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In 1860, African Americans made up the majority of the population of Mississippi, but not as citizens; they were property that could be bought and sold. They had no rights to speak of, the toil of their labors went to make wealth for others, and they could be separated from loved ones for life at the whim of their owner. Thus it is not surprising that when the United States army entered Mississippi in 1863 and began recruiting black soldiers, they enlisted by the thousands.[1]

The active recruitment of African Americans into the United States army began when President Abraham Lincoln announced his Emancipation Proclamation following the Union victory at the battle of Antietam, Maryland, on September 17, 1862. In Mississippi, news of the measure invoked howls of protest among the pro-Confederate population. In an article entitled "Arming Negroes," the editor of a Canton newspaper blasted the idea of allowing African Americans to serve in the Union Army, saying;

> And to cap the climax of cowardice and barbarity—which always go hand in hand—they are willing to employ the slaves of the South to effect her subjugation, thus acknowledging their inability to conquer us without resort to the basest and *blackest* means, and at the same time, practically, as well as theoretically, place themselves on an equality with the negro. Our antagonism with such a people should be, and will be, eternal.[2]

[1] In the 1860 United States Census for Mississippi, the state had an African American population of 437,406; of that number 436,631 were slaves. The white population was 353,899. *Mississippi Statistical Summary of Population 1800–1980* (Economic Research Department, Mississippi Power & Light Company, 1983).

[2] "Arming Negroes," *The American Citizen*, May 30, 1862.

On March 26, 1863, Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas was ordered by the Secretary of War to organize African American regiments in the Mississippi Valley. Shortly thereafter, on May 22, the United States War Department established a Bureau of Colored Troops to take charge of recruiting and organizing black regiments.[3] The first Mississippi regiments to be raised were the 1st Mississippi Infantry, African Descent, organized on May 16, 1863, and the 3rd Mississippi Infantry, African Descent, which mustered into service three days later.[4]

The majority of African American regiments raised from Mississippi were organized after the surrender of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863. The capture of the city gave United States authorities a base from which to recruit former slaves into the army. On July 11, 1863, Major General Henry W. Halleck, General-in-Chief of all the Union armies, wrote to Major General Ulysses S. Grant at Vicksburg, offering his advice on how best to defend the Mississippi River. He advised:

> The Mississippi should be the base of future operations east and west. When Port Hudson falls, the fortifications of that place, as well as Vicksburg, should be so arranged as to be held by the smallest possible garrisons, thus leaving the mass of troops for operations in the field. I suggest that colored troops be used as far as possible in the garrisons.[5]

In addition to the prodding from Halleck to employ black soldiers, Grant also received the following incentive from Abraham Lincoln on August 9, 1863:

> General [Lorenzo] Thomas has gone again to the Mississippi Valley, with the view of raising colored troops. I have no reason to doubt that you are doing what you reasonably can upon the same subject. I believe it is a resource which, if vigorously applied now,

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[3] Dudley T. Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865*(New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966), 114, 130.

[4] Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, vol. 3 (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 1344.

[5] U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901) [hereafter cited as *OR*], series 1, 24 (III): 497.

> will soon close this contest. It works doubly—weakening the enemy and strengthening us. We were not fully ripe for it until the river was opened. Now I think at least 100,000 can and ought to be organized along its shores, relieving all the white troops to serve elsewhere.[6]

African Americans, almost all former slaves, responded to Union recruiting efforts in Mississippi by enlisting in the thousands. All told Mississippi was credited with having 17,869 black men serve in uniform during the Civil War.[7] This number is almost certainly low, however, as a number of regiments credited to other states were recruited in Mississippi, and two regiments, the 70th United States Colored Infantry and the 71st United States Colored Infantry, were organized in the state and mustered directly into Federal service.[8] The African American troops serving from Mississippi included one regiment of cavalry, two regiments of heavy artillery, and five regiments of infantry.[9]

