

A COLORED BRIGADE IN THE CAMPAIGN AND BATTLE OF NASHVILLE.

By HENRY V. FREEMAN.

[Read March 8, 1888.]

IN the summer of 1863 there was gathered together at Elk River Bridge, in Tennessee, on the line of the Nashville & Chattanooga Railway, a motley collection of men who had come to be known as "Contrabands." They were of all colors, ages, and sizes. Nearly all had been slaves. They still wore the dress, — or more properly, in many cases, the undress — of the plantation. There were rag-tag and bobtail; and this material was to be organized into what was afterwards known as the Twelfth Regiment, United States Colored Troops.

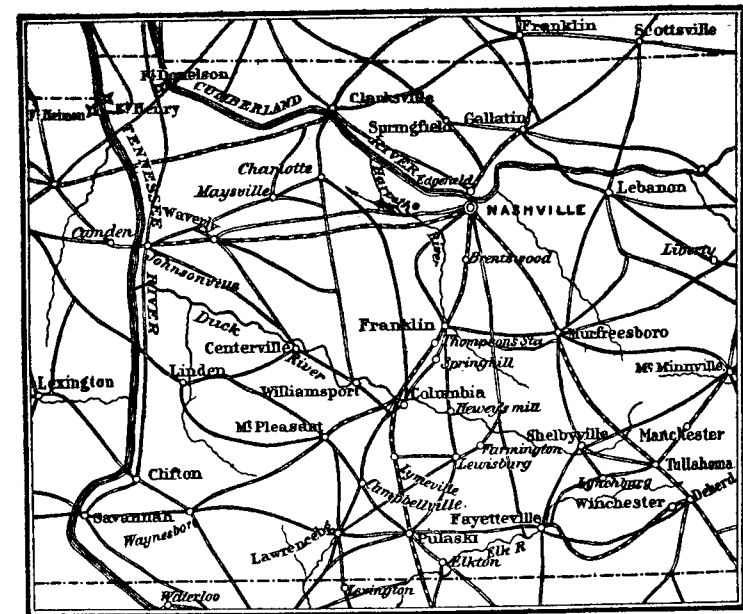
The officers of the regiment — all white men of course — had been appointed after examination by one of the boards established by the bureau, under the direction of Adjutant-General Lorenzo Thomas and Major-General Casey. These examinations were rigid, and took a wide range, covering not only military tactics and drill, but outside topics as well. Only about one third of those appearing before the boards for examination passed. The result was that the officers of colored troops were often cultivated and trained men. General Casey says of them: "From my knowledge of the officers of white volunteers, gained by my duties connected with receiving and organizing in the city of Washington three hundred thousand of them, and also as a commander of a division in the Peninsula, I have no hesitation in saying that the officers of the colored regiments who passed the board, as a body, were superior to them physically, mentally, and morally." The officers of

the Twelfth were all veterans, and, with perhaps one or, at the most, two exceptions, subsequently proved to be thoroughly competent men for the positions to which they had been assigned. They would compare favorably, I think, with those of other regiments. Some were exceptionally good officers.

Reporting for duty at Elk River Bridge, the work of organizing the companies and welding them into a battalion at once proceeded. It was not at first a very inviting prospect. Not only was the material out of which the regiment was to be organized entirely unused to military life, but the habits and feelings engendered by slavery could not be immediately changed. Many of the men were literally clodhoppers, with no ideas of neatness or cleanliness. Some were lazy, having only one idea of liberty, — that it meant freedom from all work and care. But there was plenty of material to choose from. The best men were selected. Weeding-out processes were instituted, and before a great while military order began to grow out of former chaos. The men showed an aptitude for drill and military duties somewhat surprising, considering their antecedents. They were pleased with their guns, pleased with their uniforms, and impressed with their own importance as soldiers. From slavery to freedom was itself a grand transition; but to become Union soldiers was a still higher promotion, exceeding their most sanguine hopes, — a privilege estimated at its full value.

There was plenty of work. Drill was incessant. The whole regiment was at first an extremely awkward squad. But some of the men proved apt pupils. The more intelligent were soon able to assist in drilling their more awkward comrades. In what seems now a remarkably short space of time the men were making good progress in company and regimental drill, and were in a fair way to become soldiers, so far as drill and a knowledge of the routine of camp duties could make them such.

The necessities of the case threw upon the new regiment at the outset the responsibilities and duties of soldiers in an enemy's country. Elk River Bridge was a very important structure. The force left to guard it, aside from the new regiment, was small. Just at that time there were several raids of Rebel cavalry through that section of the country, intent upon destroying General Rosecrans's communications. Several times the little force at Elk River Bridge was threatened with attack.



