

Black Soldiers in South Texas

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Part I: The Civil War

This being Black History Month, it is an appropriate time to recall the history of Black soldiers in South Texas. Their history here begins with the invasion of South Texas by Union forces on November 2, 1863. The primary mission of the Rio Grande Expedition was to stop the cotton exports passing through the region, exports which were providing the Confederacy with funds to purchase military supplies.

The Union forces under General Banks were said to number 6,998 men, not including the 15th Maine with about 350 men. The Corps d'Afrique (1st Engineers and 16th Infantry) included in the 6,998 figure numbered 467. They were Black soldiers. By 11/6 the latter contingent was busily occupied in unloading vessels and assisting Pioneer Company, another Black engineering unit, at constructing pontoon bridges. While the first soldiers to cross Boca Chica on the march to Brownsville experienced bad footing, later transitions were eased by a pontoon bridge. This consisted of two long huge India rubber bladders upon which cross timbers were secured.

The formation of the Black units deserves some clarification. The history of the 87th Infantry—Old, US Colored Troops is as follows: It was organized at New Orleans, Louisiana in October 1863 as the 16th Infantry, Corps d'Afrique; designated this regiment, April 4, 1864, consolidated with the 95th Colored Infantry, November 26, 1864, to form the 81st Colored Infantry (new), designation changed to 87th Colored Infantry (new), August 14, 1865. The Pioneer Company also consisted of Black soldiers, primarily doing engineering duties. Additional Colored troops of the 87th were assigned to Brazos Island duty from 9/64 to 5/65 after having been stationed in Morganza, Louisiana.

The Union forces soon took control of Brownsville and Fort Brown. The fortifications at Fort Brown were minimal relative to other forts to be found across the country. It was the Black backs that strengthened the fort by constructing new redoubts and rifle pits. Blacks in South Texas were not usually engaged in any military action, but one such event occurred on 8/9/64 when 75 men from the 81st Negro Engineers went to Point Isabel from the post on Brazos Island in order to collect lumber that had been landed there for their use. A small contingent of Confederates surprised them and then retreated. So did the Federals under Captain Jordan. They retreated and embarked on the little steamer *Hale* that had brought them across the bay. The following day Capt. William M. Shepherd of the 91st Illinois took a detachment from his regiment and also soldiers from the 19th Iowa back to Point Isabel. The few Confederates retired upon being confronted by this larger force.

The fact was that by 8/1/64 there were but 1,200 Union soldiers now stationed at the Brazos de Santiago post under the command of Colonel Day. A large number of them were Black.

Union officers committed themselves to educating the Blacks in their commands. It was done in a military fashion however. General Order No. 31 issued to the Missouri Black Regiment at Morganza, Louisiana, July 3, 1864 by Lt. Col. David Branson stated in

effect that all non-commissioned officers of the command who should fail to learn to read by January 1, 1865 would be reduced in rank. It went on to say, "All soldiers of this command who have by any means learned to read and write, will aid and assist to the extent of their ability their fellow soldiers to learn these invaluable arts, without which no man is properly fitted to perform the duties of a free citizen."

Once encamped at Brazos Santiago Branson continued in the same vein with his Gen. Orders No. 35 of 10/29/64, to wit:

Hereafter when any soldier of this command is found to be, or to have been, playing cards, he will be placed in some prominent position in the camp with book in hand, and required then and there to learn a considerable lesson in reading and spelling: and if unwilling to learn, he will be compelled by huger to do so. When men are found gambling in any way, the money at stake will be seized and turned into the Regt. Hospital fund. No freed slave who cannot read well has a right to waste the time and opportunity here given him to fit himself for the position of a free citizen. This order will be read twice to this command, and copied in each order book.

On 1/25/65 Maj. J. K. Hudson, commanding the regiment, in his General Orders No. 4 provided a carrot rather than a stick when he ordered:

The Regimental Council of Administration having appropriated Fifty Dollars for the purchase of premiums for the encouragement of the enlisted men of this Regiment to learn to write it is hereby ordered that a gold pen be given to the Sergeant in each Company, who shall learn to write the best by the fourth day of July 1865; that a gold pen be given in each Company who shall learn to write the best by the 4th day of July 1865; that a good book be given the private of each Company who shall learn to write the best by the 4th day of July 1865, these rewards to be publicly given by a committee chosen as mentioned in orders.