The men who served in the Mississippi colored regiments had to overcome numerous obstacles, not the least of which was the prejudice of the white soldiers in their own army. Many whites were upset at the thought of having to serve side by side with black soldiers. Some were very vocal in their opposition; a good example was Lieutenant Colonel Henry Rust of the 13th Maine Infantry, which was serving on Ship Island off the Mississippi Gulf Coast. When Rust learned that the 2nd Louisiana Native Guards, a black regiment, was being sent to serve alongside his unit, he wrote in his diary:

> Nigger on the brain. No, I have not got that. It has stuck to my stomach and gone all over me. The feeling of certainty that I have

[6] *OR*, series 1, 24 (III): 584.

[7] *OR*, series 3, 5: 662.

[8] Dyer, *A Compendium*, vol. 3, 1734.

[9] The Colored Infantry regiments serving from Mississippi were the 1st Mississippi Cavalry, 1st Mississippi Heavy Artillery, 2nd Mississippi Heavy Artillery, 1st Mississippi Infantry, 2nd Mississippi Infantry, 3rd Mississippi Infantry, 4th Mississippi Infantry, and 6th Mississippi Infantry. In March 1864 these regiments had their designations changed, and in order they became the 3rd United States Colored Cavalry, 5th United States Colored Heavy Artillery, 6th United States Colored Heavy Artillery, 51st United States Colored Infantry, 52nd United States Colored Infantry, 53rd United States Colored Infantry, 66th United States Colored Infantry, and the 58th United States Colored Infantry. OR, series 1, vol. 32 (III): 147–48.

> got to leave my two good companies here to come into collision with these niggers has made me feel homesick, and I have serious thoughts of resigning.[10]

There were many other injustices that black soldiers had to learn to adjust to in the army. African American soldiers typically served in regiments under white officers; only the non-commissioned officers were black. They were also shorted in their pay; black privates received $10.00 per month, while their white counterparts got $13.00 per month. This slight was not corrected until June 1864.[11]

In addition to the prejudice they faced from their own army, black soldiers and their officers faced the very real threat of harsh punishment if captured by the Confederates. On May 1, 1863, the Confederate Congress authorized President Jefferson Davis to have captured officers of Negro regiments "put to death or be otherwise punished" by a military tribunal. Black enlisted men were to "be delivered to the authorities of the state or states in which they shall be captured to be dealt with," which could mean death or sale into slavery.[12] This was not just an idle threat, as there were numerous instances of Confederates killing captured African American soldiers.

The African American soldiers from Mississippi who joined the Union army had a very strong motivation for doing so—the freedom of their race. When the 1st Alabama Infantry, African Descent, mustered into service at Corinth, Mississippi, in 1863, the regimental color bearer, Rufus Campbell, gave a speech in which he explained why he joined the army; a newspaper reporter recorded it thus:

> The burden of his speech was thankfulness for the privilege of becoming free, through the agency of their strong right arms; exhortation to his fellows to show themselves worthy to be free; and expression of determination to die by the flag they had received rather than disgrace it. Having felt through a long life, the evils of slavery, he rejoiced at the opportunity of rescuing his children from

[10] C.P. Weaver, ed., *Thank God My Regiment an African One: The Civil War Diary of Colonel Nathan W. Daniels* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 27.

[11] Dudley T. Cornish, *The Sable Arm*, 184–85.

[12] *OR*, series 2, vol. 5: 940–41.

