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COMPILED MILITARY SERVICE RECORDS OF
VOLUNTEER UNION SOLDIERS WHO SERVED WITH THE
UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS:
54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment (Colored)

Introduction

On the 20 rolls of this microfilm are reproduced the compiled military service records of volunteer Union soldiers belonging to the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment (Colored) which was part of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). The USCT included 7 numbered cavalry regiments; 14 numbered artillery regiments; 144 numbered infantry regiments; plus Brigade Bands Nos. 1 & 2 (Corps d'Afrique and US Col'd Troops); Powell's Regiment Colored Infantry; Southard's Company Colored Infantry; Quartermaster Detachment; Pioneer Corps, 1st Division, 16th Army Corps; Unassigned Company A Colored Infantry and Unassigned USCT. There are also miscellaneous service cards arranged alphabetically by surname at the end of the unit records. In addition there are miscellaneous personal papers arranged alphabetically by surname. The records reproduced herein are part of the carded records, volunteer organizations: Civil War, 1861-1865, in the Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's-1917, Record Group 94.

Background

United States Colored Troops

Since the time of the American Revolution, African Americans have volunteered to serve their country in time of war. The Civil War was no exception. Official sanction was the difficulty. In the fall of 1862 there were four Union regiments of African Americans raised in New Orleans, LA: the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Native Guard, and the 1st Regiment Heavy Artillery (African Descent). The 1st South Carolina Infantry (African Descent) was not officially organized until January 1863; however, three companies of the regiment were on coastal expeditions as early as November 1862. Similarly, the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry was not mustered into Federal service until January 1863, even though the regiment had already participated in the action at Island Mound, MO, on October 27, 1862. These early unofficial regiments received little Federal support, but they showed the strength of the African American soldier's desire to fight for freedom.

The first official authorization to employ African Americans in Federal service was the Second Confiscation and Militia Act of July 17, 1862. The language in this act provided President Abraham Lincoln the means to receive into the military or naval service persons of African descent for the purpose of constructing entrenchments, performing camp duty, or doing any labor for which they were found

competent. Lincoln did not authorize the use of African Americans in combat until the Emancipation Proclamation was issued as General Order No. 1 on January 2, 1863.

In late January 1863, Gov. John Andrew of Massachusetts received permission to raise a regiment of African American soldiers. The pace of organizing additional regiments was very slow. In March Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton sent Gen. Lorenzo Thomas to the lower Mississippi Valley to recruit free and contraband African Americans. Thomas was given broad authority. He was to explain the administration's policy regarding African American soldiers and recruit volunteers to raise and command them. Stanton wanted all officers of such units to be white, but that policy was softened to allow African American surgeons and chaplains. By the end of the war, in addition to the chaplains and surgeons, there were 87 African American officers. Thomas' endeavor was very successful, and on May 22, 1863, the Bureau of Colored Troops was established to coordinate and organize regiments from all parts of the country. Created under General Order No. 143, the bureau was responsible for handling "all matters relating to the organization of Colored Troops." The bureau was directly under the Adjutant General's Office and its procedures and rules were specific and strict. All African American regiments were now to be designated United States Colored Troops (USCT). At this time there were some African American regiments with state names and a few regiments in the Department of the Gulf designated as Corps d'Afrique. All these were ultimately assimilated into the USCT, even though some of the regiments retained their state designations.

To facilitate recruiting in the states of Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, and eventually Kentucky, the War Department issued General Order No. 329 on October 3, 1863. Section 6 of the order stated that if any citizen should offer his or her slave for enlistment into the military service, that person would, "if such slave be accepted, receive from the recruiting officer a certificate thereof, and become entitled to compensation for the service or labor of said slave, not exceeding the sum of three hundred dollars, upon filing a valid deed of manumission and of release, and making satisfactory proof of title." For this reason, some records of manumission are contained in the compiled service records reproduced in this publication.

