

Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era

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Review

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Smith, John David *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 080782741X

Full spectrum

Collection gives thorough view of black service

If you expect to have only one volume on African American soldiers in your Civil War library, make it this book. I do not know of another work that covers the topic as thoroughly or as thoughtfully as **Black Soldiers in Blue**.

The book consists of fourteen essays. The first and longest essay is by the editor, John David Smith, in which he traces the fitful steps with which Abraham Lincoln moved toward his decision to enroll African Americans as soldiers in the Union army. With that foundation in place, the remaining essays cover almost every other aspect of African Americans serving in the Union army during the Civil War.

Most of the Civil War battles in which African American soldiers played a significant part--Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend, Olustee, Fort Pillow, the Crater, Saltville, and Nashville--are covered in separate essays. What I particularly liked about these essays was the attention most of the authors gave to the historiography of their topics. For example, John Cimprich's piece on Fort Pillow is not a rehash of the usual arguments about who did what to whom. Instead, Cimprich carefully reviews the sources and evidence that other authors have used to construct their accounts of what happened.

Another feature that recommends this volume is the addition of essays that go beyond the usual accounts of battles and leaders. Keith Wilson, for example, provides a thoughtful essay that compares the military service of Colonels Thomas Higginson, James Montgomery, and Robert Shaw in the department of the South. His comparison of the divergent views of three officers with

impeccable anti-slavery credentials takes the reader to a new level of understanding of the complexities inherent to the decision to emancipate, educate, and incorporate an entire race into American society.

Examples of other innovative pieces in this edited volume include Noah Andre' Trudeau's detailed study of African American cavalry in the Civil War and Edwin S. Redkey interesting essay on Henry McNeal Turner, a church leader and black chaplain in the Union army. Another illustration is Michl T. Meier's account of Lorenzo Thomas and the recruitment of black troops in the Mississippi Valley. Given Thomas's pivotal role in recruiting African American soldiers, Meier's essay fills a void and demonstrates why this book on black soldiers works so well. None of these topics would appear to warrant a book-length study by themselves. However, as chapters in an edited volume they find a home.

The last two essays trace the lives of African American soldiers during Reconstruction and beyond. It is common to read about the important role that service in the Union army played in the transition of African Americans from slaves to participants in a free society, but not enough has been written about the fate of these men when the shooting stopped and they shed their uniforms. Robert J. Zalimas, Jr., offers a study of tensions between black and white soldiers in postwar Charleston, while Robert Reid follows the careers of black soldiers in North Carolina from the end of the war to the twentieth century.

Despite its many strengths, this book does have one weakness. Being an edited work, the views expressed by the various authors are not always compatible. The most obvious example is how two essayists treat the Battle of Saltville. On page 297 in Noah Trudeau's piece on black cavalry, we learn that "William Marvel's careful examination of personal service records has accounted for all but perhaps a dozen [black soldiers] who might have been murdered. While still a telling indictment of racism," Trudeau concludes, "it does not suggest that Saltville should stand alongside Fort Pillow in the halls of infamy." Nevertheless, in the first paragraph of an essay on the Battle of Saltville, Thomas D. Mays tells us "Both Union and Confederate eyewitness accounts and regimental records demonstrate that the murders at Saltville were among the worst atrocities of the American Civil War." To support his contention, Mays cites two works by William Marvel, the same authority Trudeau used for his conclusion. Understandably, the reader may be confused, and although I do not think that the two authors must agree, I did expect the editor to comment on this

controversy in the introduction and perhaps offer a suggestion as to how the reader might reconcile these disparate views.

That one criticism, however, is minor when compared to the many fine features of this work. The book is balanced, thoughtful, and complete. I learned a great deal about black soldiers in blue that I did not know before, which is always a good sign that the editor and his lineup of strong authors know what they are writing about.

James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., is Dean of the Graduate School, 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, and Pretense of Glory: The Life of General Nathaniel P. Banks, both published by LSU Press. His latest book, An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866, was released by LSU Press in April 2001.