



FOR DECADES, AFRICAN-AMERICAN REGULARS WERE THE

BUFFALO SOLDIERS

MOST EFFECTIVE TROOPS ON THE WESTERN FRONTIER

ON SEPTEMBER 24, 1868, MAJ. GEORGE A. FORSYTH MUST HAVE WONDERED if he would live to see the next morning. He lay stretched out beside the rotting carcass of his dead horse, in the willow brush and tall grass that covered a small island in the dry bed of the Arikaree River, on the vast plains of eastern Colorado Territory. All around him lay dead and wounded men—his men. And beyond the empty riverbanks, just out of rifle shot, circled the 700 Cheyenne and Oglala warriors who had kept the major's detachment trapped on this island since the 17th.

BY T. J. STILES & ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARTHUR SHILSTONE



Full-scale war with the tribes of the Great Plains had just erupted; Forsyth had taken his 50 handpicked scouts out of Fort Hays in Kansas on a march to find the enemy. But the Native Americans had found Forsyth first.

On the 17th, the Cheyenne war chief the soldiers called Roman Nose had led hundreds of fighters on a dawn charge against Forsyth's camp. Their storm of bullets and arrows laid waste to his horse herd and left many of his men dead or wounded. The major himself collapsed as a slug tore into each leg and another creased his scalp. By the 24th, repeated charges and stealthy sniping had turned half his scouts into casualties; a horrific stench now rose from the dead men and animals. The survivors, who at first had used their fallen mounts as protection, now resorted to eating the horses' decaying flesh.

Unknown to Forsyth, a company of cavalry was searching for him. Two of his scouts had slipped through the besieging Indians and made their way to Fort Wallace in Kansas, where they had alerted Capt. Louis H. Carpenter, an old Civil War comrade of the major's.

The next day, the beleaguered scouts on that malodorous little island noticed that the Indians had drawn off. Then they saw why: in the distance they discovered movement, which gradually took the form of mounted

men . . . cavalymen . . . black cavalymen. They were Captain Carpenter's troopers, pounding across the dry grass. This unit went by the name of Company H, 10th Cavalry—but Forsyth's men may indeed have known them by the name that the African-American troops earned from their Indian foes: they were the buffalo soldiers.

Forsyth's fight entered Western legend as the Battle of Beecher's Island, but few remember that he was rescued so dramatically by black troops. Despite a recent wave of interest in the professional African-American soldiers of the 19th century, many writers have treated them as a footnote to the history of the frontier. In fact, black regulars took center stage in the Army's great Western drama, shouldering combat responsibilities far out of proportion to their numbers (which averaged 10 percent of the military's total strength). Over the course of three decades on



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the frontier, the buffalo soldiers emerged as the most professional, experienced and effective troops in the service.

When Carpenter led his company into Forsyth's grim camp, only three years had passed since the end of the Civil War. Some 180,000 African-Americans had carried arms for the Union, filling out regiments, divisions, even an entire corps (the 25th, part of which occupied Richmond in the war's closing days). These were all-volunteer units, however, established for the duration of the war. Not one company in the standing Regular Army was open to African-American recruits. But on July 28, 1866, Congress provided for four Regular Army infantry regiments (the 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st) and two of cavalry (the 9th and 10th), to be composed exclusively of black enlisted men. The Army would *have* to accept African-Americans.

