



BUFFALO SOLDIERS: THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF OUR AFRICAN AMERICAN HEROES

Origins of the Buffalo Soldiers

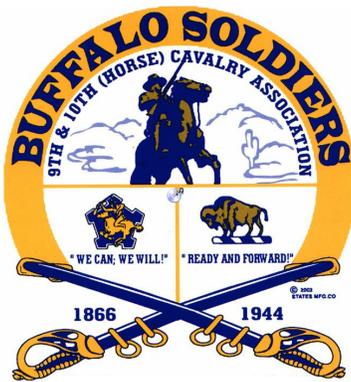
In 1866, Congress voted to establish a standing military force. Segregationists won the debate to keep Blacks segregated. So, a separate African American military force was established consisting of six all-Black regiments at 1,000 men each. They were the 9th and 10th Cavalry, 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st Infantry. Their assignment was to help rebuild the country following the Civil War and patrol the remote western frontier.

What was life like for the Buffalo Soldiers?

It was a hard life. They regularly endured long days in the saddle, slim rations, racism, and separation from family and friends. Because of discrimination, segregation, and repressive Jim Crow laws, they got the worst jobs and the most dangerous assignments. But it was a way to earn a living and gain the respect that they didn't get as Black men in regular life. Their pay was \$13 per month and they had great pride in their work.

Why were they called Buffalo Soldiers?

Some historians contend that it was because of a battle between black cavalrymen and the Cheyenne Indians in Kansas. In September 1867, Private John Randall of Troop G, 10th Cavalry was assigned to escort two civilians on a hunting trip. Once out of sight of the camp, the hunters were suddenly attacked by about 70 Cheyenne warriors. The two civilians were killed immediately and Randall's horse was shot from under him. Randall scrambled to safety behind a washout under the railroad tracks, where he fought back with only his pistol. When help from camp arrived, the Cheyenne attackers beat a hasty retreat, leaving behind 13 dead warriors. Private Randall suffered a gunshot wound to his shoulder and 11 arrow wounds, but recovered. The Cheyenne spread word of this new type of soldier, "*who had fought like a cornered buffalo; who like a buffalo had suffered wound after wound, yet had not died; and who like a buffalo had a thick and shaggy mane of hair*". Over time, the nickname "Buffalo Soldier" came to apply to all black soldiers and the 10th Cavalry later incorporated the buffalo into its regimental crest.



What did they accomplish on the "Western Frontier"

They scouted 34,420 miles of uncharted terrain, opened over 300 miles of new roads and telegraph lines. They explored some of the harshest and most desolate terrain in the nation and created many excellent maps detailing water holes, mountain passes, and grazing areas that would allow for settlement of the area. Also, even though movies show no Black cavalrymen, the Buffalo Soldiers were actually the protective force between the hostile Native Americans and the settlers winning many battles. They were not only fierce fighters, they were the most decorated soldiers in the army winning 23 Medals of Honor and 12 Certificates of Merit for their valor and courage. They also had the lowest desertion rate in the army.

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Did they serve in other wars besides the "Indian Wars"?

After the "Indian Wars," they served valiantly in the Spanish-American War, the Philippine Insurgency, the Mexican Border War, World War I, World War II and the Korean War. Just prior to WWII, the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments were essentially disbanded and the soldiers were moved into service-oriented units. The 92nd Infantry Division, AKA the "Buffalo Division", served in combat during the Italian Campaign. The 93rd Infantry Division—including the 25th Infantry Regiment—served in the Pacific theater. Separately, independent Black Artillery, Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions as well as Quartermaster & support battalions served in WWII. All of these units to a degree carried on the traditions of the "Buffalo Soldiers".

Were the Buffalo Soldiers ever at the Presidio?

Buffalo Soldiers were stationed at the Presidio in the early 1900s. In 1903, the 9th Cavalry served as the presidential Escort of Honor for President Theodore Roosevelt when he visited San Francisco. This was the first time that African Americans were given such an honor. There are now over 450 African American soldiers from the 9th and 10th Cavalry as well as the 24th and 25th Infantry buried in the San Francisco National Cemetery in the Presidio.

What was their role in the National Parks?



Lt. Col. Charles Young

The first national parks were patrolled by the Buffalo Soldiers before there was a National Park Service. A lasting legacy of the soldiers is the Ranger Hat (popularly known as the Smokey Bear Hat). Their distinctive hat crease, called a Montana Peak, (or pinch) began in 1898 when soldiers serving in the Spanish American War began to crease their Stetson hats with a Montana "pinch" to better shed water from the torrential tropical rains and kept that style on returning to America. Their commander in the parks was Captain Charles Young, the third African American to graduate from West Point. When he died, Colonel Young was the highest ranking African American in the U.S. military. He made history in Sequoia National Park in 1903 by becoming Acting Military Superintendent of Sequoia and General Grant National Parks. He was also the first African American superintendent of a national park. During Young's tenure in the park, 9th Cavalrymen in Sequoia built the first trail to the top of Mount Whitney, the highest mountain in the United States. They also built the first wagon road into Sequoia's Giant Forest and they built an arboretum on the South Fork of the Merced River in Yosemite National Park. That arboretum is considered to be the first museum in the National Park System.

Why Were the Buffalo Soldiers at West Point?

In 1907, the United States Military Academy (West Point) Detachment of Cavalry became an African American unit. Starting in 1897, there were proposals that West Point Cadets learn their riding skills from African American non-commissioned officers who were considered the best in the Army. Finally, on March 23, 1907, a one-hundred man detachment from the all-Black 9th Cavalry was assigned to teach future officers at West Point riding instruction, mounted drill and tactics until 1947.

