

"The Negro as a Soldier in the War of the Rebellion" Pamphlet, 1897

The Olustee.

In the disastrous affair of Olustee, Florida, February 20th, 1864, the redeeming feature appears to have been the conspicuous gallantry of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts. That regiment was hurried into action at the very crisis of affairs. It checked the onward sweep of a victorious enemy, and covered the retreat towards Jacksonville in a thoroughly creditable manner, as I am told, under the immediate direction of Colonel Edward N. Hallowell. In this battle the Eighth U.S. Colored Infantry lost three hundred and ten dead, wounded and missing,—the missing mostly dead or wounded left on the field, — one of the severest regimental losses during the war.

Honey Hill, S.C., November 30, 1864.

This assault, in its main features, was a repetition of Wagner. The only approach attempted to the rebel batteries and intrenchments was the narrow cutting through which the road crossed the swamp. Through this defile five companies of the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts were ordered to storm the enemy's works. The order is not free from the charge of down-right recklessness. Against the concentrated fire of artillery and musketry at one hundred yards' range the five companies charged in vain, were rallied twice and then withdrawn with a loss of twenty-nine killed and one hundred and fifteen wounded, or one half the officers and one third of the enlisted men engaged. A useless slaughter, not compensated for by some brilliant fighting both before and after the charge.

In passing, I desire in affectionate remembrance to imply give the names of Captain William Dwight Crane and Lieutenant Winthrop Perkins Boynton, who were chums in Harvard College, officers in the same company, devoted friends, who seemed always to move, to think and to act in beautiful accord, and who here fell together in common death.

Besides these, the more important actions, there were many minor affairs, not large enough to be dignified by the name of battles, but entirely sufficient to test the mettle of the men as soldiers. In these, our Massachusetts regiments appear to have been uniformly successful. There were reconnaissances and raids, rifle pits were charged and captured, prisoners were taken, and the resources of the enemy removed or destroyed. There is not time, nor is it necessary, to more than mention the conspicuous service rendered by the colored troops in the other military departments.

Port Hudson.

At Port Hudson and at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, the official reports commend the colored troops for steadiness in maintaining positions and for heroism in charging the batteries of the enemy.

In a paper read before the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, by General John C. Palfrey, the conduct of the black regiments at Port Hudson, June 27, 1863, is recorded in these forceful words: "Between the attacks of Weitzel and Augur an assault was ordered from our extreme right by the black regiments as a diversion. Their ground was very difficult and disadvantageous, and the garrison received them with special temper and exasperation. But they fought without panic, and suffered

severely before falling back in good order. Their conduct and its indication of character and manliness made a profound impression on the army, and later through the country. The day should be one of the famous dates in the progress of their race."

Chaffin's Farm and Fort Gilmer.

Paine's Division of the 18th Corps and Birney's Colored Division of the 10th Corps were conspicuously engaged at Chaffin's Farm, in the assault on Fort Gilmer and the intrenchments at New Market Heights. At Fort Gilmer they scaled the parapet by climbing upon each other's backs. A distinguished rebel general wrote at the time: "Fort Gilmer proved the other day that they would fight."

The Crater.

At the battle of the Crater, at Petersburg, July 30th, 1864, the colored troops were ordered in after the assault was a bloody failure. They failed to retrieve the disaster, but were in no way responsible for it. Their casualties in Ferrero's Division were 1327 killed, wounded and missing. The white soldiers in the Crater were permitted to surrender; many of the blacks were given no quarter.

Nashville.

In the victory at Nashville, December 16th, 1864, the heaviest loss in any regiment occurred in the 13th U.S. Colored Infantry, — 55 killed and 106 wounded: total 221. General George H. Thomas, the hero of that battle, a Virginian and at one time a slaveholder, when riding over the field, saw the dead colored troops commingled with the bodies of the white soldiers, and said, "This proves the manhood of the negro."

Fox enumerates 52 battles and actions in which colored troops were prominently engaged, and from the same authority it appears that before the war closed there were 145 regiments of infantry, 7 of cavalry, 12 of heavy artillery, 1 of light artillery, and 1 of engineers: total 166. Of these, about 60 were brought into action on the battle-field, the others having been assigned to post or garrison duty. Fox makes the following judicial remark: "Of the regiments brought into action, only a few were engaged in more than one battle; the war was half over, and so the total of killed does not appear as great as it otherwise would have done. The total number killed or mortally wounded was 143 officers and 2571 men." The actual fighting done by the colored troops was not, under the conditions stated, inconsiderable. The indirect benefit to our armies was incalculable. When General Grant gathered together his forces to make the supreme effort that culminated in the capitulation of General Lee, he added to his Army of the Potomac the white veterans that held the forts, the cities and the islands of the Atlantic Coast, as well as some of the more interior parts of the mainland. The vacated points must be held against the enemy by some one. They were so held by the colored troops. I am not able to state accurately the number of reinforcements thus contributed to the Army of the Potomac. Certainly the entire 10th Army Corps was relieved and sent to Virginia. It is probably safe to say that 40,000 men is not an over-estimate. When we remember that General Grant lost 60,000 men in 60 days, a number equal to General Lee's effective army at that time, it well becomes a question worthy the serious attention of the historian what might have been the fate of Grant's Army in the Wilderness had there been 40,000 fewer veterans than there were.

It remains to be recited that in the last desperate days of the expiring Rebellion the Confederate Congress passed a bill which provided that not more than twenty-five percent of the male slaves between the ages of eighteen and forty-five should be called out. It is worthy of note that General Lee gave his unqualified advocacy of the proposed measure. Unfortunately the passage of the act had been so long delayed that the Confederacy collapsed before results were obtained. I wish it had been otherwise. I have no hesitation in saying that the slave regiments would have deserted en masse to the

Yankees, and that the supposition that they would have fought for the Confederacy is hugely and grotesquely preposterous.

In conclusion, let us never forget the debt we owe to the colored soldiers. Let us always be willing to give them whatever credit is their due. We called upon them in the day of trial, when volunteering had ceased, when the draft was a partial failure and the bounty system a senseless extravagance. They were ineligible for promotion, they were not to be treated as prisoners of war. Nothing was definite except that they could be shot and hanged as soldiers. Fortunate indeed is it for us, as well for them, that they were equal to the crisis; that the grand historic moment which comes to a race only once in many centuries came to them, and that they recognized it. They saw that the day of their redemption had arrived. They escaped through the rebel lines of the South; they came from all over the North; and, when the war closed, the names of one hundred and eighty-six thousand men of African descent were on the rolls.