Almost immediately, the new black regulars found

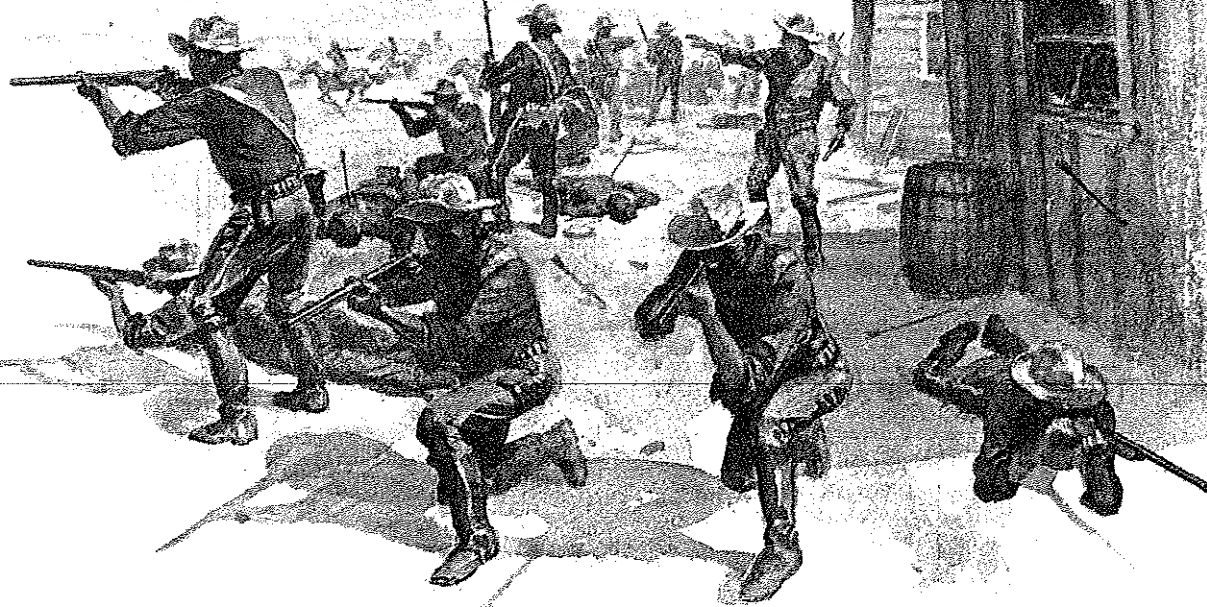
themselves in combat on the frontier. Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer's wife, Elizabeth, described an incident in June 1867 (based on an account in one of her husband's letters), when 300 Cheyennes swept down on Fort Wallace, where Custer was in command. A squad of black infantrymen from the 38th had arrived to pick up supplies, when the white garrison spilled out to form a firing line.

Suddenly, a wagon pulled by four mules tore out to the line of battle, Elizabeth wrote. "It was filled with Negroes, standing up, all firing in the direction of the Indians. The driver lashed the mules with his blacksnake, and roared at them as they ran. When the skirmish line was reached, the colored men leaped out and began firing again. No one had ordered them to leave their picket-station, but they were determined that no soldiering should be carried on in which their valor was not proved."

Despite the brave showing, the 38th Infantry was not to last. On March 3, 1869, a new law ordained a general reduction in the Army: the 38th and 41st regiments were consolidated into the new 24th Infantry, and the 39th and 40th merged to create the 25th Infantry. Occasionally, companies from the 24th and 25th infantries served with their mounted counterparts, sometimes engaging in heavy combat. The lion's share of adventure fell to the special corps of black Seminole scouts—Indians of largely African descent (SMITHSONIAN, August 1991)—who served with the 24th Infantry under Lt. John Bullis. On the whole, however, the African-American infantry regiments missed out on much of the glory won by the black cavalry.

Throughout the frontier era, black soldiers endured nearly unbearable conditions. Indeed, they complained of receiving the worst of everything, including surplus equipment and cast-off horses; many white officers openly bemoaned their assignments and some abused their troops. Maybe worst of all was local prejudice—and the Army did little if anything to help. In Texas, for example, when a sheriff killed a black Medal of Honor recipient, shooting him in the back, nothing was done. A Nebraskan who killed three black soldiers, including another Medal of Honor winner, also went unpunished. And it was nearly impossible for African-American soldiers to get commissions. One man from the 9th Cavalry said of the regiments at Fort Robinson, late in the century, "not a single colored soldier has been promoted from the ranks to the grade of an officer . . . the army is decidedly against it."

The demands of frontier warfare, however, led to wide dispersion of most regiments, which placed tremendous importance on the leadership qualities of noncommissioned officers. That was certainly true of the 9th Cavalry, scattered across the rough Texas landscape in tiny, undermanned posts. Yet the 9th's sergeants and corporals were



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precisely the men whom the Army thought most unsuited to soldiering and command: in the early years they were mostly former slaves, drawn primarily from the plantation country of Louisiana and Mississippi. Often illiterate in the beginning, these officers—and their troopers—displayed a voracious appetite for education, and they ultimately set the standard for professionalism. Desertion rates for many regiments surpassed 25 percent a year; not so among the buffalo soldiers. As the service newspaper reported, “The Ninth Cavalry astonished the Army by reporting not a single desertion for twelve months.”

