

THE BLACK OFFICER IN THE
UNITED STATES ARMY

by

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THE BLACK OFFICER IN THE UNITED STATES ARMY

At the outset of World War II, there were five Black officers on active duty in the Army. Of this total, three were chaplains. The two line officers were the now famous Benjamin O. Davis father and son team.¹ In addition, there were 353 Black officers in the reserves. Black enlisted personnel on active duty at the time numbered less than 5,000. This enlisted total represented about 5 per cent of the total military population. In accordance with the custom of the times, Blacks served in segregated units which were usually commanded by southern white officers. By 1944 the situation had drastically changed and the number of Black officers had increased to approximately 8,000. Black enlisted strength also rose to nearly 1 million personnel.² As impressive as the increase of 5 to 8,000 was, it must be noted that these 8,000 still reflected less than 1 per cent of the total United States Army officer corp. Included in these 8,000 Black officers were one general officer (General Benjamin Davis) and ten full colonels. Although these eleven senior officers represented a new plateau of achievement for the Black officer, in reality they were little more than showpieces or

¹Richard J. Stillman, II, Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Armed Forces (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), p. 22.

²"The Black Soldier," *Ebony*, August 1968, p. 176.

figureheads. Throughout the war in spite of their numbers, promotions, positions of responsibility and command were extremely limited for Black officers.

The conclusion of the war and the rapid demobilization of the armed forces brought a drastic decrease in the number of Black servicemen. By 1947, the Black officer corps was reduced to 1,125 officers. Black enlisted strength was also reduced to 87,000 or less than 5 per cent of the total military population.³ The reduction to less than 5 per cent was contrary to a long standing directive that Blacks serve in a ratio equal to their percentage of the total U.S. population. At the end of the war, the Black population was about ten per cent.

From these unfavorable beginnings, the Black officer corps has steadily increased in number, percentages and rank. The latest Pentagon statistics (December, 1974), show that the Black officer corps now numbers 4,760 and represents 4.6 per cent of the total Army officer corps.⁴ While this total of 4,760 does not approach the upper percentage represented by the 8,000 officers of World War II, it is a significant leap forward. With the deletion of quota restriction, Blacks now comprise over 22 per cent of the active duty enlisted strength.

The transition from ineffectiveness and insignificant numbers to full integration in the officer corps did not come

³Ibid., p. 175.

⁴"Steady Increase Seen in Black Participation," Army Times, 8 October 1975.

easily for Black officers. Stereotypes about mental and moral inferiority and a general public distaste for any form of equality, let alone superior status, for Blacks hindered them at every turn. It was a constant battle both in the military and in civilian life against tradition, racial bureaucracy, white fears and blind ignorance.

Perhaps the struggle of the Black officer could have been made easier if his general history had been more widely known. History and precedents have a way of making situations and events more acceptable, but this has not been the case with the Black officer. His history or previously supposed lack of history has worked against him. An analysis of American history will provide an abundance of material reflecting the individual contributions and bravery of Black enlisted men in all of this nation's conflicts. However, the record is not so clear for the Black officer or for Blacks who may have served in a leadership capacity during the early wars. No doubt, this is due both to the limited numbers of Blacks who served in such positions as well as the informal structures of early American militia units. These units lacked the thorough race conscious records which are so much a part of our present system. As a result of the vagueness in many of the entries of colonial records, the possibility and extent of Black leadership can only be inferred from overall Black participation.

The military and political factors which surrounded the use of Blacks in early America were clear and unhampered by

racial considerations. When manpower shortages existed, Blacks served in whatever capacity required. When the shortage disappeared, Blacks were rejected.

During the early colonial periods, whether considered a slave or indentured servant, every able bodied man was required to serve in the militia to repel Indian attacks and other dangers. The leadership structure of the organizations formed to protect the colony was not as formal as it would become in later years and it is quite possible that Blacks proposed and supervised plans which were carried out by the body. Such accomplishments would not classify them as officers in today's terms but would certainly have made them leaders.

