

***Hidden Heroism, Black Soldiers in America's Wars*** by Robert B. Edgarton, Westview Press, Boulder Colorado, 2001 (15 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

### **1. Haiti's Independence**

The specter of armed slaves taking their revenge against white slave owners was an unceasing nightmare that grew in urgency for slave masters as word of the Haitian revolution of 1791 reached America, stunning many southerners with the news that black slaves had killed hundreds of French slave owners before setting themselves free. Haiti, then known as Saint Domingue, was by far the richest island in the West Indies, and its takeover by some 500,000 slaves, two-thirds of them African-born, was unthinkable to American slave masters, not to mention their counterparts in the West Indies. When Napoleon sent thousands of French soldiers with orders to defeat the rebels and reimpose slavery, the U.S South rejoiced only to despair again when the ingenuity and courage of the black rebels led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, Henri Christophe, and Jean J. Dessalines-with help from tropical diseases-decimated French, setting Haiti free. [p.8]

### **2. Revenge of Former Slaves**

As Russel and Olmstead suspected, the slightest sign of aggression by a slave would usually bring brutally harsh punishment. Even so, there were approximately 250 armed slave uprisings in the South, and a few in the North, most of them leading to the loss of white lives. An example occurred in New York City, where black and Indian slaves joined in revolt killing 9 whites and wounding others. In response 18 slaves were captured, tortured and hanged or burned to death. One was sentenced to be "burned with a slow fire that he may continue in torment for eight to ten hours." In Louisiana, in 1811, some 500 slaves armed themselves and rebelled, marching on New Orleans in military formation. They were met by troops who shot 60 to death and later executed another 16. In 1822, a slave in Charleston, South Carolina, divulged and alleged plan of rebellion to be led by a former slave named Denmark Vesey, who had won \$1,500 in a lottery and purchased his freedom. He had lived a respectable life for some years in Charleston before conceiving a plan to raise an army of 9,000 slaves, kill every white man, woman, and child in the city, then sail to Africa and freedom. Vesey and 36 slaves were hanged. [p.9]

### **3. Failed Rebellions Aboard Slave Ships**

Even before the slaves arrived in the New World, aboard the heavily guarded ships of various European nations, African men and women and children often joined together and despite their chains, debilitating illnesses, and near starvation overcame their heavily armed and usually vigilant guards, taking over the ships and sailing some of them back to Africa and others to parts of South America and the Caribbean, Where these Africans set up free villages, some of which survived well past the time of emancipation in the United States. All told, there were many hundreds of shipboard slave rebellions, about one for every eight to ten voyages, according to one historian.

Another historian found that despite the incredible odds against the slaves, some 20 percent of the 400 shipboard insurrections he studied in freeing all or some of the captives. Although the great majority of these rebellions failed, they did not do so because the men, women and even children fought to regain their freedom lacked courage. [p.10]

#### **4. Indentured White Servants**

While slaves were trickling into the North American colonies early in the seventeenth century, larger numbers of white indentured servants were arriving from jails and workhouses throughout Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Among them were thousands of Scottish soldiers taken prisoner by Oliver Cromwell, but the majority were common people described as “dirty, lazy, rough, ignorant, lewd, and often criminal.” So many hardened criminals were indentured to North American colonists that Benjamin Franklin sarcastically declared that the colonies should repay the mother country for her generosity in sending over every criminal short of murderers by “return shipments of rattlesnakes.” These white indentured servants either quickly worked off their period of indenture or simply moved on, often to become productive citizens in another colony, but many others barely managed to eke out a living on the vacant but infertile hill country to the west. [p. 11-12]

#### **5. Holidays Given**

Slave owners permitted excesses that would ordinarily be punished severely. But after Christmas ended, slave owners once again issued orders and slaves meekly obeyed. This pattern of annual ceremonial license did not spread throughout the Caribbean or to the U.S South although slave owners on most plantations did tend to relax their control somewhat on Sundays and Christmas. [p.14]

#### **6. Separated Families**

Although slave owners repeatedly insisted that they rarely separated slave family members by sales to other slave owners, from 1820 to 1860 every decade saw 10 percent of all slaves in the northern tier of slaveholding states sold to new masters in the Deep South, where slavery was growing in profitability. Even much earlier, it was common for slave families to be sold apart from one another. For example, James T. Woodbury, a British visitor to Washington, D.C., who wished to visit George Washington’s tomb, was guided there by an elderly black man who had long served travelers in this way:

This old man was formerly the slave of General Washington. Mr. Woodbury asked him if he had any children. “I have had a large family,” he replied. “And are they living?” inquired the gentleman. The voice of the aged father trembled with emotion, and tears started to his eye, as he answered: “I don’t know whether they are alive or dead. They were all sold away from me, and I don’t know what became of them. I am alone in this world, without a child to bring me a cup of water in my old age.” Mr. Woodbury looked

on the infirm and solitary being with feelings of deep compassion. “And this,” thought he “is the fate of slaves, even when owned by such a good man as General Washington! Who would not be an Abolitionist?” [p.14-15]

