

## PREFACE

Until now, the valor of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw's Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, the first black regiment raised in the North, has overshadowed the service of the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry. The Fifty-fourth's charge across an open beach against a fortified enemy was instrumental in bringing about acceptance of African Americans as soldiers. Interestingly, the Fifth Massachusetts did make an assault across open ground against Rebel works, in Petersburg, Virginia. Perhaps from a historical viewpoint the regiment was "unlucky" in only suffering a few casualties. A grateful citizenry usually puts monuments up for dead heroes, not those who survive combat.

With the exception of the African-American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C., there is no monument for the officers and men of the third black regiment raised in Massachusetts, the Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry. Only stark gravestones in Virginia, Maryland, and Texas stand to mark the regiment's passing. A history of the Fifth Massachusetts has never been written. *Riders in the Storm: The Triumphs and Tragedies of a Black Cavalry Regiment in the Civil War* is about the only African American regiment of cavalry raised in the northern states during the Civil War. This black regiment of cavalry was officered by some of the scions of the first families of Massachusetts. The story of this alliance between black enlisted men and white officers, their recruitment, training, and combat, deserves to be told after more than a hundred years of silence.

This book is about one of only four African American regiments to retain its state designation. That state designation was important to Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew because he did not want his black cavalry regiment to be "United States Colored

Troops.” Andrew wanted the state that had made history with African American infantry regiments (the Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Infantry Volunteers) to carry the social experiment further: black men in uniform on horseback. When Governor Andrew wrote to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton proposing the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry he referred to the Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Infantry Regiments: “They are known on our books and rolls and orders only by their numbers and their arm of service, and not by their color.”

In fact, the designation of the regiment is only partially accurate; most of the men were not from the Bay State, and when the regiment reached the “seat of war,” as the area of operations was called then, through no fault of its own its horses were taken away. The regiment fought dismounted in the spring of 1864, taking part in the fighting leading up to the siege of Petersburg. At one point the Fifth Massachusetts was part of the XXV Army Corps. Comprised of black soldiers from twenty-two regiments separated into two divisions of seven brigades, the XXV Army Corps numbered some twenty thousand men, had a major general in command, its own artillery and cavalry units; Corps, division and headquarters flags and a unit patch. After participating in the early part of the siege of Petersburg the regiment was assigned to the prison camp at Point Lookout, Maryland. Confederate prisoners guarded by the Fifth Massachusetts kept several diaries. The Confederates’ reactions, as recorded in these diaries, range from rage that blacks could be soldiers, let alone cavalrymen, which was seen as an elite branch of the service; to disbelief and the unfounded hope that somehow these black soldiers were still loyal and respectful to their old “masters.”

During the last weeks of the war the regiment, mounted at last, took the field in the campaign leading up to the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. The Fifth Massachusetts was one of the first units to enter Richmond when that city fell to Union forces on 3 April 1865. Retreating Confederates had set fire to supplies to deny them to the enemy; the resulting fire spread and destroyed a great deal of the city. Amidst the devastated capital of the defeated South, the Fifth Massachusetts and other African-American troops of the XXV Army Corps were greeted as saviors and avenging angels by members of their newly freed race.

After the war, instead of the Grand Review and rapid demobilization that was accorded white units, the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry, as part of the Cavalry Brigade of the XXV Army Corps, was sent to Texas to encourage French troops occupying Mexico to leave that country and to prevent any Confederate units from escaping over the border and "coming back to fight another day." While in Texas morale deteriorated because the men felt they were being subjected to excessive fatigue duty and unhealthy living conditions. Several of the officers resigned, apparently feeling that they had done their part. This option was not available to the enlisted men. Toward the end of their sojourn in Texas Brevet Brigadier General Samuel E. Chamberlain, formerly of the First Massachusetts Cavalry, took command of the regiment and helped restore its pride and discipline. The Fifth Massachusetts finally took ship for Boston at the end of October 1865 and was paid off and mustered out some seven months after the end of the war.

What happened to the officers and men after the regiment was mustered out? Some of the former members of the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry became famous, like Lt. Daniel Chamberlain, who was elected Republican ("carpetbag") Governor of South Carolina in

1874 and Charles Francis Adams, Jr., who had been colonel of the regiment, who wrote history. Others quietly got on with their lives. They joined the segregated Grand Army of the Republic, they remembered fallen comrades and marched on Memorial Day. They were justifiably proud of having participated in one of the great chapters in American history. These men persevered; they proved themselves. They showed great courage and resolution and then they were largely forgotten.

We think of the Civil War as a great opportunity for study because so many of the participants were literate; censorship did not exist and because so much paper was saved. People knew they were living through momentous times, making history. The ones who lived sought to make sense of what they had lived through; those who were left behind kept letters and diaries as talismans of memory, for The Fallen.

The Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry was dramatically different than other regiments raised in the small towns of the Bay State, regiments filled with men related to each other by marriage or blood, who had grown up together who had known each other all their lives. This book seeks to understand what these men, black and white, previously unknown to each other, went through together.

We know that Massachusetts outsourced its troop quotas by sending recruiters out of state and even out of the country. In 1863 and 1864 state recruiting agents were sent to the Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic States and the occupied South to specifically recruit African Americans for the Union Army. High bounties (signing bonuses) were promised. We know that the majority of these soldiers were illiterate. Of the thousand or so troopers who entrained for Virginia in 1864 over eight hundred of them had to “make their mark” rather than sign their name.

