

We Join to Fight for Country and Our Freedom:  
But Still Not Equal  
By Michael Pritchett

During the Civil War, which has been called the bloodiest war in American history, free blacks in the North saw an opportunity to attack racial prejudice, and to prove their bravery and loyalty to the Union.<sup>1</sup> Socially, northern whites like southern whites held strong prejudices against blacks. Northerners thought enslavement of blacks was unjust and inhumane; but to think of blacks as their equals or have them as friends was out of the question.<sup>2</sup> With the South's long understanding of slaveholding they knew how to use slaves for hard labor, so when the war did break out they employed slaves to do the construction on military projects and the raising of food. This helped to free up Southern white soldiers for combat.<sup>3</sup>

During the early stages of the war black participation was kept to a very minimal degree because the federal government forbids the use of blacks in the military, and the confederacy were using blacks as free laborers. Also the federal government had an agreement with the Confederacy to return runaway slaves back to slaveholders; the agreement was called the Fugitive Slave Law. Most generals in the field disobeyed and used them anyway.<sup>4</sup> According to Joseph T Glatthaar the writer of "Forged in Battle", Northern troops took on heavy losses, so taking on fugitive slaves, and using them in government purpose help bring the war to a new juncture. The union army took a way the Southerners free laborers, and it made it difficult to convince Southerners into a pro-

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph T. Glatthaar, Forged in Battle: Alliance of Black Soldiers and White officers. (New York: free press, 1990), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 11, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

union position.<sup>5</sup>

In March of 1862 South Carolina orders were given to Major General David Hunter, a committed abolitionist, to declare martial law and emancipate all slaves in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Then at gunpoint he organized all fugitive slaves into military units. This act alienated a big portion of the black population, and hurt recruitment in the South for some time. <sup>6</sup>

During the month of July 1862, Congress passed the Militia Act because they had received reports that generals were already using runaway slaves for combat. The Militia Act was passed to give President Lincoln the power to organize free blacks and runaway slaves for military services if needed in labor battalions to free up whites for combat.<sup>7</sup> Slavery was a major argument between the North and the South, and friction between the two was out of control. Also, the North had lost a high amount of men and President Lincoln felt that if the North was going to win the war he must declare all slaves free in states that were still in rebellion. On January 1, 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. It gave blacks the right to enlist as combat soldiers. <sup>8</sup>

The next year, in early part of 1863, Massachusetts's Governor John A. Andrew organized the Fifty-Fourth colored regiment.<sup>9</sup> Later, in the summer of 1863, the Thirty-Fifth United States colored troops was formed. They were mustered in North Carolina and Virginia as the first North Carolina colored volunteers. Both units were part of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 37.

Colonel Montgomery's brigade.<sup>10</sup> After the Emancipation was given free blacks and newly freed slaves flocked to the North to join the Union Army to fight because they believed it would bring the new freedoms. Also free blacks and runaway slaves that joined the Union Army fought for their freedom and the freedom of their sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles still in the slave states. Even though these two units and other black troops fought with bravery and honor they still had to fight for equal rights, and against racism while wearing the blue Union uniform.

Logistically most Civil War battles tended to be fought at major routes, such as railroads, roads, and waterways. On February 20, 1864 the Battle of Olustee took place east of Lake City, Florida at the Atlantic and Gulf Central Railroad crossing. The battle was a major win for the Confederate forces in the South. It was important for the interior of Florida to stay in the hands of the Confederate side because it kept open a supply route to get food cattle, hogs, and ammunition to Confederate troops.<sup>11</sup> No matter how hard black would work to prove themselves equal to whites on the battle field racism still was an issue.

The primary sources used to illustrate that racism existence in the North include two letters written by black Union soldiers and one letter from a white Confederate soldier. The first source, a Sergeant in the Fifty-Fifth colored regiment wrote a letter on

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<sup>10</sup> Accessible Archives "Letters from the Battle of Olustee", available from: [http://wxlab1.entnem.ufl.edu/olustee/letters/sgt\\_55th\\_mass.html](http://wxlab1.entnem.ufl.edu/olustee/letters/sgt_55th_mass.html) internet, accessed on 20th September 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Florida Historical Quarterly "The Battle of Olustee," available from: <http://galnet.galegroup.com/servlet/HistRC1> internet, accessed on 15 October 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Accessible Archives "Letters from the Battle of Olustee," 2006.