When, in May 1865, the last battle of the Civil War took place at Palmito Ranch, south of Brownsville, the Confederate cavalry under Col. Rip Ford routed the Union forces who fled to Brazos Island and the covering protection of U.S. Navy firepower. Were it not for 140 men of the 62nd Colored Infantry who formed a skirmish line north from the river to effect a somewhat orderly retreat by the remaining Union soldiers, losses would have been greater. The CSA's Captain Carrington, perhaps with overtones of racial prejudice, later stated "Branson's Negro regiment was quickly demoralized and fled in dismay." This, in fact, was not the case at all, for it was the white Indiana troops who hastily retreated in disorder. The Blacks somewhat saved the day for the demoralized fleeing Union soldiers.

With peace being concluded white soldiers were quickly mustered out by November 1865. The situation was that as white volunteer regimental units were quickly mustered out at the end of the conflict, the Colored units were not discharged as rapidly. The Colored troops then filled the breach in Texas. This did not sit well with white Texans and became yet another sore point in the Reconstruction Era. On 11/14/66 Sheridan is quoted as saying, "The condition of civil affairs in Texas is anomalous, singular, and unsatisfactory." It was not until January 1867 that Grant gave orders to demobilize the last of the Negro volunteers. Some discharged Black soldiers were sympathetic to the cause of Benito Juárez and joined his forces to fight against the Imperialists.

A short account in Pierce's *A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley* indicates that the Black soldiers in the area were being treated shabbily and reacted accordingly. In the terminology of the time, he relates:

On October 9, 1865, at about 9 o'clock, a mutiny broke out among the negro soldiers in Brownsville. Having nothing but tents in which to live, suffering from mosquito pests, and finally chilled by a cold northern wind which had sprung up on the Saturday following, the negroes first entered a saloon on market square and there killed the proprietor. Then they rushed in parties through the city in quest of clothing, blankets, or lumber with which to protect their bodies from the cold. On the corner of 8th and Elizabeth the Dalzell house was in the course of construction. They pounced on the lumber there. William H. Putegnat in an effort to drive them off was attacked and severely wounded by a bayonet thrust on the forehead. Several Mexicans were killed. The negroes, about 60, ultimately returned to their quarters unmolested. During the Reconstruction period, neither Texans nor their occupiers distinguished themselves satisfactorily.

Part II: Post Civil War and the Decades to Follow

Black soldiers stationed at the various Valley forts were to play an important role in effecting widespread Texas communications. The telegraph, invented by Samuel Morse in 1838, was the first modern electric communications system. The first telegraph line was built in 1844. It was revolutionary for its time and by 1861 had connected both coasts to one another. In this period, however, Texas was lagging in its implementation and use. The state was first connected to the outside world by telegraph when a line reached the East Texas town of Marshall in 1854. The important port of Galveston wasn't connected until 1859 and the state capital Austin not until 1865.

It was a multi-year succession of Indian raids that stirred Texas to seek "an important auxiliary to the defense of the Texas frontier." A Texas Parks and Wildlife Department handout provides some of the background. It states:

The 9th United States Army Regiment of Cavalry was the first peacetime Cavalry unit that came to Texas following the aftermath of the Civil War. When the Ninth was ordered to Fort Stockton and Davis in 1866, their initial orders were to protect the mail and stage routes between San Antonio and El Paso, search out and defeat marauding hostiles infesting the region, and maintain law and order on the Rio Grande. Patrolling the area was almost impossible because of the huge expanse of land to be covered and the unpredictable Texas weather. In addition to the overwhelming responsibilities the Ninth had to face in Texas, the problem of racial prejudice was added. The citizens on the frontier wanted protection, but many were not happy to see it come in the form of Negro troops.

In December 1866, Company K of the 9th Cavalry was attacked at old Fort Lancaster where the Texas Buffalo soldiers then faced their foes "toe to toe." (The fort was located on the lower road from San Antonio to El Paso.) It was the most massive force that the Ninth Cavalry would ever encounter in their 18 years in Texas. They proved to be effective fighters due to their "hard work, discipline, and sense of purpose."

The handout goes on to note that "During the course of the Indian Wars, 1866-1892, enlisted men of the Ninth Cavalry were awarded 11 medals of honor; an additional four being awarded to officers of the Ninth. This was the highest number per regiment than any other regiment in the field at that time."

Not until June 1874 however was a federal bill approved authorizing the Secretary of War to construct and operate telegraph lines between various Texas military posts. The bill provided the sum of \$100,000 to begin the work. By January 1875 only 40 miles of line had been built from the supply depot established in Denison, North Texas along the Red River.

