



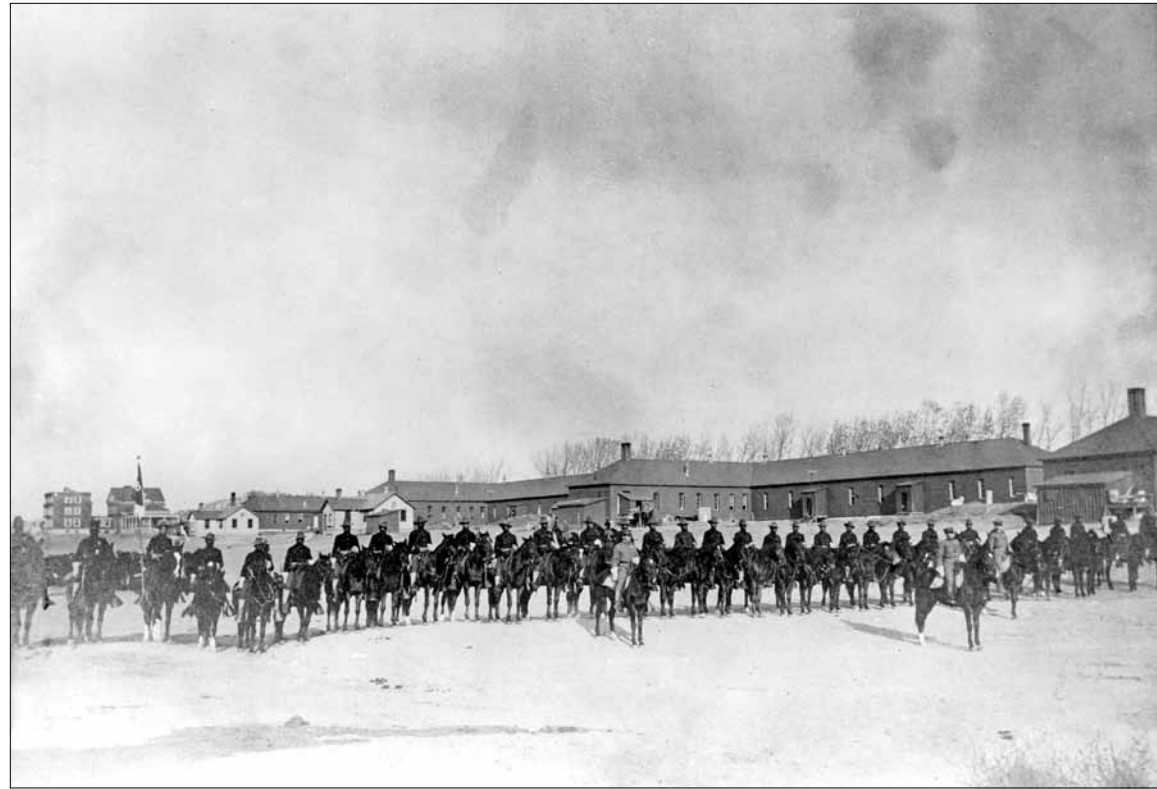
CHARLES YOUNG AND THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS AFTER THE INDIAN WARS

BY BRIAN G. SHELLUM

Black Americans have served and sacrificed in U.S. military conflicts from the Revolutionary War onward, but it was during the Civil War that they first fought in large numbers and in organized black regiments. The service of 178,975 black volunteers during the Civil War, comprising about 10 percent of the total Union manpower by the end of the bitter struggle, paid the price for blacks to serve in the Regular Army in the postwar era. These black regiments fought in all the major theaters of combat and suffered 36,847 dead, and individual members received sixteen Medals of Honor. As the Union army demobilized the last of the black volunteer regiments at the end of the war, Congress passed legislation establishing black Regular Army cavalry and infantry regiments. This was the first time the U.S. permitted blacks to enlist as regulars and as soldiers in the nation's standing army. These black regulars came to be known as Buffalo Soldiers.¹

A Ninth Cavalry squadron on the drill field, circa 1892-93. Each of the four troops has its own guidon and its own color of horse. The shadow of the reviewing stand is visible in the foreground; Crow Butte and a few of the Fort Robinson buildings are visible in the right background. NSHS RG1517-93-20

