

BLACK CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS

By Dr. Samuel W. Mitcham, Jr.

Heritage Operations Historian, SCV

AUTHOR'S DISCLAIMER: The Myth of the Enlightened and Noble Cause will not be pandered to in this article. Should a purveyor or worshipper of the Myth persist in reading, the author assumes no responsibility for your evitable dismay.

I unwittingly unleashed a bit of a firestorm in 2012 when, in my first book on the War for Southern Independence, Richard Taylor and the Red River Campaign, I was undiplomatic enough to mention the existence of black Confederate soldiers. This led to severe criticism from certain quarters; one critic even denounced it as “a travesty of Civil War history.” Another snowflake gushed: “We know there weren’t any!”¹

I decided I did not wish to endure this nonsense a second time. Cognizant of the fact that no one ever erected a monument to a critic, however, I decided to react in a manner diametrically opposed to their obvious desires, which is to intimidate all opposition into silence. Rather than go that route, as too many intellectuals and cowardly politicians have done, I doubled down. In my next book, Bust Hell Wide Open: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest, I not only mentioned the black Confederate soldier, I included a photograph of one: Private Louis Napoleon Winbush of the 7th Tennessee Cavalry.²

¹ I will not mention the names of these critics. Let these nonentities enjoy the anonymity they so richly deserve.

² Louis Napoleon Winbush (1846-1934) rode with Nathan Bedford Forrest and served, at various times, as a Confederate Army chaplain, cook, and combat cavalryman. After the war, he attended 34 United Confederate



Louis Napoleon Winbush (1846-1934) and his grandson at the 1932 Sons of Confederate Veterans Annual Meeting. Winbush rode with Nathan Bedford Forrest at Shiloh, Brice's Crossroads and other battles, and served as a cook, preacher, and combat cavalryman. He could recite the entire New Testament from memory, despite the fact that he had no education and could neither read nor write.

Veterans' Reunions in a row. The highly devout Winbush memorized the entire New Testament. This fact is doubly remarkable when one learns that he had no formal education and could neither read nor write.

Although they ignored documentary evidence, not even these hypocritical, self-ordained “politically correct” people could deny photographic evidence. They went silent, for a refreshing change. Only one critic commented, asserting: “Well, there couldn’t have been very many.”

Couldn’t there?

Some readers will be surprised to learn that there were a great many black Confederate soldiers, that many of them participated in combat, and they were good at it. (Anthony Hervey, the founder of the Black Confederate Soldier Foundation, estimated that there were at least 100,000.³ Most estimates vary between 80,000 and 96,000.) Union Private James G. Bates of the 13th Iowa Volunteers was certainly surprised when a black Confederate sniper shot some of his comrades. “I can assure you of a certainty that the rebels have negro soldiers in their army,” he wrote home. “One of their best sharp shooters, and the boldest of them all here is a negro . . . You can see him plain enough with the naked eye.”⁴

One of the first Union officers killed in the War for Southern Independence was Major Theodore Winthrop, the son of a Massachusetts governor and the descendant of a prominent New England abolitionist family. He was cut down in the Battle of Big Bethel by a black Confederate sniper named Sam, who put a musket ball through Winthrop’s heart.⁵

This sort of thing happened throughout the war. In December 1862, for example, Sherman prepared to launch what turned out to be a disastrous attack on the Confederate positions at Chickasaw Hills near Vicksburg, but Rebel snipers gave him a great deal of trouble beforehand.

³ Steve Byas, “Black Confederate Flag Activist Dies in Car Crash After Flag Rally,” *The New American Magazine*. Posted online July 20, 2015. Accessed 2019.

⁴ Kirby Smith Camp #1209, “Black Confederate Soldiers,” www.svc-kirby.smith.org/Black%20Confederate.htm.

⁵ Winthrop was an aide to the Union commander, Brigadier General Benjamin Butler.

To the astonishment of the Federals, one of the bravest and most dangerous was a black Confederate soldier. Thomas Know, a reporter for the New York Herald, who witnessed the action, wrote: "He mounts a breastwork regardless of all danger, and getting sight of a Federal soldier, draws up his musket at arm's length and fires, never failing of hitting his mark . . . It is certain that Negroes are fighting here [for the Confederacy]. . ." This disconcerted some of the less experienced Northerners, who had assumed (like today's historical neophytes) that all African Americans supported the Union.⁶ Many of them did but certainly not all.⁷ One of the last Confederate pensioners in Vicksburg, for example, was Ephram Roberson, a black man. He served in Company A/Bradford's Battalion, which was commanded by Jefferson Davis Bradford, the president's nephew.⁸

The invaders had been warned. In 1861, Frederick Douglass, a former slave who knew what he was talking about, told Abraham Lincoln to his face that, unless he guaranteed the slaves freedom, "they would take up arms for the rebels." Lincoln did not listen, and as a result, Douglass wrote in September 1861: "There are at the present moment, many colored men in the Confederate Army doing duty not as cooks, servants and laborers, but as real soldiers, having muskets on their shoulders and bullets in their pockets ready to shoot down loyal troops and do all that soldiers may do to destroy the Federal government."⁹

⁶ Andrea Warren, Under Siege (New York: MacMillan, 2009), p. 25.

