

Buffalo Soldiers in the American Southwest

OVERVIEW

Background & Origin of “Buffalo Soldiers”

African Americans fought in military conflicts prior to the Civil War, but in the Civil War they served in large numbers. Nearly 200,000 African Americans served in the Union Army. In post-Civil War 1866, Congress authorized, for the first time, African Americans to serve in the peacetime army of the United States. The 1866 legislation led to the creation of two cavalry regiments and four infantry regiments, designated the 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalry regiments and the 38th, 39th, 40th, and 41st U.S. Infantry regiments; three years later the four infantry regiments were reorganized to form the 24th and 25th infantry regiments. Outstanding service in the Civil War set the stage for creation of the all-black units. The regiments, commanded mostly by white officers, were composed of enlisted soldiers from various backgrounds, including former slaves, freemen, and veterans from the Civil War. By 1867, the first “Buffalo Soldiers” were sent to the West to protect settlers, cattle herds, and railroad crews, and to campaign against Native Americans. They remained in the West until the Spanish-American War.

There are various explanations behind the nickname “Buffalo Soldiers.” One explanation is that Cheyenne warriors referred to the soldiers as Buffalo Soldiers (more correctly translated as “Wild Buffalo” [Buffalo Soldiers National Museum 2005]) out of respect and the fierce fighting ability of the 10th Cavalry. Another explanation credits their fierce fighting spirit, as well as the soldiers’ dark skin and curly hair. Some sources also suggest the name may have arisen because soldiers wore heavy buffalo coats in winter (Buffalo Soldiers National Museum 2005). Schubert (2003) points out that there is general agreement that either the Cheyenne or the Comanche first used the term, around 1870, but that there is no evidence that the African American soldiers used the term themselves. The nickname was eventually used to refer to all African American troops that served in the frontier Indian Wars Army.



Image courtesy of Don Stivers

Formation of the African American Regiments

The initial formation of the 9th Cavalry occurred in Louisiana, with enlisted men coming from the New Orleans vicinity (NPS undated material-a). Additional recruiting brought men from Kentucky. The regiment numbered 885 enlisted men when it arrived in Texas in 1867. Formation of the 10th Cavalry began at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1866. By mid 1867, men had been enlisted from the Departments of Missouri, Arkansas, and the Platte; additional men were added when the regiment moved to Fort Riley, Kansas. The 24th Infantry was created in 1869 from consolidation of the 38th and 41st regiments. Men in the 38th regiment had come from the St. Louis area, and the 41st had been organized in southern Louisiana. Units of the 24th started serving at Fort Davis in 1869, although some men had been serving there since 1868 (in the 41st regiment). The 25th Infantry was formed in Louisiana in 1869 from the 39th and 40th Infantry regiments. The enlisted men had come primarily from northern Virginia and southern Louisiana. The regiment spent a short time in Louisiana before heading for the Texas frontier.

For additional information on the formation and duties of the individual regiments, see “History of Black Regiments at Fort Davis” at http://www.nps.gov/archive/foda/Fort_Davis_WEB_PAGE/About_the_Fort/History_of_Black_Regiments.htm. Although this material focuses on Fort Davis, other details are also provided.

Where the Regiments Served before/after Serving in the American Southwest

For a more complete chronological history of where the individual regiments served, see one of the books containing such information, or one of the many websites on the subject (e.g., [Buffalos Soldiers.com](http://BuffalosSoldiers.com), <http://www.buffalosoldiers.com/index.htm> [see “Military Chronology”]).

National Park Service Units where Buffalo Soldiers Played a Role

Buffalo Soldiers served on the western frontier continuously during the last 30 years of the Indian Wars. The all-African American regiments clashed with Cheyennes, Sioux, Arapahos, Kiowas, Comanches, Utes, and Apaches in Indian Territory (present Oklahoma), the Dakotas, Colorado, Montana, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona (NPS undated material-b). They also served in Wyoming, Utah, Nebraska, and Kansas. Because this Overview focuses on the American Southwest, Buffalo Soldier activities in other areas (e.g., the Dakotas) are not specifically discussed here. See the “Websites and Other Sources of Information” Section at the end of the overview for information in other areas. The links include those to information on 400 Buffalo Soldiers, who, in 1900 protected Yosemite National Park and Sequoia and General Grant (Kings Canyon) National Park.