Tenth Cavalry troops
behind the 1887 barracks
at Fort Robinson. NSHS
RG2301-6-6



Nearly everyone today recognizes the term Buffalo Soldier, but in the post-Civil War era the black soldiers would have been known as colored troops who served in Negro regiments. The sobriquet Buffalo Soldier came into popular use in the twentieth century, even though it has its roots in the nineteenth century and was coined by Native Americans. According to various sources, the Cheyenne and Comanche used the expression first in the late 1860s and early 1870s for the members of the black regular regiments. The term was used occasionally by the press and in private letters, but not by the black soldiers themselves. Most agree the name referred to the soldiers' dark skin and black curly hair, similar in the Indian view to that of the buffalo. There is a great deal of disagreement in any meaning beyond this visual similarity. Certainly there was no empathetic connection between the two groups; the Indians viewed the African American soldier as a blue-clad enemy bent on destroying their way of life.²

A firsthand account from 1886 illustrates the contemporary Indian view of the Buffalo Soldiers. When Maj. Frederick W. Benteen arrived with a detachment of the Ninth Cavalry at the future site of Fort Duchesne, Utah, an Indian agent reported that a Ute Indian headman shouted: "Buffalo Soldiers! Buffalo Soldiers! Coming! Maybe so

tomorrow! Don't let them come! We can't stand it! It's bad—very bad!" When the agent asked through an interpreter about the Ute's aversion to the black troopers of the Ninth, the Indian's broken English response was "All over black! All over black, buffalo soldiers! Injun heap no like him!" After rubbing his head with his hand, he screamed, "Woolly head! Woolly head! All same as buffalo! What you call him, black white man?" This is one of the earliest documented uses of the term Buffalo Soldier by Native Americans. The epithet evolved and came to embody much more.³

Establishment

Congress approved an act on July 28, 1866, that added four cavalry regiments to the six existing and twenty-six new infantry regiments to the nineteen then in service; two of the cavalry and four of the infantry regiments were reserved for black soldiers. By August 1866 the military departments began recruiting black soldiers and white officers from the former Civil War volunteer regiments to fill the ranks of the Ninth and Tenth U.S. Cavalry Regiments and the Thirty-Eighth, Thirty-Ninth, Fortieth, and Forty-First U.S. Infantry Regiments.⁴

In 1869 and subsequent years, Congress moved to reduce the size of the peacetime Regular Army by limiting its enlisted strength to less than 30,000,

the strength the army maintained throughout the Indian Wars. This mandate forced the army to reduce the number of infantry regiments to twenty-five but left the number of cavalry regiments at ten. The Ninth and Tenth Cavalry Regiments survived intact, but the Thirty-Ninth and Fortieth Regiments combined to form the new Twenty-Fifth Infantry Regiment, and the Thirty-Eighth and Forty-First Regiments formed the new Twenty-Fourth. These four Buffalo Soldier regiments comprised about 10 percent of the post-Civil War Regular Army strength, and played a key role in the Indian Wars on the western frontier in the period 1866 to 1890.⁵

Ninth Cavalry

The newly formed Ninth Cavalry Regiment shared essentially the same organization as the white regiments in the Regular Army. A cavalry regiment consisted of 12 companies formed into three battalions (four companies in each battalion). At full strength a cavalry regiment rode with 43 commissioned officers and 845 enlisted men. Each company had three officers, 10 noncommissioned officers, and 60 privates. During this period cavalry units began to commonly use the term "troop" instead of company and "squadron" instead of battalion, a practice that began during the Civil War. Cavalry units used both terms interchangeably until the army directed regiments to use troop and squadron exclusively in 1883.⁶

The Ninth Cavalry was different from the white cavalry regiments in several important ways. Black enlisted men filled the regimental ranks, though they were led exclusively by white officers, with three exceptions to be discussed later. Secondly, the army assigned chaplains to the black regiments. The army assigned chaplains to most military posts, but the black regiments were the only ones allotted unit chaplains in this period. These chaplains, commissioned as captains, ministered to the black enlisted men and taught them fundamental school subjects. This practice of chaplains educating illiterate black soldiers began during the Civil War and was perhaps as important as their religious role.⁷

