

III. COLORED TROOPS UNDER FIRE.

THE first colored regiment actually enlisted in the civil war was the 1st South Carolina, raised by Major-General Hunter (May 9, 1862); but this was disavowed by the government, though one company of it was not disbanded, and became the nucleus of a reorganized regiment, under the same name. The first regiment actually authorized by the government was the 1st Kansas Colored (August, 1862); the first regiments mustered into the service were the three composing the Louisiana Native Guard (September–November, 1862). The reorganized 1st South Carolina was authorized by the United States government, August 25, 1862, and mustered in by companies from October, 1862, to January, 1863. This was the first regiment composed of freed slaves, the others being made up of free

negroes. These five were the only colored regiments of the year 1862. It remains now to consider the circumstances under which the colored troops came actually under fire.

The first actual fighting by organized colored troops of which there is official record took place on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, October 26, 1862, when the pickets of Company A, 1st South Carolina Volunteers, under Captain Trowbridge, fired upon and drove back two boat-loads of Confederates who had attempted a landing. A day or two later (October 27, 29) the newly formed 1st Kansas Regiment had skirmishes at Island Mound, Missouri, with a loss of one officer and eight enlisted men killed, and nine enlisted men wounded. These were probably the first colored soldiers killed in the war. It

was claimed by General B. F. Butler, in a letter in the «Boston Herald» of August 6, 1887, that the 1st and 2d Louisiana Native Guard, being placed under General Weitzel, came in conflict with the enemy in «September or October,» 1862; but this very form of statement showed that he relied upon his memory, and the official records conclusively show him to be wrong in this, as in several other dates given in the letter. He said, for instance, that he «had two regiments [of colored troops] not later than the middle of August, 1862,» whereas his order calling for them was not dated until August 22; and he wrote to the War Department, in a letter undated, but received there September 11, that his first regiment would be ready «within ten days.» So, in regard to these troops coming under fire, General Butler says that it was in «September or October,» whereas General Weitzel's expedition did not set out until October 24, 1862, and that of-



MISS VIOLET SARGENT.

ficer wrote on November 1 that the colored regiments had not yet reported to him, and wrote again on November 5, saying that they had reported, but absolutely refusing to command them. As Weitzel's operations appear to have ceased the next day, it is difficult to see when these two regiments came under fire. If General Butler is, however, correct in his impression that these troops were actually under fire with Weitzel, it must have been in November, 1862, and therefore after both the South Carolina and Kansas troops had come under fire.

Expeditions along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina were also made by the 1st South Carolina on November 3-10, and again November 13-18, 1862, both times under the command of Colonel Oliver T. Beard, 48th New York Infantry. On January 23-February 1, 1863, a longer expedition was made, under my own command, up the St. Mary's River, a stream which, from its rapidity and peculiar formation, had been pronounced by the naval commanders the most dangerous in the department. These expeditions had, however, only a local value, except as testing in some degree the discipline and courage of the new levies, this test being, nevertheless, for the benefit of the whole country, as the regiment was watched by newspaper reporters with minute attention, and its smallest affairs were reported. A more important enterprise was undertaken by a brigade of two regiments under my command, which reoccupied (March, 1863) the town of Jacksonville, Florida, and took with it a large supply of uniforms, equipments, and extra rations, with a view to pushing into the interior and establishing recruiting-stations for colored troops—a movement of the greatest promise, but thwarted on the very eve of success by one of General Hunter's impulsive changes of purpose. It was of this expedition that President Lincoln wrote to General Hunter (April 1, 1863): "I am glad to see the account of your colored force at Jacksonville. I see the enemy are driving at them fiercely, as is to be expected. It is important to the enemy that such a force shall not take shape and grow and thrive in the South, and in precisely the same proportion it is important to us that it shall." Again a force of colored troops under my command was sent up the South Edisto River (July, 1863), with a view to cutting the railroads in connection with General Gillmore's attack on Charleston—an attempt frustrated by the shallowness of the stream and the artificial obstructions that had been placed in it.



MRS. SCHUYLER VAN RENSSELAER.

The first official reports from the Louisiana colored regiments are dated April 11, 1863, when Colonel Daniels reports to General Sherman a skirmish between part of the 2d Louisiana and some Confederate cavalry and infantry at Pascagoula. He says of them: "Great credit is due to the troops engaged for their unflinching bravery and steadiness under this their first fire, exchanging volley after volley with the coolness of veterans."

The first conspicuous effort in line of battle of any colored troops was in the attack on Port Hudson, May 27, 1863, when two forts were assaulted by the 1st and 3d Louisiana



BASTIEN-LEPAGE.

