



## Louisiana Native Guards



### Native Guards

*“God knows the place is bad enough, but not equal to this dismal looking sketch.”*

*Colonel Nathan W. Daniels,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment Louisiana Native Guards,  
Describing photograph of Ship Island*

In 1861, the state of Louisiana created a militia regiment for “free men of color” to help defend New Orleans against Union attack. Companies were organized and officers chosen to lead one-thousand African-American men. They were called **Native Guards**.

### Tradition

Louisiana’s free black families possessed a military tradition long before the 1860’s. In colonial times, a society of craftsmen, tradesmen and plantation owners had evolved. Free men of color historically answered calls to arms under both Spanish and French control. The tradition continued under

American control with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. In 1815, these African-Americans stood alongside General Andrew Jackson’s pirates, white militia-men and U.S. Army regulars to stop this country’s last major invasion by a foreign power—The War of 1812’s Battle of New Orleans.

### Guards Organize

*“If it comes at all imminent I shall call upon Africa to interfere and I do not think I shall call in vain.”*

*General Benjamin Butler,  
Department of the Gulf, 1862*

The Native Guards of 1861 were denied a chance to defend their city. Perhaps lacking confidence in their loyalty, state authorities nullified the regiment. Louisiana’s governor called the regiment back in August 1862, but it was too late. New Orleans had

surrendered to Federal forces.

Fearful of counter-attack. General Benjamin Butler sought to organize pro-Union militia units of both white and black locals. One hundred former Guardsmen, other free-men-of-color and runaway slaves answered Butler’s call. Five regiments were created, making these 5,000 soldiers among the first African-Americans to enlist in the Civil War. Surprisingly, the first three regiments had large numbers of black officers.

### Mixed Feelings

Union generals welcomed additional manpower, but feelings among white soldiers were at worst, deeply prejudiced. Soldiers and officers felt that the Native Guards could not accept discipline or stand in a fight against Confederates troops.

White commanders were assigned to lead the regiments, but this did not stop the distrust of black soldiers. White soldiers refused to drill beside black troops. The presence of African-American army officers evoked epithets from white officers.

### Proud Men

*Thank God my Regiment an African one, that I have been permitted to assemble them under the banner of freedom to do and die for their country & liberty—The 2<sup>nd</sup> Louisiana Regiment of Native Guards will yet have a name in history.*

*Colonel Nathan W. Daniels,  
Commanding officer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment*

An ardent abolitionist from New York and Ohio, the colonel of the 2nd Regiment, Colonel Nathan Daniels had lived in Louisiana before the war. Following service in the Army of the Ohio, Daniels returned to New Orleans. He ached to prove his new regiment’s worth in battle.

One notable African-American officer was Major Francis E. Dumas. A refined, educated plantation owner, Dumas spoke five languages.

Enlisting one hundred of his own slaves into a Native Guards company, Major Dumas called upon them to “...break the bonds of their fellow men.” Dumas was the highest ranking non-white commissioned officer to see combat during the war.

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## Ship Island

Despite a promising start, a new general arrived in December, 1862. Wary, General Nathaniel P. Banks ordered black troops to remote forts. Three companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment left for Fort Pike outside New Orleans. The other seven hundred men boarded a ship to Ship Island.

*Monday, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1863  
Came to Ship Island, Miss.—Took command of Post, relieving Col Rust of the 13<sup>th</sup> Maine Vol, a dreary desolate sandbar. Brought seven companies of my Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> La N.G. Volunteers, found two companies of 13<sup>th</sup> Maine stationed here”*

*Colonel Nathan W.  
Daniels, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment*

Ship Island’s strategic importance was obvious early in the war. Confederates off and on

occupied the partially built fort. After leaving in late 1861, U.S. sailors and marines landed afterwards.

From this new base, Union warships, patrolled from Texas to Florida searching for Confederate ships. In 1862, Union forces assembled at Ship Island before moving against New Orleans.

While recognizing its importance, Colonel Daniels was not impressed with Ship Island. One half mile wide and seven miles long, a desert-like vista greeted the Second Regiment upon its arrival.

Drill and work details were the routine. Guardsmen dug cannon emplacements, helped build the fort and guarded military convicts and suspected spies.

