

The Day the 29th Came Home

BY ALAN E. GREEN

When I was a boy growing up in Hartford, I made believe that if I were lost, my old compass would help me find my way home. I played with that compass often. I was fascinated with how it worked and how that magical dial always pointed to the north. I've had the compass now for more than 50 years. It is a sturdy, yet ancient, device compared to today's technology.

I discovered 10 years ago that the compass belonged to my great-great-grandfather, Lloyd Garrison Seymour of Hartford, a sergeant in the 29th (Colored) Regiment, Connecticut Volunteer Infantry. In 1863, when Seymour went off to serve in the Union Army, he was a husband and father who was employed as a coachman. As a child, I used the compass for play and fantasy. As a black soldier fighting for freedom in the Civil War, Seymour used that same compass to help him stay alive.

During the early years of the Civil War there was a cautious approach to the use of black troops by both federal and state governments. Connecticut Gov. William Buckingham came under attack by abolitionists for not authorizing the use of black regiments.

"It seems to me that the time has yet to come when a regiment of colored men may be profitably employed," Buckingham said. "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."

After a year of complications in recruiting white soldiers — because most able-bodied white men had already joined up — Buckingham authorized the formation of the 29th in 1863. This paved the way for free blacks, former slaves and descendants of black Revolutionary War veterans to become the new volunteers.

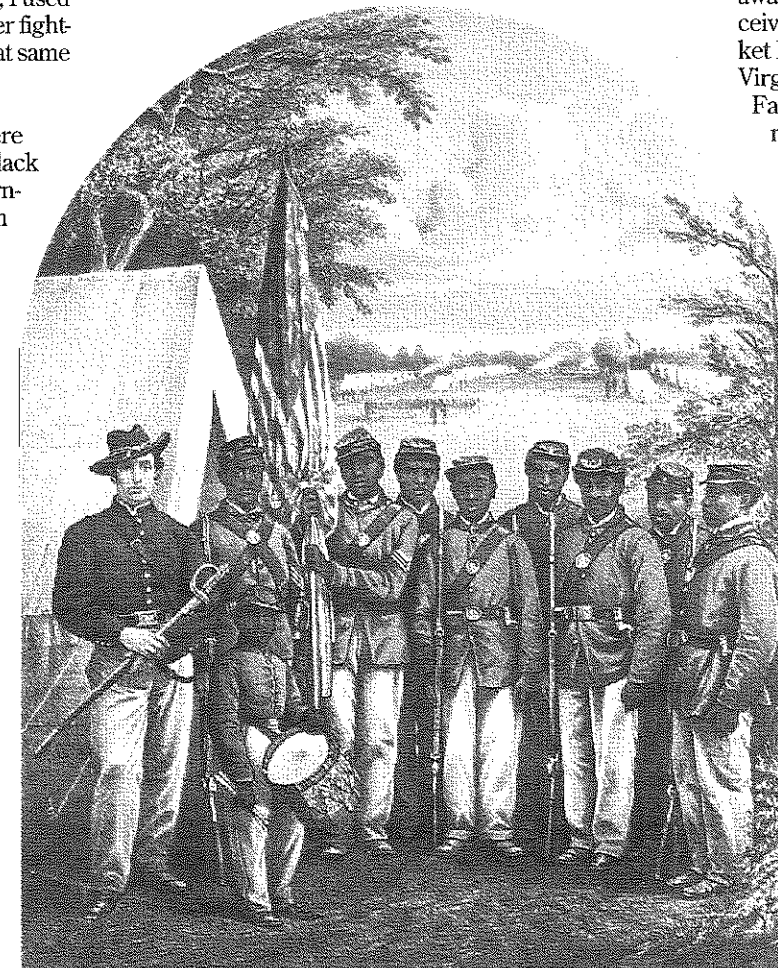
I believe that people have forgotten the commitment and struggle of black men to the right of freedom. Black men have participated and fought in all of this country's wars. More than 180,000 black men fought in the Civil War alone. Then, as now, black men viewed the military as a way to improve their position in life and in their communities.

