

Black soldiers welcomed as state's Civil War heroes

The beginning of Black History Month is an appropriate time to recall the story of the 29th Connecticut Regiment, the state's first regiment of black soldiers in the Civil War.

Organized and trained at Fair Haven in early 1864, the 29th Regiment left New Haven on March 19 for Annapolis, Md., on the troop ship Warrior. Alexander H. Newton, the regiment's supply sergeant, recalled the occasion: "The regiment paraded the streets while multitudes looked with wonder, some laughing, others cheering, mothers with their babies in their arms crying and holding on to their husbands, as they marched away to do battle for the noblest of causes. It was a scene never to be forgotten . . ."

In late August 1863, the regiment's commander, Col. William B. Wooster of Derby, marched his men into Virginia where the Union and Confederate armies, after a summer of terrible battles, faced each other in trenches around the city of Petersburg, a few miles south of Richmond.

"On the 23rd we crossed the James River on the pontoon bridge," wrote Newton, "... We were soon in front of Petersburg, looking upon the doomed city. We were greeted by a shell from the rebels ... Some of the white soldiers said, 'See they are taking those colored soldiers to the slaughter pen' ... Truly, they had said so; for I never saw such a scene that first night. Shot and shell were raining fast around us. Henry Migs, a native of Africa, was killed. He died as a soldier, true to his adopted country ... On the 24th, Private Sam Bertim of Company E was also killed. Colonel Wooster was taken sick and was carried from the rifle pits to the rear. The rebels captured one of our officers, while changing those on picket. Two men from the 29th were slaughtered ..."

In early September the black soldiers played a key role in the capture of Fort Harrison, a strategic post between Petersburg and Richmond. A soldier from another regiment who watched the 29th in action wrote, "... The line of breastworks are carried in one vigorous charge, the enemy retreating to a strong line a short distance to the rear. ... Again Col. Wooster gives the order to charge; and the leveled bayonets press forward, at first steadily and in order; but



Courtesy of Connecticut Historical Society. The Rev. I. J. Hill was an orderly to Col. William B. Wooster of Derby in the Civil War.

vance is for a moment checked and a fierce struggle ensues ... and now, above cannon and musketry, rise the ringing hurrahs of the Negroes, as they leap with their leader over the works. Without delay they push quickly forward ..."

Late in October, Gen. Grant made one last attempt to capture Richmond before winter set in, and, in this battle, the men of the 29th Connecticut were employed as skirmishers leading the Union assault. "The 29th pushed along nearly 600 strong," wrote one observer of the battle, "until they had made their way close up to the breastworks from which poured a heavy fire ... At this time, the enemy opened upon the 29th from a battery in the angle of the works; sweeping the line with shot and shell and threatening to render it untenable. A well-directed rifle fire silenced it. The (Confederate) gunners fell at their guns. Comrades attempted to crawl up; but they were shot down or forced back and the guns remained as silent as if they were spiked. The blacks exhausted their ammunition, but replenished their supply from the

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By
Neil
Hogan

the 29th Regiment paid heavily. During the Petersburg siege, the regiment lost 178 men killed and wounded.

"Well, you colored fellows have had a pretty rough job, I reckon," said a member of the 2nd Connecticut Regiment, which also fought at Petersburg.

"As rough as we care for," responded one of the black soldiers, adding ruefully, "We have to die for eight dollars a month, while you get thirteen for the same business."

By early April of 1865, it was evident that Gen. Robert E. Lee could not hold Richmond much longer, and in the capture of the Confederate capital, the 29th Connecticut led the entire Union army.

The action was described by Col. Wooster's orderly, the Rev. I. J. Hill: "During Sunday night (April 2) the brigade was out in line of battle and at 3 o'clock in the morning the rebels blew up three gunboats and commenced vacating their works in our front. At 5 a.m. the troops commenced to advance on the rebel works — the 29th taking the advance, the 9th U.S.C. (colored) troops next ... On our march to Richmond, we captured 500 pieces of artillery, some of the largest kind, 6,000 stand of small arms, and the prisoners I was not able to number. The road was strewn with all kinds of obstacles and men were lying all along the distance of seven miles ... The 29th skirmished all the way and arrived in the city at 7 a.m. and were the first infantry that entered the city ..."

Late in the summer of 1865, the 29th arrived back in New York. "We marched to pier 28 East River," wrote Newton, "where the steamboat Granite State was waiting to carry us to Hartford. The distance was about 150 miles. We