Before 1867 came to a close, the 9th Cavalry’s raw recruits won the respect of every armed opponent anywhere close to Texas. Christmas day found Capt. William Frohock and Company K on a patrol at the Pecos River, 75 miles east of Fort Stockton. The troopers settled for the night in empty Fort Lancaster, a long-abandoned post. Three men, privates Anderson Trimble, Edward Bowers and William Sharpe, stood guard over the horse herd as the troops stretched out to sleep.

The next day, Trimble, Bowers and Sharpe found themselves surrounded by armed men on horseback. They were lassoed and dragged to their deaths behind their assailants’ horses. Meanwhile, the strangers turned to the company holed up in Fort Lancaster.

Captain Frohock had trouble making out just who was firing on his detachment (the attackers were most likely Lipans, Kickapoos and Mexican outlaws). In the flurry of shouting men, ricocheting bullets, swirling dust and

pounding hooves, he estimated that at least 900 opponents encircled his men. If his guess was correct, it meant that Company K—fewer than 70 troopers—faced more men than served in the entire 9th Cavalry.

The inexperienced buffalo soldiers threw down a curtain of fire from their seven-shot Spencer carbines. For hours they fought, pumping bullets out of their carbines so fast the barrels grew blisteringly hot. Finally the enemy drew off, carrying away 20 dead and scores of wounded. The buffalo soldiers had triumphed; never again would the Lipans and Kickapoos dare to attack them so directly.

For eight years, the 9th Cavalry fought numerous pitched battles against Lipans, Kickapoos, Kiowas, Comanches—and the people destined to be their most determined foes, the Apaches. Then in late 1875, Col. Edward Hatch took the regiment into the Apache homeland, the New Mexico Territory. There he assumed the role of department commander, and his men devoted themselves to battling various Apache war parties that frequently struck out on raids off the reservations.

These warriors had long since mastered mountain guerrilla warfare. Unlike the Sioux, Cheyennes, Kiowas or Comanches, who fought primarily to keep ranchers and hunters off their homelands, the Apaches had lived for centuries among Hispanic settlements, alternately raiding and trading with neighboring villages. They knew how to lay expert ambushes in the steep cliffs lining the valleys of the Southwest, how to throw off pursuers by leaving behind elaborate dummy camps, how to camouflage cuts

in telegraph lines by splicing them with leather thongs.

The 9th was in the field constantly. Pvt. Henry Bush remembered being "continuously on scouting service which subjected us to great exposure, such as sleeping in rains and snows in the mountains unprotected from the elements, sometimes no sleep for two days, sometimes subsisting on the most meager diet, sometimes marches of ninety miles . . . in a hot scorching sun." And when they did make contact, the fighting was ferocious.

