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Soldiers' and Sailors' Historical Society  
OF RHODE ISLAND.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES:  
Third Series, No. 13.

Reminiscences of Service with Colored Troops in  
the Army of the Cumberland, 1863-65.

THOMAS J. MORGAN.



PERSONAL NARRATIVES  
OF EVENTS IN THE  
WAR OF THE REBELLION,  
BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE  
RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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REMINISCENCES OF SERVICE  
WITH  
COLORED TROOPS  
IN THE  
ARMY OF THE CUMBERLAND,  
1863-65.

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BY  
THOMAS J. MORGAN,  
[Late Colonel 14th U. S. Colored Infantry, Brevet Brigadier General U. S. V.]

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## REMINISCENCES OF SERVICE WITH COLORED TROOPS.

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THE American civil war, 1861-5, marks an epoch not only in the history of America, but in that of democracy and of civilization. Its issue has vitally affected the course of human progress. To the student of history it ranks in interest along with the conquests of Alexander, the incursions of the Barbarians, the Crusades, the discovery of America, and the American Revolution. It settled the question of our national unity with all the consequences attaching thereto, the power and perpetuity of a republic, and not only enfranchised four millions of American slaves of African descent, but made slavery forever impossible in the great republic, and gave a new impulse to the cause of human freedom. Its influence upon American slaves was immediate and startlingly revolutionary, lifting them from the con-

dition of despised chattels, bought and sold like sheep in the market, with no rights which the white man was bound to respect, to the exalted plane of American citizenship, making them free men, the peers in every civil and political right of their late masters. Within about a decade after the close of the war, negroes — lately slaves — were legislators, State officers, members of Congress, and for a brief time one presided over the Senate of the United States, where only a few years before Toombs had boasted that he would yet call the roll of his slaves in the shade of Bunker Hill.

To-day slavery finds no advocate, and the colored race in America is making steady progress in all the elements of civilization. The conduct of the American slave, during and since the war, has wrought an extraordinary change in public sentiment regarding the capabilities of the race. The manly qualities of the negro soldiers evinced in camp, on the march and in battle, won for them golden opinions and made their freedom a necessity, and their citizenship a certainty. Those of us who assisted in organizing, disciplining and leading negro troops in battle, may be

pardoned for feeling a good degree of pride in our share of the thrilling events of the great war.

When Sumter was fired upon, April, 1861, I was a boy of twenty-one, a member of the senior class in Franklin College, Indiana. I enlisted in the Seventh Indiana Volunteer Infantry, and served as a private soldier for three months in West Virginia under General McClellan—"the young Napoleon," as he was even then known. I participated in the battle of Carrick's Ford, where General Garnett was killed and his army defeated. In August, 1862, I reënlisted as a first lieutenant in the Seventieth Indiana (Colonel Benjamin Harrison), and saw service in Kentucky and Tennessee.

In January, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the proclamation of emancipation, and incorporated in it the policy of arming the negro for special service in the Union army. Thus the question was fairly up, and I entered into its discussion with the deepest interest, as I saw that upon its settlement hung great issues.

On the one hand, the opponents of the policy maintained that to make soldiers of the negroes

would be to put them on the same level with white soldiers, and so be an insult to every man who wore the blue. It was contended, too, that the negro was not fit for a soldier because he belonged to a degraded, inferior race, wanting in soldierly qualities; that his long bondage had crushed out whatever of manliness he might naturally possess; that he was too grossly ignorant to perform intelligently the duties of the soldier; that his provocation had been so great as a slave that when once armed and conscious of his power as a soldier, he would abuse it by acts of revenge and wanton cruelty.

On the other hand, it was urged that in its fearful struggle for existence, the republic needed the help of the able-bodied negroes; that with their natural instincts of self-preservation, desire for liberty, habit of obedience, power of imitation, love of pomp and parade, acquaintance with the southern country and adaptation to its climate, they had elements which peculiarly fitted them for soldiers. It was further urged that the negro had more at stake than the white man, and that he should have a chance to strike a blow for himself. It was particularly in-

sisted upon that he needed just the opportunity which army service afforded to develop and exhibit whatever of manliness he possessed.

As the war progressed, and each great battle-field was piled with heaps of the killed and wounded of our best citizens, men looked at each other seriously, and asked if a black man would not stop a bullet as well as a white man? Miles O'Reilly at length voiced a popular sentiment when he said :

“The right to be killed, I'll divide with the nayer,  
And give him the largest half.”

With the strong conviction that the negro was a man worthy of freedom, and possessed of all the essential qualities of a good soldier, I early advocated the organization of colored regiments,—not for fatigue or garrison duty, but for field service. In October, 1863, having applied for a position in the colored service, I was ordered before the Board of Examiners at Nashville, where I spent five rather anxious hours. When I entered the army, I knew absolutely nothing of the details of army life, had never even drilled with a fire company. During the

first three months I gathered little except a somewhat rough miscellaneous experience. As a lieutenant and staff officer I learned something, but as I never had at any time systematic instruction from anybody, I appeared before the Board with little else than vigorous health, a college education, a little experience as a soldier, a good reputation as an officer, a fair amount of common sense, and a good supply of zeal. The Board averaged me, and recommended me for a Major.