The Ninth U.S. Cavalry Regiment formed in New Orleans, Louisiana, beginning in August 1866, and was nearly full strength by early 1867 when it was sent to Texas to complete its training. In June the army ordered the regiment to occupy posts in west and south Texas, where it fought the Comanche and Apache and protected pioneers for eight years. In 1875 the regiment transferred to New Mexico and spent the next five years fighting the Apache

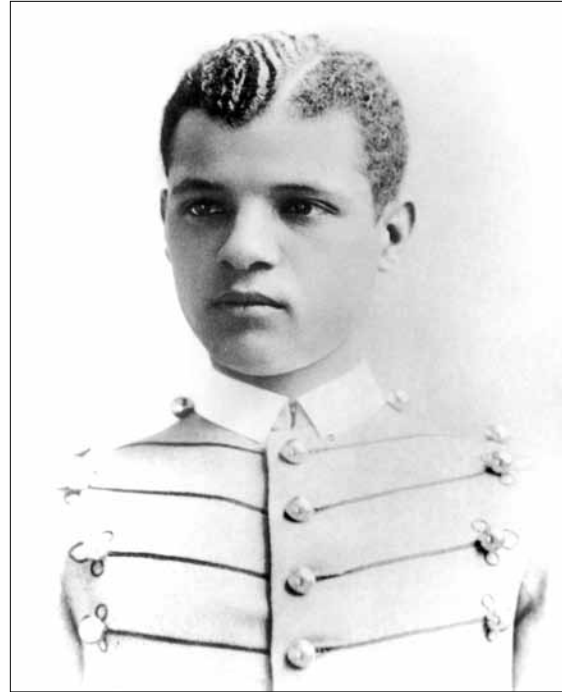
and securing settlers. The regiment moved north in 1881 to Kansas and Indian Territory (later Oklahoma), where it remained until 1885. Finally, the Ninth moved north from 1885 to 1891, where it fought the closing battles of the Plains Indian Wars against the Sioux and Cheyenne. The Ninth had its headquarters at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, from 1887 to 1898, and from 1885 to 1907 the majority of troops stationed at Fort Robinson were African American.⁸

Enlisted Men

Shortly after the legislation creating the Buffalo Soldier regiments passed in 1866, the units dispatched officers to canvass the black members of the former U.S. Colored Troops to find willing candidates to reenlist into the new regiments. Nearly half of the black soldiers recruited were veterans of the Civil War and most were former slaves, illiterate with few skills beyond those of field hands or farm laborers. Black soldiers earned the same wage as their white counterparts in the Regular Army, a situation unparalleled in the civilian world at the time. It did not take long to fill the ranks and the regiments were soon deployed to the frontier to begin the arduous nation-building tasks of fighting Indians, protecting settlers, guarding strategic points, building roads, stringing telegraph lines, maintaining military posts, securing reservations, and enduring endless tours of escort and guard duty.⁹

With congressional limits placed on its size after the Civil War, the Regular Army kept the peace in a vast western frontier with 430 companies garrisoning roughly two hundred scattered posts across the United States. Forty-four of these companies comprised the Buffalo Soldiers and it was common for black and white units to serve together at the same isolated frontier forts. The official record shows that the picture of race relations on frontier posts was far from equitable. At Fort Robinson, Nebraska, the post commander Lt. Col. J. L. Brisbin noted with alarm in 1887 that black soldiers were court-martialed at a rate more than twice that of whites. Fort Robinson's mix of large numbers of black cavalry troopers and white infantry soldiers proved a fertile breeding ground for racism. Whites in the military might grudgingly accept that blacks could be molded into capable soldiers, but continued to believe that they were dependent on their white officers for leadership. The Buffalo Soldiers could not escape the ubiquitous racism and stereotypes of the time no matter how well or consistently they performed their duties.¹⁰

John H. Alexander, who in 1887 became only the second black graduate of the United States Military Academy, served as a lieutenant in the Ninth Cavalry at Fort Robinson. NSHS RG1517-93-26