The USCT fought in 39 major engagements and over 400 lesser ones. African American soldiers earned 16 Congressional Medals of Honor. As it was in other units, the death toll from disease was very high in the USCT. Deaths from disease and battle totaled 37,000. The last regiment of the USCT was mustered out of Federal service in December 1867.

54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment (Colored)

Of all the African American regiments, this one, raised by Gov. John Andrew, is perhaps the most famous. Although it was a Massachusetts volunteer regiment, the majority of its men actually came from other states. The regiment's enlisted personnel were African American, including two sons of the prominent abolitionist Frederick Douglass, but its officers were white. Gov. Andrew chose Robert Gould Shaw to command the unit; and Shaw selected his staff, nearly all of whom had military experience. The first recruits were raised at Boston on February 9, 1863, and by the end of the following month, four companies had been organized and mustered into service. Three more companies were mustered in on April 23, and the remaining three on May 13, 1863. The regiment, which consisted of approximately 1,200 men at its inception, was officially organized at Camp Meigs, Readville, MA, on May 13, 1863, to

serve three years. Its field and staff components consisted of surgeon, assistant surgeon, adjutant, quartermaster, chaplain, lieutenant colonel, and two colonels. There were ten companies, usually with a captain in charge of each.

The 54th Massachusetts left Boston on May 28, 1863, on the steamer *De Molay*. It arrived June 3 at Hilton Head, SC, where it was attached to the Department of the South, Gen. David Hunter commanding. The regiment immediately moved to Beaufort, SC, and from June 4-8 was at Thompson's Plantation. After moving to St. Simon's Island, the 54th took part in an expedition up the Altamaha River to Darien, GA. It returned to Hilton Head on June 25 and in July formed part of Gen. Alfred H. Terry's expedition to James Island, SC. At Secessionville the regiment saw its first combat. Three companies on picket duty were attacked by rebel forces. They routed the enemy, but not before suffering 43 casualties.

The 54th then proceeded to Morris Island where it became part of the force besieging Charleston, SC, and the forts protecting its harbor. On the night of July 18, the regiment was ordered to lead the assault on Fort Wagner. Advancing to the outer works, the 54th planted its regimental flag on the parapet, but the struggle was soon seen to be hopeless and the attacking forces withdrew. The remnant of the regiment, together with a few men from other commands, was rallied about 700 yards from the fort by Capt. Luis F. Emilio, the only officer above the grade of lieutenant not killed or wounded. Among the casualties was the 54th's commander, Col. Shaw. The position was held throughout the night in expectation of a sortie by the enemy. In the morning the regiment was relieved by the 10th Connecticut. The 54th remained on duty in the trenches and in fatigue duty throughout the siege, and when the Confederates evacuated the fort on September 7, 1863, it was among the first to enter. Col. Edward N. Halowell took active command of the regiment on October 17, having recovered from wounds he suffered in the original assault on Fort Wagner.

The 54th took part in the siege against Fort Sumter and the city of Charleston from September 1863 until January 1864, then moved to Hilton Head Island, SC. There the regiment participated in the successful expedition to and capture of Jacksonville, FL. On February 20, 1864, it took part in the battle of Olustee, FL, sustaining heavy losses. The 54th returned to Morris Island on April 18 and remained there throughout the succeeding summer and autumn.

In November 1864, while companies B and F stayed at Morris Island, eight companies of the 54th again transferred to Hilton Head. On November 29 these companies moved with Gen. John P. Hatch's division to Boyd's Neck on the Broad River and participated in the battle of Honey Hill on November 30. The units proceeded to Graham's Neck on December 20 and on January 15, 1865, connected with Sherman's Army at Pocotaligo, SC. From January 15 to February 23, they marched to Charleston, skirmishing all the way. On February 27, 1865, the 54th entered Charleston where it was joined by the companies which had remained at Morris Island. The regiment was on duty in Charleston and Savannah, GA, from February 27 to March 27. After that, it had duty at various points in South Carolina until August 17, 1865.