Peter Maguire of Colchester returned from the Revolution and resorted to begging to support his family. Thirty-five years after his death, his grandson Charles was assigned to Company E of the 29th. Cuff Smith, another black Revolutionary War veteran, found himself in a similar economic position in Colchester in 1822. His grandson, Nelson A. Smith, and Nelson's two sons, George and David, went on to join the 29th and also were assigned to Company E.

Over the past 10 years, as I researched my own fami-

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MEMORIAL DAY REMINDS US OF MEN OF
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Courtesy Archive Photos

ly's genealogy, I've gained appreciation for Seymour's participation in the cruel and gory Civil War, as well as the role our soldiers of African heritage, serving in segregated regiments, played in maintaining this country's freedom.

I've been invited to speak to Civil War societies and other historical organizations in Connecticut about the role of these Civil War soldiers. People are typically unfamiliar with black Civil War regiments, but are interest-

ed in what I have learned through the State Library, the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford land records and family stories.

November 25, 1865. More than 100 black men, soldiers of the 29th Regiment, marched into Hartford, returning from war.

The 29th had played several important roles during the last two years of the war. At the battle of New Market Heights in Virginia, one of the bloodiest battles, hundreds of black soldiers, after being pinned down for about 30 minutes, charged up a steep hill and overcame Confederate troops. Of the 16 African American soldiers awarded the Medal of Honor during the Civil War, 14 received the honor as a result of their actions at New Market Heights. The 29th engaged in several other battles in Virginia, including the siege of Petersburg, the battle of Fair Oaks and the occupation of Richmond. The regiment also guarded prisoners and later sailed to ports as far away as Texas.

In the fall of 1865 the 29th, while in New Orleans guarding prisoners, received its orders to return home and boarded a vessel for New York. The voyage home was rough with terrific storms, the Rev. Alexander Heritage Newton wrote in his memoirs of serving in the 29th. The soldiers' clothes were constantly wet and it was impossible to find a place to sleep. Imagine the faith hope and courage of these black men traveling home to "freedom."

"I have named the book 'Out of the Briers' because the figure is befitting one in my own life," Newton wrote in his memoirs. "Although free born, I was under the curse of slavery, surrounded by the thorns and briers of prejudice, hatred, persecution and the suffering incident to this fearful regime. I, indeed, came out of the briers torn and bleeding."

Along the way, the 29th stopped in New York City. The regiment marched and were greeted with cheers and salutes. Newton recalled, "We had not forgotten our former experiences here however. And we were inwardly revolting the thought that as Black men we had done our part in bringing about a change of sentiment that would make a new city out of New York and every other city in the Union."

Later the regiment boarded the steamship Granite State and proceeded 150 miles through Long Island Sound and up the Connecticut River to Hartford. They were cheered

in every town and village they passed.

Buckingham and other local dignitaries greeted the 29th when they arrived in Hartford. They marched to Central Row, a street that still exists next to the Old State House in downtown Hartford, where they stacked their arms and removed their knapsacks from their backs to the accompaniment of Colt's Brass Band. They were given a feast at City Hall, after which they returned to Cen-

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The 29th

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tral Row where they were joined by Connecticut members of the 31st U. S. Colored Troops, another newly arrived regiment.

What a feeling there must have been inside these black men, that they would soon walk the streets as free men! Yet many, also, must have felt that the struggle was not over and that even more battles for freedom were to be fought. Connecticut still maintained laws that supported segregation of the races. Black men did not have the right to vote, segregated public fa-

cilities were enforced and returning black soldiers were not allowed to join peacetime militias because they were prohibited from carrying arms.

What happened to the men of the 29th when they returned to Hartford? There is much about these men's lives my research is only just beginning to uncover.

Newton was mistakenly charged with stealing clothes from a local shop owner and spent his first night as a civilian in jail. He later became a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, receiving his Doctor of Divinity degree in 1909. Charles Maguire remained in Hartford where he got a job taking care of horses. He later moved to New York, and finally settled in Providence. Charles James Quash was sentenced in 1869 to a two-year term in the Wethersfield State Prison for a burglary committed in Colchester. George S. Peters returned home to Hebron to find that he had been reported dead and his wife had left town. He searched unsuccessfully for her, and later remarried.

And Lloyd Garrison Seymour, my great-great-grandfather?

He found work as a sexton in a military hall and a church. By the standard of the day, when most black men did manual labor, he did fairly well.

