

Writer's Model

Research Paper

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Language Arts 10

30 August 2000

Forgotten Heroes

“I felt freedom in my bones” (Fincher 52). Those are the words of escaped slave Elijah Marris as he stripped away his old rags and donned his new army blues. Marris was only one of nearly 180,000 African American soldiers who served in the Union Army during the Civil War (Fincher 52). African American soldiers faced a struggle. Although they experienced discrimination, they served with great courage, and their effect on the United States was profound.

From the very beginning of the Civil War, African American soldiers attempted to enlist in the Union Army. At first, they were rejected. At the time, most Northern whites were prejudiced against African Americans and believed they were not bold enough to fight (McPherson 52). Initially, Abraham Lincoln was opposed to the idea. He believed that African American soldiers would anger the border states, causing them to turn against the Union (McPherson 52).

In 1862, however, as the North lost several major battles and morale began to drop, public opinion began to change. In the fall of 1862, Lincoln authorized the formation of the first African American regiments: the First South Carolina Volunteers (McPherson 53) and the First Kansas Colored Volunteers (Carle 79).

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation; slaves who escaped to the North were legally considered free citizens. After the proclamation, blacks could be recruited for the Union Army (McPherson 20). Of course, if the North did not win the war, the proclamation would be worthless. Historian Barbara Fields notes that African American soldiers knew that “the Emancipation Proclamation did nothing to get them their freedom. It said they had a right to put their bodies on the line if they had the nerve to believe in it” (The Civil War).

Even though African Americans joined the Union Army, they continued to experience subtle

and blatant discrimination. Men in these regiments received 10 dollars a month and no clothing allowance. In addition, African American soldiers could not serve as officers. In practice, the African American regiments often received inferior arms and ammunition. White doctors refused to serve with the regiments, and African American soldiers died of disease at a much higher rate than white soldiers (Ward, Burns, and Burns 253).

It was risky for African American soldiers to enlist in the Union Army. Angry at the idea of African American troops, the Confederate forces would not allow them to surrender. Instead, they were shot or enslaved (Ward, Burns, and Burns 335). At the fierce Battle of Fort Pillow, hundreds of black soldiers were massacred after they surrendered (“Fort Pillow”).

Discrimination and risk did not dampen the enthusiasm of the African American soldiers. In battle after battle, the soldiers showed great courage. At Fort Wagner, South Carolina, the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts led the attack on the Confederate stronghold. Half of the six hundred volunteers were killed, wounded, or captured; one soldier, Sergeant William Carney, became the first African American soldier to win the Congressional Medal of Honor (Fincher 56).

The courage shown by the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts at Fort Wagner is one of the great moments in American military history. A reporter of the time made this comment: “[. . .] if this Massachusetts 54th had faltered when its trial came, 200,000 troops for whom it was a pioneer would never have been put into the field, but it did not falter. It made Fort Wagner such a name [. . .] as Bunker Hill [. . .]” (The Civil War).

In battle after battle, African American soldiers displayed great bravery and heroism. Their courage changed the way that some Northerners viewed them. Assistant Secretary of War Charles Dana said that “the bravery of blacks in the battle at Milliken’s Bend completely revolutionized the sentiments of the Army” (Fincher 54). General Butler said, “I swore to myself a solemn oath [. . .] ‘to defend the rights of those men who have given their blood for me and my country that day and for their race forever’” (Fincher 60-61). Bruce Catton, author of The Centennial History of the Civil War, describes the change: “Under the revolution involved in the act of changing slaves into free men, even into soldiers,

there lay a profounder [sic] revolution involving the way individual men looked at their fellow human beings" (120).

The service of African Americans in the Civil War had two other profound effects. For one thing, the experience "contributed to the development of their racial pride and self-respect" (McPherson 96). For another, "the blacks' struggle to get fair treatment from the military began to quicken their drive for equal rights in civilian life" (McPherson 96).

Despite constant discrimination, African American soldiers fought courageously under adverse conditions and helped change forever the social fabric of the United States. For many years, the country was slow to acknowledge its debt to the African American soldier. In September 1996, a major memorial to honor African American soldiers who served in the Civil War was dedicated in Washington, D.C. As part of the memorial, the names of 178,000 African American soldiers and 7,000 officers who served with them are inscribed on stainless steel plaques (Grant).

Today, the somber monument of steel and stone stands mute. The words of Commander Carleton Philpot, describing the men of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry regiments, are a fitting tribute for African American soldiers of the Civil War: "This is a group of heroes—true heroes that you don't have to create. Not football players, not singers, just guys who did a tough job and nobody gave a hoot" (Spiller 86).

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Definition

A **research paper** informs readers about an interesting, new, or important topic. It usually presents one main idea and supports that idea by using facts, examples, statistics, quotations, and other evidence taken from reliable sources such as books, magazines, the Internet, movies, and interviews.

Many research papers use the structure illustrated in the framework below. Print this framework and use it as a guide when you write your own research paper.