The 54th was mustered out at Mount Pleasant, SC, on August 20, 1865, returned to Boston by steamer, and there on September 1, 1865, was discharged.

During its service in the Civil War, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment (Colored) lost 270 men: 5

officers and 104 enlisted men killed in battle or mortally wounded; 1 officer and 160 enlisted men died from disease.

Records Description

Compiled service records consist of a jacket-envelope for each soldier, labeled with his name, rank, unit, and card numbers. The compilation of service records of Union soldiers began in 1890 under the direction of Col. Fred C. Ainsworth, head of the Record and Pension Office of the Adjutant General's Office, Department of War. Information from company muster rolls, regimental returns, descriptive books, hospital rolls, and other records was copied verbatim onto cards. A separate card was prepared each time an individual name appeared on a document. These cards were numbered on the back, and these numbers were entered onto the outside jacket containing the cards. The carded information was verified by a separated operation of comparison; great care was taken to ensure that the cards were accurate.

A typical jacket contains card abstracts of entries found in original records relating to the soldier and original documents relating solely to that soldier. Examples of the latter include enlistment papers, substitute certificates, casualty sheets, death reports, prisoner-of-war memorandums, and correspondence. Unique to the records of the USCT are deeds of manumission, oaths of allegiance, proof of ownership, certificates of monetary award, and bills of sale. These items appear most frequently in units recruited in the border states of Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland. These states remained in the Union but were slave states. Jackets and cards include a section labeled "bookmark" which was reserved for cross-references to other records relating to the individual. The service records are arranged by regiment or independent battalion/company and thereunder alphabetically by surname of the soldier.

The unjacketed miscellaneous cards were accumulated by the War Department with the expectation that they would be incorporated in individual compiled service records. However, this expectation was never fulfilled, because either insufficient or contradictory information made it impossible to associate the cards or papers with a particular soldier's service record.

Related Records

Among the records of the Adjutant General's Office in the National Archives are many of the original records that were abstracted or "carded" by the Record and Pension Office. These include, in particular, descriptive books of volunteer organizations: Civil War, 1861-65. Other series in Record Group 94 that may contain information relating to volunteer Union soldiers who served with the USCT include carded records relating to staff officers: Civil War, 1861-65, arranged alphabetically by surname of officer; and carded medical records, volunteers: Mexican and Civil Wars, 1846-65.

Record Group 94 includes a card index for the USCT, reproduced as Microfilm Publication M589, *Index to Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with U.S. Colored Troops*, which may be used to locate the regiment of a USCT soldier. An index card gives the name of the soldier and his rank, as well as the unit in which he served; sometimes there is a cross-reference to his service in other units or organizations. This index does not cover the miscellaneous card abstracts and personal papers included in this microfilm publication. Other related records from RG 94 include a compilation of historical extracts and official papers concerning the military service of African Americans from the

colonial period through the Civil War entitled *The Negro in the Military Service of the United States 1639-1886*. This compilation is reproduced as Microfilm Publication M858. Record Group 94 also contains carded medical records. Records relating to the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment (Colored) include bound record books and unbound regimental papers. The first group consists of letters and endorsements sent, a register of letters received, orders issued and received, casualties, regimental and company descriptive books and company morning reports. The second group includes unbound regimental papers: letters and telegrams received; quarterly and monthly returns; rosters; casualty lists; courts-martial proceedings and sentences; morning reports; descriptive lists of deserters; lists of men detailed; recommendations for appointments; records of resignations and discharges; company inspection reports; and muster rolls. These records have been reproduced as Microfilm Publication M1659, *Records of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment (Colored), 1863-1865*.

Other record groups having information pertaining to the USCT include RG 105, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands; RG 110, Records of the Provost Marshal General's Bureau (Civil War); RG 393, Records of the U. S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920; RG 109, Records of the War Department Collection of Confederate Records, and RG 15, Records of the Veterans Administration.

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