⁷ About 191,000 African Americans served in the Union Army during the war. Perhaps the most famous black Confederate soldier was Holt Collier (c. 1848-1936) of the 9th Texas Cavalry, which was part of Major General Earl Van Dorn's command. He fought throughout the war. During Reconstruction, he was arrested for murdering a Union officer who insulted his former master and commanding officer. Although he never denied it, the military tribunal did not have sufficient evidence to convict him. A renowned hunter, Collier was Theodore Roosevelt's guide and was instrumental in the creation of the Teddy Bear. See Minor Ferris Buchanan, Holt Collier, for an excellent biography.

⁸ Display in the Confederate Room, Old Courthouse Museum, Vicksburg. Roberson died in 1922.

⁹ Frederick Douglass, Douglass' Monthly, Vol. 4 (September 1861), p. 516. Also see www.jewishworldreview.com accessed 2012; www.forrestescort.org/black.s/htm, accessed 2012.

This they certainly did. Writing in 1863, Horace Greeley, the founder of the New York *Tribune* and arguably the greatest newspaper editor of his time, wrote: “For more than two years, Negroes have been extensively employed in belligerent operations by the Confederacy. They have been embodied and drilled as rebel soldiers and had paraded with white troops at a time when this would not have been tolerated in the armies of the Union.”¹⁰



A rifle squad from the 5th Georgia Infantry Regiment, which fought on the Western Front. Note the third man on the left.

¹⁰ www.jewishworldreview.com accessed 2012; www.forrestescort.org/black.s/htm, accessed 2012.

In September 1862, Robert E. Lee ordered a staff officer to determine for him how many armed blacks were serving in the ranks of the Army of Northern Virginia. There were more than 3,000 under arms, carrying “rifles, muskets, sabers, Bowie knives, dirks” and all sorts of other weapons.¹¹ This report was delivered shortly after the Battle of Sharpsburg (Antietam), when 3,000 men would equal more than 7% of Lee’s army.

Why would African-Americans fight for the Confederacy? First of all, the Union offered them nothing prior to January 1, 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation was declared in effect. Second, the African-Americans were Southerners also. The invading armies often looted or destroyed their homes, just as they did the homes of whites. Third, the behavior of bluecoats vis-à-vis African-Americans was, in general, pretty bad. Clearly they were not all the liberators certain pseudo-historians and leftist Hollywood directors portray them as being. One of the plantations they looted, for example, belonged to Elizabeth Meade Ingraham. Because it was made a U.S. corps headquarters, her plantation was sacked over a period of several days, “. . . the house was literally gutted, up stairs and down,” she recalled. She asked the pillagers if they were fighting to free the slaves. Every one of them denied it. As if to prove their point, they proceeded to rob the blacks and the slave quarters. Kate, one of the slaves who had been robbed, walked over to U.S. Brigadier General Alvin Peterson Hovey and related to him how they stole her things, and told him to his face that the Yankees “came to rob the negroes, not protect them.”¹²

Contrary to leftist mythology, the Northern soldiers were often hard on Southern blacks. African-American women frequently suffered violent rapes at the hands of their "liberators."

¹¹ Thomas C. Mendes, “Blacks, Jews Fight on the Side of the South,” Washington Times, June 15, 2002.

¹² Elizabeth Meade Ingraham Diary, May 8, 1863. Incidentally, Mrs. Ingraham was not a Southerner. She was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her younger brother was U.S. Major General George G. Meade, the commander of the Army of the Potomac during the Battle of Gettysburg.

Daughters were often raped in front of their mothers. U.S. Captain Eben F. Cutter, acting quartermaster of the "African Brigade" at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, in 1863, reported that he was "disturbed every night with complaints from black men that their wives were being ravished by white soldiers." Major Bryant of the 1st (U.S.) Mississippi Infantry Regiment, African Descent, testified that a dozen or more white soldiers had been arrested for attempted rape. Colonel Issac F. Shepard also reported rapes, as well as Negroes being robbed and their quarters ransacked and burned. God must weep, he wrote General Grant, that such a "holy cause" such as emancipation was being degraded by such "outrageous atrocities."¹³

Naturally, when it came to offenses against innocent Negroes, some Union units were worst offenders than others. One of the worst was the 10th Illinois Cavalry, which was supposed to be scouting for the African American regiments at the Milliken's Bend area of Louisiana in 1863. One of its company commanders, Captain Christopher H. Anderson, admitted that half of his men viewed it as "a degradation to come in contact with Negro soldiers" and admitted that his men "abused Negroes."