Buffalo Soldiers were known to have played a significant historical role in at least six parks in the American Southwest. These six parks are Fort Davis National Historic Site (FODA) and Guadalupe Mountains National Park (GUMO) in Texas, Fort Larned N.H.S. (FOLS) in Kansas, and Fort Bowie N.H.S. (FOBO) and Chiricahua National Monument (CHIR) in Arizona. Buffalo Soldiers were also stationed at Fort Huachuca (still an active military installation) near Coronado National Memorial (CORO) in Arizona.

Fort Davis National Historic Site (FODA), Texas

As a vital part of the defense system of western Texas, Fort Davis played a significant role in the history of the American Southwest. The fort’s primary role until 1881 was that of safeguarding the west Texas frontier against the Comanches and Apaches. Troops stationed at the post, from 1854 to 1891, protected mail coaches, emigrants, freighters, and travelers on the San Antonio-El Paso Road.



A 9th Cavalry company on Parade at Fort Davis, circa 1875

In June 1867, four companies of the recently-organized 9th Cavalry arrived at Fort Davis. During their time at Fort Davis (1867-1875), the Buffalo Soldiers protected traffic on the San Antonio-El Paso Road and helped build the post into one of the largest in the state. When the 9th Cavalry left the fort in 1875, it went to New Mexico.

In the summer of 1867, one of the first assignments of the 10th Cavalry was to guard Kansas Pacific Railroad work crews (in Kansas) and engage with the Cheyenne. In Colorado and Oklahoma they engaged in skirmishes with the Kiowa and Comanche. In 1873, five companies of the regiment were moved to Texas, and two years later Company H moved to Fort Davis. Units of the 10th served at Fort Davis for the next ten years (1875-1885), and this post became their headquarters in 1882. In western Texas, the regiment’s duties were to protect mail and travel routes, control Native American movements, and gain knowledge of the terrain.

The last major military campaign involving troops from Fort Davis occurred in 1880; six companies of the 10th Cavalry, as well as one company of the 24th Infantry were involved in the Victorio Campaign (see below under GUMO). Not long after the Victorio Campaign, the Indian Wars in west Texas were over. Responsibilities of soldiers at the fort then became more routine— they escorted railroad survey parties, repaired roads and telegraph lines, and pursued bandits. The 10th Cavalry moved to Arizona in 1885, where it spent much time in the field during campaigns against Geronimo.

The 24th Infantry served at Fort Davis from 1869 to 1872 and again in 1880. These soldiers guarded stage stations, constructed fort buildings, scouted and patrolled desolate terrain, and constructed roads and telegraph lines throughout western Texas and southeastern New Mexico; they also interacted with Apache, Comanche, and Kiowa. After

The American Southwest

serving in Texas, the 24th Infantry was stationed in Indian Territory (present Oklahoma) and headquartered at Fort Sill. In 1888, the regiment was moved to New Mexico and Arizona, where it protected settlers and guarded Apaches.

Companies of the 25th Infantry served at Fort Davis for 10 years, from 1870-1880. The construction of 91 miles of telegraph line from Fort Davis to Eagle Springs (near present-day Sierra Blanca, Texas) was one of their most important accomplishments; the line proved a vital communication link during the Victorio Campaign in 1880. The infantrymen also constructed new roads. The regiment transferred to the Dakota Territory in 1880 and to Montana in 1888.

Much more detail on the history of the four Buffalo Soldier regiments at Fort Davis can be found at the NPS website (see “History of Black Regiments at Fort Davis” at http://www.nps.gov/archive/foda/Fort_Davis_WEB_PAGE/About_the_Fort/History_of_Black_Regiments.htm).