> such a fate. 'Why,' said he, 'there's not much blood in a man any how, and if he is not willing to give it for the freedom of his children and friends, he does not deserve to be called a man.'[13]

Despite the many obstacles placed in their path, black Mississippians fought very well when given the chance. The first Mississippi regiment to see combat was the 1st Mississippi Infantry, African Descent, at the battle of Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, June 7, 1863. In that battle a combat-hardened brigade of about 1,500 Texans led by Brigadier General Henry McCulloch attacked the Federal garrison at Milliken's Bend, which consisted of the 8th, 9th, 11th, and 13th Louisiana Infantry Regiments, African Descent, the 1st Mississippi Infantry, African Descent, and the 23rd Iowa Infantry; all told the defenders had about 1,061 men.[14]

The Colored infantry regiments at Milliken's Bend were all new to the army, had very little training and many of them were indifferently armed with old and obsolete muskets. The only advantage the Federal troops had was a fairly strong defensive position based around the levees near the Mississippi River, and they had the support of the ironclad USS *Choctaw* just offshore.[15]

The Confederates charged the Federal position at Milliken's Bend, and the fighting quickly devolved into a savage hand-to-hand contest. One Confederate soldier in the 17th Texas Infantry wrote of the fight:

> Just at daylight we reached the camp of the enemy, and our regiment opened the battle by a furious charge upon the entrenchments. Then ensued a scene of carnage I shall never forget as long as I live. For Forty minutes we fought the enemy on top of the breastworks which we had scaled, in a hand to hand fight. So close were we that we could catch the bayonets of each other, and did use our muskets as clubs to fight with.[16]

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[13] "Letter from Corinth," *Cincinnati Gazette,* June 29, 1863.

[14] Terrence J. Winschel, *Triumph and Defeat* (Mason City, IA: Savas Publishing Company, 1999), 169–70.

[15] Ibid., 170.

[16] "Editor Telegraph," *Semi-Weekly News*, July 23, 1863. A transcript of this article can be found online at: http://www.uttyler.edu/vbetts/SA%20Semi-Weekly%20News.htm.

Eventually the weight of the Confederate attack forced the Federal troops to retreat toward the Mississippi River. The Texans pursued, but were forced back by the hail of iron thrown at them by the USS *Choctaw*. The battle ended with heavy casualties on both sides; the Federals had 101 killed, 285 wounded, and 266 captured or missing. The Confederates had 44 killed, 131 wounded, and 10 missing.[17]

The importance of Milliken's Bend was that it proved to many white skeptics that African Americans did have the courage and determination to fight very effectively against the Confederates. Captain M. M. Miller of the 9th Louisiana Infantry, African Descent, proudly wrote of his troops after the battle, "I never more wish to hear the expression 'The niggers won't fight.' Come with me 100 yards from where I sit and I can show you the wounds that cover the bodies of 16 as brave, loyal, and patriotic soldiers as ever drew bead on a rebel."[18]

The regiment that probably saw the most combat from the state was the 1st Mississippi Cavalry, African Descent, later designated the 3rd United States Colored Cavalry. While the black infantry and artillery units were relegated to garrison duty along the Mississippi River, the 1st, the only cavalry unit raised in Mississippi, was constantly on the move. The regiment participated in raids that took them across the length and breadth of Mississippi and into Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee as well.[19] During the course of the war, the 1st Mississippi participated in over a dozen major raids into Confederate territory and fought in numerous skirmishes. The regiment had 37 men killed in action and 367 who died from disease and other causes during the war.[20] In October 1864, the 1st Mississippi took part in a successful raid, in which they captured three cannon from the enemy. A Vicksburg newspaper wrote of the regiment:

> We learn the black horse cavalry (U.S. 3d Colored) under gallant leader Maj. [Jeremiah B.] Cook, captured the three pieces of

[17] Terrence J. Winschel, *Triumph and Defeat*, 171.

[18] *OR*, series 3, vol. 3, 454.

[19] Dyer, *A Compendium*, vol. 3, 1343–44, 1720–21.

