

## LIVING

## Civil War black units earned claim to glory

By Diana Ross McCain

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Millions of Americans learned of the service of black soldiers in the Civil War only through the 1989 movie "Glory," which dramatized the heroism and sacrifice of the men of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. But Connecticut had its own black units in the Civil War, the 29th and 30th regiments of the Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, whose approximately 1,750 members labored, suffered, fought, bled, and in many cases gave their lives for the Union, earning their own claim to glory.

There was widespread opposition in the North to letting blacks serve in the army, with most white Northerners adamant that the war was being fought to preserve the Union, not to free Southern slaves. Connecticut's governor, William Buckingham, a Republican, aware of this attitude, initially was wary of the proposal that the state enlist blacks, writing in August 1862 that "the time may yet come when a regiment of colored men may be profitably employed. But now, if a company ... should be introduced into a regiment, a regiment into a brigade, it would create so much unpleasant feeling and irritation that more evil than good would result."

This policy forced a number of Connecticut black men who were eager to serve the Union cause to enlist in black regiments in neighboring Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

But as the bloody war went into its third year, it became difficult for Connecticut to fill its quota of soldiers with exclusively white recruits. At last, on Nov. 23, 1863, Governor Buckingham, with the authorization of the General Assembly, called for recruiting the 29th Regiment of Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, a black unit except for its officers, who were white.

By the end of 1863 the 29th Regiment, with more than 1,250 men, was full. Yet so many blacks still sought to enlist that a second regiment, the 30th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, was quickly authorized. It enrolled about 450 men in four companies.

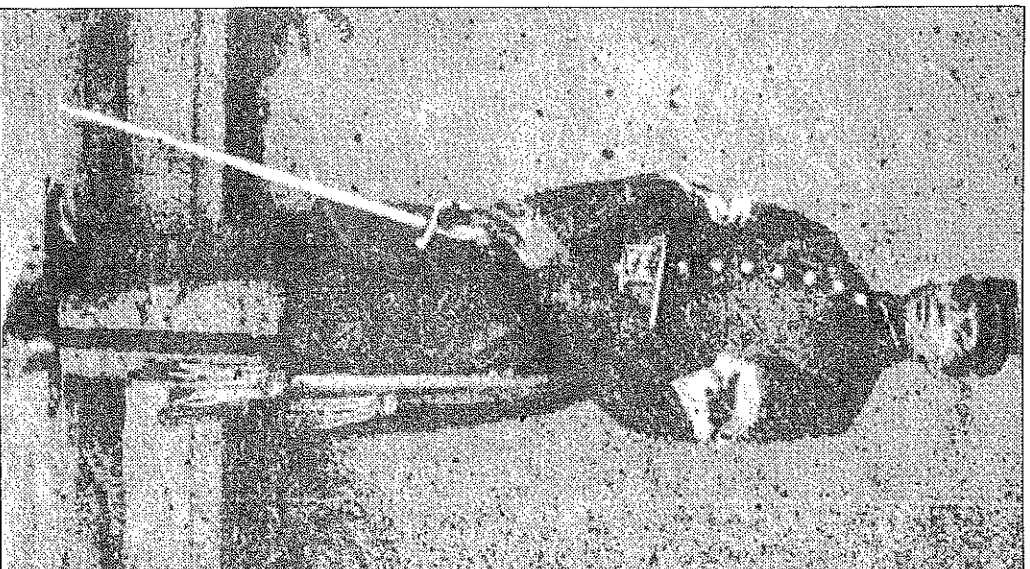
Before a second full regiment could be formed, the urgent need for manpower at the front resulted in the combination of four companies of the 30th with companies from other states in a federal black infantry regiment.

Some of those who enlisted in the 29th Regiment had been born free men in Connecticut or other states. Others were former slaves who had fled to freedom behind the lines of advancing Union troops, or had been liberated by Union forces and had been recruited by agents sent South by the state of Connecticut or by Connecticut towns to help fill their quota of soldiers for the army. But the black troops had one thing in common — a willingness to risk their lives in a crusade to free millions of their brothers and sisters still held in bondage and to prove that blacks were as capable, courageous, and loyal as any white men.

From the start, the men of the 29th Regiment experienced greater difficulties than their white comrades-in-arms. Many black recruits were cheated out of part of the bounty money they had been promised for enlisting. They were initially paid less than white soldiers. Even worse than these inequities, galling as they were for black soldiers, was the fate that awaited him if they were taken prisoner by Confederate troops.

"We were told by the enemy," Sgt. Alexander H. Newton of the 29th regiment recalls in his autobiography, "that if we were captured our tongues would be cut out, or we would be starved to death; that there would be no exchange of prisoners in our case."

The men of the 29th Regiment went into battle against Confederate forces in Virginia several times during August, September, and October 1864. Twenty-four of their number were killed on the battlefield, and another 18 died of injuries. An additional 135 were wounded. But 178 men — more than all who were killed or wounded in combat combined — lost their lives to the deadliest foe of the war: disease. When these figures are added to those who were injured or killed by accidents, captured, or discharged for disability, the total



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## Sgt. Alexander H. Newton

number of casualties of the 29th Regiment came to 470 — more than one in every three men. Casualties for the men who served in the four companies of the 30th Connecticut Regiment totaled 182 — nearly 40 percent of those who enlisted.

Some small sense of the suffering and sacrifice of not only the brave men of the 29th but of their relatives and friends can be gleaned from a brief look at the black community of one eastern Connecticut town, Griswold. Although in 1860 Griswold had fewer than 90 black residents, a dozen black men from that town served in the 29th regiment. One was Joseph O. Cross, who enlisted as a private on Dec. 31, 1863, at the age of 28. He marched off to war, leaving behind his 83-year-old widowed father and his 30-year-old wife, Abby, who not only had to care for four children, ages 1 to 9, but was still mourning the death of another child, who had died that year at age 5.

Joseph was eventually promoted to sergeant, and survived combat to return home safe and sound in October 1865.

Some of Joseph's family and neighbors were less fortunate. While in the service his brother-in-law, Horace Simons, contracted a fever from which he never fully recovered; he died on Jan. 22, 1866, at the age of 34. Joseph's nephew, Amos C. Brewster, who rose from corporal to sergeant, suffered a wound to his left foot in a battle at Kell House, Va., on Oct. 27, 1864, and lost several toes. Charles W. Hazard, the only son of the eight children of Elias and Caroline Hazard, was wounded and died on Jan. 19, 1865, at the age of 21. After the war Charles' sister, Caroline, married another veteran of the 29th Regiment, John Rogers, whose leg was amputated as the result of a battle wound at Kell House.

Brave and patriotic men such as these represented not only the soldiers of the 29th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry but the 186,000 blacks who by the end of the war had worn Union blue, hoping thereby to help the country they claimed as theirs by right of birth make progress toward the liberty and equality promised when the country had been founded almost a century earlier.

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