstone, the press coverage, and the naming of a small Reisterstown street as Augustus Walley Way, said, “They are the forgotten heroes.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, she added, “Almost nothing has been written on the Buffalo Soldiers,” an observation that might startle someone who had seen Bruce Glasrud’s bibliography. Reporting on another observance in the same month, the newsletter of the Council on America’s Military Past (CAMP), a national historical group, took the same position, with a lead sentence that claimed that “the stories of unsung heroes who helped tame the Southwest began Black History month activities at El Paso, Tex., community college....”<sup>2</sup> Even the Smithsonian magazine could not resist labeling a 1998 article about buffalo soldiers as concerning “unsung heroes of the frontier ....” A historian with numerous citations in the Glasrud compilation (picking one at random, let’s say “me,” with nine references) might well begin to wonder whether his effort had been worthwhile.<sup>3</sup>

Reasons for the durability of this perception are not clear. Perhaps the myth is an appropriate, even overdue, antidote to the Custer-centric view of the western army, which still remains strong, and sometimes includes strange supporting voices, such as the Indians who assert their own ancestors’ prowess by claiming that when they rubbed out Custer they defeated the Army’s best.<sup>4</sup> The myth of the “forgotten heroes” and the

“untold story” may help reinforce claims that whites deliberately obscure or trivialize the role of blacks in American history and thereby reinforces a sense of victimhood, the maintenance of which some people might find advantageous or at least comforting. Perhaps invocation of the myth serves merely as a ritualized introduction to discussions of the subject, a convenient attention-getting device for headlines, journalistic leaders, or introductory statements. Certainly it can serve to mask personal sloth or ignorance. A person can always claim that his lack of knowledge is based, not on a failure to read and to learn, but on the fact that the story had been hidden from him. Even academicians can—and do—find the myth irresistible. On the first page of a 1999 book, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry 1867-1898*, Professor Charles Kenner asserted that the buffalo soldiers’ “lives and deeds have largely been overlooked.”<sup>5</sup> Kenner’s publisher, the University of Oklahoma Press, incidentally, is also Bill Leckie’s publisher and has produced the 20 printings of Leckie’s book. If any people should have known better, it was the editors at Oklahoma. Whatever the reason or reasons, the view endures, despite ample evidence that the buffalo soldier story has been widely told.

The other myth, that of the disproportionately large significance of buffalo soldiers in the taming of the West, is more susceptible to dispassionate analysis. This assertion does in fact have some basis in reality. Soldiers and officers alike knew that their units were kept away from centers of populations, served far longer at more remote posts, and generally faced more austerity and greater hardships than other troopers.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, as in the period of the bitter wars against the Apaches in 1877-1881 in New Mexico and Arizona, this separation from their fellow citizens thrust them into severely trying military campaigns. At other times, their isolation put them in places removed from combat as well as civilization. Lieutenant John Bigelow of the Tenth Cavalry, for example, considered his regiment’s experience during 1869-1872 at Fort Sill in Indian Territory to have been that of “an army of occupation, to hold the country from which the Indians had been expelled and to keep the Indians within the bounds assigned to them.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Lieutenant (later Colonel) George Andrews, characterized the Twenty-fifth Infantry’s ten years in Texas during 1870-1879, as “a continuous series of building and repairing of military posts, roads and telegraph lines; of escort and guard duty of all descriptions; of marchings and counter-marchings from post to post, and scouting for Indians which resulted in a few unimportant skirmishes.”<sup>8</sup>

It is possible to count the skirmishes and battles between the Army and the western tribes, determine whether white or black regiments fought in them, and

compare the level of participation in these encounters with the percentage of black units in the service.<sup>9</sup> Black units made up twenty percent of the cavalry force and eight percent of the infantry through the frontier period, or about 11.4% of the force. Three slightly different compilations of skirmishes and battles of the frontier period—done by the Adjutant General’s Office, appended to Francis Heitman’s biographical dictionary, and published by the National Indian War Veterans—place participation of black troopers between 11.9% and 13.8%.<sup>10</sup> So the numbers suggest that buffalo soldiers did not in fact carry a disproportionate burden of the fighting. This is not to say that their contribution was not significant or grindingly hard. But research does provide some data against which to measure claims.