May 29th, 1864 to the editor, Mr. Weaver, of the black owned newspaper called The Christian Recorder. He tells the Editor about his disappointment in Governor Andrews who did not use his authority from Washington to see that the Negro troops had the same pay, rations, and treatment as the white troops. He also explains their treatment after they arrived to assist in the Battle of Olustee.<sup>12</sup> The second source, E.D.W, who served in the Fifty-Fourth, also writes a letter to the editor of the Christian Recorder. E.D.W gives the editor an overview on how they fought during the Battle of Olustee. His major complaint is about pay, “White troops receive their pay every two weeks but the Negro soldiers have not received theirs in two years.”<sup>13</sup> Third source is Corporal Henry Shackelford’s letter that he wrote to his mother on February on 20th, 1864. It was published in the Atlanta Intelligencer on March 2, 1864. His letter represents the white soldiers and focused on their victory at Olustee, and he acknowledges how the Negro troops fought well. The letter also shows the violence that Negro troops had to endure from Confederate troops if captured.<sup>14</sup>

Through the course of the Civil War black soldiers had to fight racism from the North that was just as cruel and degrading as that in the slave owning South. Despite this, blacks saw the war as away to show that they are equal to whites, and to shatter the racism and cruelty that was directed towards them. In the battles that they fought, whether they won or lost, they fought with honor. When the Union army would lose a battle blacks were to blame not the white General in charge or the head decision makers at the war department.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Because General Seymour, a white officer, disobeyed orders from the expedition Commander General Gillmore, he lost the battle of Olustee, yet many racists still blamed black troops for the defeat. A Philadelphia newspaper printed, “Bad Conduct of a Negro regiment” and “denounced black solders for breaking under fire and running away.”<sup>15</sup>

The Battle of Olustee took place on February 20, 1864. It is also known as the Battle of Ocean Pond. Truman Seymour, the commander of the Union forces in Florida, had captured Baldwin after being there for two days. Baldwin was an important railroad junction west of Jacksonville. With no resistance from the Confederate forces, Union forces made advancements three miles off of Lake City. General Seymour contacted General Gillmore about seeing a large rebel force by Lake City. This rebel force made any other progress inadvisable. General Seymour said, “To thwarted, defeated” he wrote, “will be a sad termination to a project, brilliant thus far.” On February second Seymour told Gillmore, “He might fortify Baldwin.”<sup>16</sup> General Seymour decided to do something different a week later; he moved west to take the state capital at Tallahassee. General Seymour disobeyed orders from General Gillmore and his staff’s own information that rebel units, as large as his were waiting for him at Olustee. Seymour and his men marched into a small narrow area with the swamps on the south of the Jacksonville railroad line on the north towards Ocean Pond. On their way locals warned them, “Expect a thrashing.”<sup>17</sup>

The Confederates sent out large skirmishers<sup>18</sup> that made contact with Union forces. Seymour never made it to the rebel fortifications; he sent his regiments into battle.

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen E. George, *A Voice of thunder*, ed. Donald Yacovvonce (Chicago: press University of Illinois Unrbana, 1997), 69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

The Confederate force, which was over 5,200 strong, cut his regiment to pieces. The Seventh New Hampshire and all white regiment took off running under fire, and the eighth United States Colored Troops, took on the brunt of the rebel forces without any combat experience. Their losses out of five hundred forty-four men were three hundred killed. Colonel Montgomery's brigade that included the Fifty-Fourth was in the rear in reserve. Around four o'clock late after noon they were given orders to move the front of the lines, "At double quick." The Fifth-Fourth dropped their coats and knapsacks and rushed forward yelling, "Three cheers for the Fifth-fourth and seven dollars a month." For two miles the Fifth-Fourth ran to the front of the lines; white men were yelling, "We're badly whipped" and "You'll get killed."<sup>19</sup> General Seymour rode over to Colonel Edward N. Hallowell and informed him that they lost everything. He also told his all black troops that it was all up to them. Even with all those casualties the Fifth-Fourth held their ground. They used up all their ammunition then they held the line with bayonets; Lieutenant Colonel Hopper drilled them in the manual of arms. It deceived the rebel force into believing that reinforcements had arrived. It saved the regiment from being destroyed by rebel forces.<sup>20</sup> While black troops saved the day white in the north still held negative views towards blacks.

Even though blacks went to fight on the side of North because they saw freedom and equality with North, the North shared a lot of similarities in their views towards black soldiers as the South did. Northern and Southern whites both held inferior views of

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: Alliance of Black Soldiers and White officers*.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen E. George, *A Voice of thunder*, ed. Donald Yacovvonce (Chicago: press University of Illinois Urbana, 1997), 16.

<sup>20</sup> Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 12.

blacks; they believed blacks were lazy, ignorant, and jolly.<sup>21</sup>

E.D.W who was part of company B. Fifty-Fourth Mass. wrote to the Christian Recorder in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania after the battle of Olustee.