A few days after the examination I received an order to report to Major George L. Stearns, who had charge of the organization of colored troops in that department. He assigned me to duty temporarily in a camp at Nashville. Major Stearns was a merchant in Boston who had been for years an ardent abolitionist, and who, among other good deeds, had befriended John Brown. He was a large-hearted, broad-minded, genial gentleman. When the policy of organizing colored troops was adopted, he offered his services to the government, received an appointment as Assistant Adjutant General, and was ordered to Nashville to organize colored regiments. He

acted directly under the Secretary of War, and independently of the Department Commander. To his zeal, good judgment and efficient labor, was largely due the success of the work in the West.

November 1, 1863, by order of Major Stearns, I went to Gallatin, Tennessee, to organize the Fourteenth United States Colored Infantry. General E. A. Paine was then in command of the post at Gallatin, having under him a small detachment of white troops. There were at that time several hundred negro men in camp, in charge of, I think, a lieutenant. They were a motley crowd—old, young, middle-aged. Some wore the United States uniform, but most of them had on the clothes in which they had left the plantations, or had worn during periods of hard service as laborers in the army. Gallatin at that time was threatened with an attack by the guerrilla bands then prowling over that part of the State. General Paine had issued a hundred old muskets and rifles to the negroes in camp. They had not passed a medical examination, had no company organization, and had had no drill. Almost immediately upon my arrival, as an attack was immi-

ment, I was ordered to distribute another hundred muskets, and to "prepare every available man for fight." I did the best I could under the circumstances, but am free to say that I regard it as a fortunate circumstance that we had no fighting to do at that time. But the men, raw and untutored as they were, did guard and picket duty, went foraging, guarded wagon trains, scouted after guerrillas, and so learned to soldier by soldiering.

As soon and as fast as practicable I set about organizing the regiment. I was a complete novice in that kind of work, and all the young officers who reported to me for service had been promoted from the ranks, and were without experience except as soldiers. The colored men knew nothing of the duties of a soldier, except the little they had picked up as camp followers. Fortunately there was one man, a Mr. A. H. Dunlap, who had had some clerical experience with Colonel Birney, in Baltimore, in organizing the Third United States Colored Infantry. He was an intelligent, methodical gentleman, and rendered me invaluable service. I had no quartermaster, no surgeon, no adjutant. We had no tents,

and the men were sheltered in an old, filthy tobacco warehouse, where they fiddled, danced, sang, swore or prayed, according to their mood.

How to meet the daily demands made upon us for military duty, and at the same time to evoke order out of this chaos, was no easy problem. The first thing to be done was to examine the men. A room was prepared, and I and my clerk took our stations at a table. One by one the recruits came before us *a la Eden, sans* the fig leaves, and were subjected to a careful medical examination, those who were in any way physically disqualified being rejected. Many bore the wounds and bruises of the slave-driver's lash, and many were unfit for duty by reason of some form of disease to which human flesh is heir. In the course of a few weeks, however, we had a thousand able-bodied, stalwart men.

I was quite as solicitous about their mental condition as about their physical status, so I plied them with questions as to their history, their experience with the army, their motives for becoming soldiers, their ideas of army life, their hopes for the future, etc., etc. I found that a considerable number of

them had been teamsters, cooks, officers' servants, etc., and had thus seen a good deal of hard service in both armies, in camp, on the march, and in battle, and so knew pretty well what to expect. In this respect they had the advantage of most raw recruits from the North, who were wholly "unused to war's alarms." Some of them had very noble ideas of manliness. I remember picturing to one bright-eyed fellow the hardships of camp life and campaigning, and receiving from him the cheerful answer: "I know all about that." I then said: "You may be killed in battle." He instantly replied: "Many a better man than me has been killed in this war." When I told another one who wanted to "fight for freedom," that he might lose his life, he replied: "But my people will be free."

The result of this careful examination convinced me that these men, though black in skin, had men's hearts, and only needed right handling to develop into magnificent soldiers. Among them were the same varieties of physique, temperament, mental and moral endowments and experiences as would be found among the same number of white men. Some

of them were finely formed and powerful, some were almost white, a large number had in their veins white blood of the F. F. V. quality, some were men of intelligence, and many of them deeply religious.

Acting upon my clerk's suggestion, I assigned them to companies according to height, putting men of nearly the same height together. When the regiment was full, the four centre companies were all composed of tall men, the flanking companies of men of medium size, while the little men were sandwiched between. The effect was excellent in every way, and made the regiment quite unique. It was not uncommon to have strangers, who saw it on parade for the first time, declare that the men were all of one size.

In six weeks three companies were filled, uniformed, armed, and had been taught many soldierly ways. They had been drilled in the facings, in the manual of arms, and in some company movements.

November twentieth, General George H. Thomas, commanding the Department of the Cumberland, ordered six companies to Bridgeport, Alabama, under command of Major H. C. Corbin. I was left

at Gallatin to complete the organization of the other four companies. When the six companies were full, I was mustered in as Lieutenant Colonel. The complete organization of the regiment occupied about two months, being finished by January 1, 1864. The field, staff and company officers were all white men. All the non-commissioned officers, hospital steward, quartermaster sergeant, sergeant major, orderlies, sergeants and corporals were colored. They proved very efficient, and had the war continued two years longer, many of them would have been competent as commissioned officers.