Tensions came to a head on May 30, 1863, when two soldiers from the 10th Illinois Cavalry got drunk and decided to tie a black soldier to a tree and beat him for being a black soldier. One of them kicked him so violently in the genitals that he was unable to work several days later. From there, they attacked Lizzie Briggs and her 10-year-old daughter. They forced the daughter to spread her legs, but Lizzie wrestled her away before they could rape her. The Yankees then threatened Lizzie with a hatchet. Lizzie's mother, who was very old, tried to save her daughter and granddaughter, but the bluecoats knocked her down and kicked her. Meanwhile, some more blacks

¹³ See Linda Barnickel, Milliken Bend, for further details.

appeared and tried to save the women. One Yankee knocked down a teenage boy and kicked him in the face, while the others ripped the clothes off a Negro woman, but she managed to escape before they could have their way with her. More black men rushed to the aid of their women. The odds shifted, so the would-be rapists ran away, except for Private John O'Brien, who was captured.

Colonel Shepard, the commander of the 1st (U.S.) Mississippi Infantry Regiment, African Descent,¹⁴ was a true believer in the cause of Abolition, and he was already angry because African American men appeared at his headquarters every night, complaining that their mothers, wives, and daughters had been violated by Union soldiers. He ordered Private O'Brien whipped by members of his unit. Two white officers who witnessed the whipping found it inconsequential. The men used "twigs" that broke after a few blows, and one sergeant deemed the punishment "very light." The officers of the 10th Illinois Cavalry, however, flew into a rage, because a white soldier had been beaten by Negroes. They demanded Shepard apologize and resign. The enlisted men threatened to clean out "that damned nigger camp." Major Elvis P. Shaw of the 10th requested a court of inquiry.

In early June, Grant's inspector general, Brigadier General Jeremiah C. Sullivan, arrested Colonel Shepard. A court-martial was convened at Milliken's Bend on June 4. It met over a ten-day period, interrupted by a Confederate attack. The court exonerated Shepard on the grounds that too many abuses against black soldiers and their families had gone unpunished and ignored. It also pointed out that there had not been a single reported incident of abuse or attempted rape since O'Brien's "whipping."¹⁵

¹⁴ Later redesignated 51st United States Colored Troops (USCT) Infantry Regiment.

¹⁵ See Linda Barnickel, Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 2013), pp. 74-77. Isaac Shepard (1816-1889) was appointed brigadier general in November 1863 but his nomination was not confirmed by the Senate, despite the fact he was commanding a brigade, so he left the army in frustration.

Entire books have been written about the black Confederate soldiers. I encourage the reader to google “black Confederate soldiers,” and to search the same topic on amazon.com. From these sources they will find enough information to keep them reading for some time.

There is no doubt about it: the black Confederate soldier was very good at the business of war. After the surrender, when he was asked what he thought of the dozens of African-Americans who fought under his command, Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest declared: “Better Confederates never lived.” High praise indeed from the man whom liberals associate with the founding of the Ku Klux Klan.

Like their white counterparts, the Black Confederate soldiers went home after Appomattox but continued to be proud of their service to the Confederacy. On February 11, 1890, an appropriations bill for a monument to the Confederate dead was introduced in the Mississippi legislature. The state had limited funds, so it met with some opposition.

John F. Harris, a Negro Republican from Washington County, rose to support the measure. He said to the Speaker: “When the news came that the South had been invaded, those men went forth to fight for what they believed . . . Sir, I went with them. I, too, wore the gray, the same color my master wore. We stayed four long years, and if that war had gone on till now I would have been there yet . . . I want to honor those brave men who died for their convictions. When my mother died I was a boy. Who, Sir, then acted the part of a mother to an orphaned slave boy, but my ‘old missus.’ Were she living now, or could speak to me from those high realms where are gathered the sainted dead, she would tell me to vote for this bill. And, Sir, I shall vote for it. I want it known to all the world that my vote is given in favor of the bill to erect a monument in honor of the Confederate dead.”

When the tremendous applause died down, the measure passed overwhelmingly. Every black legislator voted for it.¹⁶



Harper's Weekly, front page of the January 10, 1863. Harper's was a popular paper in the North during the war. The photograph shows two well-armed black Confederate pickets.

¹⁶ Newspaper article posted in the Confederate Room, Old Courthouse Museum, Vicksburg.