

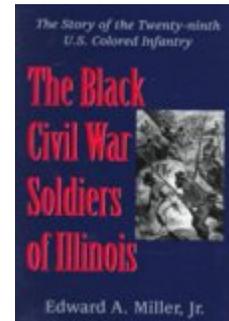
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward A. Jr. Miller. *The Black Civil War Soldiers of Illinois: The Story of the Twenty-Ninth U.S. Colored Infantry*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998. xi + 267 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-199-1.

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Edward A. Miller's *Black Civil War Soldiers of Illinois: The Story of the Twenty-ninth U.S. Colored Infantry* is a rare find in the trove of Civil War regimental histories. Many of the works in this genre are patriotic narratives fused with long quotations from *The Official Records* which focus on local volunteers and the assorted challenges faced and overcome by the regiment. *Black Civil War Soldiers*, however, is more than the standard narrative recounting of battlefield exploits; it is a melding of demographic, social, and military history that sheds light on the history of a single black infantry regiment serving in the Eastern theater and Texas.

Beginning in November 1863, recruiting agents for the Twenty-ninth began the search for volunteers in Illinois. Chapter One, "Finding a Place," details the efforts involved in raising a black regiment in a state with few potential recruits. The agents' job was not an easy one, and they encountered difficulties from the outset of their venture. Potential recruits were reluctant to enlist because of the lower pay and lack of federal bounties initially promised to black troops and because of their knowledge of and experience with long-standing local prejudice. In addition, the Illinois recruiters ran into competition from agents representing the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island. In time, the pay situation was equitably settled, and Illinois, unlike the federal government, paid bounties to black recruits. Few of the men who enlisted in 1863 were from Illinois or had been free men. Many of the recruits were runaways from Missouri and Kentucky, but quite a few came from as far away as Mississippi and Virginia. Throughout this chapter, Miller presents a goodly number of background sketches of the officers and men. Importantly, Miller does all of this

against the backdrop of "The Race Issue in Illinois" (p. 7).

For much of the regiment's history, it faced a severe shortage of officers and men. Indeed, the Twenty-ninth went into its sole battle, the Crater, in 1864, severely under-strength. Following this disastrous battle, the regiment spent much of its time in support activities or in quiet zones. It was not until the war had virtually ended that sufficient numbers of men were available to fill the open slots. The recruiting story is a comprehensive picture of the challenges involved in raising a regiment, and it gives a good feel for the process, its difficulties, and the men involved in it.

In the remaining five chapters, Miller tells of the regiment's participation in the siege of Petersburg, its deployment to Texas, its eventual mustering out in November 1865, and the postwar lives of many of the Twenty-ninth's soldiers. For most veterans of the Twenty-ninth, life after the army was a return to menial labor in their home states. Even for the officers, postwar life was a return to the familiar. The regiment's story is based upon painstaking research in the National Archives' military and pension files for individual soldiers. Miller's decision to make use of these files was, in large part, forced upon him by the circumstances of history. Most of the regiment's men were illiterate. Therefore, Miller had to rely upon transcribed enlistment and service records and postwar pension applications. Few of the men left the kind of personal records that help the historian humanize and give flesh and blood to their work. Because the focus of this book is on the lives of common soldiers, Miller does not allow officers or non-regimental sources to pre-

dominate. The author makes impressive use of his circumscribed choice of materials, and it is to his credit that he has been able to tell the regiment's story so fully.

Miller's focus on the life of a single black regiment is a welcome addition to the historiography of the Civil War. Some 149 black regiments and batteries served the republic, but few of these units' stories have been told. Luis F. Emilio's 1894 *History of the Fifty-fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1865*, later dramatized in the film *Glory*, virtually stands alone in the field of black regimental histories. Historians like Dudley T. Cornish, in *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (1987), and Joseph T. Glatthaar, in *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (1990), have looked at the black military experience, albeit from a broader perspective than that of an individual regiment. By turning his attention to the Twenty-ninth U.S. Colored Infantry, Edward A. Miller Jr. has given his readers a more intimate look at the black soldier in Civil War history.

As a regiment, the Twenty-ninth U.S. Colored In-

fantry does not stand out for any particular reason. Like most black regiments, the Twenty-ninth was recruited late in the war and thus did not have the opportunity to see much action. Besides this basic chronological consideration, common prejudice and serious reservations by senior commanders about the capacity for combat of the "sable arm" limited the regiment's active campaigning. Its sole battle was at the Crater during the siege of Petersburg, and for much of its service it was relegated to laboring on fortifications and other such support activities. It is, however, the very nature of the Twenty-ninth's history of the common black soldier's military experience in the Civil War that makes its story important. By having detailed the experience of this regiment and the lives of many of its soldiers before, during, and after the war, Miller has given readers a more intimate look at the lives of soldiers who "did their duty" (p. xi).

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