Guadalupe Mountains National Park (GUMO), Texas

In the late 1860's the Guadalupe Mountains were one of the last strongholds of the Mescalero Apache, who had been fighting for their lands and way of life for years (Bieri undated material). In the area that is now GUMO (in west Texas), there were several skirmishes between the Mescalero Apaches and the Buffalo Soldiers. In 1879, the Apache leader Victorio fled a southeastern New Mexico reservation with a number of his followers and began raids in western Texas and northern Mexico. The last skirmish between the Buffalo Soldiers and Victorio's warriors occurred in August 1880, about 40 miles south of the Guadalupe Mountains. Victorio escaped the encounter into Mexico, but was later killed there by Mexican troops. Not long after his death, the last free Apaches surrendered and the Indian Wars in West Texas were over. The Buffalo Soldiers also explored and mapped much of the region, which had been little known. Soldiers of the 9th and 10th Cavalries were stationed here from 1867-1880 (NPS undated material-c). For more information on the soldiers at GUMO and the challenges and hardships all Buffalo Soldiers faced, see Bieri (undated material, found at <http://www.nps.gov/gumo/historyculture/soldiers2.htm>).

Fort Larned National Historic Site (FOLS), Kansas

Fort Larned was established on the western Kansas prairie for the protection of mail coaches, freighters, and other

traffic on the Santa Fe Trail. Operating from 1860 through the late 1870s, it was the most important military post guarding the northern portion of the Trail. The fort was also the site of an Indian Agency, and therefore important in maintaining amicable relations with Plains Indians. Fort Larned was the first military installation to receive for duty one of the newly formed all-African American cavalry regiments (Buffalo Soldiers.com 2007); Company A of the 10th Cavalry arrived in April of 1867, with just under 100 men (Walker 1997). Soldiers with Company A were the only black troops at the fort and experienced discrimination (Walker 1997). One incident of conflict between white and African American soldiers resulted in the loss of Company A's stables, horses, and equipment in a fire (Buffalo Soldiers.com 2007).

Fort Huachuca near Coronado National Memorial (CORO), Arizona

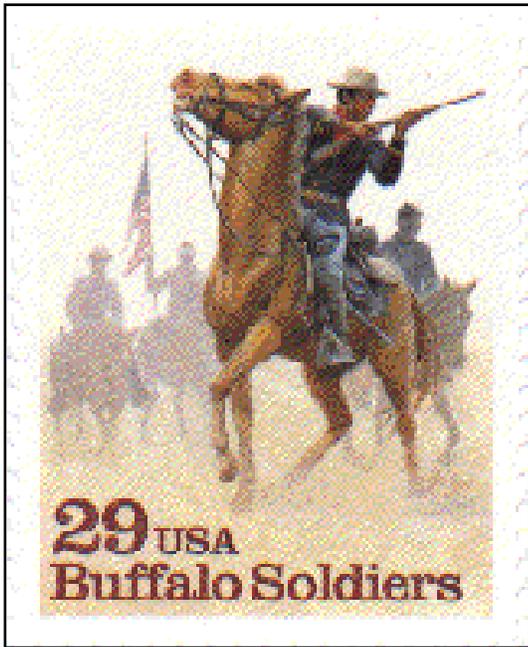
The U.S. Army Intelligence Center and Fort Huachuca, an active military installation, is located to the north of CORO in southeastern Arizona. Fort Huachuca began its long history in the late 1870s. A camp was initially established in the Huachuca Mountains to protect settlers and travelers in southeastern Arizona, while also interfering with Apache routes of escape into Mexico (U.S. Army Intelligence Center and Fort Huachuca 2005).

In 1892, members of the 24th Infantry were the first African American troops to serve at Fort Huachuca (Finley 1993). The 24th remained until 1896. After fighting in Cuba, Companies A and H of the 25th Infantry arrived in 1898. In the same year, troops from the 9th Cavalry were stationed at Fort Huachuca. Both regiments stayed only briefly. However, arriving at the end of 1913, Buffalo Soldiers of the 10th Cavalry spent nearly 20 years at Fort Huachuca. This time began “the continuous era of black soldiers” at



The 10th Cavalry Fort Huachuca.