[20] Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served With The United States Colored Troops: 1st Through 5th United States Cavalry. Microfilm Publication M1817, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

> artillery which were brought here as the trophies of the late fight near Woodville, Miss. It has been the custom of some white folks to underrate the courage of the negro soldiers, but we have heard officers and men of white commands who have been in action with the 3d Colored Cavalry say that they are as good fighters as there are in the U.S. army, and under the lead of the chivalrous Cook, they will charge to the cannon's mouth.[21]

One of the most interesting battles involving black soldiers in Mississippi was the fight at Coleman's Plantation in Jefferson County on July 4, 1864. This engagement was probably the first time that white Mississippians fought black Mississippians in a Civil War battle. A Union raiding force that included the 48th and 52nd United States Colored Infantry regiments traveled down the Mississippi River by boat and landed at Rodney, Mississippi, reaching the town on July 3, 1864.[22]

Moving inland, the Federal column was attacked the next day at Coleman's Plantation, about twelve miles from Rodney, by a Confederate force led by Colonel Robert C. Wood, Jr. After a fierce battle that lasted most of the day, the Yankees were forced to stage a fighting withdrawal back to their boats to avoid being flanked and cut off from their transport home. This movement was successfully completed, and the men boarded their boats on the night of July 4. The raid had been intended to occupy Colonel Wood's troops and prevent them from moving against another Federal column that was raiding Jackson, Mississippi, and in this aim the operation was considered a complete success.[23]

The fighting done by the black regiments at Coleman's Plantation did draw some attention. In an article about the battle published in a Vicksburg newspaper, the writer stated that "The Colored troops fought like tigers often clubbing the enemy down with the buts [sic] of their muskets. No cowardice was shown by any of the command, and all acted with the most determined bravery and coolness."[24] Even one

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[21] "The Black Horse Cavalry," *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, October 13, 1864.

[22] Edwin C. Bearss, *The Tupelo Campaign June 22–July 23, 1864, A Documented Narrative & Troop Movement Maps* (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1969), 177.

[23] Ibid., 178–91.

[24] "Fighting at Coleman's Plantation Near Rodney," *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, July 7, 1864.

of the Confederate officers involved in the fight admitted that the colored regiments he faced at Coleman's had fought very well. In a letter dated July 9, 1864, Major Elijah Peyton, who commanded a battalion of cavalry in the battle, wrote: "After dark we pursued the enemy to within two miles of Rodney, driving him to his gun boats. The negro troops contested obstinately every inch of ground."[25]

As the war continued, African American soldiers played an increasingly important role in defending the Union garrisons in Mississippi. A good example is Vicksburg, where by the spring of 1864, there were 320 officers and 5,854 men from colored regiments stationed in the city. This total was about one-half of the entire city garrison.[26]

Like their white counterparts, the black regiments from Mississippi had their share of malcontents, troublemakers, and ne'er-do-wells. Most infractions were minor, but some serious offenses were committed by African American soldiers. One of their most notorious crimes involved the murder of Vicksburg citizen John H. Bobb on May 18, 1864. Bobb had chased off a group of African American soldiers he found picking flowers from his garden. The men later came back and shot him to death.[27] The murder of John Bobb brought a swift response from Major General Henry W. Slocum, commander of the District of Vicksburg. He had published in the Vicksburg newspaper General Orders No. 7, in which he spelled out why such behavior would not be tolerated:

> The recent murder of a citizen, by colored soldiers, in open day, in the streets of this city, should arouse the attention of every officer serving with these troops to the absolute necessity of preventing their soldiers from attempting a redress of their own grievances. If the spirit which led to this act of violence is not at once repressed, consequences of the most terrible nature must follow. The responsibility resting upon officers in immediate command of colored troops cannot be over-estimated. The policy of arming colored men, although at first strongly opposed, has finally been very generally approved by loyal men throughout the country. If this experiment

[25] E.A. Peyton to William McCardle, July 9, 1864. Record Group 9, R151/B16/S3, Box 315, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

[26] *OR*, series 1, vol. 32 (III), 561.

[27] "Horrible Murder by Colored Soldiers," *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, June 14, 1864.