Boredom was punctuated by rumors of enemy warships steaming towards the island. All night alerts gave way at dawn to more drill and details.

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## Pascagoula Raid

On April 9, 1863, Colonel Daniels received orders to land at Pascagoula, Mississippi. Believing this was to divert enemy troops from Charleston, South Carolina, Daniels and 180 men sailed for Pascagoula.

*We had hardly thrown out Pickets when the lookout gave the alarm that The Confederate Cavalry were coming down upon us. I myself saw them from The Cupola of The Hotel coming down the Mobile Road in heavy force with banners waving, cutlass’s flailing, evidently intending to make an immediate attack.*

*Colonel Nathan W. Daniels,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment*

Landing at 9:00 A.M., Guardsmen held the town until 2:00 P.M. Daniels writes that his men fought intelligently, repulsing several attacks. Special mention was written of Major Dumas’ bravery.

As more enemy approached, a withdrawal was ordered. The day’s darkest moment then erupted when a cannon shell exploded among retreating troops. Daniels felt it was intentional due to an earlier quarrel on Ship Island between Guardsmen and sailors of the *U.S.S. Jackson*, the warship supporting the retreating Guardsmen at Pascagoula.

Daniels felt the Pascagoula Raid was successful. Only two men were lost to enemy fire. Six more died from the *Jackson’s* errant shellfire.

Newspaper accounts electrified citizenry back in New Orleans. While small in scale, the Pascagoula raid was the first successful use of black troops in the Department of the Gulf.

Months later, the 2<sup>nd</sup>’s fellow regiments, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Louisiana Native Guards, fought at Port Hudson, located on the Mississippi River, further proving the value of black troops to the Union.

The actions of the Native Guard regiments helped clear the way for nearly 180,000 African-American troops to eventually serve in the Union Army. As for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Louisiana, Colonel Daniels wrote they were eager to return to battle.

Instead, Nathan Daniels was removed from his command to face court-martial. Charges included inappropriate use of government property. Daniels had used heavy timbers delivered for the fort’s construction to instead build artillery emplacements amid the sand dunes. He thought it expedient in the face of possible attack. Daniels would resign five months later before his trial commenced.

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## War’s End and Beyond

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment would never fight again as a unit. Still skeptical, General Banks ordered a review of all black officers. By mid-1863, most were replaced by white officers. The regiment became in June 1863 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, *Corps de Afrique*; and then reorganized again as the 74<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry (U.S.C.I.) in April of 1864.

In August 1864, 15,000 Union soldiers sailed east from Ship Island to participate in the Battle of Mobile Bay. Companies G, H, and I of the 74<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.I followed to assist in the final attack against Fort Morgan, but the fort surrendered before their arrival. The three companies returned to Ship Island and the dull, isolated routine of drills and work details.

An additional duty in late 1864 was the guarding of Confederate prisoners-of-war. Located one-and-a-half miles from the fort, the camp’s population rose and fell from several hundred to over 3000.

At the war’s end, the last Confederate prisoners were quickly dispersed and sent home. The 74<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.I, which had landed 33 months earlier as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment Louisiana Native Guards, disbanded and left Ship Island forever.

In 1870, the last United States Colored Troops to garrison Ship Island, the 25<sup>th</sup> regiment, left for San Antonio, Texas—to become known as one of the famous “Buffalo Soldier” regiments of the old West.

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## Lasting Legacy

*“...the only time in my life I have felt anything like Patriotism,”*

*Captain Pinkney B.S. Pinchback,  
Company Commander, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment  
Fort Pike, Louisiana*

The Native Guards of the 1860’s helped pave the way for black troops to serve in today’s United States military. Many returned to New Orleans and became involved in early efforts at gaining civil rights—including the right to vote.

Captain Pinkney B.S. Pinchback, while not at Ship Island, became Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana for a short period. Supposedly the wealthiest African-American in the state at that time, Major Francis Dumas came close to being elected governor during Reconstruction.

Ship Island and Fort Massachusetts are today protected within Gulf Islands National Seashore. For information about ferry boat fees and schedules, call 228 875-9057.