On the other hand, the bureaucratic machinery of the army housed, uniformed, equipped, and mounted black and white Regular Army troops the same. If a quartermaster issued a black regular unit threadbare uniforms, foul rations, or swaybacked horses, it was due to an overburdened procurement system and insufficient congressional appropriations rather than racism. The same treatment might befall a white regiment. The army simply could not afford to cripple one tenth of its combat power by deliberately issuing substandard items to the black regiments. The army bureaucracy was by regulation color-blind when it came to all things official such as recruiting, medical services, military pay, and pensions. Black and white soldiers received equal treatment when they applied for admission to the government-sponsored Soldiers' Home in Washington, D.C.¹¹

By 1890 there was a core of long-service, experienced frontier veterans in the Buffalo Soldiers that gave them a solid cadre of competent soldiers and professional noncommissioned officers. In an era when desertion was a chronic problem for the Regular Army, black soldiers rarely deserted. Secretary of War Redfield Proctor in 1889 suggested raising a black artillery regiment based solely on their low desertion rate relative to white regiments. Black regulars also had a consistently higher reenlistment rate than white units. These and other factors helped the Buffalo Soldier regiments develop a high esprit de corps, which in turn helped

the black soldiers win the grudging respect of most of their white officers.¹²

White Officers

Congress mandated that all of the lieutenants and two-thirds of the captains and field grades in the new infantry and cavalry regiments created in 1866 be set aside for volunteers who had at least two years of field service during the Civil War. The remaining third comprised Regular Army officers and most of these were graduates of West Point. Though at least one hundred black officers served in the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War, none received commissions in the Buffalo Soldier regiments, most not having the minimum two years of field service. All of the volunteer officers competing for commissions in the new black and white regiments had to pass an examination before a board of officers. Ultimately, the quality of the officers in the black regiments ran the gamut from indifferent and incompetent to the highly capable and was probably no different than the other regiments in the regular army.¹³

Louis H. Rucker was among the white officers awarded Regular Army commissions in the Ninth Cavalry when it formed in 1866 and served with the unit until 1897. Rucker began his career as an enlisted volunteer in the Civil War in 1861 and was a first lieutenant by the end of the war. In the Ninth he proved an able second lieutenant, an efficient first lieutenant regimental quartermaster, and a superb troop commander after promotion to captain in 1879. Rucker served as one of the exemplary company commanders in the Ninth Cavalry during this period, a low-key officer who treated his enlisted and noncommissioned officers with respect and whose smaller than average troop desertion and dishonorable discharge rates reflected his effectiveness. Rucker served as a key mentor to black officers John Alexander and Charles Young during their formative years as second lieutenants with the Ninth.¹⁴

Frank B. Taylor was the polar opposite of Rucker. With no Civil War experience, Taylor used political connections to obtain a commission in the Twenty-Fifth Infantry in 1867. He transferred to the white Eighteenth Infantry in 1869, where his regimental commander tried to discharge him, and later moved to the Ninth Cavalry, where in 1881 he was court-martialed for verbally abusing, pistol-whipping, and beating a black trooper with the butt of a carbine. The board recommended he be dismissed, but President Chester Arthur reduced the sentence and he continued to serve. In addition to his contempt

for black enlisted men, Taylor avoided service in the same troop with two of the black officers then on active service. Within a week of Lt. Charles Young joining his troop at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, in 1889, Captain Taylor fell "ill" and remained on the sick list for nine months. Two years earlier, after Lt. John Alexander was assigned to his troop, Taylor found convenient ways to be out on detached service for five months and was then reassigned. For the leadership of the regiment to condone such behavior indicates an unhealthy racial climate that could not have been lost on Young or Alexander.¹⁵

Black Officers

Only three black Regular Army line officers served in the U.S. Army during the late 1800s and all were graduates of West Point. Of the thirteen blacks who attended the United States Military Academy in this postwar period, only three graduated: Henry O. Flipper in 1877, John H. Alexander in 1887, and Charles Young in 1889. The War Department assigned these black officers solely to the Buffalo Soldier regiments after graduation and the three had diverse careers and mixed successes.¹⁶