It has been a year since we have received any pay, but the white soldiers get their pay every two months; (\$13.00 per month) but when it comes to the poor Negro he gets none. The Fifth-Fourth left Boston the 28th of May 1863. in time of enlisting members for the regiment, they were promised the same pay, and the same rations as other soldiers. Since that time the government must have charged them more for clothing any other regiment; for those who died in a month or two after their enlistment, it was actually said that they were in debt to the government Those who bled on James Island and Wagner, are the same. Why is it not so with other soldiers? Because our faces are black we are put beneath the very rioters of New York. We never brought any disgrace by cowardice, on the State We left.<sup>22</sup>

After retreating back to Jacksonville from Olustee black troops were put to work building forts, entrenchments, and batteries. According to Sergeant of the Fifty-Fifth Mass,

Remaining a few day we were detached part going to Palathi and part to yellow bluff, were fatigue duty commenced. When we got through there we were order to South Carolina, leaving the 8<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania a white regiment to enjoy the fruits of our labor as had often done to other white regiments. So we enter South Carolina once more, and it was intimated by one prominent officers that by promising to double duty we would be allowed to land, but other wise. However, we landed and commenced picket duty, each man coming off and going the next day. This was kept up some time. We were taken of duty and put on fatigue duty on Saturday-all this going on, and we not receiving a cent of remuneration, after having been in the service for one year.(7)

President Lincoln promised equal pay to all the black regiments on Union side. But the Federal Government had reneged, deciding that black soldiers enlisted under the July Militia Act, which said that blacks could get paid ten dollars a month minus three

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

dollars for clothing, would get seven dollars a month. This would made the lowest ranking white receive the same pay as the highest ranking black.<sup>23</sup> Colonel Montgomery had talk to the regiments about pay and their morale, but his statements showed the racism that most officers still had.

Colonel Montgomery addressed the black soldiers because their morale and the morale of other black units were down. They started to protest to white officers by demanding equal pay, and some even refused to take their pay. What he had to say hit them hard; white officers were even stunned by what he said. He told them that they should be glad to pay for the right to fight. Instead of squabbling over pay, he warned them that a refusal to accept pay from the federal government amounted to mutiny. And mutiny would be punishable by death. He also told them this while forgetting about their great reputation. He insisted that they still had not proven that they were equal, or could fight as good as the white man. Montgomery continued claiming the black soldiers had inherent disadvantages to overcome; they were a race of slaves, yet few years ago their father worshipped snakes and crocodiles in Africa. He told them that their faces resembled a beastly character. The best way for them to improve their yellow faces is to get rid of the bad blood is to marry the blackest of women. Many white officers felt their units were on the verge of mutiny, and that they had to kill black troops when they refused duty to get order back in the ranks.<sup>24</sup>

Prejudice was the heart of the matter. The Lincoln administration was still having problems convincing the military and the public to accept units to have black officers. White officers had a hard time dealing with blacks on an equal level because they felt

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<sup>22</sup> Accessible "The Battle of Olustee", accessed on 20September 2006

<sup>23</sup> George, A Voice of thunder, 60.

blacks were an inferior race. When men of seventh Indiana infantry passed the fifteenth U.S colored infantry; the white troops were silent until they saw a black officer walk by them. They yelled out at the black officer take them off his straps; kill him they all said in line. If the white troops were not in the line of march they would have done him harm according to one white officer.<sup>25</sup> A group of white officers had written a letter to the President Lincoln stating that they would resign after they had found out that their commander would be a prominent black surgeon.<sup>26</sup> One white soldier who went by the name of Jeff Hoge; while still in school had written a letter to his aunt. Telling her how there was a Nigger in one of his classes, and found him unbearable, being funny he asked her would she be honored to have one in class with her.

Not all white officers feared blacks fighting in the Union Army. Many officers that commanded blacks were well-educated sons of abolitionists. For instance, leaders from the earlier abolitionist movement were there for over thirty years or more years. They knew they were not in shape to fight a war. Some of them sent family members like James Chaplin Beecher, son of Lyman Beecher the minister, and half brother to Harriet Beecher Stowe. There were others like the Welds, the Birneys, and the Garrisons; the most well- known son to fight with black troops was Robert Gould Shaw, son of wealthy merchant Francis George Shaw. Meanwhile, other white officers harassed black officers that were indifferent to them, some of them tried to challenge black officers on the grounds of their intelligence. But it did not work because most black officers had proven themselves in the tactics regulation. Captain Andre Cailloux, a man of high intelligence, popular of in the free black community, and educated in Paris, spoke French and English.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 177.