When General Paine left Gallatin, I was senior officer and had command of the post and garrison, which included a few white soldiers, besides my own troops. Colored soldiers acted as pickets, and no citizen was allowed to pass our lines, either into the village or out, without a proper permit. Those presenting themselves without a pass were sent to headquarters under guard. Thus many proud southern slaveholders found themselves marched through the streets guarded by those who three months before had been slaves. The negroes often laughed over

these changed relations as they sat around their camp fires, or chatted together while off duty, but it was very rare that any southerner had reason to complain of any unkind or uncivil treatment from a colored soldier.

About the first of January occurred a few days of extreme cold weather, which tried the men sorely. One morning, after one of the most bitter cold nights, the officers coming in from picket marched the men to headquarters and called attention to their condition—their feet were frosted, and their hands frozen. In some instances the skin on their fingers had broken from the effects of the cold. It was sad to see their suffering. Some of them never recovered from the effects of that night, yet they bore it patiently, uncomplainingly.

An incident occurred while I was still an officer in a white regiment that illustrates the curious transition through which the negroes were passing. I had charge of a company detailed to guard a wagon train out foraging. Early one morning, just as we were about to resume our march, a Kentucky lieutenant rode up to me, saluted, and said he had some run-

away negroes whom he had arrested to send back to their masters, but as he was ordered away, he would turn them over to me. (At that time a reward could be claimed for returning fugitive slaves.) I took charge of them, and assuming a stern look and manner inquired: "Where are you going?" "Going to the Yankee army." "What for?" "We wants to be free, sir." "All right, you are free; go where you wish." The satisfaction that came to me from their heartfelt "Thankee, sir; thankee, sir," gave me some faint insight into the sublime joy that the great Emancipator must have felt when he penned the immortal proclamation that set free four millions of human beings. These men afterward enlisted in my regiment and did good service. One day, as we were on the march, they, through their lieutenant, reminded me of the circumstance, which they seemed to remember with lively gratitude.

The six companies at Bridgeport were kept very busily at work, and had but little opportunity for drill. Notwithstanding these difficulties, however, considerable progress was made in both drill and discipline. I made earnest efforts to get the regi-

ment united and relieved from so much labor, in order that they might be prepared for efficient field service as soldiers.

In January I had a personal interview with General Thomas, and secured an order uniting the regiment at Chattanooga. We entered camp there under the shadow of Lookout Mountain, and in full view of Mission Ridge, in February, 1864. During the same month, Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas, from Washington, then on a tour of inspection, visited my regiment and authorized me to substitute the eagle for the silver leaf.

Chattanooga was at that time the headquarters of the Department of the Cumberland. General Thomas and staff, and a considerable part of the army, were there. Our camp was laid out with great regularity, our quarters were substantial, comfortable, and well kept. The regiment numbered a thousand men, with a full complement of field, staff, line and non-commissioned officers. We had a good drum corps, and a band provided with a set of expensive silver instruments. We were also fully equipped, the men were armed with rifled muskets, and well clothed.

They were well drilled in the manual of arms, and took great pride in appearing on parade with arms burnished, belts polished, shoes blacked, clothes brushed, in full regulation uniform, including white gloves. On every pleasant day our parades were witnessed by officers, soldiers and citizens from the North. It was not unusual to have two thousand spectators. Some came to make sport, some from curiosity, some because it was the fashion, and others from a genuine desire to see for themselves what sort of looking soldiers negroes would make.

At the time that the work of organizing colored troops began in the West, there was a great deal of bitter prejudice against the movement. White troops threatened to desert if the plan should be really carried out. Those who entered the service were stigmatized as "nigger officers," and negro soldiers were hooted at and mistreated by white troops.

Apropos of the prejudice against so-called "nigger officers," I may mention the following incident: While an officer in the Seventieth Indiana, I had met and formed a passing acquaintance with Lieutenant Colonel ——, of an Ohio regiment. On New

Year's day, 1864, I chanced to meet him at a social gathering at General Ward's headquarters in Nashville. I spoke to him as usual, at the same time offering my hand, which apparently he did not see. Receiving only a cool bow from him, I at once turned away. As I did so he remarked to those standing near him that he "did not recognize these nigger officers." A report of the occurrence in some way, I know not how, came to the ears of Lorenzo Thomas, the Adjutant General of the army, then in Nashville, who investigated the case, and promptly dismissed Colonel — from the United States service.

Very few West Point officers had any faith in the success of the enterprise, and most northern people, perhaps, regarded it as at best a dubious experiment. A college classmate of mine, a young man of intelligence, and earnestly loyal, although a Kentuckian and a slaveholder, pleaded with me to abandon my plan of entering this service, saying: "I shudder to think of the remorse you may suffer from deeds done by barbarians under your command."

General George H. Thomas, though a southerner

and a West Point graduate, was a singularly fair-minded, candid man. He asked me one day, soon after my regiment was organized, if I thought my men would fight. I replied that they would. He said he thought "they might behind breastworks." I said they would fight in the open field. He thought not. "Give me a chance, General," I answered, "and I will prove it." Our evening parades converted thousands to a belief in colored troops. It was almost a daily experience to hear the remark from visitors: "Men who can handle their arms as these do, will fight." General Thomas paid us the compliment of saying that he "never saw a regiment go through the manual as well as this one."

We remained in "Camp Whipple" from February, 1864, till August, 1865, a period of eighteen months, and during a large part of that time the regiment was an object lesson to the army, and helped to revolutionize public opinion on the subject of colored soldiers.

