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RECOLLECTIONS
OF
MY SLAVERY DAYS

BY

WILLIAM HENRY SINGLETON

EXCERPT

This incident, as I say, must have happened a short time before the beginning of the war, because shortly afterwards Samuel Hymans, a young man from our community who was attending West Point, came home for a vacation, but when the vacation was over he did not return to West Point. Instead he commenced to organize a company of soldiers. I was very anxious to go with him as his servant and my master, at his request, let me do so. The reason why I was anxious to go with Hymans was because I wanted to learn how to drill. I did learn to drill. In fact I learned how to drill so well that after a while when he was busy with other matters he would tell me to drill the company for him. After Fort Sumpter

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was fired upon. Hyman's company went to form with other companies in Newbern, the First North Carolina Cavalry. This regiment was stationed at Newbern until the 14th of March, 1862, when Burnside and Foster captured Newbern and drove our regiment to Kinston. At Kinston, I ran away from the regiment and made my way to Burnside's headquarters at Newbern. I secured employment as the servant of Col. Leggett, of the 10th Connecticut Regiment. I told the Colonel my story, but I found out later that my story was not believed and that they thought I had been sent by the rebels to secure information for them about the Union troops. I soon had an opportunity, however, to convince them of my honesty. A stranger was brought in to the camp and brought to headquarters as a suspicious person. He would give no information about himself and no one, of course, knew anything about him. Finally I was sent for and asked if I knew the man. I replied that I did, that he was Major Richardson of the First North Carolina Cavalry. After giving this information I was sent out of the room and later the adjutant on General Foster's staff came to me and told me I must not be too positive about this man because he was a Union man. My reply was, "If I am not correct, you can cut my throat." He told the guard to keep a watch over me, that they had not got through with me. So I was held until they could secure further information. They secured information the next day that I was a slave and had been a servant for one of the officers in the First North Carolina Cavalry and that it was a fact that I had run away from there. This information was secured from Colonel Leggett, for it was by his sentries that I was picked up when I came into the Union lines. Then I was taken to General Burnside's headquarters and asked the best way to reach the rebels at Wives Forks, before you could get into Kinston. I laid the route out for them the best I knew how, but said that if I were going to

command the expedition I would give them a flank movement by the way of the Trent river, which was five miles farther from Wives Forks than the Neuse river. But they did not accept my proposition and attacked directly, with the result that they were repulsed.

I took part in that attack as a guide and had a horse shot from under me. A few days later I told Colonel Leggett that I would not fight any more unless I was prepared to defend myself. He said, "We never will take niggers in the army to fight. The war will be over before your people ever get in." I replied, "The war will not be over until I have had a chance to spill my blood. If that is your feeling toward me, pay me what you owe me and I will take it and go." He owed me five dollars and he paid me. I took that five dollars and hired the A. M. E. Zion church at Newbern and commenced to recruit a regiment of colored men. I secured the thousand men and they appointed me as their colonel and I drilled them with cornstalks for guns. We had no way, of course, of getting guns and equipment. We drilled once a week. I supported myself by whatever I could get to do and my men did likewise.

I spoke to General Burnside about getting my regiment into the federal service but he said he could do nothing about it. It was to General Burnside, however, and my later association with him, when I was with him for a time as his servant, that I owe what I now regard as one of the great experiences of my life. It was one day at the General's headquarters. His adjutant pointed to a man who was talking to the general in an inner room and said, "Do you know that man in there?" I said, "No." He said, "That is our President, Mr. Lincoln." In a few minutes the conference in the inner room apparently ended and Mr. Lincoln and General Burnside came out. I do not know whether they had told President Lincoln about me before or not, but the General pointed to me and said, "This is the little fellow who got up a colored regiment." President Lincoln shook hands with me and said, "It is a good thing. What do you want?" I said, "I have a thousand men. We want to help fight to free our race. We want to know if you will take us in the service?" He said, "You have got good pluck. But I can't take you now because you are contraband of war and not American citizens yet. But hold on to your society and there may be a chance for you." So saying he passed on. The only recollection I have of him is that of a tall, dark complexioned, raw boned man, with a pleasant face. I looked at him as he passed on in company with General Burnside and I never saw him again.

