

A Regiment of Slaves: The 4th United States Colored Infantry, 1863-1866

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Review

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Longacre, Edward G. *A Regiment of Slaves: The 4th United States Colored Infantry, 1863-1866*. Stackpole Books, \$27.95 ISBN 811700127

A distinguished unit

Story told from black soldiers' perspective

Civil War historians have recently benefited from new books that have as their basis previously unpublished journals and family letters. They are also experiencing an interest in an area that constitutes one of the overlooked pieces of the greater social drama that surrounded the war — namely the role and history of African-American soldiers in the conflict.

Edward Longacre has done an excellent job of chronicling the history of the 4th United States Colored Infantry, a Maryland unit recruited from a mix of free blacks and runaway and liberated slaves.

What helps to set this book apart from other African-American unit histories is its perspective. Instead of the more common use of letters and journals by white officers, **A Regiment of Slaves** is also able to include the unit's story from the point of view of its enlisted ranks. It does this in no small part through the collected thoughts of its Sergeant Major, Christian Abraham Fleetwood. Fleetwood was an exceptionally talented, educated, and free black resident of Baltimore and was raised in the childless home of one of the city's most prominent businessmen, John C. Brune. Before the war Fleetwood was being prepared for a career in business and had been schooled to be one of the best-educated African-Americans in Baltimore. His thoughts and observations throughout the unit's military experiences are exceptionally articulate and revealing.

Militarily, the 4th United States Colored Infantry is a most appealing black regiment to study, proving itself to be a very capable and competent unit. It was

recruited in the summer of 1863 and retained on active duty until May of 1866, a year after Lee's surrender. It performed service in several major engagements of 1864 around Petersburg as part of the Army of the James, and in combat actions with the XXV Corps in North Carolina in 1865. It conducted itself in a distinguished manner and earned a record of which to be proud.

The book is well written, extensively footnoted, and stimulating to read, neither dragging nor delving into unnecessary distraction. It presents the historical detail and explanation that adds dimension to the unit's experiences, placing them in proper perspective and setting. Moreover it successfully expresses the attitudes and emotions of the regiment's individual soldiers, providing an excellent feel for the service and sacrifice that the individual soldier shared with his white counterpart but, more importantly, including the frustrations that beset African-American soldiers and regiments in particular.

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