Native Guard, the whole being under the command of Colonel John A. Nelson. The whole negro force consisted of 1080, and it made three successive charges upon a fort protected in front by a deep and almost impassable bayou. Their loss was 37 killed, 155 wounded, and 16 missing. General Banks stated in his official report that "their conduct was heroic; no troops could be more determined or more daring. . . . Whatever doubt may have existed before as to the efficiency of organizations of this character, the history of to-day proves conclusively, to those who were in a position to observe the conduct of these regiments, that the government will find in this class of troops effective supporters and defenders."

A smaller engagement took place at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, which is thus described by General Grant in his "Personal Memoirs": "On the 7th of June [1863], our little force of colored and white troops across the Mississippi at Milliken's Bend were attacked by about 3000 men [under General McCulloch] from Richard Taylor's trans-Mississippi command. With the aid of the gunboats they were easily repelled. . . . This was the first important engagement of the war in which colored troops had been under fire. [This is an error, the attack on Port Hudson having preceded it.] These men were very raw, having been all enlisted since the beginning of the siege [of Vicksburg], but they behaved well."

The next important engagement in which negro troops took part was the attack of the 54th Massachusetts (Colonel R. G. Shaw) upon Fort Wagner in South Carolina. This colored regiment had acquitted itself well on James Island, South Carolina, July 16, in a skirmish; and its colonel had made this the ground of an application to be brigaded with white troops under General G. C. Strong. The request being granted, it set out on its march on the evening of that very day from James Island to Cole's Island, and thence by steamers successively to Folly and Morris islands, being almost without rations during this time, and bivouacking two nights in a hard rain. It reached the headquarters of General Strong, the commander of the expedition, about 5 P. M., and took its place at once on the right of a brigade containing five white regiments. The assault was finally made about midnight, under cover of a bombardment, and the regiment actually gained the parapet of the fort; but, being left for some reason without proper support, it was ultimately driven out, having suffered fearfully. More than half the officers were killed or wounded, and nearly one half the men were killed, wounded, or missing.¹ After an hour's fighting the regiment was withdrawn, under command of Captain Luis F. Emilio, and was formed anew in line of battle about seven hundred yards from the fort, where it awaited orders for another charge.² The attack was, however, discontinued, the commanding officer, General Strong, being mortally wounded. I subsequently conversed with this brave officer, a little before his death, and asked him to tell me frankly how the 54th Massachusetts had behaved. His answer was: "No new regiment which had lost its colonel could have behaved better."

The attack on Fort Wagner, with the picturesque and gallant death of young Colonel Shaw, made a great impression at the North, and did more than anything else, perhaps, to convince the public that negro troops could fight well, not merely as skirmishers, but in line of battle. To this was added the general sympathy called forth by a manly letter from the father of Colonel Shaw, requesting General Gillmore to refrain from all effort to recover the body of his son, but rather to leave it buried with those of his soldiers.

¹ "Official Army Register," VIII, 314.

² Williams's "Colored Troops," p. 193; his statement being based on information received from Captain Emilio, who commanded at the close of the engagement. Compare the accounts of survivors in "Howard Memorial Biographies," II, 257.

The early stages of a great movement always call for more fullness of narration than the later ones. During the remainder of the war the negro troops were so intermingled with other troops that it is less easy to trace their distinctive history. In the Department of the South, three colored regiments acquitted themselves well, under Major-General Seymour, in the disastrous battle of Olustee, Florida (February 20, 1864); two at James Island, South Carolina (July 2, 1864); and five at Honey Hill, South Carolina (November 30, 1864). In the Army of the Cumberland, a black regiment—the 14th United States Colored Troops—made a courageous charge in the defense of Dalton, Georgia (August 15, 1864), and «an enviable reputation in the Western army,» according to Colonel Morgan, its commander, during the defense of Decatur, Alabama. Eight regiments took part in the successful battle of Nashville, Tennessee (December 15, 16, 1864), against Hood's veterans. Twenty-five per cent. of the loss in this battle, according to General Steedman, fell upon the negro division; and he adds that most of this took place during their «brilliant charge upon the enemy on Newton Hill.»¹

On April 12, 1864, Fort Pillow, with a garrison of about 557 men, half white and half negro, was taken by a Confederate force under General Forrest, and the garrison was massacred under circumstances of peculiar barbarity. General Grant, in his «Memoirs,» quotes General Forrest as saying in his despatches: «The river was dyed with the blood of the slaughtered for two hundred yards. The approximate loss was upward of 500 killed, but few of the officers escaping. My loss was about 20 killed. It is hoped that these facts will demonstrate to the Northern people

that negro soldiers cannot cope with Southerners.» General Grant adds: «Subsequently Forrest made a report in which he left out the part which shocks humanity to read.»