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On January 1, 1863, he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which made me and all the rest of my race free. We could not be bought and sold any more or whipped or made to work without pay. We were not to be treated as things without souls any more, but as human beings. Of course I do not remember that I thought it all out in this way when I learned what President Lincoln had done. I am sure I did not. And the men in my regiment did not. I had gone back to Newbern then. The thing we expected was that we would be taken into the federal service at once. It was not until May 28, 1863, however, that the thing we had hoped for so long came to pass, when Colonel James C. Beecher, a brother of Henry Ward Beecher, that great champion of our race, came and took

command of the regiment. I was appointed Sergeant of Company G, being the first colored man to be accepted into the federal service and the only colored man that furnished the government a thousand men in the Civil War. The regiment was at first called the First North Carolina Colored Regiment. It later became known as the 35th Regiment, United States Colored troops. Soon afterwards we were armed and equipped and shipped to South Carolina and stationed at Charleston Harbor. From that time until June, 1866, when we were mustered out at Charleston, South Carolina, I was in active service, ranking as First Sergeant, Company G, 35th U. S. Colored Infantry. J. C. White was the Captain of that company and Colonel James C. Beecher was the commander of the regiment. We saw active service in South Carolina, Florida and Georgia. I was wounded in the right leg at the battle of Alusta, Florida. After the war ended we were stationed for a time in South Carolina doing guard duty and were finally mustered out of the service on June 1, 1866. My honorable discharge from the service dated on that day, although it is worn and not very legible now, as you can see, is one of my most prized possessions. Some years ago a man from the government service in Washington made out for me in a detailed form a record of my war service. It is in much more complete form than I have set it down here, but I think such details are of more interest to one's family than to the general public.



Lincoln's letter to Horace Greeley, printed in the New York Times, August 22, 1862 (excerpts)

Dear Sir:

I have just read yours of the nineteenth instant, addressed to myself through the New York Times. . . .

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing," as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt. I would save the Union. I would save it in the shortest way under the Constitution. . . .

My paramount objective is to save the Union, and not either to save or destroy slavery.

If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.

What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save this Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. . . .

I have here stated my purpose according to my views of official duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.

Yours,
A. Lincoln.

General Benjamin Butler to General-in-Chief Winfield Scott, May 27, 1861 (excerpts)

Sir,

Since I wrote my last dispatch the question in regard to slave property is becoming one of very serious magnitude. The inhabitants of Virginia are using their negroes in the batteries, and are preparing to send the women and children South. The escapes from them are very numerous, and a squad has come in his morning to my pickets bringing their women and children. . . . I have therefore determined to employ, as I can do very profitably, the able-bodied persons in the party, issuing proper food for the support of all, and charging against their services the expense of care and sustenance of the non-laborers. . . . I know of no other manner in which to dispose of this subject and the questions connected therewith. As a matter of property to the insurgents it will be of very great moment. . . . As a means of offence therefore in the enemy's hands these negroes when able bodied are of the last [most] importance. Without them the batteries could not have been erected at least for many weeks. As a military question it would seem to be a measure of necessity to deprive their masters of their services.

Benj. F. Butler



African-Americans in the Civil War



As was true in the American Revolution, early in the armed conflict between the North and the South, free African-Americans in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia came forward to volunteer for military service. Though their offers were rebuffed as the Union Army sought to recruit 75,000 white volunteers, hundreds of slaves nonetheless defected to Union lines, offering their services in the Union Army. While at first these fugitives were returned to their masters, they were soon deemed "contrabands" of war—confiscated property—and by mid-1861, Lincoln issued orders to his commanders that the escaped slaves not be returned.