Despite the relative ease with which overall significance can be measured, the idea of disproportionate importance also included its own complicating and contradictory duality. On one hand, the troopers were the best the army had, disproportionately contributing to the military conquest of the west. This assertion carries an uplifting message of strength, endurance, heroism, and importance. Yet, it bears its own counterbalancing admission of guilt because they achieved their renown against the native peoples of the West, another oppressed people of color. The conflict between “uplift” and “guilt,” to use categories proposed by historian Robert Utley, is resolved by asserting that the soldiers understood and empathized with the plight of the native peoples they helped pauperize and confine to reservations.<sup>11</sup>

Both aspects of this view, that the soldiers were the Army’s best and that they uniquely appreciated the tragedy of the Indians, were articulated in the 1997 film “Buffalo Soldiers,” directed by the well-known actor Danny Glover. This film, aired by Turner Network Television and meant to be taken seriously, as evidenced by the “Educator’s Guide” that was released with it,<sup>12</sup> portrayed the buffalo soldiers as so proficient that they were able to do something no United States soldiers, black or white, ever managed to do, surprise and capture Victorio and his band of Warm Springs Apaches. Then, with the Apaches under their control, the troopers did something no United States soldiers, black or white, were ever known to do. After sympathetic conversations over coffee, in which soldiers and warriors expressed their mutual understanding of the oppression each experienced at the hands of whites, the troopers let the Apaches go.

This rainbow-coalition fantasy insulted all of the participants. The Apaches, who were among the most astute of trackers, trailers, and scouts, never allowed themselves to be encircled by a patrol of American soldiers, white or black. The Buffalo Soldiers, had they been adept enough and lucky enough to have bagged Victorio, would never

have let their enemy go. The producers of the film, determined to validate their own notions of race relations, showed an acute disrespect for the strangeness of the past in coming up with a story that might have provided consolation but did not reflect reality.<sup>13</sup> They produced an engaging “cinematic fantasy,” to use the phrase with which historian Edmund Morgan described a piece of ahistorical fiction in which the Smithsonian’s own staff had a hand, a film called “The Patriot.”<sup>14</sup>

My own experience, while leading a buffalo-soldier tour of the northern plains in 1995, made clear on a personal level the intensity of the Indians’ objection to the claim of some special ties between the soldiers and the warriors they faced. I spent three days trying to explain to a busload of vacationers on the tour that the past was strange territory, that history did not always validate current views, and that buffalo soldiers and Indians did not achieve some empathy based on color. I cited the writings of Kenneth Porter, a pioneer in the study of relations between Texan tribes and blacks, and I quoted the buffalo soldiers themselves, who used the same dismissive epithets—“hostile tribes,” “naked savages,” and “redskins”—that were employed by whites. I told them about the racist caricatures in which buffalo soldiers indulged, such as when Private Robinson of D Company, 24th Infantry, went to a masquerade ball at Fort Bayard in 1894 dressed as “an idiotic Indian squaw.”<sup>15</sup> I still did not get through to all of the tourists, notably a young black reporter who persisted in the view that soldiers and warriors must have seen some commonality in their condition.

Enlightenment came on the fourth day. We were on the Pine Ridge reservation in Shannon County, South Dakota, the poorest county in the United States, heading for Drexel Mission and the site of Ninth cavalryman William Wilson’s brave dash for reinforcements, for which he received a Medal of Honor. On the way, we made the obligatory stop at Wounded Knee Creek to see the site of the massacre and visit the cemetery. There, the burial ground on the wind-swept hill dramatically illustrated the tragedy of Indian life. There was the mass grave, with about 150 victims of the 7th Cavalry, but there were also the 20th-century graves, those of the children—life expectancy is very short on the Pine Ridge—and those of the soldiers—killed on hills in Korea or in paddies in Vietnam—who, like the black troopers of an earlier generation, probably hoped that military service would validate their claim on citizenship.

