

H-Net Reviews

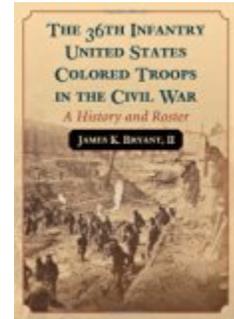
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James K. Bryant. *The 36th Infantry United States Colored Troops in the Civil War: A History and Roster*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2012. viii + 248 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6878-2.

Reviewed by Matthew Hauck (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-CivWar (April, 2013)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle



A Model Regiment

Thanks to the 1989 movie *Glory*, the popular image of African American participation in the Union Army during the American Civil War is dominated by the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. While by Hollywood standards the movie is a fairly accurate depiction, the 54th Massachusetts was only one regiment, and its experiences were not necessarily typical of other African American regiments. For instance, where the 54th was composed largely of Northern free men of color, the 36th United States Colored Troops (originally the 2nd North Carolina Colored Infantry) consisted almost exclusively of former slaves from North Carolina and Virginia. This latter regiment comprises the subject of James K. Bryant's *The 36th Infantry United States Colored Troops in the Civil War*.

Although at times Bryant's book does follow the standard framework of regimental histories by studying events in chronological order, his work generally tends toward a thematic approach. The thesis of this book is that "although the 36th USCT is rooted in Edward A. Wild and his African Brigade, the story of this 'model regiment' can stand on its own as a medium in the transition from slavery to freedom. The soldiers were not alone in this transformation as they not only carried their family members and fellow slaves into this period of vast change, but also brought along their white officers and other who worked on their behalf in this change" (pp. 2-3). In other words, while the 36th was unique, it also provides an excellent window for understanding for what

the life-altering transformation from slavery to freedom mean to blacks and whites alike. It wasn't just African Americans who would be forever changed: the United States Army would now be biracial thanks in part to the 36th and white Americans (especially Southerners) were going to have to adjust to the new status of African Americans. For these reasons, one can follow Thomas Morris Chester, the African American war correspondent, in describing the 36th USCT as a "a model regiment" (p. 5).

Bryant compares the motives of different African American soldiers in the Union Army (Northern/freeborn vs. Southern/former slave) asserting that while Northern-born African Americans enlisted to prove their worth and therefore gain their equality, Southern-born African Americans by and large enlisted to gain their freedom and that of their kin. For this reason, Bryant's book is more than just a history of the regiment; it is a work of social history.

The story of the 36th USCT is significant for several reasons. First, it details the experiences of a Union regiment that performed different services in a variety of locales: first in eastern North Carolina and southeastern Virginia, where the regiment participated in small-scale operations; as guards at the military prison at Point Lookout, Maryland; as part of the Army of the James, where they took part in the Battle of New Market Heights (September 29-30, 1864); and finally on garrison duty in the American Southwest. Second, this book relates the

experience of one of the first African American regiments organized during the Civil War, from the relationship between black soldiers and white officers that changed attitudes within the American military establishment, to efforts to enlist new recruits from what was still hostile territory. These recruiting patrols allow the reader to see how deeply ingrained Southern fears of slave insurrection and race mixing were. The largest number of complaints made by white Southerners who encountered the 36th USCT had to do with supposed threats to the white population and sexual advances toward white women. Both of these types of charges were found to be untrue upon investigation.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of primary source material on the 36th Bryant spends much of the text writing about the United States Colored Troops in general. Since a majority of the rank and file were former slaves and therefore illiterate, the authors has relied on a wide variety of sources: the Official Records, the papers of white

officers who commanded the 36th, correspondence from units that served alongside the 36th, and documents from officers who commanded the units within which the 36th served (including General Benjamin Butler). The papers of Southerners who encountered the 36th (for example, white slave owners who “lost” their slaves when the regiment went on recruiting patrols or Southern POWs from Point Lookout, where the regiment served as guards for a time) are also illuminating. Very frequently, however, a general discussion of the United States Colored Troops must serve to fill the gaps between these primary sources.

Editing also presents something of a problem. Throughout the book, a number of sentences are missing words, and in other cases, sentences often do not make sense. Overall, however, the author does a good job of telling the story of the 36th USCT and scholars of the Civil War in general or the United States Colored Troops, or just about anyone who enjoys regimental histories, will profit from reading it .

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Matthew Hauck. Review of Bryant, James K., *The 36th Infantry United States Colored Troops in the Civil War: A History and Roster*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37357>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.