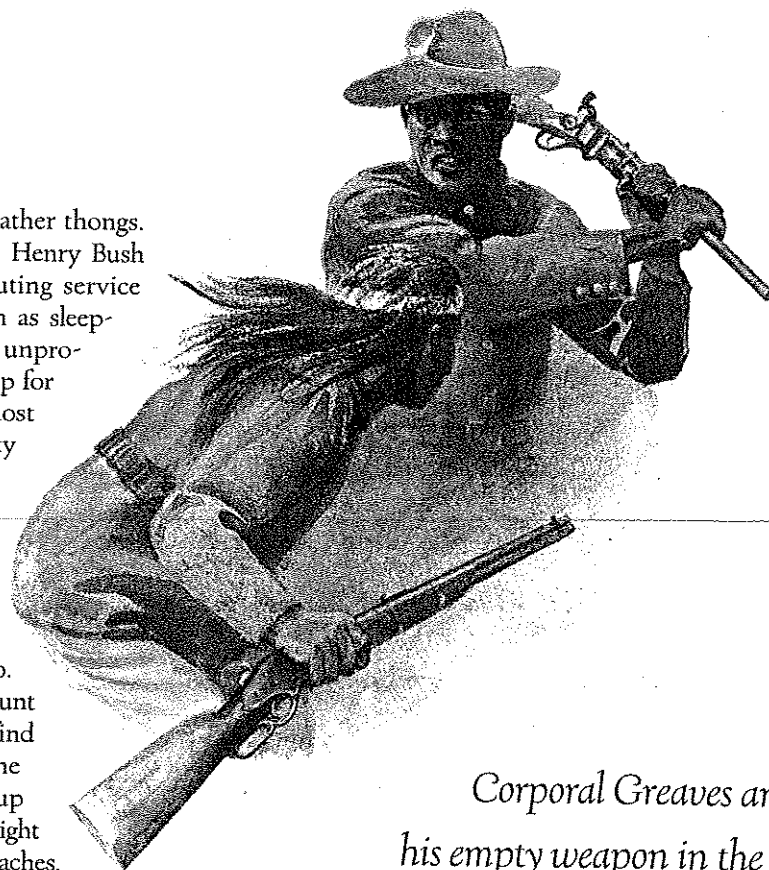
In January 1877, Capt. Charles D. Beyer learned that a party of Apaches had broken out of the San Carlos reservation in Arizona and had crossed into New Mexico. He issued orders to Lt. Henry Wright to mount six troopers and three Navajo scouts and find their trail. On a cold, clear, winter day, the detachment of buffalo soldiers clambered up through the rocky Florida Mountains, riding right up to the edge of a camp of more than 40 Apaches.

The troops immediately saw how precarious their situation was: ten men, deep in the mountains and far from help, surrounded by nearly five times their number. Even worse, they no longer carried the rapid-firing Spencer carbines, which carried seven rounds in a tubular magazine; they now used single-shot Springfields, while many Apaches wielded new multi-shot Winchesters.

Lieutenant Wright decided to brazen it out. He trotted his horse straight into the heart of the camp, followed by his tiny squad, and shouted for the Apache chiefs to meet him in council. The troopers slid off their saddles as Wright spoke to the Indians through a Navajo scout. He and his men, he said, would be happy to accept their surrender. The chiefs apparently did not laugh; as the negotiations continued, the soldiers noticed that the women and children were silently slipping away while the warriors encircled the detachment.

Suddenly Wright shouted for his men to break through the ring. At the first step forward, the Apaches shouldered their rifles. In an instant, 26-year-old Cpl. Clinton Greaves swiveled his carbine toward the closest warrior and squeezed off its single round. Leaping toward the line of warriors, he seized the barrel of his weapon and arced its wooden shoulder stock through the air, slamming it into the body of one of his foes.

As this powerful trooper—"a big fine looking soldier," another trooper recalled—swung left and right, the rest of the detachment fired and reloaded madly. Lieutenant Wright shot down a nearby Apache; privates Dick Mackadoo and Richard Epps shot three more warriors as lead



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snapped through the air in every direction. The troopers frantically mounted and galloped through the opening Corporal Greaves had created. After a few seconds more of intense fighting, the Apaches themselves scattered to the mountain peaks for cover, intending to challenge the soldiers from afar. The troopers not only managed to get away unscathed, but left with 11 Apache horses.

Wright and his men earned nearly legendary status within the regiment for their brave stand in the Florida Mountains. But the highest recognition of all went to Corporal Greaves: on June 26, 1879, he became the second trooper in the 9th Cavalry to earn the Medal of Honor.

Soon the regiment came to grips with the leader who would prove to be its deadliest enemy of all: Victorio, chief of the Warm Springs band of Apaches. Tension had been building as the Bureau of Indian Affairs tried to shift his people to the San Carlos reservation in Arizona. After two escapes from San Carlos, Victorio and his band were permitted to remain at a reservation in their native New Mexico. Just when a measure of peace seemed to be in hand, lawmen arrived to arrest the chief for murder. In August 1879, he fled the reservation with 60 followers, soon to multiply to more than 300. The Victorio War had begun.