Overview - Buffalo Soldiers



the fort (Finley 1993). The 10th Cavalry was with General John J. Pershing on the 1916 expedition into Mexico, and it guarded the United States-Mexico border during World War I. The 10th Cavalry was replaced as the main combat unit at the fort in 1933 by the 25th Infantry Regiment. During World War II, the 25th was incorporated into the 93rd Infantry Division and deployed to the Pacific in 1943.

A wealth of information on the history of Fort Huachuca and the Buffalo Soldiers can be found in Finley (1993); also see the “Websites and Other Information” section.

Fort Bowie National Historic Site (FOBO), Arizona

Located in southeastern Arizona, Fort Bowie (1862-1894) was a focal point in Army operations against the Chiricahua Apache in the 1860s-1880s. The fort was located at the eastern entrance of Apache Pass, a highly traveled mountain crossing of strategic value due to the presence of spring water. The pass was used by the Apache people, as well as Spanish, Mexican, and American settlers. Thirty years of conflict between the U.S. military and the Chiricahua Apaches at Fort Bowie culminated in the surrender of Geronimo in 1886. The 10th Cavalry participated in campaigns against Geronimo near Fort Bowie (Schubert 2003 [Chapter 34]). The area was also the site of a wagon train massacre (the Bascom Affair), and the battle of Apache Pass, where a group of Chiricahua Apaches fought the California Volunteers.

Chiricahua National Memorial (CHIR), Arizona

South of FOBO, CHIR celebrates natural features, such as rock spires, and history. Faraway Ranch was the home of Swedish immigrants who settled in Bonita Canyon in the late 1880s; their homestead became a guest ranch that operated from 1917 to 1972. Significant events involving Buffalo Soldiers in this area included the field activities of the 10th Cavalry during the Geronimo Campaign (Schubert 2003 [Chapter 34]). Troops from three Companies of the 10th established a long-term camp, called Camp Bonita, here in 1885-1886 (NPS undated material-c). The NPS has excavated and documented the camp.

African American Officers

Three African Americans graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point during the 19th century. The men, Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander, and Charles Young, were assigned to African American units. Flipper was the first graduate and was assigned in July 1877 to the 10th Cavalry (NPS undated material-d). Flipper, a second lieutenant, was first stationed at Fort Sill. One of his successes at Fort Sill, as the post’s engineer, was the construction of a system to drain stagnant ponds harboring mosquitoes (and potentially causing malaria). In 1880, Flipper was assigned to Fort Davis, Texas, with the duties of Acting Assistant Quartermaster and Acting Commissary of Subsistence. In 1881, Flipper found that commissary funds were missing, and he hid the loss until he could discover the reason behind it. His actions resulted in a court-martial. In December of 1881, he was tried at Fort Davis and found guilty of “conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman” and was dismissed from the army.

Flipper maintained his innocence. He went on to have a successful civilian career, which included work with the federal government (including the Department of Justice). Various attempts over the years to clear his name were unsuccessful. He died in 1940 at the age of 84. Thirty-six years later, the U.S. Army reviewed his case and awarded him an honorable discharge, dated June 30, 1882. The army concluded that Flipper’s sentence was “...unduly harsh, and therefore unjust.” In 1999, President Clinton posthumously pardoned Second Lieutenant Flipper.

To learn more about Flipper’s life, see NPS (undated material-c), or one of the books that examines this first African American graduate of West Point (e.g., Flipper 1998).

The American Southwest

The interesting and impressive history of John H. Alexander, the second African American graduate of West Point (class of 1887), can be found at <http://www.cals.lib.ar.us/butlercenter/abho/docs/2003%20John%20H%20Alexander.pdf>, and that of Charles Young, the third graduate (class of 1889), can be found at <http://www.buffalosoldier.net/CharlesYoung.htm>.

