

# THE FIRST FREEDMEN TO BECOME SOLDIERS

By John M. Hawks

[Dr. Hawks served as surgeon of colored troops for nearly the whole period of the Civil War. He was Acting Surgeon of the First S. C. V. of Colored Infantry, and later Surgeon of the Twenty-first Regiment, U. S. C. T. In July of 1863 Dr. Hawks, with his wife as assistant, had charge of General Hospital No. 10 in Beaufort, S. C., where were cared for the wounded men of Colonel Shaw's regiment, who had been engaged in the charge on Fort Wagner, Morris Island.]

*By Courtesy of the Southern Workman.*

**A**T THE outbreak of the Civil War in April, 1861, every anti-slavery man thought he saw at once the proper way to end the strife in the shortest possible time. That way was to proclaim liberty to the slaves and make soldiers of the men. It seems very strange now to think how long it was before such action was advocated by the public press. The first article to appear in a newspaper, advocating the arming of the slaves, was printed in the *Manchester Daily American* of August 27,

1861, and was written by the author of this paper.

On my way home from Washington, D. C., in February, 1862, I called at the office of the New York Freedmen's Aid Association and volunteered my services as physician to the freedmen on the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Sailing from New York in March, I reported at Hilton Head, S. C., to Edward L. Pierce, who was in charge of the affairs of the freedmen, and was assigned to duty on Edisto Island. From there I wrote in March to Major-General David Hunter, suggesting to him that he raise a regiment of Negroes, reminding him what good soldiers they made under Toussaint in Hayti.

One of the first things to be done towards raising the regiment was to secure for officers in the new regiment white men with some military experience. Volunteers from regiments in the Department were called for and the following non-commis-

sioned officers responded to the call: From the 100th Penn. Vols. ("Round-heads"), Sergeants William James, James Pomroy, J. H. Randolph, Alexander Heasley, and Harry West. From the 48th N. Y. Vols., Sergeants W. H. Danielson and Henry Beach. From the N. Y. Engineers, C. T. Trowbridge, John Trowbridge, Geo. Walker, James Harrold, and John Goddard. The regiment was raised and made useful as laborers about the wharves and in the quartermaster's department, but with very little time to devote to military drill. The War Department was not willing, although it was in great need of soldiers, to take so radical a step as to arm the fugitive slaves.

Horace Greeley in his *New York Tribune* had addressed a letter to the President, headed, "The Prayer of Twenty Millions," in which he urged that a proclamation be issued declaring liberty to the slaves. In reply to this letter Mr. Lincoln said: "It is my duty to put down the rebellion without interfering with slavery; if I must touch slavery, I shall touch it as lightly as possible." Hence the services of these slaves as soldiers were refused, and the so-called Hunter Regiment was disbanded, with the exception of Company A on duty on St. Simon's Island.

But the fates had ordered otherwise; the slaves were to become soldiers and fight for the Union and their own liberty. Brigadier-General Saxton, commanding the Beaufort District, visited the War Department in Washington and in September returned to Beaufort with authority from the Secretary of War to raise a brigade of five thousand Negro soldiers. And in a few weeks after Hun-

ter's Regiment was disbanded, the enlistment of the freedmen began in earnest. Captain Trowbridge's Company A became Company A in the new regiment, which was styled the First Regiment of S. C. Volunteers, but was afterwards called the 33rd Regiment, U. S. C. T. Captain William James enlisted twice as many recruits as any other officer—a full company for himself and as many in other companies.

This event, the first muster of freedmen into the United States Army was a very important epoch in the history of the United States, and occurred on November 7, 1862, at General Saxton's headquarters in Beaufort, S. C. It was on the first anniversary of the capture of Port Royal, and at the time of the organization of the Department of the South. Captain James had his men drawn up in line; and as he read their names from the roll, each man answered "Here." Then, with uncovered heads and right hands raised, the men took the usual oath of allegiance, which was administered by General Saxton. This simple ceremony over, the newly made soldiers marched back to their camp. But the greatness of the occasion, considering its far-reaching consequences, can hardly be overestimated. Only a few months before, these men were chattels. They had no family names; they were listed by their owners under a single given name, as Tom, Dick, Harry, July, Friday, Plato, Homer, Jupiter, like other live-stock on the plantation. Now they took surnames, which are not only written on the records of their Company, but are inscribed on the rolls of the Adjutant-General at Washington with those of the other defenders of the nation.

Thus they became founders of family names \* which will be honored by their descendants through all future generations.

Our regiment now numbered eight hundred at Camp Saxton, four miles south of Beaufort. We had a major, a chaplain and lieutenant-colonel, but no colonel. There was a lieutenant-colonel in a New York regiment who desired the position, but we needed a man to command the new regiment who was a friend to the Negro. I called on General Saxton in company with Chaplain Fowler, and recommended Rev. Thomas W. Higginson of Worcester, Massachusetts, giving some account of his active anti-slavery work in Kansas and in Boston. It is not so very strange that General Saxton had not heard of this man; for the general was an officer in the regular army. Higginson was at the time, though I did not know it, a captain in the 52nd Regiment Mass. Vols. He was immediately commissioned as colonel and in a few days he arrived and took command of the regiment. He very soon secured the confidence and respect of the officers and men under his command. He seemed determined to put his regiment in the best condition possible. Sufficient proof of his success in that line is found in the fact that the appearance of the regiment on parade and inspection won the praise of the officers of the regular army.

I shall never forget the impressiveness of the daily dress parade; on these occasions, when the regiment was in position, Colonel Higginson

\* Anyone desiring to see the list of the first freedmen mustered into the army may address Dr. J. M. Hawks, 16 Newhall Street, Lynn, Mass.

stood like a statue facing the men in line of battle, and in a loud, clear voice of command said, "Attention, battalion, shoulder arms!" It seemed to me that he spoke not merely to the thousand men there in uniform, but to the hundred thousand that were to come and did come and "shoulder arms" in defence of the Union. Among the other commands, that of "Load at will, load," when, with the regularity of a great machine, a thousand steel ramrods went ringing down into the muskets, was thrilling and assuring.

As it had been my privilege and pleasant duty to examine many of the new recruits for this regiment and to see them mustered into the service, it was also a valued privilege to be with them when first under the fire of the enemy. This was at Blew & Todd's Mills, near Darien, Georgia, in November, 1862, on an expedition commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Beard of a New York Regiment. Captain James was ordered to reconnoitre the neighborhood with his company. In the action which followed, Corporal Isaac W. Jenkins was wounded by a musket ball which shattered the bone of his left arm. He went to his officer and said, "Captain, my arm is broken, shall I go to the rear?" In the Freedmen's Hospital a few days afterwards, I removed about four inches of the shaft of the bone, which had been broken into eighteen pieces. The corporal made a good recovery and his arm became about as useful as ever. These men made true and trusty soldiers, and from this small experimental beginning of the First Regiment of S. C. V. of Colored Infantry, there came to be 138 regiments of colored infantry and 17 of cavalry and artillery, which took part in more than

two hundred and eighty engagements and won the official praise, "The colored troops fought nobly."

The honor alluded to of establishing family names is for individuals of the colored race. But who can estimate the value of the Negro soldiers to the Union army? At what

time in our long struggle could all these trusty and loyal legions have been spared? In those dark and gloomy years when the war hung in even scale, who can say that the weight of the Negro soldiers in the balance did not tip the beam in favor of the Union?