

Freedom Riders: Complex Characters Present Black Cavalry Regiment's Plight

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Review

FREEDOM RIDERS

Complex characters present black cavalry regiment's plight

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Ballard, Allen B. *Where I'm Bound*. Simon & Schuster Books, 2000-10-01. ISBN 684870312

It was not until 1943, when Bell Irving Wiley published *The Life of Johnny Reb*, that the common soldier in the Civil War gained his voice. Although veterans on both sides of the conflict published reminiscences after the War, their memoirs lacked the perspective that only a scholar such as Wiley could give to place the voices of individual soldiers in a broader context.

The groundbreaking work on Johnny Reb was followed nine years later by Wiley's companion piece on Billy Yank. Since then, more than a dozen professional historians have attempted capture the voice of the common soldier. Regrettably, these works have been limited entirely to white soldiers because the largely illiterate African-American soldiers did not leave written records of their service. Although Joseph T. Glatthaar attempted to deal specifically with the black experience in *Forged in Battle*, even he was forced to dwell on the white officers who commanded these men rather than on black soldiers themselves.

Given the lack of primary source material, black soldiers will never gain their voice unless it is through a work of fiction. Fortunately, this void has now been filled by Allen B. Ballard, a teacher of African American history at the State University of New York at Albany.

Where I'm Bound follows the career of a black slave, Joe Duckett, who escapes his master, joins the Union army, and serves as a scout and non-commissioned officer in the 3rd Cavalry, United States Colored Troops. His story begins in June 1863, shortly after the battle of Milliken's Bend, and closes in early February 1865. The action takes place in north Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta, where Joe fights a private war involving guerrillas and

bushwhackers, contrabands and slaves, soldiers and civilians. Other characters in Ballard's novel include Zenobia, Joe's wife; Betty, Joe's mistress; Richard Kenworthy, Joe's former master and a colonel in the Confederate Army; Sue, Kenworthy's wife; and Pauline, Kenworthy's black mistress. Joe's white company commander, William Stiles, completes the diverse cast of emotionally complex characters.

Although some characters in **Where I'm Bound** were inspired by real people and the events are drawn from a published history of a Union regiment of black cavalry, the reader may wonder whether Ballard has taken too many liberties with the record. For example, in one scene the author has Confederate soldiers using a pack of slave dogs to lead their charge. Despite Ballard's claim in an author's note that the incident actually occurred, the reader's credulity may be challenged by the melodramatic manner in which it is presented.

Pro-Confederate readers will most likely complain that Ballard has sensationalized the plight of the black soldier, while readers in sympathy with the circumstances of African-Americans during that period will applaud his honest depiction.

But who knows what really happened? It is precisely because racial antagonisms permeated almost every aspect of the Civil War that we have no way today of determining just how nasty things got.

Partisan wrangling aside, readers will find **Where I'm Bound** to be a good read, a novel that gives voice to a group of men and women that has stood too long in the shadows cast by the War's more illustrious luminaries. It is about time that we listen.

James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., is associate provost, professor of psychology, and lecturer in history at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has written two books on the Civil War: The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War (1995), and Pretense of Glory: The Life of General Nathaniel P. Banks(1998).