My Lieutenant Colonel and I rode over one evening to call on General Joe Hooker, commanding the

Twentieth Army Corps. He occupied a small log hut in the Wauhatchie valley, near Lookout Mountain, and not far from the Tennessee river. He received us with great courtesy, and when he learned that we were officers in a colored regiment congratulated us on our good fortune, saying that he believed they would make the best troops in the world. He predicted that after the rebellion was subdued, it would be necessary for the United States to send an army into Mexico. This army would be composed largely of colored men, and those of us now holding high command would have a chance to win great renown. He lamented that he had made a great mistake in not accepting a military command and going to Nicaragua with General Walker. "Why," said he, "young gentlemen, I might have founded an empire!"

While at Chattanooga I organized two other regiments, the Forty-second and the Forty-fourth United States Colored Infantry. In addition to ordinary instruction in the duties required of the soldier, we established in every company a regular school, teaching the men to read and write, and taking great pains

to cultivate in them self-respect and all manly qualities. Our success in this respect was ample compensation for our labor. The men who went on picket or guard duty took their books, as quite as indispensable as their coffee pots.

It must not be supposed that we had only plain sailing. Soon after reaching Chattanooga heavy details began to be made upon us for men to work upon the fortifications then in process of construction around the town. This incessant labor interfered sadly with our drill, and at one time all drill was suspended by orders from headquarters. There seemed little prospect of our being ordered to the field, and as time wore on and arrangements began in earnest for the new campaign against Atlanta, we began to grow impatient of work and anxious for opportunity for drill and preparations for field service.

I used every means to bring about a change, for I believed that the ultimate status of the negro was to be determined by his conduct on the battle-field. Nobody doubted that he would work, while many did doubt that he had the courage to stand up and fight

like a man. If he could take his place side by side with the white soldier, endure the same hardships on the campaign, face the same enemy, storm the same works, resist the same assaults, evince the same soldierly qualities; he would compel that respect which the world has always accorded to heroism, and win for himself the same laurels which brave soldiers have ever worn.

Personally I shrink from danger, and most decidedly prefer a safe corner at my own fireside to an exposed place in the face of an enemy on the battlefield, but so strongly was I persuaded of the importance of giving colored troops a fair field and full opportunity to show of what mettle they were made, that I lost no chance of insisting upon our *right* to be ordered into the field. At one time I was threatened with dismissal from the service for my persistency, but that did not deter me, for though I had no yearning for martyrdom, I was determined, if possible, to put my regiment into battle at whatever cost to myself. As I look back upon the matter, after twenty-one years, I see no reason to regret my action, unless it be that I was not even more per-

sistent in claiming for these men the rights of soldiers.

I was grievously disappointed when the first of May, 1864, came, and the army was to start south, leaving us behind to hold the forts we had helped to build. I asked General Thomas to allow *me* at least to go along. He readily consented, and directed me to report to General O. O. Howard, commanding the Fourth Army Corps, as volunteer aide. I did so, and remained with him thirty days, participating in the battles of Buzzards Roost, Resaca, Adairsville and Dallas. At the end of that time, having gained invaluable experience, and feeling that my place was with my regiment, I returned to Chattanooga determined to again make every possible effort to get it into active service.

A few days after I had taken my place on General Howard's staff an incident occurred, showing how narrowly one may escape death. General Stanley and a staff officer, and General Howard and myself were making a little reconnoissance at Buzzards Roost. We stopped to observe the movements of the enemy, Stanley standing on the right, Howard

next on his left, and I next. The fourth officer, Captain Flint, stood immediately in rear of General Howard. A sharpshooter paid us a compliment in the shape of a rifle ball, which struck the ground in front of General Howard, ricocheted, passed through the skirt of his coat, through Captain Flint's cap, and buried itself in a tree behind.

At Adairsville a group of about a dozen mounted officers were in an open field, when the enemy exploded a shell just in front and over us, wounding two officers and five horses. A piece of the shell passed through the right fore leg of my horse, a kind, docile, fearless animal, that I was greatly attached to. I lost a friend and faithful servant.

On asking leave to return to my command, I was delighted to receive from General Howard the following pleasant note :

HEADQUARTERS FOURTH ARMY CORPS,  
ON ACKWORTH AND DALLAS ROAD,  
8 miles from Dallas, Ga., May 31, 1864. }

COLONEL:— This is to express my thanks for your services upon my staff during the past month, since starting on this campaign. You have given me always full satisfaction, and more, by your assiduous devotion to duty.

You have been active and untiring on the march, and fearless in battle.

Believe me your friend,

O. O. HOWARD,

Major Gen. Com'd'g Fourth Corps.

To Col. T. J. MORGAN, Com'd'g U. S. C. T.

General James B. Steadman, who won such imperishable renown at Chickamauga, was then in command of the District of Etowah, with headquarters at Chattanooga. I laid my case before him; he listened with interest to my plea, and assured me that if there was any fighting to be done in his district, we should have a hand in it.

