

## **The Unknown Battle of the Civil War**

It looked like a pool of white flowing through the fields. Decked out in blue or gray, they ebbed and flowed through the valley, shooting their guns all the way. The whiteness was stained with red blood and many had fallen to the ground. But why was there not any blackness in this pale pool? Why was it so white? This pool of white was a common scene during the Civil War. Of these men fighting in the first two years of the war, there were no African Americans because of the negative prejudice the white soldiers had towards them. The African Americans who wanted to join the army were free men. They had either run away from their slave-holders in the Confederacy, which was Virginia and most of the states south of it, or had gained freedom by the Emancipation Proclamation, which ended slavery. They were able-bodied, smart-minded men, who were fit for the army. Then why were these African Americans not allowed to fight in the beginning of the Civil War?

Even after the Emancipation Proclamation, which stated, “And I further declare and make known that such persons (the freed African American slaves), of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States...” (Lincoln, 1863), they still were not allowed to fight until later in 1862. Also, why did these African Americans have to face so many hardships being soldiers in the Civil War? White Northern males still thought harshly of them as worthless slaves instead of free men. Frederick Douglass once said, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress” (West India Emancipation speech, 1857). African Americans definitely had to face many struggles that were unjust and unfair to become soldiers. Some of these struggles were not being able to enlist in the army, working laboriously instead of fighting, and receiving unequal pay.

As the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, African Americans were delighted that they would be allowed to fight in the Union army, but the cruel government would not let them. African Americans started enrolling themselves in the army, but the government and Northerners considered the war a “white man’s war” and wouldn’t let them join. Frederick Douglas lamented this injustice, “Our Presidents, Governors, Generals and Secretaries are calling, with almost frantic vehemence, for men.-- ‘Men! men! send us men!’ they scream, or the cause of the Union is gone, the life of a great nation is ruthlessly sacrificed, and the hopes of a great nation go out in darkness; and yet these very officers, representing the people and Government, steadily and persistently refuse to receive the very class of men which have a deeper interest in the defeat and humiliation of the rebels, than all others” (McPherson,164). Douglas points out that there were thousands of African Americans ready to join the Union army, and yet the government still refused to accept them, even though they were desperate for men. African Americans had fought in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, so it seems strange that they were not allowed to fight in the Civil War, where they were supposed to be counted as free men. This is because the Northerners still thought of them as an inferior race, even though the Emancipation Proclamation that their president had created said they were not.

Northerners gave two main responses to the protests about excluding African Americans from fighting in the Union army. One was that the Northerners were too prejudiced against these men and did not want to fight side by side with a “negro.” The other reason was that they thought the African Americans would be so fearful and cowardly that they would not be good soldiers. Northerners thought this way because African Americans had been kept in harsh bondage for so long. The President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, shared this prejudice, though he despised the enslavement of African Americans. However, he only

supported the Northerners for political reasons. He said, “To arm the negroes, would turn 50,000 bayonets from the loyal Border States (the states not in the Union or the Confederacy) against us that were for us” (McPherson,166).

As the war progressed, the War Department finally realized that the Union was in a rough patch and needed African American men to fight. White men would not join because the Union had lost so many battles, and they felt like the cause was now hopeless. But the blacks were very eager to fight. So, on July 17, 1862, Congress passed two acts. They passed The Confiscation Act, which allowed the president to recruit as many African American soldiers as he pleased, and a militia act, which repealed a 1792 law that stated African Americans could not bear arms. Soon after, on August 25, 1862, the War Department allowed the first black regiment to join the Union army. This was a huge breakthrough for African Americans as they strived to end racism. The regiment was a group of black men led by a white man, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and was called the First South Carolina Volunteers. These men’s strong acts of valor during battle proved to Congress that they could fight well. Higginson wrote in his journal, “It needs but a few days to show the absurdity of doubting the equal military availability of these people, as compared with whites...” (McPherson,168). African Americans were allowed to fight, but now they faced many more struggles.

“(Racism) is not about how you look, it’s about how people assign meaning to how you look” (Robin D.G. Kelley, historian). Once there were black regiments, Northerners assigned a lot of meaning to how the African Americans looked in a very negative way. African Americans were now allowed to fight, but in actuality they weren’t. First of all, the government began recruiting African American soldiers trying to gain their interest. One campaign poster stated, “To Colored Men. Freedom, Protection, Pay, and a call to military duty!” (Black Recruiting

Poster, 1860's). This statement, however, didn't come true until much later in the Civil War. Instead of fighting, most of these men worked at hauling logs, loading ammunition, digging trenches, and other laborious tasks. General David Ullman, leader of the Corps De Afrique, wrote to Senator Henry Wilson, Chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, about this issue saying, "The first point to settle is whether it be intended to make these men soldiers or mere laborers; if the latter, the mode pursued is the right one, and I have nothing more to say. If the former, then there are some vital changes to be made. I fear that many high officials outside of Washington have no other intention than that these men shall be used as diggers and drudges"(McPherson, 1999). Many complaints, such as the one above kept pouring in, so the War Department issued a decree on June 14, 1864. It stated that black troops and white troops would get the same amount of fighting compared to labor, settling this issue.