But the most extensive service of negro troops took place during 1864 in Virginia, where they were at first mostly assigned to General Burnside, in the 9th Army Corps. At Powhatan, May 24, a force of colored troops, under General E. A. Wild, defended a fort against General Fitzhugh Lee; and a division of half a dozen regiments, under General Hincks, carried a line of rifle-pits, June 15,



PETER COOPER.

with the battle-cry, «Remember Fort Pillow!» and took sixteen guns. This division in particular was repeatedly in skirmishes before Petersburg, Virginia; and its total loss between January 15 and January 30 amounted to 575.

In the final assault on Petersburg, it was the desire of General Burnside to put his colored division in front. This is stated by General Grant in his «Personal Memoirs,»

¹ Williams's «Negro Troops,» pp. 282-90. The «Official Army Register» (VIII, 338) assigns but six regiments to this battle; but Williams gives officially the losses of eight.



1. COLUMBIAN MEDAL: REJECTED DESIGN.



2. COLUMBIAN MEDAL: REJECTED DESIGN.

and he adds: «Meade interfered with this. Burnside then took Ledlie's division—a worse selection than the first would have been.» In Grant's opinion, neither Ledlie nor Ferrero, who commanded the colored troops, was «equal to the occasion.» The assault through the exploded mine was a failure, the white troops having recoiled, partly through the inefficiency of their commander; and the colored troops who were sent in to relieve them accomplished nothing, though they confessedly fought well. Their loss was very great. Thus the 28th United States Colored Troops (Lieutenant-Colonel Russell) lost 7 out of 11 officers, and 91 out of 224 men, both the color-sergeants and all the color-guard being killed.¹ Later (October 7, 1864) the thanks of Major-General Birney, commanding the 10th Army Corps, were expressly given to the colored troops attached to his corps for their courage at Newmarket Heights, Fort Pillow, Fort Harrison, and elsewhere.

In March, 1865, President Lincoln reviewed 25,000 colored troops in the Army of the James. They took an active part in the final campaign against Petersburg and Richmond, and headed the entrance to both cities. It was eminently appropriate that the race which was the innocent cause of the Civil War, and whose freedom it virtually secured, should furnish the first Union soldiers to take possession of the conquered cities. The fears of barbarity and indiscriminate insurrection had ceased, and it was found that the black soldiers, trained and dis-

ciplined by military life, were not only courageous and faithful in the field, but orderly and self-respecting in the hour of victory.

In computing the actual value of colored troops, it must be remembered that they were not enlisted on any large scale until the war was nearly half through, and that they were in many places denied the discipline and opportunity that are needed to make soldiers. It must also be borne in mind that the original theory of their enlistment was to set free an equal number of white troops for more active service; and that in the most conspicuous trials made of them, as at Port Hudson, Fort Wagner, and Petersburg, the regiments employed had absolutely their first experience of hard fighting. There was also from the beginning some reluctance in putting the best guns into their hands; and it was often the case that they had the discouragement of knowing themselves less well armed than the white Union regiments beside them or the Confederate troops opposed to them. That under these circumstances their service was creditable is sufficiently proved by the fact that the ablest officers of the Confederate army wished to imitate the example of the United States government in employing them.

When General Lee was appointed commander-in-chief of the Confederate army, early in 1865, he recommended the policy of employing negroes as soldiers; and a measure for thus employing them twice passed the lower house of the Confederate Congress, only to be rejected by the Senate. It is a curious fact that one of the very last general orders issued by the adjutant and inspector-general was to detail an officer, Lieutenant

¹ Williams's «Negro Troops,» p. 250. An excellent narrative of the part taken by colored troops in this assault appeared in THE CENTURY MAGAZINE for September, 1887.

Cowardin, to recruit colored troops in Halifax County, Virginia. The adoption of this policy came too late to be of any service to the Confederate cause, but not too late to give emphatic indorsement to the policy adopted by the United States government.

The expected value of the colored troops for defensive service was undoubtedly justified, and they furnished an indispensable requisite for some important movements. The most conspicuous of these instances was perhaps in connection with the most brilliant separate achievement of the war. When Sherman made his great march to the sea, not a colored regiment marched with him; but the march would itself have been fruitless had not the troops in the Department of the South, his objective point, proved trustworthy, and these were two thirds negroes. «The operations on the South Atlantic coast, which long seemed a merely subordinate and incidental part of the great conflict, proved to be one of the final pivots on which it turned.» White troops made the march, but black regiments kept the door open.