August 15, 1864, we had our first fight at Dalton, Georgia. General Wheeler, with a considerable force of rebel cavalry, attacked Dalton, which was occupied by a small detachment of Union troops belonging to the Second Missouri, under command of Colonel Laibold. General Steadman went to Laibold's aid, and forming line of battle, attacked and routed the southern force. My regiment formed on the left of the Fifty-first Indiana Infantry, under command of Colonel A. D. Streight. The fight was short, and not at all severe. The regiment was all

exposed to fire. One private was killed, one lost a leg, and one was wounded in the right hand. Company B, on the skirmish line, killed five of the enemy and wounded others. To us it was a great battle, and a glorious victory. The regiment had been recognized as soldiers. It had taken its place side by side with a white regiment. It had been under fire. The men had behaved gallantly. A colored soldier had died for liberty. Others had shed their blood in the great cause. Two or three incidents will indicate the significance of the day. Just before going into the fight, Lieutenant Keimborts said to his men: "Boys, some of you may be killed, but remember you are fighting for liberty." Henry Prince replied: "I am ready to die for liberty." In fifteen minutes he lay dead, a rifle ball through his heart, a willing martyr. During the engagement, General Steadman asked his aide, Captain Davis, to look especially after the Fourteenth Colored, as he did not know how they would stand fire. Captain Davis rode up just as I was quietly rectifying my line, which in a charge had been disarranged. Davis, putting spurs to his horse, dashed back to the Gen-

eral, and reassured him by reporting that "the regiment was holding dress parade over there under fire." After the fight, as we marched into town through a drenching rain, a white regiment, standing at rest, swung their hats and gave three rousing cheers for the Fourteenth Colored. Colonel Streight's command were so pleased with the gallantry of our men that many of them afterward, on being asked: "What regiment?" frequently replied: "Fifty-first Colored."

During the month of August we had some very hard marching in a vain effort to have another brush with Wheeler's cavalry.

The corn in East Tennessee was in good plight for roasting, and our men showed great facility in cooking, and marvellous capacity in devouring it. Ten large ears were not too much for many of them. On resuming our march one day after the noon halt, one of the soldiers declared himself unable to walk, and asked permission to ride in an ambulance. His comrades said that having already eaten twelve ears of corn, and finding himself unable to finish the thirteenth, he concluded that he must be sick and unfit for duty.

September 27, 1864, I reported to Major General Rousseau, commanding a force of cavalry at Pulaski, Tennessee. As we approached the town by rail from Nashville, we heard artillery, then musketry, and as we left the cars we saw the smoke of guns. Forest, with a large force of cavalry, had been steadily driving Rousseau before him all day, and was destroying the railroad. Finding the General, I said: "I am ordered to report to you, sir." "What have you?" "Two regiments of colored troops." Rousseau was a Kentuckian, and had not much faith in negro soldiers. By his direction I threw out a strong line of skirmishers, and posted the regiments on a ridge, in good supporting distance. Rousseau's men retired behind my line, and Forest's men pressed forward until they met our fire, and recognizing the sound of the minie ball stopped to reflect.

The massacre of colored troops at Fort Pillow was well known to us, and had been fully discussed by our men. It was rumored, and thoroughly credited by them, that General Forest had offered a thousand dollars for the head of any commander of a "nigger" regiment. Here, then, was just such an opportunity

as those spoiling for a fight might desire. Negro troops stood face to face with Forest's veteran cavalry. The firing was growing hotter, and balls were uncomfortably thick. At length the enemy, in strong force, with banners flying, bore down toward us in full sight, apparently bent on mischief. Pointing to the advancing column I said, as I passed along the line: "Boys, it looks very much like fight. Keep cool; do your duty." They seemed full of glee, and replied with great enthusiasm: "Col'nel, dey can't whip us; dey nebber git de ole Fourteenth out of heah, nebber." "Nebber drives us away widout a mighty lot of dead men," etc., etc. When Forest learned that Rousseau was reinforced by infantry, he did not stop to ask about the color of the skin, but after testing our line, and finding it unyielding, turned to the east, and struck over toward Murfreesboro.

An incident occurred here illustrating the humor of the colored soldier. A spent ball struck one of the men on the side of the head, passed under the scalp, and making nearly a circuit of the skull, came out on the other side. His comrades merrily

declared that when the ball struck him, it sang out "too thick," and passed on.

As I was walking with my adjutant down toward the picket line, a ball struck the ground immediately in front of us, about four feet away, but was so far spent as to be harmless. We picked it up and carried it along.

Our casualties consisted of a few men slightly wounded. We had not had a battle, but it was for us a victory, for our troops had stood face to face with a triumphant troop of southern cavalry, and stopped their progress. They saw that they had done what Rousseau's veterans could not do. Having travelled four hundred and sixty-two miles, we returned to Chattanooga, feeling that we had gained valuable experience, and we eagerly awaited the next opportunity for battle, which was not long deferred.

Our next active service was at Decatur, Alabama. Hood, with his veteran army that had fought Sherman so gallantly from Chattanooga to Atlanta, finding that his great antagonist had started southward and seaward, struck out boldly himself for Nashville. October twenty-seventh I reported to General R. S.

Granger, commanding at Decatur, Alabama. His little force was closely besieged by Hood's army, whose right rested on the Tennessee river, below the town, and whose left extended far beyond our lines, on the other side of the town. Two companies of my regiment were stationed on the opposite side of the river from Hood's right, and kept up an annoying musketry fire. Lieutenant Gillet, of Company G, was mortally wounded by a cannon ball, and some of the enlisted men were hurt. One private soldier in Company B, who had taken position in a tree as a sharpshooter, had his right arm broken by a ball. Captain Romeyn said to him: "You would better come down from there, go to the rear and find the surgeon." "Oh, no, Captain," was his reply, "I can fire with my left arm," and so he did.