The first noteworthy involvement of a Black as leader in one of America's armed conflicts occurred on 5 March 1770 in Boston, Massachusetts. The discontent with British rule which had swept the colonies for nearly two years finally erupted into violence between a large crowd of Boston townspeople and a contingent of British soldiers. In the ensuing melee, shots were fired by the British, and eleven colonists were wounded. Five of these later died. The first man hit and killed was Crispus Attucks, a black dock laborer and runaway slave whom history has recognized as the "leader" of the crowd.⁵

During the Revolutionary War, over 5,000 Blacks were employed in the militia and in most cases were completely

⁵Robert W. Mullen, Blacks in American Wars (New York: Monad Press, 1973), pp. 9-11.

integrated into the various units. A simple song sung by the British and Tories attest to the composition of many of the colonial ranks.

The rebel clowns, oh!
 what a sight
 Too awkward was
 their figure
 T'was yonder stood
 a pious wight
 And here and there
 a nigger.⁶

This early use of Blacks in the Revolutionary War did not reach the levels that it might have since some colonists became fearful of the consequences of arming and training men who would have to return to slavery at the end of the conflict. This fear was so great in the southern colonies that racial prejudice often undermined the war efforts. In the latter stages of the war, efforts were initiated by Congress to recruit 3,000 additional Blacks and form Black units in South Carolina, Georgia, Maryland and Virginia.⁷ Although badly needed, these units were not formed. The fear of armed Blacks was the cause, but most southern colonists cited an aversion to depriving a master of his property as the reason. Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, however, did produce all Black units.⁸ Of these three units, the only one

⁶Jack D. Foner, Blacks in the Military in American History (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), p. 8.

⁷Foner, Blacks in the Military in American History, pp. 12-14.

⁸Richard J. Stillman, Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Armed Forces (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), p. 8.

to see actual combat as a unit was the Rhode Island Battalion. In August of 1778, this unit held a position against a large British-Hessian force. The Rhode Island Battalion has been described as "ultimately composed of 5 companies numbering 226 officers and men and was headed by Colonel Christopher Green, a white."⁹ The emphasis on the fact that Colonel Green was white may imply that some, if not all, of Colonel Green's subordinate officers were Black.

As previously stated, in the integrated units of the 17th and 18th century American Armies, personnel were unidentified by either race or position, and it is possible that some experienced or exceptional Blacks received low level appointments or commissions. Although most historians disagree with this conjecture, they do not completely deny its possibility. The opinion of the Department of Defense is typical: "Although there were many Negro heroes in the Revolutionary War, all appear to have served as enlisted men."¹⁰ The possibility of Black officers in the American army seems even more plausible when one considers the French and Spanish use of Blacks. When France and Spain joined the American cause in 1779, Black troops from the French West Indies and Louisiana were introduced into the war. The Spanish in particular organized

⁹Foner, Blacks and the Military in American History, p. 10.

¹⁰Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Integration and the Negro Officer in the Armed Forces of the United States of America (Washington: Department of Defense, 1962), p. 1.

militia companies of free Blacks and slaves who were commanded by Black officers of the line."¹¹

In 1792, Congress passed a Militia Act which forbade the use of Blacks in the militia, the Army, the Navy or Marines.¹² This directive was largely ignored at the unit level, where due to personnel shortages, Blacks were allowed to participate as laborers, pioneers, and musicians. Paradoxically, South Carolina, Georgia, and North Carolina were the biggest violators of the Militia Act. But while these militia units were willing to relax the rules in the lower ranks, they strictly followed the provisions of the act in positions of leadership and responsibility.

A possible reason for the exclusion of Blacks from the militia may have been the success of the greatest slave rebellion in modern history, the Haitian Revolution. Toussaint L'Ouverture, a Black in command of a slave army, used guerrilla tactics to defeat a series of French and British expeditionary forces sent against him. Events in Haiti demonstrated the dangers of militarily trained Blacks under an experienced and developed Black leader.

