

Shoulder to shoulder as comrades tried: black and white Union veterans and Civil War memory.

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"Shoulder to Shoulder as Comrades Tried":

Black and White Union Veterans and Civil War Memory

Andre Fleche

On May 6, 1864, the 30th Regiment, United States Colored Troops (USCT), prepared to go into battle as one of the first African American units to fight alongside the Army of the Potomac. The 30th, part of the First Brigade, Fourth Division, of Ambrose Burnside's Ninth Corps, had spent most of the Battle of the Wilderness guarding wagon trains and the Rapidan River crossings at Germanna Ford. On the night of May 6, however, the troops found themselves marching behind Union lines on the double-quick in order to stem a surprise Confederate flank attack on the Union right and save the Sixth Corps and potentially the entire federal army from rout. The 30th's brigade commander galloped up and down the line of march shouting, "Now, boys, for the honor of the black brigade! Show the Sixth Corps you are men! This is your chance!"

The soldiers of the 30th did not get their chance that night. Remnants of the Sixth Corps stabilized the situation before the unit arrived on the scene. Still, the regiment did not leave the Wilderness unnoticed by the Army of the Potomac. Free S. Bowley, a young white lieutenant with the 30th and an advocate of the preservation of the memory of the deeds of his men well into the early years of the twentieth century, recalled the scene as his brigade marched past the Union Fifth Corps front on the way to Spotsylvania: "The soldiers thronged to the road to see the colored division. Our men, aware that they were objects of criticism, closed up their ranks, brought their guns to the right shoulder, and presented a creditable military appearance." Still, many of the white soldiers, skeptical of the military abilities of African Americans and **[End Page 175]** harboring racist sentiments, "were not disposed to let them pass without some 'chaffing.'" The black soldiers, in the words of Bowley, "were quite equal" to the occasion, and they responded by reminding the Fifth Corps men of the cause all Union soldiers shared. "One colored soldier, with a clear, mellow voice, raised the song: 'Will you, will you, Fight for de Union?' Instantly the whole line took up the chorus: 'Ah-ha! Ah-ha! We'll fight for Uncle Sam!'" In that moment, the men of the 30th won over their audience. Applause erupted from the Fifth Corps lines.¹

The Army of the Potomac's Fifth Corps is perhaps the last place from which to expect such a show of interracial solidarity among soldiers. Once commanded by Fitz-John Porter and full of conservative regulars from the antebellum army, it had been one of George B. McClellan's pet fighting units. McClellan, Porter, and much of the Army of the Potomac had consistently opposed confiscation, emancipation, and black enrollment. When African American soldiers took the field in 1864, however, the opinion of many in the Army's rank and file gradually shifted to one of acceptance of black troops as fellow warriors. A similar process was at work in other Union armies. African American soldiers earned a reputation for bravery and increasing acceptance as veteran Union troops at the Battles of Fort Wagner, Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend, Olustee, and the Crater, among others. This transformation in opinion proved neither complete nor easy. Black troops battled inequality in pay, faced constant discrimination from white comrades-in-arms, and received an unfair share of noncombat labor duty more often than they fought Confederates. By the end of the war, however, white and black veterans found that a common cause in ending the rebellion, a sense of shared experience and hardship as soldiers, and bravery on the battlefield proved more important than race in determining the worth of a fighting man. That sentiment persisted overwhelmingly among Union veterans into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²

Throughout the postwar years, prior military service...

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