

## *Montana's African American Military History*

### *The Buffalo Soldier Era*

The African American military tradition reaches back to colonial times. However, as a matter of official recognition, the first detachment of all-black soldiers fought for the Union Army during the latter years of the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Between 1866 and 1869, the newly constituted United States Armed Forces reconfigured the original companies into four military units—the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry and the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Colored Infantry Regiments. Soon afterward they began their deployment in the American Southwest protecting settlers. Throughout the 1870s and 80s, in addition to their regular duties of manning forts and defending military outposts and frontier towns, the two infantry regiments performed public service jobs such as stringing telegraph wire across a vast expanse of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiments fought Native American nations in all-out campaigns and brief skirmishes, earning them a certain amount of renown in the western territories.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the late 1880s, the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments deployed north to the Dakotas and Montana Territory.<sup>3</sup> Over the next decade, Forts Shaw, Maginnis, Custer, Keogh, Assiniboine, Harrison, and Missoula became a temporary home for the Buffalo Soldiers. It was during this time that the 25<sup>th</sup> captured the American public's imagination as an experimental bicycle division. Seeking to replace expensive horses with cheaper forms of transportation, the military personnel of the 25<sup>th</sup> performed patrols and other duties on two wheels. The experiment gained national attention when, in 1896, these African American cyclists embarked upon a remarkable journey from Missoula to St. Louis.<sup>4</sup>

In 1898 the Spanish-American War marked a temporary end to Buffalo Soldiers' deployment in the West. All four regiments were posted to active combat duty. The 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry became renowned for its gallant charge up San Juan Hill alongside Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, while the other regiments equally distinguished themselves in less celebrated clashes with the enemy. In fact, both the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> played a significant role in the capture of San Juan Hill as well as in the Battle for El Caney.<sup>5</sup> After the Cuban campaign, the regiments were sent to repress guerilla fighters in the Philippines, a highly controversial operation that would last for years.<sup>6</sup> The wars in Cuba and the Philippines had a lasting impact on the shape of Montana's African American communities. Many soldiers returned to Montana weary and unwell, and chose not to reenlist with the Army, but instead make the state their permanent home.

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<sup>1</sup>Following the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment was formed as one of the first official black units. The Confederate Army also enlisted beginning in 1865, but their numbers never came close to matching the nearly 200,000 serving in the Union Army.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Carroll, Ed. *The Black Military Experience in the American West*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1971) passim.

<sup>3</sup>Lieutenant H. W. Hovey, "The Twenty-Fourth Regiment of Infantry," in *The Black Military Experience in the American West*, ed. John. M. Carroll (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1971) 93.

<sup>4</sup>Fredrick Remington, "Vagabonding with the Tenth Horse," in *The Black Military Experience in the American West*, ed. John. M. Carroll (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1971) 166.

<sup>5</sup> Richard E. Killblane, "[Spanish-American War: Battle of San Juan Hill](#)," *History.Net*, 6/12/2006.

<sup>6</sup>"[The Philippine War - A Conflict of Conscience for African Americans](#)," Presidio of San Francisco National Park online history and culture essays, National Park Service, 12/28/2015.