The men of the 9th Cavalry quickly learned how Victorio had won his reputation as a great war chief. He selected as one of his first targets the horse herd of Company E; on September 4, the Indians killed five troopers, wound-

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ed three more and rode off with 46 animals. Shortly afterward, Victorio unleashed a well-planned ambush in the canyon of the Los Animas River, leaving as many as eight buffalo soldiers dead or wounded.

After these setbacks, Col. Hatch assigned Maj. Albert B. Morrow to lead the pursuit. Morrow's hard-riding troopers repeatedly made contact with Victorio's forces, engaging in bitter but indecisive fighting. The skillful Apache would slip away over the border into Mexico, where the 9th Cavalry's scouts could not follow.

On May 13, 1880, Sgt. George Jordan of Company K learned precisely where the Apaches were. This native of Tennessee had just made camp with 25 men at a stage station, having spent a long day escorting a train of supply wagons. As the detachment prepared for a well-earned night of rest, a courier rode in with a desperate message: Victorio was headed for the settlement of Fort Tularosa.

The sergeant called his men together. "They all said they would go on as far as they could," Jordan reported. At 8 o'clock in the evening, they began a hard march for the endangered village. At about 6 the next morning, the tired troopers rode into the silent town, its women and children peering out apprehensively through shuttered windows. "When they recognized us as troops," he recalled, "they came out of their houses waving towels and handkerchiefs for joy."

Sergeant Jordan boasted more than ten years of experience in the 9th Cavalry; he knew what it meant to command a detachment, and he knew how to fight the Apaches. After a brief rest, he set his men to work building a stockade. By the end of the afternoon, they were done; the men had not slept for at least 24 hours, but they could now lead the residents inside a hastily built fort.

As the sun dipped down to the west, Sergeant Jordan stood outside the stockade talking to a civilian when a shot cracked the quiet evening. Instantly dozens of bullets splattered the ground as Jordan and his companion sprinted for the fort. Soon scores of Apache warriors charged across the dry desert floor. "[They] tried time and time again to enter our works," Jordan reported, "but we repulsed them each time, and when they finally saw that we were masters of the situation they turned their attention to the stock and tried to run it off." Head-on attacks against an entrenched foe were not the Apache way; Victorio soon pulled away. "The whole action was short but exciting while it lasted, and after it was all over the townspeople congratulated us for having repulsed a band of more than 100."



Congress congratulated Jordan with the Medal of Honor.

Nine days later, a unit of Indian scouts severely shot up Victorio's camp, sending the chief flying into Mexico with Morrow's command snapping at his heels. The move set the stage for the final, decisive phase of the campaign—and shifted the burden to the rest of the buffalo soldiers: the men of the 10th Cavalry, led by Col. Benjamin Grierson, and those of the 24th and 25th infantries.

Grierson believed Victorio would reenter the United States in western Texas; to stop him, he decided to cast a net to ensnare the chief no matter which direction he turned. The key was water: only a handful of springs dotted the dry mountains southeast of El Paso. By guarding the most important water holes, and by posting a network of scouts along the Rio Grande, he could block any attempt to penetrate West Texas.

The night of July 29 found Grierson at Tenaja de los Palmos, a strategic water hole between Fort Quitman (to the west on the Rio Grande) and Eagle Springs (15 miles to the east). He had with him a half-dozen buffalo soldiers, one white officer and his 20-year-old son, Robert. Earlier that day, Grierson and his men had been met by three African-American troopers bearing a critical dispatch from the Rio Grande: the Apaches had been seen crossing the river into Texas.

It was no ordinary buffalo soldier who led the couriers; it was Lt. Henry O. Flipper, the first black graduate of West Point and an officer of the 10th Cavalry. "I rode 98 miles in 22 hours mostly at night, through a country the Indians were expected to traverse," he wrote. "I had no bad effects from the hard ride till I reached [Grierson's] tent. When I attempted to dismount, I found I was stiff and sore and fell from my horse to the ground. . . ."

After resting, Flipper left with orders that all available troops should make haste for Grierson's position. Meanwhile the colonel and his men spent the night throwing

Lieutenant Flipper, the only

African-American line officer, was the object of hatred by fellow officers.

up two stone breastworks atop the rocky ridge overlooking the water hole. Despite the desperate odds, Grierson had decided to make a stand. If he could deny Victorio access to the water in that canyon, he was certain that the Apaches would have to turn back to Mexico. The next morning, at about 4 o'clock, Lt. Leighton Finley rode in with reinforcements: a mere ten cavalrymen.