In March the Office of the Chief Signal Officer placed First Lieutenant Adolphus Washington Greely in charge. The background of this Newburyport, Massachusetts soldier was somewhat unique. In the Civil War he saw action in several major battles, in which he sustained serious wounds on three occasions. He rose from the rank of private to Brevet Major of Volunteers. At the end of the war he was mustered out. In March 1867 he reentered the army as a second lieutenant.

Greely was, in the following eleven months, to almost complete the entire line before asking to be relieved in March 1876. It was on June 2, 1875) that the first telegraph line into Indian Territory was completed. It stretched from Fort Richardson, Texas to Fort Sill in Oklahoma Territory. The line had been built by the 4th Infantry.

The Denison line met a line from Fort Sill, Oklahoma at Jacksboro, Texas and then was routed southwest through Fort Griffin, Camp Colorado, Fort Concho, and terminated at Camp Stockton. At Fort Concho another segment of the line moved generally southeast connecting Fort McKavett, Mason, Fredericksburg, San Antonio, Castroville, Uvalde, Fort Clark, Fort Duncan at Eagle Pass, Fort McIntosh 33 miles above Laredo, the Ringgold Barracks at Rio Grande City, and then along the river to Fort Brown at Brownsville. Portions of the line were erected simultaneously. This latter portion was why the route warranted its name, the Military Telegraph Road, on lower Valley maps. By 1908 some mapmakers had already shortened the name simply to Military Road and in its 1923 soil survey map, the USDA called it the Old Military Road.

It was on June 28, 1875 that a 24th Infantry detail from Fort Brown commenced work from there to the Ringgold Barracks. They were under the direction of U.S. Military Academy graduate Lt. W. H. W. James. Initially the work was delayed about three weeks due to the tardy shipment of poles from Virginia. The poles used from Brownsville to Fort McIntosh were juniper costing \$2.20 each. Elsewhere local timber had been utilized. These included post oak, ash, red mountain cedar, elm, juniper (white cedar), and to a much lesser extent pecan, hackberry, and walnut. The poles were 20' in length and 4½ inches in diameter. They carried Kenosha insulators which were of grooved wood for the wire and had a petticoat bottom. These proved to be inefficient and were replaced after being in service from 1872 to 1876. The conductor line was No. 9 galvanized iron wire. On every fifth pole a lightning rod was affixed. Those that were improperly attached gave trouble when they were bent across the transmission wire after being struck by lightning. On July 15 the line from Rio Grande City to Laredo was commenced by a second detail of the 24th under the leadership of Lt. John I. Kane. This unit accomplished the unequaled construction speed of two miles per day. The Brownsville connection reached the town on August 28, exactly two months after it was started. Mainly for repair purposes an office with Sgt. Edward A. Lewis in charge was opened 9/12/75 in

Edinburgh (now the town of Hidalgo). This same month, on the 22nd, the line was damaged about thirteen miles above Brownsville. Bandits or rustlers were likely responsible for pulling up two poles and cutting the wire in eight places. The final connection of the line from San Antonio to Brownsville would occur on February 2, 1876 when the segment from Fort Duncan at Eagle Pass going to Laredo was completed. Together with experienced signal service personnel the military labor responsible for construction was furnished by the Black "Buffalo Soldiers" of the 24th Infantry. The latter have not been given sufficient credit for their meritorious work. The 24th Infantry Regiment had been established on 9/21/1866 as part of the 10th Cavalry Regiment. It was the first peacetime all-Black regiment in the regular U.S. Army.

The Handbook of Texas provide information on an incidence at Rio Grande City. The most serious rift between Fort Ringgold and the citizens of Rio Grande City occurred in 1899 when Troop D of the Ninth United States Cavalry briefly garrisoned the installation. The black troops, returning triumphantly from the Cuban campaign, quickly grew impatient at racial restrictions and harassment. Tensions heightened amid conflicting reports of impending attacks on the fort and town. On the night of November 20 post commander 2d Lt. E. H. Rubottom responded to a presumed assault on the garrison by ordering Gatling gunfire on the area between the post and town. Only one minor injury resulted, but Rubottom's action succeeded in quelling the disturbance. Ensuing federal, state, and grand jury investigations failed to specify culpability or motivation, although many townspeople and other Texans insisted that soldiers feigned an attack on the fort in order to wreak havoc on the community. Lt. Col. Cyrus S. Roberts of the United States Army and Thomas Scurry, adjutant general of Texas, concluded that Rubottom had acted unwisely but recommended no charges against him or others. Governor Joseph Sayers favored the locals' demand that the Ninth Cavalry be moved, and the residents requested that a white garrison be retained.