Medals of Honor

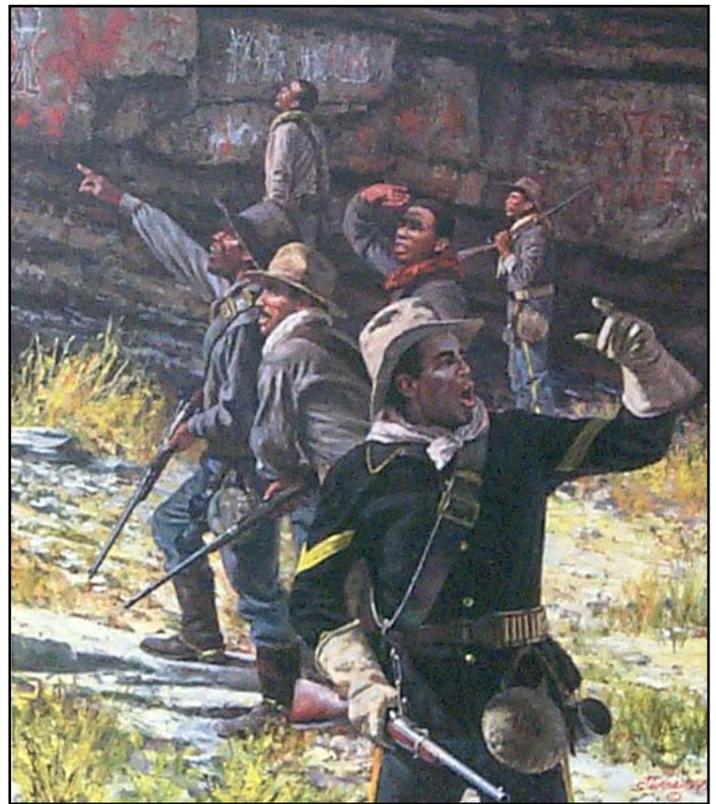
The Medal of Honor, the highest award that can be given to a member of the U.S. military, is presented by the president. It is awarded to an individual who, while serving his country, “distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.” The Medal of Honor was authorized in 1862. It was awarded to 417 men who served in the frontier Indian Campaigns between 1865 and 1899. Eighteen were awarded to African American soldiers: 8 were presented to members of the 9th Cavalry, 4 to members of the 10th Cavalry, and 6 to members of the 24th Infantry (Schubert 1997). Five members of the 10th Cavalry received the award during the Spanish American War. For more information on the Medal of Honor recipients, see “Black Recipients of the Medal of Honor” (at http://www.nps.gov/archive/foda/Fort_Davis_WEB_PAGE/HOME.htm), or one of the many websites or books (e.g., Schubert 1997) on the subject.



Medal of Honor recipient, Sergeant Thomas Shaw, who served as a private at Fort Davis in 1870 and 1871.

in the settlement and development of the American West. In addition to their efforts on the battlefield, they built or renovated posts, strung thousands of miles of telegraph wire, escorted trains, stages, cattle herds, railroad crews and surveying parties, and opened new roads and mapped uncharted country.

Following the first Buffalo Soldiers, African American regiments later served in the Spanish-American War, Philippine Insurrection, Mexican Punitive Expedition, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. In the 1950s, African American regiments were disbanded when all military services were integrated. At that time, for the first time, black and white soldiers served together in the same regiments.



The Discovery

Image courtesy of Don Stivers

The Buffalo Soldier Legacy

Throughout the period of the Indian Wars, about 20 percent of the U.S. Cavalry troopers and 8 percent of the infantry soldiers were African American, and they fought nearly 200 engagements (Schubert 2003). The Buffalo Soldiers rose above the challenges of harsh living conditions, difficult duty, and racial prejudice to gain a reputation of dedication and bravery. Stationed on the U.S. frontier from the 1860s to the 1890s, Buffalo Soldiers played a major role