I still have that old compass. It sits on my desk serving as a reminder of the commitment of my great-great-grandfather and other black men. It also helps me think about our future and that we, as a society, are still fighting and working for equality for all. One day I will pass this relic on to my daughters. I hope they, too, will use this old compass as a reminder that black men fought for their freedom. ■



GINA BARRECA

Out of Focus

My old friend Lynette is a hot-shot marketing executive. I can't figure out *exactly* what she does (people with fancy business jobs usually confound me when they try to explain what fills their days). But I find myself emotionally and intellectually captivated by one particular aspect of Lynette's work: focus groups. Perhaps my fascination stems from the fact that so many groups of which I am a member are decidedly unfocused, but whatever the cause, I find myself entreating her to tell me what the latest focus group project involves so that I can compare my own responses with those of the F.G.

As far as I understand it, F.G.s help folks decide how to produce and market products. It wouldn't be cool, I suppose, to show how ridiculous every human being looks brushing his or her teeth — sudsing up, swirling, spitting out, getting water on the mirror — so instead we have commercials showing people *talking* about toothpaste instead of using it. It's tough, in contrast, to imagine a car commercial where the car is not shown *in use*. A car ad that doesn't show a car actually moving would be The Car Ad of Doom.

You'd never show what a woman looks like coloring her hair at home because no one would ever buy the stuff, or what a guy looks like applying athlete's foot medication to either of his athlete's feet because no one would ever watch television again for fear of seeing this action repeated.

So folks in business need to figure out what the rest of us poor souls think, apparently, because there are people in marketing who argue that it would be just swell to show a guy in the process of using a nose-hair clipper whereas the rest of us know that we would have to give up all interaction with the media if we ever watched someone on a giant screen really getting into nose-mode.

The information I've received

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from Lynette, however, has occasionally tripped me up. For example, she recently did a long survey concerning the order in which most people clean themselves in the morning. What is the very first thing you do? Do you face the water in the shower, lifting your kisser to it, or do you turn so that the water hits your back? Do you wash your face before you wash your hair? Do you put the soap into the washcloth before dampening it; do you use a washcloth at all? Which side do you wash first, your right or your left? Do you lather up all at once or bit by bit? Do you keep your eyes open or closed?

Seems simple enough, right? Not for your correspondent here. I no longer know how to take a shower. Suddenly I'm aware of a process that had become so totally ritualized as to be nearly unconscious; I'm like the victim of some alien abduction who has had that part of her mind washed away. I walk into the shower, turn on the water, and stand there like a fool. While I'm busy wondering whether I usually keep my eyes open, windows are fogging. The wallpaper is starting to curl at the edges. My husband is yelling at me to hurry up. As I stand soggy with indecision, I realize this is not a good use of my time, not to mention a real waste of water, but I cannot help it.

Why are questions like Lynette's confusing? Because an astonishing amount of what we do

everyday remains pretty much unexamined. When forced to evaluate our own rituals, we become perplexed by their very familiarity. This is why it's difficult to teach somebody else to drive, or cook, or tie shoelaces.

Not that we haven't become *wedded* to precisely the way we perform these unspoken ceremonial acts. We'll argue with genuine vigor against those heretical practices used by Others. "If they're not doing it the way we do it, they must be doing it wrong" could be our collective motto — or the title of a new country song.

So what's the lesson in all of this? Maybe we should all be forced (although perhaps not exclusively by marketing professionals) to examine the small rituals of everyday life in order to see what it is, *exactly*, we spend much of our time actually *doing*.

Then we might be able to face really big questions, such as "Why do I do what I do?" and "Should I try to do it differently?" "What would happen if, just this once, I wash my hair *before* I wash my face?" or "How about putting the milk in the cup *before* I pour in the coffee?" These sorts of questions could lead to ones causing what one writer called "sea changes" in our lives — enormous, overwhelming emotional, intellectual, and spiritual overhauls. Or they might lead simply to a reaffirmation of our original choices.

But at least we'd be reminding ourselves that we make choices, even when we don't think of them as big decisions, and that each choice influences the course of our lives and the lives of those around us whether we're aware of it or not.

Just don't let the questions — big or small — make you stand, unable to move, in the shower for too long. ■

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