Another soldier of Company B was walking along the road, when, hearing an approaching cannon ball, he dropped flat upon the ground and was almost instantly well nigh covered with the dirt ploughed up by it, as it struck the ground near by. Captain Romeyn, who witnessed the incident, and who was greatly amused by the fellow's trepidation, asked

him if he was frightened. His reply was: "Fore, God, Captain, I thought I was a dead man, sure."

Friday, October 28, 1864, at twelve o'clock, at the head of three hundred and fifty-five men, in obedience to orders from General Granger, I charged and took a rebel battery with a loss of sixty officers and men killed and wounded. After capturing the battery and spiking the guns, which we were unable to remove, we retired to our former place on the line of defense. The conduct of the men on this occasion was most admirable, and drew forth high praise from Generals Granger and Thomas. Hood having decided to push on to Nashville without assaulting Decatur, withdrew. As soon as I missed his troops from my front, I notified the General commanding, and was ordered to pursue with the view of finding where he was. About ten o'clock the next morning, my skirmishers came up with his rear guard, which opened upon us a brisk infantry fire. Lieutenant Woodworth, standing at my side, fell dead, pierced through the face. General Granger ordered me to retire inside the works. The regiment, although exposed to a sharp fire, came off in splendid order.

As we marched inside the works, the white troops who had watched the manœuvre, gave us three rousing cheers. I have heard the Pope's famous choir at St. Peter's, and the great organ at Freiburg, but the music was not so sweet as the hearty plaudits of our brave comrades.

As indicating the change in public sentiment relative to colored troops, it may be mentioned that the Lieutenant Colonel commanding the Sixty-eighth Indiana Volunteer Infantry, requested me as a personal favor to ask for the assignment of his regiment to my command, giving as a reason that his soldiers would rather fight alongside of the Fourteenth Colored, than with any white regiment. He was ordered to report to me.

After Hood had gone, I returned to Chattanooga, but not to remain. (We had travelled two hundred and forty-four miles.)

November twenty-ninth, in command of the Fourteenth, Sixteenth and Forty-fourth Regiments, United States Colored Infantry, I embarked on a railroad train at Chattanooga for Nashville. On December first, with the Sixteenth and most of the

Fourteenth, I reached my destination and was assigned to a place on the extreme left of General Thomas's army, then concentrating for the defense of Nashville against Hood's threatened attack.

The train that contained the Forty-fourth Colored Regiment, and two companies of the Fourteenth, under command of Colonel Johnson, was delayed near Murfreesboro until December second, when it started for Nashville, but when crossing a bridge not far from the city its progress was suddenly checked by a cross fire of cannon belonging to Forest's command. I had become very anxious over the delay in the arrival of these troops, and when I heard the roar of cannon, thought it must be aimed at them. I never shall forget the intensity of my suffering as hour after hour passed by bringing me no tidings. Were they all captured? Had they been massacred? Who could answer? No one. What was to be done? Nothing; I could only wait and suffer. The next day, Colonel Johnson reached Nashville, reporting that when stopped, he and his men were forced under heavy fire to abandon the train, clamber down from the bridge and run to a block house near

by, which had been erected for the defense of the bridge, and was still in possession of Union soldiers. After maintaining a stubborn fight until far into the night, he withdrew his troops, and making a detour to the east, came into our lines, having lost in killed, wounded and missing two officers and eighty men of the Forty-fourth, and twenty-five men of the Fourteenth.

Just as Captain C. W. Baker, the senior officer of the Fourteenth, was leaving the car, a piece of shell carried away the top of his cap, and thus added immensely to its value — as a souvenir. Some of the soldiers that escaped lost everything except the clothes they had on, including knapsacks, blankets and arms. In some cases they lay in the water hiding for hours, until they could escape their pursuers.

Soon after taking our position in line at Nashville, we were closely besieged by Hood's army, and thus we lay facing each other for two weeks. Hood had suffered so terribly by his defeat under Schofield at Franklin, that he was in no mood to assault us in our works, and Thomas needed more time to concentrate and reorganize his army before he could safely

take the offensive. That fortnight interval was memorable indeed. Hood's army was desperate. It had been thwarted by Sherman, and thus far baffled by Thomas, and Hood felt that he must strike a bold blow to compensate for the dreadful loss of prestige occasioned by Sherman's "march to the sea." His men were scantily clothed and poorly fed; if he could gain Nashville, our great depot of supplies, he could furnish his troops with abundance of food, clothing and war material, encourage the Confederacy, terrify the people of the North, regain a vast territory taken from the South at such great cost to us, recruit his army from Kentucky, and perhaps invade the North.

Thomas well knew the gravity of the situation, and was unwilling to hazard all by a premature battle. I think that neither he, nor any of his army, ever doubted the issue of the battle when it should come, whichever force should take the initiative. The authorities at Washington grew restive, and the people at the North nervous. Thomas was ordered to fight; Logan was dispatched to relieve him if he did not, and Grant himself started West to take com-

mand. Thomas was too good a soldier to be forced to offer battle until he was sure of victory. He knew that time was his best ally, every day adding to his strength and weakening his enemy. In the meantime the weather became intensely cold, and a heavy sleet covered the ground, rendering it almost impossible for either army to move at all. For a few days our sufferings were quite severe. We had only shelter tents for the troops, with very little fuel, and many of our men who had lost their blankets keenly felt their need.