At the base of the hill on which sits the Wounded Knee cemetery, a Dakota woman stopped her car and asked the journalist, who was walking with my wife, what he was doing at Wounded Knee. When he said, a little proudly, that he was on a buffalo soldier tour, she

replied: "Buffalo Soldiers and the white man killed my people. My ancestors are up there. And I don't appreciate you being here." Finally, she said, "Why don't you go visit Abraham Lincoln's grave?" The reporter came back to the bus stunned but with a new appreciation for the strangeness of the past.<sup>16</sup>

Once the myths are cleared away, two salient points remain. Of primary importance is the fact that buffalo soldiers participated in major mainstream American processes, the expansion of the United States and its populations and the displacement of native peoples. At the same time, because of white racism and the discrimination that it spawned, they performed their duties and lived the lives of soldiers under conditions that were peculiarly trying. They endured indignities small and large, ranging from the deliberate exploitation of racial hatreds by Wyoming cattlemen in 1892 to the summary dismissal from the service of an entire battalion after a shooting incident in 1906 at Brownsville, Texas.

About thirty years ago, when knowledge of the Buffalo Soldier was beginning to be spread by the pioneering work of Leckie, Arlen Fowler, Marvin Fletcher, and others, a song performed by both the Flamingoes and the Persuasions asked "Buffalo Soldier, will you survive in this new land?" The answer seems clear now. The buffalo soldier is thoroughly imbedded in our culture and has become a part of American history, and the reply to the musical question is a resounding "yes."

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Washington Times, Monday, February 14, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> "Black soldiers remembered in Texas," Headquarters Heliogram, no. 207 (February-March 2000), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> T. J. Stiles, "Buffalo Soldiers," *Smithsonian* 29 (December 1998), pp. 82-94. The quotation is from the magazine's table of contents. *Smithsonian* publishes letters but not those calling into question its views on buffalo soldiers. Even though my work was at the top of the list of "additional sources," my correspondence on this matter, sent twice, was ignored twice.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, James Welsh with Paul Stekler, *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), pp. 61, 127, 170. On the many manifestations of Custer's enduring fame, see Brian W. Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: the Anatomy of an American Myth* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry 1867-1898* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Army and Navy Journal*, 17 June 1876, p. 726; *Ibid.*, 21 November 1891, p. 219; *Ibid.*, 16 January 1882, p. 331.

<sup>7</sup> John Bigelow, "Tenth Regiment of Cavalry," *Journal of the Military Service Institution* 8 (March 1892), p. 221.

<sup>8</sup> George Andrews, "Twenty-fifth Regiment of Infantry," *Journal of the Military Service Institution* 8 (March 1892), p. 225.

<sup>9</sup> Around 1970, Historian Thomas Phillips claimed that between 1866 and 1891, the Army fought 2,704 engagements against Indians, with black troops participating in 141 of these, or just over five percent. Thomas D. Phillips, "The Black Regulars," in *The West of the American People*, ed. Allan G. Bogue et. al. (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock, n.d.), p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Adjutant General's Office, *Chronological List of Actions, &c., With Indians, From January 1, 1866, to January, 1891*; Francis E. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, from its Organization, September 29, 1789, to March 2, 1903*, vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), pp. 426-449; George W. Webb, *Chronological List of Engagements Between the Regular Army of the United States and Various Tribes of Hostile Indians Which Occured During the years 1790 to 1898, Inclusive* (St. Joseph, MO: National Indian War Veterans, 1939).

<sup>11</sup> Robert M. Utley, "The Contributions of the Frontier to the American Military Tradition," in *The Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, 1959-1987*, Harry R. Borowski, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1988), p. 527.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Needles, "Educator's Guide," <http://learning.turner.com/Buffalo/index/html>, December 1997.

<sup>13</sup> On "the strangeness of the past," see Simon Schama, "Clio at the Multiplex," *New Yorker* (January 19, 1998), pp. 38-43.

<sup>14</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, "In Love With Guns," *New York Review of Books*, XLVII (19 October 2000), 30-32.

<sup>15</sup> Frank N. Schubert, *Black Valor: Buffalo Soldiers and the Medal of Honor, 1870-1898* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1997), pp. 128-129.

<sup>16</sup> For the reporter's own account of this incident, see M. Dion Thompson, "Visiting the World of Buffalo Soldiers," *Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 1996, travel section. Also see Frank N. Schubert, *Black Valor: Buffalo Soldiers and the Medal of Honor, 1870-1898* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1997), p. 168.