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## Interview

### **CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THUNDER AT THE GATES: THE BLACK CIVIL WAR REGIMENTS THAT REDEEMED AMERICA**

**Egerton, Douglas R.**

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Interview with Douglas Egerton, author of *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments That Redeemed America* Interviewed by Tom Barber

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is pleased to speak with Douglas Egerton, Professor of History at Le Moyne College and author of several books including *The Wars of Reconstructions: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era*, *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War*. Today we are here to talk with him about his latest book, *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America*, and co-winner of this year's Lincoln Prize. Professor Egerton, thank you for joining us today.

Douglas Egerton (DE): Good to talk to you.

CWBR: What drew you to investigate these black regiments, and can you explain how these units redeemed the United States?

DE: Sure. The answer to your first question--my books tend to lead one to the next. I never have a plan and as I'm writing I realize that here is something that needs more than the few pages it's getting. And my last book on Reconstruction, one of the people who I wrote about, just got a few pages, was a black boatman from Elmira, New York, who settled in SC after the war, went into state politics, a guy named Stephen Swails, and he was in the 54th and I thought "There's a lot more to this story here. " And of the 1510 identified people of color, men of color, who go on to politics--national and state level in Reconstruction, at least 130 are ex-military. So there's a lot more of this story to tell.

In terms of how they redeemed America, they were the guinea pigs--they're the test case these three regiments--and they knew it. White America, including the North, especially among conservative northern democrats were very reluctant for black men to serve, and had grave doubts about ability of black men to be combatants and that opinion kind of turned on a dime after July 18, after the battle of Ft. Wagner. Lincoln wholeheartedly, at that point, began to recruit black soldiers, 180,000 black men served by the end of the war. And so, these guys didn't just kind of redeemed themselves they sort of changed the opinion of white America had toward black soldiers and black citizens, so they're impact was enormous.

CWBR: How did these black regiments come to form? African Americans had fought in the nation's conflicts since the Revolution. What went into creating these regiments?

DE: Well, it wasn't easy. As you mentioned black Americans, of course, had fought in previous conflicts, which white Americans always tried after the conflict to very much forget. And of course, one thing that is very confusing about the Civil War is that when white southerners secede they made it very clear they are leaving because of Lincoln or they're leaving because of perceived attacks on slavery, attacks on the right of slave holders to carry their property into the western territories, so they make it very clear that this is a war about slavery, but that's not for the first two years the Northern point of view. Lincoln makes it very clear this is a war to save the Union, not a war against slavery, no matter what Jeff Davis is saying. So after Ft. Sumter, young black men from Syracuse, where I live, from Chicago, go down and try to enlist, and they're turned away on the orders of Lincoln and Stanton, and the war department, and were told that this is a white man's war, this is not about slavery, and that goes on for two years. Until finally, of course, January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation goes into effect and now the country has two war aims: reunion, but now also black liberation, and also, of course, because the armies needed more men. It suddenly becomes very sensible to begin to recruit all these black men all across the North, young and able bodied. But of course the way Civil War armies work is that you enlist in a state, even sometimes local regiment, and then you are folded into the larger national army, so you are in the Connecticut 31st or the Virginia 76th. So the governor of Massachusetts, was a liberal Republican, John A. Andrew, the governor of New York--where I live-- was a conservative Democratic who had no interest in black military service, so Andrew is the first guy to write to war department to say "let's raise a regiment"

and then mid-January Stanton agreed. And so black men from all across the North who wanted to serve, had to go to Boston. They came from all across the North to Readville, which is just outside Boston, at Camp Meigs and join up. Basically, it had been pushed for a long time by activists like Frederick Douglas, but finally Andrew gets the job done.

CWBR: So why were so many in the North opposed black regiments. It seems militarily, it is the smartest thing to do because, the Confederacy gets a lot military value from black labor, but as you mentioned so many were opposed to these regiments and their formation, and what were some of the reasons?

DE: Well you know we tend to think, optimistic creatures that we are as Americans, that history moves in one direction--life always gets better. But of course for blacks living in the North the 1850s was one debacle after the next, the Fugitive Slave Act, in which a long free blacks are being captured and returned to slavery in the South. The Dred Scott decision in which the Supreme Court of the United States announces that blacks, even if born free in Boston, are not citizens of the United States. So for a lot of white conservatives, like the governor of New York, Horatio Seymour, if black men can fight and can wear a blue uniform then that was their ticket to citizenship. And so it was really kind of less about, I think, questions about black men's ability to fight, but rather what they thought would happen with black veterans after the war--the political demands they would make, white Americans in the North did not what to concede, and so that was the big push there.

CWBR: And so, even after these regiments are formed, these sort of political battles don't stop over just the question of whether the regiment should be formed. What other obstacles did the soldiers who joined face off the battlefield?

DE: Well they faced all kinds of discrimination within the U.S. Army and they also faced the possibility of brutalization by the Confederate army but, first things first, because most people in Congress, including Republicans assumed that blacks assigned on would be driving wagons, digging ditches, working as laborers, arriving without decent clothing. They're paid only about half of what white soldiers were paid. White soldiers approximately \$13 a month, black soldiers were paid \$10 and then \$3 dollars was deducted for uniforms that was not deducted from white soldiers. So they faced that kind of stuff, internal discrimination at least initially, and really until the last few months of the war.