On December fifth, before the storm, by order of General Steadman, I made a little reconnoissance, capturing with slight loss Lieutenant Gardner and six men from the Fifth Mississippi Regiment. December seventh we made another, in which Colonel Johnson and three or four men were wounded. On one of these occasions, while my men were advancing in face of a sharp fire, a rabbit started up in front of them. With shouts of laughter several of them gave chase, showing that even battle could not obliterate the negro's love of sport.

But the great day drew near. The weather grew

warmer, the ice gave way, Thomas was ready, and calling together his chiefs, laid before them his plan of battle.

About nine o'clock at night, December 14, 1864, I was summoned to General Steadman's headquarters. He told me what the plan of battle was, and said he wished me to open the fight by making a vigorous assault upon Hood's right flank. This, he explained, was to be a feint, intended to betray Hood into the belief that it was the real attack, and lead him to support his right by weakening his left, where Thomas intended to assault him in very deed. The General gave me the Fourteenth United States Colored Infantry, under Colonel H. C. Corbin; the Seventeenth United States Colored Infantry, under the gallant Colonel W. R. Shafter; a detachment of the Eighteenth United States Colored Infantry, under Major L. D. Joy; the Forty-fourth United States Colored Infantry, under Colonel L. Johnson; a provisional brigade of white troops under Colonel C. H. Grosvenor, and a section of artillery under Captain Osborn, of the Twentieth Indiana Battery. The largest force I had ever handled was two regiments,

and as I rather wanted to open the battle in proper style, I asked General Steadman what suggestions he had to make. He replied: "Colonel, to-morrow morning, at daylight, I want you to open the battle." "All right, General. Do you not think it would be a good plan for me to—," and I outlined a little plan of attack. With a twinkle in his kindly eye he replied: "To-morrow morning, Colonel, just as soon as you can see how to put your troops in motion, I wish you to begin the fight." "All right, General; good night." With these explicit instructions I left his headquarters, returned to camp, gave the requisite orders for the soldiers to have an early breakfast and be ready for serious work at daybreak. Then taking Adjutant Clelland I reconnoitered the enemy's position, tracing the line of his camp fires, and decided on my plan of assault. The morning dawned with a dense fog, which held us in check for some time after we were ready to march.

During our stay at Nashville, I was the guest of Major W. B. Lewis, through whose yard ran our line. He had been a warm personal friend of Andrew Jackson, occupying a place in the Treasury

Department during his administration. He gave me the room formerly occupied by the hero of New Orleans, and entertained me with many anecdotes of him. I remember in particular one which I especially appreciated, because of the scarcity of fuel in our own camp. At one time General Jackson ordered certain troops to rendezvous for a few days at Nashville. Major Lewis, acting as quartermaster, laid in a supply of several hundred cords of wood, which he supposed would be ample to last during their entire stay in the city. The troops arrived on a "raw and gusty day," and being accustomed to comfortable fires at home, they burned up every stick the first night, to the Quartermaster's great consternation.

To return. On the morning of December fifteenth, Major Lewis said he would have a servant bring me my breakfast, which was not ready, however, when I started. The boy, with an eye to safety, followed me afar off, so far that he only reached me, I think, about two o'clock in the afternoon. But I really believe the delay improved the flavor of the breakfast.

As soon as the fog lifted, the battle began in good earnest. Hood mistook my assault for an attack in force upon his right flank, and weakening his left in order to meet it, gave the coveted opportunity to Thomas, who improved it by assailing Hood's left flank, doubling it up, and capturing a large number of prisoners.

Thus the first day's fight wore away. It had been for us a severe but glorious day. Over three hundred of my command had fallen, but everywhere our army was successful. Victory perched upon our banners. Hood had stubbornly resisted, but had been gallantly driven back with severe loss. The left had done its duty. General Steadman congratulated us, saying his only fear had been that we might fight too hard. We had done all he desired, and more. Colored soldiers had fought side by side with white troops. They had mingled together in the charge. They had supported each other. They had assisted each other from the field when wounded, and they lay side by side in death. The survivors rejoiced together over a hard-fought field, won by a common valor. All who witnessed their conduct

gave them equal praise. The day that we had longed to see had come and gone, and the sun went down upon a record of coolness, bravery, manliness, never to be unmade. A new chapter in the history of liberty had been written. It had been shown that marching under a flag of freedom, animated by a love of liberty, even the slave becomes a man and a hero.

At one time during the day, while the battle was in progress, I sat in an exposed place on a piece of ground sloping down toward the enemy, and being the only horseman on that part of the field, soon became a target for the balls that whistled and sang their threatening songs as they hurried by. At length a shot aimed at me struck my horse in the face just above the nostril, and passing up under the skin emerged near the eye, doing the horse only temporary harm, and letting me off scot free, much to my delight, as may be supposed. Captain Baker, lying on the ground near by, heard the thud of the ball as it struck the horse, and seeing me land on the ground, cried out: "The Colonel's shot," and sprang to my side, glad enough to find that the poor

horse's face had been a shield to save my life. I was sorry that the animal could not appreciate the gratitude I felt to it for my deliverance.