This brought justice to one injustice, but the issue of unequal pay persisted. To a Union white soldier, the government paid 13 dollars plus 3 dollars and 25 cents for the uniform, monthly. In contrast, an African American Union soldier was only paid 10 dollars minus 2 dollars for his uniform. Congress still thought of African Americans as slaves, not as real soldiers, which really makes no sense. They had proven themselves to be great fighters. Why did they not get paid more than some of the white soldiers who were not very good fighters, then? One soldier from the 54th Massachusetts regiment said, "Now it seems strange to me that we do not receive the same pay and rations as the white soldiers. Do we not fill the same ranks? Do we not cover the same space of ground? Do we not take up the same length of ground in the graveyard that others do? The ball does not miss the black man and strike the white, nor the white and strike the black. But, sir, at that time there is no distinction made, they strike one as much as another. The black men have to go through the same hurling of musketry, and the same

belching of cannonading as white soldiers do.... (We don't get paid the same amount of money) because our faces are black" (EDW,1864). This letter shows how nonsensical this law was. Those men were great at fighting and deserved equal pay. This last statement, "Because our faces are black," really puts the African Americans experience during the Civil War into perspective. The animosity that the Northerners had toward the black men was the reason they faced so many struggles.

African Americans, nevertheless, gained equal commission, but not without many conflicts. The 54th and 55th Massachusetts regiments were so infuriated by this issue that they proclaimed that they would not accept any money until that money was equal with the white man's pay. In another letter from an unknown soldier about this issue, one hears the outrage. "What do you think of this? We rally to the defence of our imperiled country; we freely offer our lives in its defence. The Government acknowledges the value of our services, and yet they permit our brave men to be treated in a shameful manner. When I enlisted at Boston, Mass., Feb. 21st, 1863, I enlisted on the same terms as other soldiers - clothing, rations, and pay. But all their promises are false and untrue. We have been serving nearly sixteen months, faithfully and truly, the Government of the United States, yet not received one cent of pay" (HIW,1864). Even though the government promised them money, African Americans rarely received pay. The legislature got fed up with all the protesting and passed a law stating that they would give them the difference between how much they were supposed to get, 8 dollars, and how much they were really getting, which was usually not very much at all. One soldier from the 55th Massachusetts regiment stated, "We did not come to fight for money, for if we did, we might just as well have accepted the money that was offered us; we came not only to make men of ourselves, but of our other colored brothers at home, and we do highly honor the generous-hearted people of the State

of Massachusetts for their prompt and generous offer” (McPherson,202). This letter shows that the new law did not satisfy the black soldiers. They did not want 8 dollars, they wanted the 13 dollars they rightly deserved for being in the army. They had been trying to say this since 1862, but Congress had not been listening. This whole issue of unequal pay was really split between the Democrats and Republicans. The Democrats thought that if there was equal pay it would just downgrade the white men. Republicans knew how the African American soldiers’ families were struggling without a source of income. These debates kept on becoming more and more heated. It even led to one soldier in the 55th Massachusetts to be court marshaled and executed. Finally on June 15, 1864, Congress issued a decree that black and white soldiers would receive the same pay. This decision stated that all African American soldiers who had been free by April 19, 1861 would get paid the equal amount of money as the white men retroactively from January 1, 1864. It took Congress a whole year, plus nine months and 21 days, from when the African Americans were allowed to fight, to ensure they were paid equally. This struggle of pay and all other struggles African Americans had to face to try to gain equality was their own battle of the Civil War. Even though this battle was unknown, since it was never officially recorded as part of the Civil War, it did, unfortunately, happen.

This battle really shows the absurdity of racism. The whites not allowing African Americans to fight when the law even stated they could was absurd. Only using them like slaves instead of letting them fight was unjust. Giving them lower pay than the white soldiers was just unfair. Overall, mistreating African Americans because their ancestors, who lived in sunny regions, developed a dark skin tone that was passed down to them, was extremely wrong. This shows how selfish those white men were. The white men only looked at the outer appearance of someone and not the braveness and greatness they possessed. The sad reality is that Americans

still think this way now, but it needs to change. Isn't America supposed to be a "free country?"

Then why don't some Americans treat it this way?

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To Colored Men!

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