We do have some letters from troopers in the regiment: from Frederick Douglass' son, First Sergeant Charles Douglass, from Trooper Charles Beman and from an anonymous trooper writing to the *Weekly Anglo-African* who used the pen-name "Africano." We also have a fair amount of carefully preserved letters written by white officers from the Bay State. There are newspaper accounts and official records. But we do not have the caches of letters and diaries associated with other regiments; the layers of eyewitness accounts that make the Civil War such a rich field to explore. Instead, we use the sources available to us as a guide to imagine the men's hopes and dreams and motivations, and yes, their courage and commitment.

If, through some magic, we could interview the troopers and officers of the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry, I believe the most important question we could ask these men, now long dead, was why did they serve? Why did they join the United States Army in the midst of the Rebellion, as Northerners called it? What did they think of their experiences? The natural follow-up question would be, "Was it worth it?" True, the answers might vary as much as the individuals who gave them. But the war in 1863 was brutally different than the one that broke out in April of 1861. This was a fight to the finish, an existential contest far removed from the days of ninety day regiments in clean uniforms. These men were all volunteers. Did they know what they were getting into? A few of the white officers did. Colonel Henry Sturgis Russell had been in it from the beginning and seen heavy fighting. In some, no doubt, the fires of patriotism burned high. They were filled with idealism and felt a mystic connection to the concepts of freedom and democracy, liberty and union. These men agreed with Lincoln that the United States was

the last best hope for man on earth and worth dying for. That patriotism is even more commendable as it existed after years of murderous blunders, corruption and waste.

There were abolitionists who served; well educated, affluent officers usually. For them serving with African Americans was an opportunity to right a terrible wrong done to fellow human beings, to blot out the national sin. Radical abolitionists all had a millenarian streak, to some degree. Some believed with John Brown that the “crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood.” These men recognized the images from the Book of Revelation in the Battle Hymn of the Republic and concurred with Julia Ward Howe that a fiery sword would bring God’s redemptive grace.

There were economic incentives for both officers and enlisted. “A dollar a day is a white man’s pay,” a common saying in the 1860’s, gives an idea of how little white laborers earned. How enormous a bounty of several hundred dollars must have seemed! If you are poor enough, you will take another man’s money to risk your life for his. If you are poor enough, regular meals; a pair of shoes; a government provided suit of clothes might seem like a good bargain for that risk. Prior enlisted white soldiers had a chance to become officers and gentlemen. Some of the officers were new to America. If you are a recent immigrant, putting on a uniform may be a way of being accepted by the earlier immigrants. One immigrant group, despised by the earlier arrivals who viewed them as dirty, violent, dangerously fecund illiterates under the sway of a foreign power (the Pope), formed whole regiments who received extreme unction as they went forward to the slaughter. Those who survived had indisputably earned a place at the table. There may have been a social stigma attached to serving in a black regiment, but the chance to go from corporal to captain might make up for that. And besides, the Fifth Massachusetts

was a cavalry regiment, the elite units of the day. Cavalrymen were the fighter pilots of the nineteenth century: expected to show initiative; to be scouts, the “eyes of the army;” to make destructive raids into enemy territory; to make earth-pounding, sabre-wielding charges with great élan. A sponsoring government needed a massive commitment in time and resources to mount, equip and train the twelve hundred men that made up a regiment of cavalry.

We can understand how the motivations mentioned above would lead a young man to volunteer for the Fifth Massachusetts. There is one more set of circumstances that must always be remembered when we try to get into the heads and hearts of the African American troopers.

Consider: In 1861 a black man, born in the United States, with few exceptions, was deprived of the right to marry; to rear a family; to own property; to give or receive gifts; to earn a living, learn a trade, receive an education; to purchase his own freedom or that of his family. He was further forbidden to enter into contracts; to use the courts; to assemble; to speak freely; to worship; to vote; to bear arms; to travel without hindrance or harassment; to simply ensure the physical inviolability of his person or that of his family. The Supreme Court had ruled that despite being an American, he would never be a citizen.

Yet, by the winter of 1863, when Governor Andrew won authorization for the Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry and began recruiting, life for African Americans had changed. A previously ostracized, marginalized, barely tolerated race, whether north or south of the Mason-Dixon Line had proven themselves as combat troops. Black men were being accosted, sidled up to, invited to meetings, and addressed with courtesy.

“How would you like an expenses–paid trip to Philadelphia, to Washington, D.C., to Boston, Massachusetts? Would several hundred dollars in bounty interest you? Rest assured, your families will be taken care of.” In return, black men had the opportunity to free their race, to fight their oppressors, to fight for liberty. In so doing, they also to embarked on a journey as much of self-discovery as it was of serving their country. Certainly, African Americans knew that there was expediency in the promises that the government made – some promises would be kept and some would not. Racial prejudice was not going to disappear overnight because the Republic desperately needed the contributions of African Americans. For instance, the Union Army, indeed, American society, was willing to allow African Americans to become soldiers, but would not consider - could not even conceive of - taking orders from a black officer. This was why the handful of African Americans who became officers in the Civil War were either chaplains, recruiting officers or in black units. A black man with authority over whites was unthinkable. This was part of the subconscious, pervasive, corrosive, nature of racism in the United States. But other promises were kept: To wear the uniform of the United States and to be treated with dignity as soldiers, of equal pay, of use in combat rather than as labor or support troops, to serve as cavalry troopers – that is the story of the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry: a thousand men, more or less, white and black, enlisted and officer, Boston Brahmin and former slave who made their way from all over the country to Camp Meigs, Readville, Massachusetts in the winter of 1863.