It was not long before African-Americans took a more active role. In May 1862 Robert Smalls, who would later serve in Congress, commanded a Confederate gunboat in Charleston harbor and became a hero. In March, General David Hunter, a white abolitionist, raised the 1st South Carolina Volunteers; former U.S. senator Jim Lane recruited the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers; and in New Orleans, General Ben Butler declared martial law, emancipated the slaves (without authorization from the president), and commissioned the 1st Louisiana Native Guards, called the *Chasseurs d'Afrique*. "We come of a fighting race," vouched the leader of the Native Guards to his commanding officer. "Pardon me, General, but the only cowardly blood we have got in our veins is the white blood." In July 1862 Congress wrote into law what had been established in fact and authorized the employment of "persons of African descent" in the Union Army. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation,[†] issued January 1, 1863, cleared away the remaining obstacles to the enlistment of black men, not merely as laborers, but as soldiers.

The two most celebrated black units during the war were the Massachusetts 54th, led by Robert Gould Shaw, and the 1st South Carolina Volunteers under Thomas Wentworth Higginson. In Massachusetts, black troops were raised with the promise of "the same wages, the same rations, the same equipment, the same protection, the same treatment, and the same bounty secured to white soldiers." Now that the enlistment of black troops had become federal policy, in the editorial included here, Frederick

1863, and in the bloody and futile battle, more than fifteen hundred black soldiers were killed next to their commander, but their bravery under fire had been tragically demonstrated.

In South Carolina, Higginson, an abolitionist, essayist, and former Unitarian minister who had participated in the Underground Railroad, traveled to Kansas as a Free-Soil gunrunner, and backed John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, now held the strategic position at Beaufort in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. His troops played a critical part in the naval blockade of the South, and in the public debate over the use of black soldiers. In his diary, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, from which the following excerpts are taken, Higginson claims that "this particular regiment was watched with microscopic scrutiny by friends and foes. I felt sometimes as if we were a plant trying to take root, but constantly pulled up to see if we were growing." Higginson's eight hundred men made several forays upriver and participated in a raid on Jacksonville, Florida. Of their successes, he wrote, "There were more than a hundred men in the ranks, who had voluntarily met more dangers in their escape from slavery than any of my young captains had incurred in their lives."

Despite their demonstrated bravery, black soldiers faced numerous obstacles. As Higginson's letter to the *New York Times* that follows attests, black troops also waged a constant struggle for pay, being given almost half of what white troops earned. Many black troops refused all pay rather than accept reduced wages. Before the pressing need for their assistance was made clear, some Union officers stated that if black troops rose up in the rebel South, they would turn to fighting *them* instead of the enemy. The animosity the sight of black troops unleashed in the Confederate Army led to the brutal massacre of three hundred black troops (as well as women and children) at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, on April 12, 1864, where Confederate troops under the command of Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest went beyond performance of duty to a display of wanton savagery later condemned by the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War. At the bloody battle of the Crater near Petersburg, Virginia, black troops found themselves fired upon by both Confederate forces and Union troops who at best showed little regard for the lives of their comrades and at worst intentionally vented their race hostility. Black troops sometimes returned what they got, however, and charging under the black flag and fired by the cry "Remember Fort Pillow," they often gave no quarter to Confederate soldiers.

For its part, as the tide of war turned, the South began to consider utilizing the available black manpower. While it was initially suggested that blacks would defend their "homeland" out of a sense of fidelity, the depth of their loyalty must soon have become apparent and official policy never

end of the war General Lee was advocating the use of black troops who would thereby win their freedom.

About 185,000 African-Americans served as soldiers on the Union side throughout the war, nearly half raised in the South, while another 200,000 blacks supported the troops as mechanics, stevedores, cooks, and laborers. Black troops participated in significant battles at Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend, Chaffin's Farm, New Market, Charleston, Little Rock, Memphis, Nashville, Richmond, Vicksburg, and Appomattox. Court House among others, as well as during the famed naval confrontation between the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor*. More than 37,000 men lost their lives in the war, and at least twenty black soldiers and sailors won the Congressional Medal of Honor. In addition, blacks served as spies and scouts—none more useful than Harriet Tubman—and engaged in sabotage. The gains black soldiers achieved were more than merely strategic. As one of Higginson's men, Thomas Long, argued, "If we hadn't become sojers, all might have gone back as it was before. . . . suppose you kept your freedom without enlisting in his army; your children might have grown up free and been well cultivated so as to be equal to any business, but it would have been always flung in dere faces—'Your fader never fought for his own freedom'—and what could dey answer? Neber can say that to dis African Race any more." "It was their demeanor under arms," wrote Higginson, "that shamed the nation into recognizing them as men."