The *Brownsville Herald* issue of 10/23/1899 headlined one article: "A platoon of negro soldiers sneaked out of Fort Ringgold, entered Rio Grande City bent on shooting up the police force. Over 100 shoots were fired. No injuries." This publicity may have laid the unfavorable sentiments of the Brownsville citizenry and the incident, known as "The Brownsville Affray", that occurred in 1906.

Coming from Nebraska, 167 soldiers of companies B, C, and D of the black Twenty-fifth United States Infantry United States Army had, on July 28, 1906, been stationed at Fort Brown, Brownsville. Most had lengthy service records with "outstanding credentials for service, loyalties, discipline, and bravery during battles fought in Cuba and the Philippines. Six held the Medal of Honor and 13 had been awarded citations for bravery in the Spanish-American War." For all intents and purposes it maybe concluded that neither the community nor officials then treated them even-handedly. On white-owned saloons, restaurants, and all public and recreational facilities signs were posted. They were said to have read. "No niggers or dogs allowed."

On the night of August 12, an alleged attack on a white woman of Brownsville town immediately generated a hostile citizenry. Maj. Charles W. Pierce, white commanding officer of the black companies, tried to cool matters by curfewing his troops the following evening. Peace was broken when, around midnight of August 13, a brief shooting spree erupted. Killed was Frank Natus, bartender at John Tillman's Ruby

Saloon, the only bar in the town of 6,000 inhabitants to serve the blacks. Police lieutenant M.Y. Domiguez was shot in the arm and later lost it.

General Blocksom, Assistant Inspector-General Major to Inspector General Ernest Garlington of the army's Southwestern Division, was sent, to the Valley to investigate events occurring on August 13 and 14, 1906. What had ensued that warranted investigation was a serious incident which can only be outlined here. Books have been written on the subject, and there is no one definitive truth to the matter.

Almost immediately accusations were hurled at the black soldiers. This is what precipitated Blocksom's dispatch to the Valley. He soon "deemed the soldiers uncooperative and urged their dismissal if they refused to turn evidence." When nothing was forthcoming, Texas Ranger Captain William Jesse McDonald conducted his own investigation. It led to the arrest of twelve enlisted men who allegedly held key positions in a conspiracy. Obviously any evidence was very weak for the Cameron County grand jury failed to return any indictments. Still Gen. Garlington, a South Carolina native, in his own separate investigation charged a "conspiracy of silence" and agreed with Blocksom's earlier recommendation to dismiss the soldiers.

The soldiers, who had been transported to San Antonio, became the victims of adverse public opinion and, in a sense, political pawns. Blocksom had put together a 112 page report titled "Affray at Brownsville, Texas 8/13 and 14/06. Investigation of the Conduct of United States Troops." It was published by the Government Printing Office in 1906. In 1907 the same office would publish a 210 page report by Milton B. Purdy with Blocksom as co-author. It was titled "Additional Testimony Related to the Brownsville Affray." Some critics characterized both Blocksom and Garlington as "racists."

Valley Congressional Representative, John Nance Garner, who would later become vice-president in 1932 and 1936 under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, may or may not have reflected the sentiments of his constituency when he introduced legislation in 1906, 1907, 1910, and 1911 to remove all blacks from the army and prevent further enlistment of blacks. His efforts failed in Congress.

On November 28, 1906, safely after elections, President Theodore Roosevelt discharged "without honor" all 167 black soldiers. The issue then rose to national prominence as Roosevelt opponents William Howard Taft and especially Senator Joseph B. Foraker of Ohio called for a Senate investigation. Eventually in March 1908, the Senate Military Affairs Committee concurred with the Roosevelt's decision. However, a minority of four Republicans on the committee dissented by stating the evidence was inconclusive.

The wheels of justice often move very slowly. In 1972, sixty-four years after the Senate report, scholarly research critical of the government's handling of the affair convinced California Representative Augustus Hawkins that those unjustly discharged should be awarded "honorable" discharges. President Richard M. Nixon agreed and awarded it to them. This was done posthumously except for the lone surviving veteran, 86 year old Dorsie Willis, who was also given a one time lump-sum pension payment of \$25,000. Thus closed a cloudy chapter in Brownsville history.