The officers of colored regiments at this time had every incentive to do the utmost within their power to make their men good soldiers. Their own personal safety was dependent on the fighting qualities of their men, more than in white regiments. Immediately after the organization of the first regiment of colored troops, in the spring of 1862, an order was issued by the Rebel War Office declaring that officers connected with such organizations should be treated as outlaws. On January 12, 1863, the Confederate Congress enacted that "every white person, being

a commissioned officer, or acting as such, who, during the present war, shall command negroes and mulattoes in arms against the Confederate States, or shall arm, train, organize, or prepare negroes or mulattoes for military service against the Confederate States, or shall voluntarily aid them in any military enterprise, attack, or conflict, in such service, shall be deemed as inciting servile insurrection, and shall, if captured, be put to death or otherwise punished, at the discretion of the Court."

This was no idle threat. The Confederates meant to make this service hazardous. At Fort Pillow the Rebels, under command of Generals Forrest and Chalmers, massacred, after they had surrendered, nearly the whole garrison, consisting of about four hundred colored and white troops. They intended to prevent enlistment of colored troops by intimidation if they could.

In July, 1863, President Lincoln issued a retaliatory general order that "for every soldier of the United States killed in violation of the laws of war, a Rebel soldier shall be executed." Yet in December, 1863, Jefferson Davis issued another proclamation to the same effect as the Act of the Confederate Congress before mentioned. It was in the spirit of these barbarous orders that colored troops and their officers who fell into Confederate hands were generally treated, whenever it could be done with impunity.

It is true, therefore, that the officers and men of colored regiments always felt that they were subjected to more than the legitimate hazards of war. Nevertheless, it was, I think, also true that this very additional element of hazard rendered the service more inviting to some at least of the men of the North, who loved liberty and hated slavery.

I may here add that the Twelfth United States Colored Troops did not lack abundant evidence of the extra hazard to which its officers were subject by reason of the color of its enlisted men. Three of its officers were murdered while prisoners of war. One, Lieutenant W. L. Clark, captured upon a railroad train, was made to kneel down, and

was shot in cold blood by his Rebel captors because he belonged to this colored regiment. Two others, Lieutenant and Quartermaster George Fitch and Lieutenant D. G. Cooke, accidentally captured after the Battle of Nashville in company with a captain of the Forty-fourth United States Colored Infantry, by a portion of Forrest's command, were led off, under pretence of being sent to that General's headquarters, and in a secluded ravine, without warning, shot down like so many dogs. Two of them were instantly killed; the third, with a bullet in his head, was left for dead, but subsequently recovered to tell the savage story. There was in the South a certain barbarism and ferocity, the outgrowth of slavery, which frequently found expression during the war, and which even since the war breaks out now and then in acts of outrage and violence unworthy of civilized men.

The work of making soldiers out of slaves was not, of course, immediately accomplished, no matter how great the incentive. It took time, patience, and hard work. But that the results were satisfactory, subsequent history sufficiently demonstrates. At the first, peculiar difficulties were encountered. The men, like some white soldiers, were superstitious. Near one part of the picket line at Elk River were the graves of several Rebel soldiers, killed in a skirmish a short time before. The ghosts of these departed Rebels frequently appeared to the pickets, who would persist, night after night, in shooting at these unsubstantial fabrics of their visions. The writer has a distinct personal recollection of this part of the line one dark night, when, as officer of the day, he inadvertently got on the wrong side of the picket line.

The men were very devotional. Some were preachers, and from the top of a barrel, for a pulpit, were in the habit of giving frequent specimens of that peculiar eloquence which used to arouse religious fervor in old plantation days. These services were accompanied with all the peculiar manifestations connected with slave worship.

Down in the company quarters, at first, it was not an uncommon thing to see a crowd of hearers worked into frenzy, here and there one dropping in a trance lifeless and rigid upon the ground, under the influence of some wild exhorter in language meaningless or unintelligible to Anglo-Saxon ears.

I have thus endeavored to give some idea of the organization and the kind of material out of which this colored regiment was formed. I propose now to tell, as briefly as may be, the story of the part which the Twelfth United States Colored Infantry, and the brigade with which it was connected, took in the campaign and battle of Nashville.

The brigade in question consisted of the Twelfth, Thirteenth, and One Hundredth regiments of United States Colored Troops. It was commanded by Colonel and Brevet Brigadier-General Charles R. Thompson, of the Twelfth.

In November, 1864, these troops were guarding the Northwestern Railroad from Nashville to Johnsonville, on the Tennessee River,—an important line of supply to the Department of the Cumberland.

On November 28, 1864, the writer, then in command of a post on this line, received the following order, marked "Confidential and important :"—

The Lieutenant-Colonel commanding directs me to say to you to have your command in readiness to move at a moment's notice, and to report to headquarters the amount of ammunition on hand. It is reported that Hood is between Columbia and Pulaski, and that our forces are falling back. It is supposed we are to march to Clarksville.

Very respectfully,

J. A. DEMUTH,
Lieut. and Actg. Adjt.

Early on the morning of December 1, the expected orders were received, to hold the post until the last train from Johnsonville should pass. About noon, this train came along and sped away into Nashville, arriving just in time to escape capture by Hood's army, which was