

Buffalo Soldiers from the 10th U.S. Cavalry stand in a New Mexico camp.



HENRY A. SCHMIDT, 1891, PHOTO COURTESY PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVE, (NMHM/DCA), NEGATIVE # 058556

THE Buffalo Soldiers

LITTLE-KNOWN HORSEMEN OF HISTORY

Newly freed slaves joined cavalry regiments after the Civil War, charting their futures in the American West on horseback.

By Anna Sochocky

Horses pick a path, nose to tail, across a rocky creek bed. Above, a canopy of ghost-like sycamores block the sun and sight of the riders. The riders, once slaves and now soldiers, ride with one mission in mind: to capture or kill Victorio, war chief of the Chihenne Apaches.

It is Sept. 18, 1879, and more than 100 soldiers from Company B and Company E of the U.S. 9th Cavalry have tracked Victorio, along with 60 of his warriors, to the base of Las Animas Creek, deep in the maze of the Black Ridge Mountains, which will one day become part of New Mexico.

Without warning, a hail of bullets and arrows rain down on the soldiers. Horses are shot dead from underneath their riders. Scrambling to dismount and reach for their rifles, the men, who will later come to be recognized as the Buffalo Soldiers, are pinned between the canyon walls surrounding the river. Gunfire ricochets off canyon walls. The soldiers, having ridden into an ambush, are engaged in a struggle to the death.



A THIRST FOR LAND

The Union Army's 1865 victory in the Civil War meant freedom for thousands of enslaved African Americans, but life in the war's aftermath still included lynching, segregation and prejudice.

During the Civil War, about 180,000 black soldiers fought for the Union Army (with an additional nearly 20,000 serving in the navy), and an estimated 40,000 Army soldiers died, most of those deaths a result of disease or infection. Debate about the continued service by black men during peacetime reached a fever-pitch after the armistice. Some argued that the African American men should be forbidden from enlisting, while others reasoned that those in the all-black Union regiments had served with distinction.

The nation's thirst to settle the Western frontier ended the debate. The U.S. Congress answered the call for troops on July 28, 1866, establishing two mounted cavalry and four infantry (later consolidated to two) all-black units in a peacetime army. Soldiers enlisted in droves. A five-year enlistment guaranteed \$13 each month, and a future that included shelter, food and freedom. Enlistees worked seven days a week, apart from July 4 and Dec. 25.

The mounted units, the 9th and 10th Cavalries, and the infantry regiments, the 24th and 25th, were dispatched to Texas, Arizona, Colorado, the Dakotas and New Mexico for two purposes: law enforcement, including capturing horse thieves, and military campaigns against Native Americans. In part, the soldiers were tasked with orders to protect white settlers from what the U.S. Army termed the "Apache Menace" and were ordered to subdue tribal members and forcibly relocate them to government-sponsored reservations.

Buffalo Soldiers were stationed at Diamond Creek, about 15 miles west of Chloride, New Mexico, in 1892.

HENRY A. SCHMIDT, 1892, PHOTO COURTESY PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVE, (NMHM/DCA), NEGATIVE # 012828





John Denny, a 9th Cavalry sergeant, received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his bravery in his regiment's battle with Apache leader Victorio.

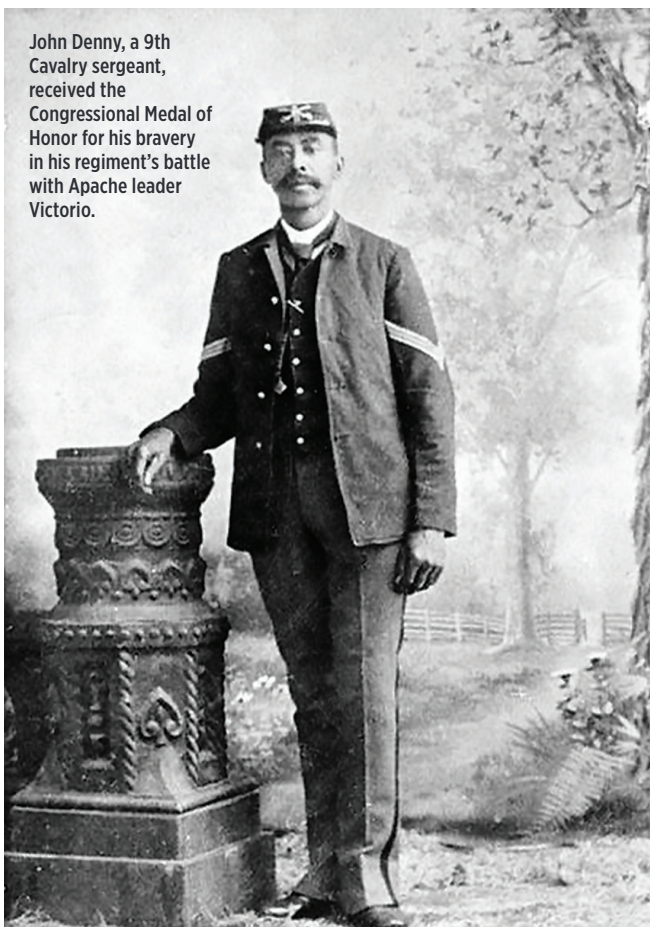


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TAMING THE WEST

Daily life on the Western frontier was especially inhospitable for the soldiers. Disease and dysentery, a result of unsanitary living conditions, claimed dozens of lives. Creek beds equaled bathing facilities. Poorly ventilated and vermin-infested barracks resulted in widespread diarrhea, bronchitis and tuberculosis. Carb-heavy diets of bread, beans and sweet potatoes lacked variety. Hard tack, a cracker made from flour, water and a little salt, sustained many.