Aside from the obvious threat that armed and trained slaves might present, the exclusion of Blacks from the militia may also have been due to the increasing importance of the

¹¹Foner, Blacks and the Military in American History, p. 16.

¹²Stillman, Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Armed Forces, p. 8.

militia as a social and political institution. The periodic company musters became community gatherings and festivals. In addition, leadership in the militia often served as a political stepping-stone for many officers.¹³ Clearly, white Americans of that period did not want Blacks involved in social and political matters.

However, with the advent of war in 1812, America was again willing to make a compromise in its racial practices and use Black troops. The Battle of New Orleans was the high point of Black involvement in that war. General Andrew Jackson, while responsible for the defense of New Orleans, upheld the rights of Blacks to defend their country on an equal footing with white soldiers. William C. Clairborne, Governor of the Louisiana Territory, offered General Jackson several units of free Blacks to assist in the defense of New Orleans, and Jackson readily accepted. The acceptance of these units produced the largest assembly of Black troops ever gathered on American soil up to that time. Two battalions of nearly 500 free Blacks were side by side in the center of the line, and additional Black companies were scattered among the white regiments located in other sections of the line. Unfortunately, the racial composition of the leadership structure of these "free colored" battalions is unknown. But here again it is highly possible that Blacks must have held the equivalent

¹³ Marcus Cunliffe, Soldiers and Civilians (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 230-232.

of at least low-rank commissions within some if not all of these units.

Blacks played a significant role in the Seminole Wars, where they fought against federal troops. The Seminoles gave refuge to escaped slaves and accepted them as equals within the tribe. Blacks were allowed to intermarry freely and often achieved the status of chief counselors and tribal war leaders.¹⁴ Throughout the first and second Seminole Wars, Blacks and Blacks of mixed Indian blood served as warriors and war leaders. The campaigns that they conducted against the federal troops were outstanding demonstrations of guerrilla warfare.

Although many American leaders who fought in the Seminole Wars emerged with a heightened respect for the combat abilities of Blacks, the lessons were quickly forgotten. In the short space of time between the Second Seminole War and the Mexican War the deeds of Blacks were effectively erased from the minds of Americans and the pages of history. Pre-civil war America regarded Blacks as cowardly and childlike, with little ability in fighting or leadership.¹⁵ The concept was reinforced by the fact that the only participation of Blacks in the Mexican War was as body servants.

On 15 April 1861, three days after the Civil War began, President Lincoln issued a call for 75,000 men for the Union

¹⁴Foner, Blacks and the Military in American History, p. 28.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 30.

Army. As in past conflicts, Blacks were willing and in some cases eager to assist. However, when the Blacks of the North went to the recruiting offices, they found signs reading "White Men Only." The National Militia Act of 1792 was still in effect, and Blacks were not welcomed. This policy changed only when it became necessary to use all available manpower. The first all Black regiment was officially mustered into the Army in November of 1862.

Out of Black participation in this war, the Black officer emerged separate and identifiable for the first time. Union records show that there were at least 75 Black commissioned officers including 8 commissioned physicians.¹⁶ Two of the most notable of these officers were Lieutenant Colonel William R. Reed, who was killed while leading his regiment, the First North Carolina, in a gallant charge at the Battle of Olustee, Florida and Paris-educated Captain Andre Cailloux who commanded the First Native Guards of Louisiana.¹⁷ Examples of other units with Black officers were the First and Third Infantry of the Corps d' Afrique, each of which had a complement of 19 Black officers as part of the regularly assigned 34 officers.

Between the end of the Civil War and World War I, however, except for a brief period during the Spanish-American

¹⁶Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Integration of the Negro Officer, p. 2.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 2.