> is successful—if these troops prove powerful and efficient in enforcing obedience to law, all good officers connected with the organization will receive the credit which will be due them as pioneers in the great work. But if in teaching the colored man that he is free, and that in becoming a soldier he has become the equal of his former master, we forget to teach him the first duty of the soldier, that of obedience to law and to the orders of those appointed over him—if we encourage him in rushing for his arms, and coolly murdering citizens for every fancied insult, nothing but disgrace and dishonor can befall all connected with the organization.[28]

Despite a few problems, the Mississippi African American regiments continued to make a positive contribution to the war effort, serving as garrison troops in outposts and taking the fight to the enemy in raids throughout the state. The 3rd United States Colored Cavalry saw particularly active service, taking part in several important raids to the interior of Mississippi. From July 2–10, 1864, the regiment was part of an expedition to Jackson, the state capitol, and when the Union soldiers marched into the city, the Vicksburg paper noted,

> The citizens of Jackson seemed very fearful lest they should somewhere upon their premises encounter the terrible Negro in blue—Yet that personage darkened no forbidden doors, and was everywhere as unthreatening and peaceful as a cloudless sky.[29]

On the retreat from Jackson back to Vicksburg, the 3rd United States Colored Cavalry was heavily engaged in a rear-guard action as Confederate troopers sought to overtake and destroy the Federal column. The Federal troops, however, were able to beat off determined attacks by the Rebel cavalry and make a safe return to their base at Vicksburg. Once again the conduct of the 3rd Cavalry was praised by the Vicksburg newspaper, which noted:

> The gallantry of the veteran troops, infantry and cavalry, was such as it has always been; the conduct of the squadron of colored cavalry, under Major Cook, was not only unexceptional, but worthy of

[28] "General Orders No. 7," *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, June 28, 1864.

[29] "The Late Expedition to Jackson, Miss.," *Vicksburg Daily Citizen*, July 12, 1864.

> all praise. The enemy would have needed to have invoked to their aid a whole forest of Forrest's to have been able to add this encounter to the list of Confederate successes.[30]

Although the war ended in the spring of 1865, the Mississippi black regiments remained on duty for another year, serving as garrison troops in various posts both inside and outside the state.[31] When the 52nd United States mustered out at Vicksburg on May 5, 1866, the local paper noted that the regiment "Donated about seven hundred dollars to the 'Lincoln Monument Fund,' and the following day presented to their late Colonel Geo. M. Zeigler, a fine heavy gold watch."[32]

When the Mississippi colored regiments mustered out of service, they did so knowing they had earned the right to citizenship in the United States and the state of Mississippi through their faithful service. In a speech given at Baltimore, Maryland, African American orator Frederick Douglass talked of the contributions made by black soldiers to the war effort:

> He has illustrated the highest qualities of a patriot and a soldier. He has ranged himself on the side of Government and country, and maintained both against rebels and traitors on the perilous edge of battle. They are now, many of them, sleeping side by side in bloody graves with the bravest and best of all our loyal white soldiers, and many of those who remain alive are scarred and battered veterans.[33]

The scarred and battered veterans of the Mississippi black regiments carried with them a pride in their service that carried over into civilian life. After the war many black Mississippians showed that pride by joining the Grand Army of the Republic, the largest Union veteran's organization in the United States.[34] They had served their country well

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Dyer, *A Compendium* , vol. 3 , 1720–21, 1732–34.

[32] *Vicksburg Daily Citizen*, May 10, 1866.

[33] "Inauguration of Douglass Institute," *The Liberator*, October 13, 1865.

[34] Dr. Barbara A. Gannon of the University of Central Florida has identified sixteen African American Grand Army of the Republic camps in Mississippi. A list of these camps can be found online at: http://www.woncause.com/appendices.php#appendix_1.

in time of war, and earned the respect of both friend and foe alike. These men had been good soldiers in the fight for freedom, and they continued fighting as civilians for the rights they had earned on many a Civil War battlefield.