## **7. Denying the Vote**

In 1840, 93 percent of the free blacks in the North were denied voting rights. What is more, terrible mob violence against blacks took place in several northern cities, such as Philadelphia and Cincinnati. The attacks in Cincinnati were so brutal that half of the city’s 2,200 black inhabitants immigrated to Canada, where they founded the town of Wilberforce, Ontario. While all of this racial separation and hatred was taking place in the North, blacks’ staunchest advocates, the so called abolitionists, surprisingly continued to accept the racist stereotype that people of African descent were mild, gentle, and tranquil-“the mildest and gentlest of men”-not at all like the whites who oppressed them. And few white northerners advocated racial equality. [p.24]

## **8. The “Colored” Troops**

After Lincoln reluctantly made his Emancipation Proclamation and it was finally implemented, 180,000 black volunteers would serve in racially segregated combat units of the Federal Army known as “United States Colored Troops.” Over 144,000 of these men came from slave states. [p.26]

## **9. Once Freed, National Pride**

One of the first regiments of former slaves actually to be mustered into the Federal Army, and, as we have seen, the first one to see combat, was the 1<sup>st</sup> South Carolina Volunteers, all of whom were illiterate and only one in ten of them showed any sign of white ancestry. Soon after their first battle, they came under the command of white colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a staunch abolitionist and former friend of John Brown, who had spent ten years at Harvard, where he excelled in mathematics, mastered five languages and became a clergyman before entering the army, originally commanding white recruits. When these men from South Carolina’s remote Sea Islands had been properly uniformed, they were formally welcomed into the Union Army by several officials, one of whom read the Emancipation Proclamation and dramatically declared them free men. They spontaneously responded by singing “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee.” Higginson was so profoundly moved by this beautifully rendered declaration of patriotism that he soon after wrote, “I never saw anything so electric; it made all other words cheap; it seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed.” [p.28]

## **10. Valiant Soldiers**

Many of Higginson’s former slave soldiers had been whipped by their masters when they sang with joy after Lincoln’s election, but now they were free to sing what they liked every night after training and many did so with gusto. While some of them sang and danced all night, most sat sedately talking, smoking, and cleaning their weapons.

Others attended a school organized by the regiments chaplain, and some men who sought out education proved to be truly gifted. Many soldiers probably enjoyed gambling but Higginson did not report it. When it came time for these black soldiers to go into battle, they proved themselves to be remarkably alert sentries as well as brave, clever soldiers who used deception well and ignored minor wounds. Higginson found them more excitable than white troops but equally brave, concluding, “It was their demeanor under arms that shamed the nation into recognizing them as men, many North and all but a few South emphatically still did not. [p.29]

### **11. Most Were Young Men Seeking Freedom**

In the period just preceding the war, about 50,000 slaves each year fled from their plantations. Many did so in search of their wives and children after they had been sold to a new owner, but others simply sought freedom. Most of the runaways were young men, and they were often helped by older women like Tubman. [p.36]

### **12. Black Regiment Entered Richmond**

When Richmond finally fell to Union Forces, over 12 percent of whom were black, the black 5<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Calvary was given the honor of being one of the first three regiments to enter the city:

Richmond Negroes were beside themselves with joy. Here on horseback and afoot were men of color, in neat blue uniforms, their shoulders erect, their heads high, their eyes confident. The black admirers ran along the sidewalks to keep up with the moving column, not wishing to let this incredible spectacle move out of sight. In acknowledgment of their reception the Negro cavalymen rose high in their stirrups and waved their swords. The cheers were deafening. [p.38]

### **13. The Myth of Black Cowardice**

After returning to the South, some veteran white soldiers who fought in Cuba protected black soldiers against white insults and violence, but many other white soldiers who had not fought in Cuba joined local whites in hurling insults at the “heroic” black veterans who had “saved” Teddy Roosevelt and others. Others actually attacked them, killing some without facing arrest. Blacks in the South welcomed the returning black soldiers with great pride, but one black Georgian correctly concluded that “the Negro’s valor has *intensified* prejudice against him.” The more that newspapers praised these men, the more white southerners were determined to assert their everlasting supremacy. The South’s cherished myth of black cowardice was not to be questioned, much less dramatically demolished. [p.54]

### **14. A Threat to White Dominance**

Between the end of reconstruction and the Spanish-America War, the South was searching for a solution to its “race problem” and there were southern liberals as well as a few oases of tolerance such as New Orleans, but by 1900, blatant white supremacy

was the rule everywhere, and poor whites in particular were determined to enforce it. The valor displayed by black soldiers in Cuba was widely seen as a direct threat to the dominance of these white people. [p.55]

### **15. Booker T Washington Going to White House Causes Great Ire**

In 1901, when he invited the elegant scholar Booker T. Washington to dine with him at the White House, the southern press, including many of its most influential newspapers, exploded in outrage. The *Atlanta Constitution* ran a cartoon of Roosevelt “cuddled up with a pop-eyed Negro wearing the traditional minstrel show costume of huge collar, gaudy shirt, speckled spats.” Not to be outdone by others who exploded with indignation, South Carolina Senator “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman who was quoted saying, “The action of President Roosevelt in entertaining that nigger will necessitate our killing a thousand niggers in the South before they will learn their place again.” [p.56]