Charles Young graduated from West Point in 1889 and like Alexander, selected the Ninth Cavalry. He joined his unit at Fort Robinson, Nebraska,

and a year later rotated to Fort Duchesne, Utah, just before the Ninth participated in the Pine Ridge Campaign, the end to the wars with the Plains Indians. Young matured and honed his skills as a leader at Fort Duchesne while maintaining the peace with the Ute Indians, serving there until 1894. Unlike the two black academy graduates preceding him, Young went on to a long and distinguished career and eventually attained the rank of colonel.¹⁷

The legislation creating the black regular regiments in 1866 mandated the commissioning of chaplains—though not specifically black chaplains—to minister to and educate the black enlisted men. It took some years for the army to fill these positions, and even longer to find black chaplains to serve, despite the fact that at least fourteen black officers served as chaplains with the U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War. Ultimately, five black chaplains served in the Buffalo Soldier regiments in the 1800s, including Henry V. Plummer, commissioned in 1884, Allen Allensworth in 1886, Theophilus G. Steward in 1891, George W. Prioleau in 1895, and William T. Anderson in 1897.¹⁸

End of the Indian Wars

By 1890 the serious troubles with the Plains Indians were over, so the soldiers of the black regular



Lt. Charles Young graduated from West Point in 1889 and joined his Ninth Cavalry unit at Fort Robinson. Young went on to a long and distinguished career, eventually attaining the rank of colonel. Courtesy of the Coleman Collection, National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wilberforce, Ohio



Interior of an 1887 adobe barracks at Fort Robinson. The all-black Ninth Cavalry lived in buildings that were identical to those of their counterparts in the all-white Eighth Infantry. NSHS RG1517-93-13



A photograph belonging to Charles Young showing a cavalry encampment, likely en route to Sequoia National Park in 1903.

Courtesy of the Coleman Collection, National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wilberforce, Ohio

regiments, like white frontier troops, spent much of their time performing routine garrison duties such as drill, training, target practice, and practice marches. Once the Indians were settled on reservations, the operational role of the army in the West changed, which facilitated improvements in the lives of the soldiers, black and white. Gen. John M. Schofield, the serving Commander in Chief of the Army, declared in 1884: "The period of 'temporary huts' for the troops has passed." In this new role, the army concentrated troops near the reservations where they might be needed, and those posts selected for retention were provided appropriations for permanent, comfortable buildings. The spread of the railroad and telegraph meant these forts were no longer isolated; instead, they were regularly supplied with food and other goods. White settlements sprang up around posts ending the soldiers' isolation.¹⁹

Perhaps more important to the everyday lives of the Buffalo Soldiers were the creature comforts afforded by the new permanent posts. Congress approved appropriations in 1886 to complete improvements in the barracks and other buildings at various posts, among them Fort Robinson, Nebraska. After the Ninth Cavalry moved its headquarters

to Fort Robinson in 1887, the members of the Ninth moved into new barracks with all of the amenities they could ask for. It was certainly not lost on the black troopers of the Ninth that they lived in buildings that were identical to those of their counterparts in the all-white Eighth Infantry. The army achieved this equality of housing not by design but by practical circumstance; they had no idea whether a white or black regiment would occupy the barracks they constructed. The army bureaucracy was color-blind at a time when the rest of America was not.²⁰

One other interesting mission given to both black and white regiments in the post-Indian War era was patrolling, safeguarding, and building the infrastructure necessary to open our national parks to tourism. From 1886 until 1916, when the federal government created the National Park Service, the U.S. Army protected first Yellowstone, later Yosemite, and finally Sequoia National Park. Yellowstone National Park was the first national park created in 1872, but the federal government did not budget any money for its operation, so the U.S. Army took over responsibility in 1886. The army was the only organization with the mobility, manpower, and logistics to undertake the job. I am most familiar with the Ninth Cavalry at Sequoia National Park the summer of 1903, when two troops under Capt. Charles Young patrolled and improved the roads leading into the Giant Forest. Since Young commanded the expedition and was seconded to the Interior Department for the summer, this made him the first African American national park superintendent.²¹

Conclusion

The service and sacrifice of black volunteer soldiers during the Civil War paid the price for blacks to enlist as regulars in the postwar standing army. Soon after they arrived on the western plains, the Native American tribes gave the members of these black regiments the nickname Buffalo Soldiers because of their dark skin and black curly hair. Dispersed among several hundred isolated posts across the country, they served and fought side by side with white regiments, though not always in racial harmony. White officers led these regiments, with the exception of three black West Point graduates. Many, but not all of the black soldiers and white officers developed mutual trust and respect.