They were not allowed to rise into the ranks of commissioned officers. Three of the guys that I write about in my book made that leap and made it to the rank of lieutenant. Many of the men had served under white officers who had very little training and were much much younger than they were. There were a lot of white officers that made it very clear, especially outside of black regiments, they just didn't want blacks in the military. And of course these guys are fighting in much larger groupings with other white units that just don't want them there. They also sign up knowing that on Christmas Eve 1862 it becomes clear the Emancipation Proclamation is not going to happen. President Davis issues an edict announcing that black men taken under arms will be sold into slavery and that white officers will be severely executed as insurrectionists, as sort of John Browns. So these guys are facing trouble within the army and trouble from the Confederates. They were really in between kind of a rock and a hard place and yet they sign on anyway.

CWBR: So they sign on and what kind of white officers are tapped to lead these units?

DE: They mostly come out of the antislavery movement (or at least their parents come out of the antislavery movement, these are all younger guys of course). The Republicans for the most part, but a lot of them are not hardcore abolitionists. There is a distinction between being antislavery/mainstream Republican, like Lincoln being a hardcore Garrisonian/Frederick Douglass abolitionist. They're sons of privilege. They all go to Harvard, at least the guys I write about. They come from money and so they're sympathetic to black soldiers and they want to advance the cause, they don't have to do this, they volunteer for this. But neither do they come from a background that allows them to understand what these men are like. In the film *Glory* Robert Gould Shaw has a friend Andre Braugher, a character he's known for years but that's completely made up. Shaw didn't know any black folks before serving in the 54th. So even though these guys are among the more Progressive, northern white contingent, there's still some kind of friction. They don't really understand each other very much. Certainly the working class black guys, the farm boys came from Ohio who served on the 54th and 55th, there's a real cultural gulf between them and the Harvard kids.

CWBR: Is this goal something that's closed over time? How does it break across the spectrum? Because in the book, some of these white officers appear to become more sympathetic and others are okay with leading black soldiers but

still have a really difficult time with the notion of black citizenship and how service in the army is going to be a foundation toward black citizenship and voting rights.

DE: It varies. Most of the guys I followed did change over the course of the war. If a ghastly Civil War won't change your attitude then nothing will. Lincoln changes at the top. When Rob Shaw first signs on, he's reluctant to do so because he's with his band of brothers in his white regiment. He's also afraid his that his fiancé will look down at him for leading black soldiers in battle because it's almost a disreputable thing to do, in Northern opinion. He first, and so famously, is a "negro colonel" and of course he doesn't use the term "negro. " But he stops, about two months into the training he realizes how good these guys are as soldiers. He dies at the age of 25, kind of a much more enlightened person. And two brothers from Philadelphia who I also follow Ned and Pen Hallowell, they also show real progress and they actually look to appreciate the guys, they're leading. And the fourth white officer I followed, Charles Francis Adams Jr., he's an Adams, he comes from this long line of anti-slave politicians. He never learns to understand, or like, the guys he leads in the 5th Cavalry. Basically he goes to his grave harboring doubts about the ability of black men to be horsemen, to be efficient cavalry men. Later in life he turns on Reconstruction, he turns on black voting rights, he turns on Irish voting rights. Given Adams is a prickly, not very lovable guy. But the war changes most of these people.

CWBR: One final question, how do many of the soldiers in these regiments transition from being a soldier into a citizen? How long does the war stay with them and in what ways does it stay with them?

DE: They're always really, really proud of their service. One of the photographs I have, in the book, is late 19th century when the Shaw monument was put up in Boston and survivors come and march. By this time these are old guys, but they want to be there for their last reunion. So they're always really proud of their service. Most come back to the north, only Steven Swails settles for a time in South Carolina. But they're determined to change the north as well, bear in mind of course, only in New England could black men vote before the war. Equal basis with white men. New York has a property qualification that is not imposed on white voters. Lincoln's Illinois, black men can't vote at all, Pennsylvania they can't. And that's where these guys are coming from. So when they come home they're going to make certain that the world they live in, is changed. There will be decent schools for the children, and integrated streetcars

for themselves. And again these are guys who faced tough fire during the war so they're not going to back down when someone tells them to get off their streetcar. One of the guys that I follow, is Lewis Douglass, the son of Frederick Douglas, who's a sergeant major when he's badly wounded in Fort Wagner and mustard out and after the war he's ice skating outside of Baltimore and some white toughs want him off the rink, so he takes his skates' shoe and he puts it on his hand like a glove and goes after these guys and almost cuts one's thumb off. These are guys, they faced tough battle and they're not going to back down now so for them the war is just part of their crusade. It's not the end of their determination to fundamentally change America.

CWBR: Professor Egerton, I appreciate you taking the time to sit and discuss your most recent work, *Thunder at the Gates: The Black civil War Regiments that Redeemed America*.

DE: It was a pleasure, thanks so much.