During that night Hood withdrew his army some two miles, and took up a new line along the crest of some low hills, which he strongly fortified with some improvised breastworks and abattis. Soon after our early breakfast we moved forward over the intervening space. My position was still on the extreme left of our line, and I was especially charged to look well to our flank to avoid surprise.

The Second Colored Brigade, under Col. Thompson, of the Twelfth United States Colored Infantry, was on my right and participated in the first charge upon Overton's Hill, which was repulsed. I stood where the whole movement was in full view. It was a grand and terrible sight to see those men climb that hill over rocks and fallen trees, in the face of a murderous fire of cannon and musketry, and often reaching the enemy's works only to be driven back. White and black mingled together in the charge and on the retreat.

When the Second Colored Brigade retired behind

my line to reform, one of the regimental color-bearers stopped in the open space between the two armies, where, although exposed to a dangerous fire, he planted his flag firmly in the ground, and began deliberately and coolly to return the enemy's fire; and, greatly to our amusement, kept up for some little time his independent warfare.

When the second and final assault was made, the right of my line took part. It was with breathless interest I watched that noble army climb that hill with a steady resolve which nothing but death itself could check. When at length the assaulting column sprang upon the earthworks, and the enemy seeing that further resistance was madness, gave way and began a precipitous retreat, our hearts swelled as only the hearts of soldiers can, and scarcely stopping to cheer, or to await orders, we pushed forward and joined in the pursuit until the darkness and the rain forced a halt.

The battle of Nashville did not compare in numbers engaged, in severity of fighting, or in the losses sustained, with some other western battles. But in the issues at stake, the magnificent generalship of

Thomas, the completeness of our triumph, and the immediate and far-reaching consequences, it was unique, and deservedly ranks along with Gettysburg as one of the decisive battles of the war.

When General Thomas rode over the battle-field and saw the bodies of colored men side by side with the foremost on the very works of the enemy, he turned to his staff, saying: "Gentlemen, the question is settled; negroes will fight." He did me the honor to recommend me for promotion, and told me that he intended to give me the best brigade he could form. This he afterward did.

After the great victory we joined in the chase after the fleeing foe. Hood's army was whipped, demoralized, and pretty badly scattered. A good many stragglers were picked up. A story circulated to this effect: Some of our boys, on making a sharp turn in the road, came upon a forlorn southern soldier who had lost his arms, thrown away his accoutrements, and was sitting on a log by the roadside, waiting to give himself up. He was saluted with: "Well, Johnny, how goes it?" "Well, Yanks, I'll tell ye. I confess I'm horribly whipped and badly demoralized, but blamed if I'm scattered."

After we had passed through Franklin, we had orders to turn about and return to that city. I was riding at the head of the column, followed by my own regiment. The men were swinging along, "arms at will," when they spied General Thomas and staff approaching. Without orders they brought their arms to "right shoulder shift," took the step, and striking up their favorite tune of "John Brown," whistled it with admirable effect while passing the General, greatly to his amusement.

We had a very memorable march from Franklin to Murfreesboro over miserable dirt roads. About December nineteenth or twentieth, we were on the march at an early hour, but the rain was there before us, and stuck by us closer than a brother. We were drenched through and through, and few had on a dry thread. We waded streams of water nearly waist deep, we pulled through mud that seemed to have no bottom, and where many a soldier left his shoes seeking for it. The open woods pasture where we went into camp that night, was surrounded with a high fence made of cedar rails. That fence was left standing, and not a rail was touched—until—well!

I do believe that the owner's bitterness at his loss was fully balanced by the comfort and good cheer which those magnificent rail fires afforded us that December night. They did seem providentially provided for us.

During the night the weather turned cold, and when we resumed our march the ground was frozen, and the roads were simply dreadful, especially for those of our men who had lost their shoes the day before, and were now compelled to walk barefoot, tracking their way with blood. Such experiences take away something of the romance sometimes suggested to the inexperienced by the phrase, "soldiering in the sunny south;" but, then, a touch of it is worth having for the light it throws over such historical scenes as those at Valley Forge.

We continued in the pursuit of Hood as far as Huntsville, Alabama, when he disappeared to return no more, and we were allowed to go back to Chattanooga, glad enough of an opportunity to rest. Distance travelled, four hundred and twenty miles.

We had no more fighting. There were many interesting experiences, which, however, I will not

take time to relate. In August, 1865, being in command of the post at Knoxville, Tennessee, after forty months of service, grateful to have escaped without imprisonment, wounds, or even a day of severe illness, I resigned my commission to resume my studies, which the foolish firing on Fort Sumter had so rudely interrupted.

Colonels Shafter, Johnson, Corbin, and a number of line officers who were with me in the colored service, entered the regular army, where some are still on duty. I was strongly urged to do the same, but my tastes were not military. So long as the Union was imperilled, and there were blows to be struck for freedom, I could endure the hardships and enjoy the service of the army. But when peace came, I felt that my place was in the ranks of those who seek in some humble way to assist in promoting education and moral and social reforms.

I cannot close this paper without expressing the conviction that history has not yet done justice to the share borne by colored soldiers in the war for the Union. Their conduct during the war has been a silent, but most potent factor in influencing public

sentiment, shaping legislation, and fixing the status of colored people in America. If the records of their achievements could be put into such shape that they could be accessible to the thousands of colored youth in the South, they would kindle in their young minds an enthusiastic devotion to liberty and manhood.











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