Men of Color, to Arms!

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"Action! Action! not criticism, is the plain duty of this hour."



WHEN FIRST THE REBEL CANNON SHATTERED THE WALLS OF Sumter and drove away its starving garrison, I predicted that the war then and there inaugurated would not be fought out entirely by white men. Every month's experience during these weary years has confirmed that opinion. A war undertaken and brazenly carried on for the perpetual enslavement of colored men, calls logically and loudly for colored men to help suppress it. Only a moderate share of sagacity was needed to see that the arm of the slave was the best defense against the arm of the slaveholder. Hence with every reverse to the national arms, with every exulting shout of victory raised by the slaveholding rebels, I have implored the imperiled nation to unchain against her foes, her powerful black hand.

Slowly and reluctantly that appeal is beginning to be heeded. Stop now to complain that it was not heeded sooner. That it should not, may or may not have been best. This is not the time to discuss that question. Leave it to the future. When the war is over, the country is saved, peace is established, and the black man's rights are secured, as they will be, history with an impartial hand will dispose of that and sundry other questions. Action! Action! not criticism, is the plain duty of this hour. Words are now useful only as they stimulate to blows. The office of speech now is only to point out when, where, and how to strike to the best advantage.

There is no time to delay. The tide is at its flood that leads on to fortune. From East to West, from North to South, the sky is written all over, "Now or Never." "Liberty won by white men would lose half its luster." "Who would be free themselves must strike the blow." "Better even die free, than to live slaves." This is the sentiment of every brave colored man amongst us.

There are weak and cowardly men in all nations. We have them amongst us. They tell you this is the "white man's war"; that you will be no "better off after than before the war"; that the getting of you into the army is to "sacrifice you on the first opportunity." Believe them not; cowards themselves, they do not wish to have their cowardice shamed by your brave example. Leave them to their timidity, or to whatever motive may hold them back.

I have not thought lightly of the words I am now addressing you. The counsel I give comes of close observation of the great struggle now in progress, and of the deep conviction that this is your hour and mine. In good earnest then, and after the best deliberation, I now for the first time daring this war feel at liberty to call and counsel you to arms.

By every consideration which binds you to your enslaved fellow-countrymen, and the peace and welfare of your country; by every aspiration which you cherish for the freedom and equality of yourselves and your children; by all the ties of blood and identity which make us one with the brave black men now fighting our battles in Louisiana and in South Carolina, I urge you to fly to arms, and smite with death the power that would bury the government and your liberty in the same hopeless grave.

I wish I could tell you that the State of New York calls you to this high honor. For the moment her constituted authorities are silent on the subject. They will speak by and by, and doubtless on the right side; but we are not compelled to wait for her. We can get at the throat of treason and slavery through the State of Massachusetts. She was the first in the War of Independence; first to break the chains of her slaves; first to make the black man equal before the law; first to admit colored children to her common schools, and she was first to answer with her blood the alarm cry of the nation, when its capital was menaced by rebels. You know her patriotic governor, and you know Charles Sumner. I need not add more.

Massachusetts now welcomes you to arms as soldiers. She has but a small colored population from which to recruit. She has full leave of the general government to send one regiment to the war, and she has undertaken to do it. Go quickly and help fill up the first colored regiment from the North. I am authorized to assure you that you will receive the same wages, the same rations, the same equipments, the same protection, the same treatment, and the same bounty, secured to the white soldiers. You will be led by able and skillful officers, men who will take especial pride in your efficiency and your valor, and see that your rights and feelings are respected by other soldiers. I have assured myself on these points, and can speak with authority.