War, the Black officer virtually disappeared. In spite of the Blacks' honorable and effective service, racist thinkers within the military reasserted the myth that the Black man was unable to lead and unsuitable for commission. Only four regiments of Black enlisted men were authorized for retention on the active rolls: the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry regiments. The 9th and 10th Cavalry, or "Buffalo Soldiers" as they were known, became famous in the latter part of the 1800's for their exploits against the American Indians. Young white officers were usually assigned to these regiments as their first tour after graduation from West Point. But an assignment to a Black regiment for a senior white officer was not a desirable one. It is said that George A. Custer refused a full Colonel's rank in the 9th Cavalry in favor of a Lieutenant Colonel's rank in the 7th Cavalry.¹⁸

The shortage of military manpower at the beginning of the Spanish-American War in 1898, encouraged the War Department to accept the need for Black officers as well as Black enlisted men. With the advent of war, the size of the Army was increased and Congress, without hesitation, authorized the formation of ten Black regiments. Due to a critical shortage of available officers, President McKinley authorized the commissioning of 100 Negro second Lieutenants to serve in these

¹⁸Edgar I. Stewart, Custer's Luck (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), p. 168.

units.¹⁹ However, because of rapid developments in the war and the requirement for immediate deployment of troops to Cuba, the only Black units to see action were those four regular Army regiments already in service. Although the regiments fought brilliantly, their accomplishments added little justification to the Black pleas for more Black officers. The lack of sufficient Black officers in the command structure during their deployment and the success the troops achieved under white officers failed to demonstrate a need for the Black officers.

In this, as in previous wars, the conclusions drawn by Blacks about their current and future role in the army differed radically from the perceptions of the whites. Blacks in each conflict, no matter how low their rank or position, saw an opportunity to prove their full military potential to themselves, their race, and to white America. On the other hand, whites viewed Black participation not in terms of racial pride but in terms of outcome. If the Blacks failed, it was used as reinforcement of the myth that Blacks were stupid, cowardly, lazy good-for-nothings, who were unfit for tasks above cooking and cleaning. If they succeeded in difficult assignments such as combat, it was offered as proof that with proper white leadership there might be a place for the Black soldier. Black success was attributed to white leadership and Black failure to the nature of Blacks.

¹⁹Robert W. Mullen, Blacks in America's Wars (New York: Monad Press, 1975), pp. 35-36.

The Army Reorganization Act of February, 1901 coupled with the end of the war in the Philippines permitted the Army to send most of its regular units home and to disband its volunteers. Black enlisted men who wished to remain on active duty in one of the regular Black regiments were given the opportunity to do so. But the same generous terms were not extended to Black volunteer officers. The provisions of the Reorganization Act allowed for an increase in the size of the peacetime Army and the creation of 1135 new officer vacancies or positions. So critical was the need for new regular Army officers to fill these positions that every colonel of a volunteer regiment was allowed to designate any or all officers whom he considered qualified for appointment to the regular army. Hundreds of white officers were selected for appointment in this manner, but not one of the 100 Black volunteer officers.

Nevertheless, the reorganization did provide for the first time in American history an opportunity for non-West Point Blacks to become a part of the Regular Army officer structure. The first appointed was John R. Lynch, a former paymaster and Major in the volunteers. On 8 February 1901, he was appointed Captain in the Paymaster Department of the Regular Army. The second Black to receive a Regular Army commission was Benjamin O. Davis. Davis had been a First Lieutenant in the volunteers during the Spanish-American War and upon his discharge enlisted in the 9th Cavalry with the hope of obtaining a commission. On 12 March, he became one of

only twelve enlisted men (Black and white) who passed the examination for commissioning in the Regular Army. In spite of objections by numerous Regular Army Officers, on 19 May 1901 Davis was appointed to the rank of Second Lieutenant in the Regular Army and became the first Black to rise from the ranks to a Regular Army commission. Corporal John E. Green passed the required examinations for a commission in July of 1901 and shortly thereafter became the third Black Regular Army officer.²⁰

Initially, the appointments of Davis and Green were hailed by many Black Americans as proof of the enlightened and fair treatment of Blacks by the Army and as examples of the opportunities available. In the opinion of many Blacks at the time, "the door was open." It was to be only a matter of time before more Blacks were accepted as commissioned officers. But as the years passed and there were no additional promotions or appointments of Blacks to officer status, the Black community began to realize that the appointments of Davis and Green had been token gestures to silence criticism. The Army, of course, denied charges of Black tokenism or a change in racial policy and continued to insist that any capable and ambitious Black could still receive a commission by merely passing the requirements as Davis and Green had done.