Stifling heat in summer, subzero temperatures in winter, and crosswinds strong enough to unseat the most skilled horsemen jeopardized missions too. Boots fell apart. Horses collapsed and died from the strain and insubstantial food. Dust devils, swirling tornadoes of wind and sand, encrusted eyelids and blinded vision. A misstep could send a soldier and his horse catapulting over a rocky precipice to certain death.

Gear matched the quality of the food. Broken or worn saddles sat atop horses old enough to be retired. Soldiers were equipped only with a poncho, a blanket, a feed bag

Soldiers from the 9th U.S. Cavalry mount their horses for a scouting mission.



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and oats, a sheath to hold a rifle, a saber and a canteen; a recreational camper today would be more prepared.

New Mexico territory attracted a mishmash of characters—including cattle ranchers and rustlers, merchants and outlaws, cowboys and soldiers. Disputes arose like wild fire. White settlers illegally staked out land protected by Indian treaty. Racial prejudice by local citizens, whom the black military were sworn to protect, ignited false charges against the soldiers. White commanders turned down posts to command black units on many occasions.

Amid the harrowing circumstances, cavalry soldiers built and repaired frontier outposts and military forts. In the saddle, they surveyed and mapped unknown terrain, and hunted for and secured watering holes. Soldiers guarded and escorted the U.S. mail stagecoaches. Illegal gun trafficking and alcohol sales to Native Americans required policing. Hundreds of miles of telegraph poles were strung by infantry men, and on occasion soldiers laid train tracks side by side with railroad workers.

Yet, even in the face of inferior treatment, black cavalry and infantry members embraced their twin mottos—"We Can: We Will" and "Ready And Forward"—with pride.



A STRUGGLE TO THE DEATH

The Indian Wars from 1860 to 1890 slowed Western expansion, but one by one, Native American tribes were crushed by the U.S. Army's might.

The Apache Tribe, once based in Arizona and New Mexico, was the last to resist. The U.S. government banished them to



HEROES HONORED

three overcrowded reservations, one in Arizona and two in New Mexico. Demoralized by the conditions his people faced, Chief Victorio and 60 warriors escaped Arizona's San Carlos reservation in 1877, determined to return to their native lands at Ojo Caliente in New Mexico. Poor living conditions had taken a toll. The close band of Apache warriors reverted to murderous rampages, torturing and killing settlers, stealing horses and raiding mine sites to survive. Hit-and-run attacks and disappearance into the mountains were their only strategies.

On Sept. 18, 1879, Victorio's luck ran out.

The 9th Cavalry spent months scouting for evidence of Victorio and his band of warriors. Reconnaissance parties often covered 20 miles in the saddle each day searching for evidence of Apache bands. The average length of a scouting expedition numbered 14 days with more than 280 miles logged by each soldier.

Colonel Edward Hatch, a rare white commander of the 9th Cavalry, noted the strain shouldered by the soldiers and their horses when he wrote, "... the work performed by these troops is most arduous, horses worn to mere shadows, men nearly without boots, shoes and clothing. That the loss in horses may be understood when following the Indians in the Black Range the horses were without anything to eat five days except what they nibbled from piñon pines..."

Following a tip from a Native scout, Company B of the 9th Cavalry ventured into the Black Range Mountains on that Sept. 18—only to find that they were riding into a trap laid by Victorio and his men. Camouflaged by beds of leaves and branches, Victorio's men opened fire from the protection of shelves in the canyon walls. Unable to move forward or retreat, bullets and arrows showered the stunned soldiers for hours. Casualties, both horse and human, mounted. One victim, a young private, lay wounded and trapped by the firefight.


Heroes are made in a moment, and the moment in Massacre Canyon belonged to Company B Sgt. John Denny. Seeing his injured private, Denny weaved into the shower of assault, picked up his wounded soldier, and spirited him to safety.

Two nearby cavalry companies, hearing echoes of gunfire, located the encircled regiments but soon were pinned down, unable to save their comrades or escape Apache attack. The battle raged until nightfall when all cavalry units retreated.

While six soldiers, two Navajo scouts, one civilian and 32 horses lost their lives in the mouth of Massacre Canyon, three soldiers, including Denny, would receive the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In all, 23 Buffalo Soldiers received the Congressional Medal of Honor, including three for service during what became known as Victorio's War in New Mexico. Denny was not honored for 12 years until 1879 when pressure from Colonel Edward Hatch and Denny's comrades forced the Army's hand. Denny retired after 30 years of service to Nebraska and died in 1901 at the U.S. Soldiers Home in Washington, District of Columbia.

Denny died with only the Congressional Medal of Honor, a silver watch and 68 cents to his name. The U.S. military was desegregated upon order from President Harry Truman in 1948. The last living Buffalo Soldier, Mark Matthews, died in 2005 at age 111.

The chapter in U.S. history chronicling the African American men who settled the American West fosters both respect and controversy in the minds of many historians. Some believe the newly freed men became the architects of Native Americans' subjugation. Yet without the tenacity of the Buffalo Soldiers, who executed their missions faithfully, the American West may have not been settled before the turn of the 19th century. 

An Epithet Becomes A Legacy

Bob Marley and the Wailers crooned about the bravery of the Buffalo Soldiers, but what is the origin of the nickname?

Historians disagree about who coined the term Buffalo Soldier and the reasons for the name. Resemblance between the soldiers' short, curly hair and the buffalo's hide is one theory. The fact that soldiers wore buffalo robe coats in winter is another. Appearances aside, Native Americans revered the courage of the sacred buffalo and bestowed the name on black soldiers for their fierceness on the battlefield. The 10th Cavalry adopted an image of the buffalo as its regiment crest.