More than twenty years of unswerving devotion to our common cause may give me some humble claim to be trusted at this momentous crisis. I will not argue. To do so implies hesitation and doubt, and you do not hesitate. You do not doubt. The day dawns; the morning star is bright upon the horizon! The iron gate of our prison stands half open. One gallant rush from the North will fling it wide open, while four millions of our brothers and sisters shall march out into liberty. The chance is now given you to end in a day the bondage of centuries, and to rise in one bound from social degradation to the plane of common equality with all other varieties of men.

Remember Denmark Vesey of Charleston; remember Nathaniel Turner of Southampton; remember Shields Green and Copeland, who followed noble John Brown, and fell as glorious martyrs for the cause of the slave. Remember that in a contest with oppression, the Almighty has no attribute which can take sides with oppressors.

The case is before you. This is our golden opportunity. Let us accept

it, and forever wipe out the dark reproaches unspontaneously hurled against us by our enemies: Let us win for ourselves the gratitude of our country, and the best blessings of our posterity through all time. The nucleus of this first regiment is now in camp at Readville, a short distance from Boston. I will undertake to forward to Boston all persons adjudged fit to be mustered into the regiment, who shall apply to me any time within the next two weeks.

Frederick Douglass, March 2, 1863

Farewell Address to the Troops

" . . . amidst the terrible prejudices that then surrounded us, has grown an army of a hundred and forty thousand black soldiers, whose valor and heroism has won for your race a name which will live as long as the undying pages of history shall endure. . . ."

HEADQUARTERS 33D UNITED STATES COLORED
TROOPS, LATE 1ST SOUTH CAROLINA VOLUNTEERS,

MORRIS ISLAND, S.C.
February 9, 1866.

GENERAL ORDERS, NO. 1.

COMRADES,—The hour is at hand when we must separate forever, and nothing can ever take from us the pride we feel, when we look back upon the history of the First South Carolina Volunteers,—the first black regiment that ever bore arms in defence of freedom on the continent of America.

On the ninth day of May, 1862, at which time there were nearly four millions of your race in a bondage sanctioned by the laws of the land, and protected by our flag,—on that day, in the face of floods of prejudice, that wellnigh deluged every avenue to manhood and true liberty, you came forth to do battle for your country and your kindred. For long and weary months without pay, or even the privilege of being recognized as soldiers, you labored on, only to be disbanded and sent to your homes, without even a hope of reward. And when our country, necessitated by the deadly struggle with armed traitors, finally granted you the opportunity *again* to come forth in defence of the nation's life, the alacrity with which you responded to the call gave abundant evidence of your readiness to strike a manly blow for the liberty of your race. And from that little band of hopeful, trusting, and brave men, who gathered at Camp Saxton, on Port Royal Island, in the fall of 1862, amidst the terrible prejudices that then surrounded us, has grown an army of a hundred and forty thousand black soldiers, whose valor and heroism has won for your race a name which will live as long as the undying pages of history shall endure; and by whose efforts, united with those of the white man, armed rebellion has been conquered, the millions of bondmen have been emancipated, and the fundamental law of the land has been so altered as to remove forever the possibility of human slavery being re-established within the borders of redeemed America. The flag of our fathers, restored to its rightful significance, now floats over every foot of our territory, from Maine to California, and beholds only freemen!

Soldiers, you have done your duty, and acquitted yourselves like men, who, actuated by such ennobling motives, could not fail; and as the result of your fidelity and obedience, you have won your freedom. And O, how great the reward!

It seems fitting to me that the last hours of our existence as a regiment should be passed amidst the unmarked graves of your comrades,—at Fort Wagner. Near you rest the bones of Colonel Shaw, buried by an enemy's hand, in the same grave with his black soldiers, who fell at his side; where, in future, your children's children will come on pilgrimages to do homage to the ashes of those that fell in this glorious struggle.