In spite of the Army's assurances of fair treatment for Blacks, conditions for Black officers and enlisted men

²⁰Foner, Blacks in the Military in American History, p. 94.

steadily degenerated after the turn of the century. Before 1900, although segregated, Blacks were treated with equality in pay and educational and recreational opportunities. After 1900, as heightened racism gripped the nation, it also gripped the Army. Black troop strengths in their four regiments steadily decreased, and no efforts were initiated to recruit more Blacks. Bi-racial recruiting booklets were dropped, and the practice of separating the races at such previously unsegregated facilities as recruiting depots and training centers became established.

This sudden change in attitude by the Army is not at all difficult to understand. The Army in many ways is a mirror of the society that produces it. If society is prejudiced, then the Army will be too. Similarly the number of Black officers and the rank to which they rise reflect the status of Blacks in society. Blacks normally have had to achieve stature and significance in civilian society before achieving corresponding and complementary gains in the Army. It is no oversimplification to state that if there are no Blacks in national politics or other influential positions, there can be no Black officers in the military. In the outside world, many of the small gains toward racial equality were erased. The South, where most Black troops were stationed, enacted "Jim Crow" laws. In the North, racial animosity heightened as immigrants and industrial workers feared a Black threat to the labor market. Both the Black officer and enlisted man were victims of the times. Survival for the Black officer was difficult;

progress in the military was almost impossible. The mass punishments of Black soldiers in Brownsville in 1906 and in Houston in 1917 typified the climate which Black troops endured. The rise and fall of the Black officer and enlisted man was at this time, as it had been throughout America's history, tied to the status of the Black population at large. The Black soldier and, in particular, the Black officer at this time could not exceed the status of the Black population. It is unfortunate but true that the Black officer was normally viewed by most military personnel as a Black first and then as an officer and a soldier. He was more closely identified with his race than with any other nationality or ethnic group.

Paradoxically, this period in American history was known as the Progressive Period. It was a period in which many Americans sought to reestablish economic individualism and political democracy for the nation and wipe out many of the social abuses of the day. While impressive gains were made for whites in such areas as child labor laws, graduated income tax and political reform, it was an ultraconservative period for Blacks. The Black population did not participate in or benefit from most of the progressive reforms. The economic status of Blacks improved slightly, but socially and politically they were little better off than they had been before the nation expressed its desire for change.

On the federal level, little was done to promote or insure equality for Blacks either in politics or in the military. Theodore Roosevelt vacillated between placating conservative

whites in the South and wooing Black voters in the North. Although Roosevelt reluctantly appointed a few Black men to office, his successor President Taft publicly announced that he would not make such appointments if whites objected. Candidate Wilson made vague pleas and promises in an effort to gain support from Black voters during the election campaign of 1912. Black suspicions of the southerner Wilson proved well-founded; for, under Wilson, the concepts of racial supremacy and segregation gained even more strength than under the wavering policies of Roosevelt or the racially insensitive policies of Taft.

Blacks realized that white progressivism had little to offer them; but when they looked within their own ranks, they found conflicting paths to follow. The options available centered on the gradualist, separatist policies of Booker T. Washington or the more militant policies of William E. B. DuBois. In retrospect, the activist approach of DuBois seems to have produced more results. The activism of the Niagara Movement, the legislative victories of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National League on Urban Conditions did much to widen economic and social opportunities for Blacks.²¹ The Black officer, lacking in numbers and organization, had to wait for the success of the civilian community and ride the coattails of the above organizations in order to advance.

²¹The National League on Urban Conditions is now known as the National Urban League.