Young Robert Grierson would later scrawl in his journal a vivid account of the events that followed. Sometime after 8, as the little party finished breakfast, the scouts south of camp sent up the cry "Here come the Indians!" Then he saw them: dozens of long-haired warriors, rifles held at the ready as they nudged their horses through the canyon southeast of their position on the ridge.

As a dense cluster of Apaches rode slowly across the rough trail, the Indians heard the sound of galloping horses. Down Finley's buffalo soldiers came, snapping off shots as they thundered into the valley. "Several Indians hid in a hollow till Lt. F. passed, & then fired on his party," Robert wrote. "He had them on both sides of him & poured it into them thick & vice versa. The rifles sounded splendidly and you could hear the balls singing. Just as Lt. Finley was about to dislodge the Indians from behind a ledge, Capt. Viele's and Lt. Colladay's companies came & in the smoke and dust took F. for Indians and fired on him."

Capt. Charles Viele, Lieutenant Flipper and the troopers of Company C had just arrived from Fort Quitman. Now they fired on Finley by mistake; fortunately, both Viele and Finley pulled their men back to Grierson's breastworks. "All got back about the same time," wrote Robert, except one black trooper whose horse had been shot; after him galloped the resurgent warriors, convinced now that the battle had turned in their favor. "He got along as best he could—the Indians were nearly on him—he turned & fired his revolver & this checked them some."

Grierson ordered his men to fire. "We then let fly from our fortifications at the Indians about 300 yards off & golly!! You ought to've seen 'em turn tail & strike for the hills." In four hours of desperate fighting, the Apaches lost seven men; the 10th Cavalry, one trooper. The battle left Victorio short on food and water, and saddled with dead

and wounded; he had no choice but to retreat to Mexico.

In early August, he returned and slipped past Grierson's men on his way to another strategic water hole, Rattlesnake Springs. Determined to get there first, Grierson and his men covered 65 miles in 21 hours. The buffalo soldiers outpaced their fast-moving Indian foes as Grierson led them on a parallel path, keeping to the far side of a mountain range to mask their presence from the enemy.

The 10th Cavalry won the race, arriving in the early hours of August 6. "We got there and at once took position for a fight," Flipper recalled. Grierson laid out an elaborate ambush, sending Captain Viele with companies C and G to occupy the walls of the valley above the springs. "No lights or fires were allowed and we had to eat cold suppers without coffee," Flipper continued. "If [the Apaches] once got in as far as the

spring, we would have them surrounded and every vantage point occupied."

At 2 in the afternoon, the long, ragged band of Apaches rode into sight, ambling slowly through the bunchgrass and rocks and cactus on their tired horses. The Indians in the lead sensed that something was wrong and stopped their advance. When Viele saw them grow cautious, he gave orders to commence firing. The first of eight volleys of rifle fire erupted from the valley walls; Victorio's men scrambled for cover.

The master of the ambush had been ambushed himself—but the trap had been sprung too soon, and the long-range fire did little damage to the Indians. The Apaches, however, were desperate for water. Victorio rallied his men for an attack. Warriors on horseback surged across the valley floor, screaming their defiance and loosing shots at the dug-in buffalo soldiers. Just as the Apaches neared the springs, Capt. Louis H. Carpenter and Lt. Thaddeus Winfield Jones led companies H and B on a charge from one flank, crashing into the Apaches with carbines blazing. Victorio's men withdrew once again.

Over the next two hours, the firing died away to silence; Grierson knew better than to stage a pointless assault on Apaches holed up in the rocks. Then, as so often happened in battle, the unexpected occurred. At 4 o'clock a line of wagons rounded a mountain eight miles southeast



of the water hole. A party of warriors emerged from the rocks and scampered onto their ponies, undoubtedly relieved to find an easy target beyond the reach of Grierson's men (and probably hoping to get some water as well).