When New Orleans fell to the Union in 1862, he was one of the first men to start a company of black troops. He whipped his company into an outstanding unit. On May 26, 1863 they held their line for attack on Port Hudson according the New York Times, his unit and other Louisiana Native Guards fought with inner strength comparable to any Union Army regiments.<sup>27</sup>

Black soldiers suffered violence from both the Confederate and Union soldiers; black soldiers had to beg for their life in some incidents if captured by Confederate soldiers. Corporal Henry Shackelford's letter to his mother telling her about the Battle of Olustee said,

“The Yankees were giving back and on our pushing forward, pitched three Negro regiments against us, and acknowledged that they fought well. We walked over many a wooly head as we drove them back. The Yanks couldn't stand before the Georgia Boys and finally gave away and ran, our boys pursuing. We got all their artillery, 8 pieces, took about 400 prisoners and killed about the same number. How our boys did walk into the Niger's, they would beg and pray but it did no good. We drove them about five miles when a halt was ordered, we built big fires and then we did enjoy captured coffee, sugar, hams, bread and everything else. We remained about three hours in this position, and then returned to our camps “kivered” with honor and glory.”<sup>28</sup>

Confederate soldiers let their hatred for Black soldiers show by killing them on the spot. For example in Louisiana a lieutenant stated that when confederate troops attacked their outpost they had killed black soldiers, and mutilated the bodies as a warning. The next morning they were found with ears cut off and burned. Also white

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 124,128.

<sup>28</sup> Accessible Archives “The Battle of Olustee,” available from: <http://exlab1.entem.ufl.edu/olustee/letters/hshackelford.html> internet, accessed on 20 September 2006.

Union officers that commanded black troops were usually shot on the spot too.<sup>29</sup>

There were other incidents where Confederate took revenge on black soldiers. At Fort Pillow in April of 1864 a Confederate Cavalry led by General Nathan B. Forrest overran the fort. The fort had about five hundred and fifty men, most of them black, from the Sixth United States colored heavy artillery and the Second United States Colored Light artillery. One soldier tells what happened when the fort was captured. He said that the slaughter was awful, and words cannot tell what the scene was like. The Negroes would run up to their feet and drop to their knees, and with hand in the air screamed for mercy, but they were ordered to stand on their feet then shot.<sup>30</sup>

All black troops had to deal with the reality of racism, blacks did achieve some freedom. White officers that served felt that education in a free society was very important for a free society to be successful. Blacks also had a passion to learn. Soldiers knew that self improvement was the key; they took every opportunity that the army gave to them. Some units went out and hired teachers. In some units the chaplain was in charge of teaching. Most blacks made great progress in fighting illiteracy during their time in the military. By the time most black troops finished studying their reading and writing skills they surpassed most of the black population.<sup>31</sup> Some black units would hire a teacher and pay them from unit funds, and in some regular units a few white officers in black units would head educational programs. Northern benevolent associations and families of

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<sup>29</sup> Canadian Review of American Studies "Black experience in the union army: The other civil war", available from: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=11&hid=5&sid=2793322ed-ecc2-492e-bb39-4cc>. Internet accessed on 11 November 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Glatthaar, Forged in battle, 226.

white officers would provide books and blackboards.<sup>32</sup> Most of the time duties interfered with the academic schedule, but the commitment of black soldiers for self-improvement overcame all obstacles. Black units proved that fair opportunity would build their self-improvement and self-worth.<sup>33</sup> Many black veterans came together to show their pride and the achievements that they have made.

Many units held reunions after the war because their service was so important to them, but mostly the reunions were for officers. Some asked black soldiers to come. Black officers had little in common culturally with whites, and smaller contact reunions with black troops seldom happened.<sup>34</sup> Some black veterans got together and held their own reunions in the communities that they lived.

Black veterans in 1887 got together and held their first convention in Boston close to three hundred ex-soldiers, came from as far as Ohio. To give out honors to soldiers that worked hard to have black units, and to celebrate the achievements of United States Colored Troops. One of the few black officers was James Monroe Trotter who at that time was a government official. And many white ex-officers that fought at Fort Wagner showed up. On the second day a resolution was passed that the government of the country will, with every means it may process, see to that the colored soldier and his relatives or race will have equal protection of the law.

The later years for the black veterans tended to be hard for the old soldiers. Illnesses and injuries became major problems for officers and men. Most suffered from arthritis and rheumatism, and many got by on military pension for support. Some of these

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>34</sup> Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 262.

old soldiers cared for themselves in old soldiers homes in the North, but ones who lived in the South had to cope any way that they could or with the help of their relatives.

At one time it was customary for the Civil War veterans to parade down the streets with dignitaries leading the way followed by white ex-soldiers; then, bringing up the rear, would be the black ex-soldiers. They continued to do this for sixty years, as long they stayed physically able, to show and remind all Americans that they sacrificed for this country and the union, and freedom to be an American.<sup>35</sup>

The Civil War was one the worst wars in American history because no matter what side that a soldier fought on it was an American who died. For blacks it was a time to prove that they were equal to whites and the country was equally their home. Becoming a soldier and earning the opportunity to educated themselves and seek out self improvements showed racists that blacks were not inferior. The Civil War should be always remembered to show that those in bondage, if given the opportunity, can overcome their situation.

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 262.

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