In the way of direct service, it appears by the «Official Army Register» that the colored troops sustained actual casualties in two hundred and fifty-one different engagements, and doubtless took part in many more. To those commanding them the question of their fighting qualities was soon solved; and these were, of course, the persons best qualified to judge them. Two thirds of a good soldier consists in good discipline and organization; and the remaining one third, where the race element enters in, did not in this case involve enough difference to affect the result with any seriousness. It was like asking whether men with black eyes or with blue eyes made the better soldiers. Perhaps the best thing said or written about the freed slaves during the war was the answer given by General Saxton, after receiving a long series of questions about them from some benevolent committee. He bade his secretary draw a pen across all the interrogations, and write at the

bottom this summary: «They are intensely human.» The qualities of the negro soldiers were simply human. They were capable of fatigue or ardor, of cowardice or courage, of grumbling or cheerfulness, very much as white soldiers would have been in their place. If it is necessary to scrutinize more minutely, it is possible to say that they were more enthusiastic under excitement, and more easily depressed; more affectionate if judiciously treated, and more sullen and dogged if discouraged; more gregarious, and less prone to individual initiative—and so on with many other minor differences. Yet even these generalizations would be met by so many scattered exceptions as to be of subordinate value. Every regimental or even brigade commander comes to know after a while who are the men in his command who covet danger, who are the men who simply face it when it is inevitable, and who are the men who need watching lest they actually flinch; and all this is equally true, whether they be white or black. «Two o'clock in the morning courage,» in Napoleon's phrase, is a thing that belongs to the minority in every

race; and it is probably no more abundant, and yet no rarer, among black soldiers than among white.

Two peculiar traits of the black troops grew out of their former state of servitude. When serving on their own soil, or even on a soil and under conditions resembling their own, they had the great advantage of local knowledge. They were not only ready to serve as guides, but they were virtu-

ally their own guides; they were serviceable as Indian scouts are serviceable; they could find their way in the dark, guess at the position of an enemy, follow a trail, extract knowledge from others of their own race; and all this in a way no white man could rival. Enterprises from which the bravest white men might shrink unaided could sometimes be safely transacted by black soldiers, or in their company. Again, they had to sustain them the vast stakes of personal freedom and that of their families. Say what one pleases,



3. COLUMBIAN MEDAL: ACCEPTED DESIGN.

they all desired this freedom,—I never encountered an exception,—and it gave them a peculiar stimulus apart from that of the white soldier. The latter had at stake his flag, his nation, his comrades, his life; the black soldier, if he had been a slave, had all these things risked upon the issue, and one thing more—his personal freedom, with that of his household. The negro regiments themselves recognized this, and had a feeling that they were playing for higher prizes than their white associates. Let the Confederacy succeed, and they would be remanded into slavery, while the white soldiers would simply lay down their arms and go home. No one who did not serve with them and have their confidence could know the great strength of this feeling in their hearts.

Their antecedents as slaves were not in themselves, as many supposed, a good preparation for the life of a soldier; for military discipline is of a higher grade than plantation discipline, and appeals throughout to a man's self-respect. It was necessary to educate this self-respect; and therefore it was generally found that officers who proceeded merely in the slave-driver method were unsuccessful with black soldiers. Again, they had a great taste for certain things which white soldiers were apt to find distasteful—namely, what may be called the manners of the camp, such as the salutation of officers, the gradations of rank, the precise formalities of guard duty. This last aptitude, joined with

the natural suspiciousness created by their previous lives, made them admirable sentinels. They generally felt it a step upward to enter military life, with its routine and discipline; whereas to white soldiers these were wholly a sacrifice, accepted only for the sake of their country. Sanitary regulations, for instance, were far more easily enforced among negroes than among whites, simply because the latter could never quite get over the feeling that the whole thing was a bore, and not what they enlisted for. The colored soldiers accepted it as a part of the whole affair, and raised no questions. On the other hand, the general ignorance of the black soldiers was a great inconvenience, and threw an exhausting amount of writing and clerical duty upon the officers of colored regiments. The health of the negroes was also a great source of solicitude: although more proof against malaria, they were more subject to pulmonary disease; and it was often hard to get good surgeons for the colored regiments, as it grew harder, indeed, for all regiments in the latter part of the war. As a whole, service with negro troops had two special satisfactions apart from all strictly military considerations: the peculiarly warm and, as it were, filial relation which readily grew up between them and their officers; and the feeling that their service in war was not merely a chapter in the history of a conflict, but in the emancipation and elevation of a race.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

THE SECRET.

NIGHTINGALES warble about it
 All night under blossom and star;
 The wild swan is dying without it,
 And the eagle cryeth afar;
 The sun he doth mount but to find it,
 Searching the green earth o'er;
 But more doth a man's heart mind it,
 Oh, more, more, more!

Over the gray leagues of ocean
 The infinite yearneth alone;
 The forests with wandering emotion
 The thing they know not intone;
 Creation arose but to see it,
 A million lamps in the blue;
 But a lover he shall be it
 If one sweet maid is true.

G. E. Woodberry.