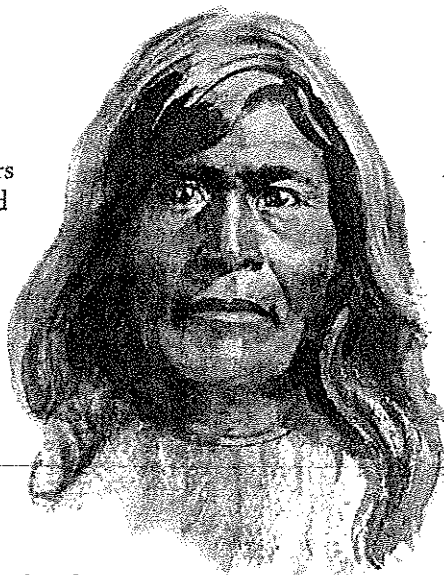
Suddenly the Apaches pulled up short—for out of the wagons poured the buffalo soldiers of the 24th Infantry, the escort for this supply train for the 10th Cavalry. These foot soldiers unleashed a devastating fire across the valley floor. The Indians turned and fled; and within a few days they fell back to Mexico.

On October 14, 1880, Mexican troops trapped Victorio's badly reduced forces, killing the great chief in the final assault. But the victory had already been won. The Victorio War was perhaps the most difficult campaign ever waged against the Apaches. It was also one of the few Apache wars fought largely by regular troops, not Apache scouts enlisted by the Army—and those troops were largely buffalo soldiers. They out-marched, out-fought and out-generated a foe often considered to be the hardest marching, hardest fighting, most skillful enemy in frontier history.

Over the remaining years of the frontier era, the buffalo soldiers stayed at the center of events. The 10th Cavalry, for example, played a significant role in the last major act of Indian warfare in the Southwest: the Geronimo Campaign of 1885-86. The 9th Cavalry and the 25th Infantry also joined operations against the Sioux in 1890-91.

Lieutenant Flipper, however, endured a sad sequel to the Victorio War. As the only African-American line officer in the 10th, he remained the object of special hatred by many of his fellow officers. As quartermaster at Fort Davis, Texas, in July 1881 he discovered commissary money was missing from his trunk. On December 8, 1881, a court-martial found Flipper innocent of embezzling the funds—but guilty of "conduct unbecoming an officer." (Historians believe the court-martial occurred as a result of Flipper's friendship, albeit platonic, with a white woman.) Expelled from the military, he worked as a civil engineer, and as a translator, but he failed in his unceasing efforts to clear his name. Finally, on December 13, 1976, after long campaigning by Flipper's descendants and defenders, the Army's board of corrections exonerated him, issuing an honorable discharge 36 years after his death.

As the buffalo soldiers watched the promising age of Reconstruction—the nation's first civil rights era—come crashing down into the rubble of segregation, they saw themselves as the last bastion of public service for African-



Americans. "They are possessed of the notion," wrote one chaplain, "that the colored people of the whole country are more or less affected by their conduct in the Army."

In the Spanish-American War and in the Philippine insurrections, these regiments added pages to their thick record of accomplishments. Ironically, these units were largely kept out of combat in the two world wars, although African-American volunteers and draftees

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fought courageously in France, Italy and Germany. Yet even those who saw combat suffered severe prejudice; only a handful received awards for valor. On January 13, 1997, President Bill Clinton took a small step to rectify this injustice by awarding the Medal of Honor to seven African-Americans who had served in World War II.

In recent years, interest in the buffalo soldiers has flourished. They have been commemorated with a postage stamp, historical-reenactment groups and a 1997 cable television movie. Much of the new recognition stems from the efforts of one black officer who strongly identifies with his 19th-century predecessors. In 1982 he arrived at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (birthplace of the 10th Cavalry), and was dismayed to find not one memorial to the buffalo soldiers' "incredible contribution to the American West." That officer was Colin Powell. In 1992, he returned to Fort Leavenworth—this time as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—to dedicate a monument by sculptor Eddie Dixon. It was a fitting tribute from a military that hesitated to accept African-Americans, learned to depend on them, and finally—under the leadership of a modern black soldier—has come to honor their memory. WA

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In 1880, Apache war chief Victorio and his men, seeking water at Rattlesnake Springs in Texas, found the buffalo soldiers instead.