The four regiments comprising the Buffalo Soldiers played a critical role in the settling of the western frontier during the period after the Indian Wars, proving capable soldiers and establishing a creditable record. Remarkably, they were the only

black Americans at the time afforded equal recruitment, pay, housing, and pensions. In all things official, black soldiers were treated as equals, though racial bias persisted in all social or off-duty situations. These black regulars served competently with white regulars in spite of the ubiquitous racial prejudice of the age. What's more, the service of the Buffalo Soldiers paved the way for future generations and assured these black trailblazers a prominent place in U.S. military history. 🇺🇸

NOTES

¹ Frederick H. Dyer, *Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1959), 11-12. (Of 36,847: 2,894 were killed or mortally wounded, 29,658 died of disease, 98 died as prisoners of war, 596 died in accidents, 3,621 died of all other nonbattle causes.); Frank N. Schubert, *Black Valor: Buffalo Soldiers and the Medal of Honor, 1870-1898* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1997), 2-4.

² William H. Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 25-26.

³ Eugene E. White, *Experiences of a Special Indian Agent* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 146-49.

⁴ General Order No. 56, War Department, Adjutant General's Office, Washington, Aug. 1, 1866; Speech, "Should the Negro Enlist in the Union Army?" National Hall, Philadelphia, published in *Douglass' Monthly*, August 1863; Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 218-20.

⁵ Coffman, *Old Army*, 218-20.

⁶ Mary Lee Stubbs and Stanley Russell Connor, *Armor-Cavalry* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Army, 1969), 20; *U.S. Army Register, 1880*, 278-79.

⁷ Stubbs and Connor, *Armor-Cavalry*, 20.

⁸ Theophilus F. Rodenbough and William Lawrence Haskin, *The Army of the United States: Historical Sketches of Staff and with Portraits of Generals-in-Chief* (New York: Maynard, Merrill, 1896), 280-87.

⁹ *U.S. Army Register, 1880*, 280-83; William A. Dobak and Thomas D. Phillips, *The Black Regulars, 1866-1898* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), xii-xiii.

¹⁰ *U.S. Army Register, 1880*, 267-74; Charles L. Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867-1898* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 27.

¹¹ Dobak and Phillips, *Black Regulars*, 267-73.

¹² Dobak and Phillips, *Black Regulars*, *Ibid.*, 265-66; Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry*, 23-26.

¹³ General Order No. 56, War Department, Adjutant General's Office, Washington, Aug. 1, 1866.

¹⁴ Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, from its Organization, September 29, 1789, to March 2, 1903* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 850; Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry*, 26; Brian Shellum, *Black Officer in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment: The Military Career of Charles Young* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 34-47.

¹⁵ Ninth Regimental Return, November 1889-September 1890, NARA; Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry*, 113-14; Coffman, *Old Army*, 221.

¹⁶ Brian Shellum, *Black Cadet in a White Bastion: Charles Young at West Point* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 42-47.

¹⁷ Shellum, *Black Officer in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment*, 9-47.

¹⁸ Bruce A. Glasrud and Michael N. Searles, *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2007), 68-70.

¹⁹ Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 399-400.

²⁰ Thomas R. Buecker, *Fort Robinson and the American West, 1874-1899* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1999), 158-64.

²¹ Shellum, *Black Officer in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment*, 140-54.

Brian Shellum has worked as a senior intelligence analyst at the Joint Improvised Explosive Device (IED) Defeat Organization with the Department of Defense since 2006. Before that, he worked as a historian at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) following a career as a U.S. Army and armor officer and West European foreign area specialist. He is the author of Black Cadet in a White Bastion: Charles Young at West Point and Black Officer in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment: The Military Career of Charles Young, both published by the University of Nebraska Press.