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**Foundation**  
*Telling the Army Story...  
one Soldier at a time*

# Voices of the Past

## CIVIL WAR

### Highlights:

- How to utilize the African-American population posed a peculiar issue for Northern and Southern leaders.
- The Emancipation Proclamation created a large recruiting pool for the Union Army.
- Sixteen U.S. Colored Troops received the Medal of Honor.

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## Earning the Right to Die: United States Colored Troops

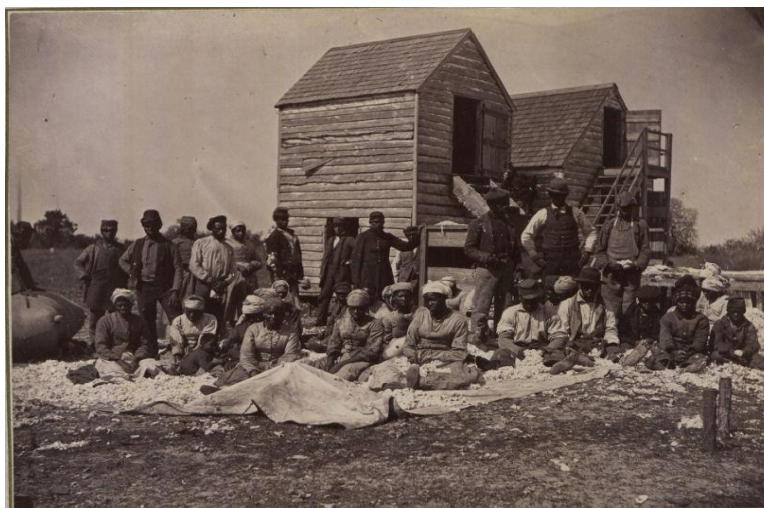
### (Washington, D.C., 1861-1865)

Few people are aware today that some of the first black Union soldiers in the Civil War were liberated slaves, known as "contrabands", who were impressed into service as laborers and supply troops when their home territories were conquered by the Federal army.

When Union Secretary of War Simon Cameron issued orders to arm newly freed slaves in South Carolina in 1862, he was quickly overruled by President Abraham Lincoln. But Lincoln would soon change his mind. In August of that year the president's new opinion was formalized through a War Department order authorizing the recruitment of blacks in exchange for full emancipation. This authorization gave state governors and military district commanders the freedom to muster black regiments. This order,

along with the Emancipation Proclamation, soon resulted in thousands of emancipated and escaped slaves, contrabands, and freedmen flocking to recruiters charged with raising the manpower for new regiments

In August 1863, the Federal Government established its first Colored Infantry and Cavalry regiments, comprised of contrabands and escaped slaves. By the end of the year, there were two Cavalry and ten Infantry regiments in Federal service, operating in the Virginia and North Carolina tidewater regions. In 1864, the Federal Government took responsibility for all black troops in present and future service Except for four units – the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry,



Contrabands on General T.F. Drayton's plantation, Hilton Head 1862. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Military History Institute, MOLLUS-MASS Collection



President Abraham Lincoln. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

*"...all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free..."*  
- The Emancipation Proclamation



Colonel Robert G. Shaw, commanded the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

and the 29th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry – all existing state regiments and units in the Corps d’Afrique were reconstituted as part of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). The existing regiments were given new designations, beginning with the 11th United States Colored Infantry and the 2nd United States Colored Cavalry Regiments. New regiments, including Heavy Artillery Regiments, were all also incorporated as part of the USCT.

Initially greeted with controversy and some hostility from their fellow northern Soldiers, black Soldiers were used only for manual labor in the rear at first. After the first black units – particularly the 1st South Carolina Infantry and 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiments – proved their worth in battle, they were increasingly used in a front-line combat role. By 1864, some United States Colored Troops regiments were recognized as being virtual “shock troops,” their morale and quality equal to some of the best and most famous units in either army.

The black Soldier was not immune to discrimination. Arguments and fights with white Soldiers were common; nor was it unheard of for officers to join in the mistreatment. Racial prejudice, part of the culture at that time, cast African-Americans as inferiors and extended throughout the War Department, making it extremely difficult for black soldiers to become officers. By the end of the war, there were fewer than 100 black lieutenants in the entire Union Army. The most galling discrimination – unequal pay for black soldiers – was enacted by the Federal Government. Initially, black soldiers regardless of rank were paid \$10 per month with a \$3 deduction for clothing and equipment. White soldiers, on the other hand, were paid

a \$13 monthly salary and given their clothing and equipment at no cost.

By the end of the war, some 170 regiments of USCT cavalry, infantry, and artillery were formed, comprising over 186,000 men – ten percent of the entire force. The greatest testament to their bravery is the sixteen black soldiers who were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

### Sources

Adapted from *Defending the Long Road to Freedom: The Story of Black Soldiers in the American Army (1770-1953)*. “Earning the Right to Die: The Civil War Experience: 4. The United States Colored Troops” & “5. The Role of Black Troops in the Union Army.” CD-ROM. Army Heritage Center Foundation. 2004.



Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, Fort Lincoln. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Military History Institute, MOLLUS-MASS Collection