

Fort Davis

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Desertion in the African-American Regiments During the Frontier Indian Wars

The success and effectiveness of African-American enlisted men during the frontier Indian Wars was in part a result of the training, leadership, equipment and experience provided by the Regular Army. It was also due to the determination to succeed of the black recruits who enlisted in the army.

An Act of Congress of July 28, 1866 authorized two black cavalry and four black infantry regiments as part of the Regular Army. Recruiting for the new regiments, which were considered by the army as somewhat of an experiment, began in the fall of 1866 and special attention was given to the caliber of men selected. Solicited first were personnel of the U. S. Colored Troops, blacks who fought in the Union Army. New recruits came from the ranks of these volunteers from the New Orleans area, the fringes of the southern states, and from large northeastern cities like Boston and New York.

Benjamin H. Grierson, Colonel of the Tenth U. S. Cavalry, was especially concerned with enlisting men who demonstrated initiative and a keen desire to learn. He sought men who possessed a sense of self-esteem and who would "do credit to the regiment." Recruits in the Tenth as well as in the other black regiments were raw, and few had any expertise that qualified them for military service. Many could not read or write. Grierson and the other regimental commanders of African-American troops, however, achieved a measure of success. The men they enlisted had one essential quality necessary for becoming soldiers – they had the desire to succeed.

Social advancement and economic independence were principal motives for black enlistments throughout the Indian Wars. The Regular Army offered African Americans a chance to better themselves in post-Civil War society, which legally recognized their rights as free men but did little to protect their status as citizens or to insure them a chance at "the good life." The fortitude to be "somebody" led blacks to enlist in large numbers. It was this same persistence that spurred them to stay in the army once they had enlisted.

Desertion was the single most serious problem of the late 19th-century army. In 1891, Secretary of War Stephen B. Elkins estimated that one-third of the men recruited into the army between 1867 and 1891 deserted. Only a small percentage of this figure, however, was from the ranks of the black regiments. In 1868, out of the army's 10,939 deserters, only 394 were blacks. As African Americans represented approximately one-ninth of the total strength of the army, these figures reflect a ratio of one to three. Desertions in the white regiments were roughly three times greater than among black enlisted men.

In the Southwest, the desertion rate appears to have been far below the national average. The black regiments boasted desertion rates lower than other regiments on the frontier. The Tenth Cavalry in 1877 had a total of 18 desertions as compared with 184 for Colonel Ranald Mackenzie's Fourth Cavalry. In 1880, despite the hardships of the Victorio Campaign, the Tenth Cavalry reported only 5 desertions. The regiment had the best record of any unit in the country. From 1867 to 1881, the years Fort Davis was manned exclusively by black enlisted men, the average desertion rate at the post was slightly more than six men per year.

African-American recruits faced the same hardships as their white counterparts. Low pay (\$13.00 per month for a private), loneliness, and boredom were common conditions endured by all soldiers on the frontier. An army investigation disclosed that the use of liquor and general dissatisfaction with army life were two of the major reasons for desertions. Nonetheless, in the face of such obstacles, the black soldiers admirably resisted the temptation to desert. They were more content in the army than their white comrades and consequently drunkenness was lower than in white regiments.

African Americans joined the army for some of the same reasons whites enlisted. Ironically though, whites deserted for some of the same reasons blacks remained. The desire to better oneself after receiving a free ticket to the West was a common cause of desertion among white enlisted men. Conversely, black regulars were proud of their occupations as soldiers. To desert would necessitate a drop in status to a socially unacceptable position.

Generally the African-American enlisted men who served in the Indian Wars Army enjoyed being soldiers. They were proud of their profession and proud to play a part in bringing peace to the American frontier. Their desertion record is one that often is overlooked in the annals of military achievements, yet it is one that serves to strengthen their accomplishments and to give added dignity to their service.