The flag which was presented to us by the Rev. George B. Cheever and his congregation, of New York City, on the first of January, 1863,—the day when Lincoln's immortal proclamation of freedom was given to the world,—and which you have borne so nobly through the war, is now to be rolled up forever, and deposited in our nation's capital. And while there it shall rest, with the battles in which you have participated inscribed upon its folds, it will be a source of pride to us all to remember that it has never been disgraced by a cowardly faltering in the hour of danger or polluted by a traitor's touch.

Now that you are to lay aside your arms, and return to the peaceful avocations of life, I adjure you, by the associations and history of the past, and the love you bear for your liberties, to harbor no feelings of hatred toward your former masters, but to seek in the paths of honesty, virtue, sobriety, and industry, and by a willing obedience to the laws of the land, to grow up to the full stature of American citizens. The church, the school-house and the right forever to be free are now secured to you, and every prospect before you is full of hope and encouragement. The nation guarantees to you full protection and justice, and will require from you in return the respect for the laws and orderly deportment which will prove to every one your right to all the privileges of freemen.

To the officers of the regiment I would say, your toils are ended, your mission is fulfilled, and we separate forever. The fidelity, patience, and patriotism with which you have discharged your duties, to your men and to your country, entitle you to a far higher tribute than any words of thankfulness which I can give you from the bottom of my heart. You will find your reward in the proud conviction that the cause for which you have battled so nobly has been crowned with abundant success.

Officers and soldiers of the First South Carolina Volunteers, I bid you all farewell.

By order of Lt.-Col. C. T. TROWBRIDGE, commanding Regiment

E. W. HYDE,
Lieutenant and Acting Adjutant

"Cannot even the fact of their being in arms for the nation, liable to die any day in its defence, secure them ordinary justice?"

HEADQUARTERS FIRST SOUTH CAROLINA
VOLUNTEERS,

BEAUFORT, S.C.,
Sunday, February 14, 1864.

To the Editor of the New York Times:

May I venture to call your attention to the great and cruel injustice which is impending over the brave men of this regiment?

They have been in military service for over a year, having volunteered, every man, without a cent of bounty, on the written pledge of the War Department that they should receive the same pay and rations with white soldiers.

This pledge is contained in the written instructions of Brigadier-General Saxton, Military Governor, dated August 25, 1862. Mr. Solicitor Whiting, having examined those instructions, admits to me that "the faith of the Government was thereby pledged to every officer and soldier under that call."

Surely, if this fact were understood, every man in the nation would see that the Government is degraded by using for a year the services of the brave soldiers, and then repudiating the contract under which they were enlisted. This is what will be done, should Mr. Wilson's bill, legalizing the back pay of the army, be defeated.

We presume too much on the supposed ignorance of these men. I have never yet found a man in my regiment so stupid as not to know when he was cheated. If fraud proceeds from Government itself, so much the worse, for this strikes at the foundation of all rectitude, all honor, all obligation.

Mr. Senator Fessenden said, in the debate on Mr. Wilson's bill, January 4, that the Government was not bound, by the unauthorized promises of irresponsible recruiting officers. But is the Government itself an irresponsible recruiting officer? and if men have volunteered in good faith on the written assurances of the Secretary of War, is not Congress bound, in all decency, either to fulfill those pledges or to disband the regiments?

Mr. Senator Doolittle argued in the same debate that white soldiers should receive higher pay than black ones, because the families of the latter were often supported by Government. What an astounding statement of fact is this! In the white regiment in which I was formerly an officer (the Massachusetts Fifty-First) nine tenths of the soldiers' families, in addition to the

pay and bounties, drew regularly their "State aid." Among my black soldiers, with half-pay and no bounty, not a family receives any aid. Is there to be no limit, no end to the injustice we heap upon this unfortunate people? Cannot even the fact of their being in arms for the nation, liable to die any day in its defence, secure them ordinary justice? Is the nation so poor, and so utterly demoralized by its pauperism, that after it has had the lives of these men, it must turn round to filch six dollars of the monthly pay which the Secretary of War promised to their widows? It is even so, if the excuses of Mr. Fessenden and Mr. Doolittle are to be accepted by Congress and by the people.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

T. W. HIGGINSON,
Colonel commanding 1st S.C. Volunteers

