

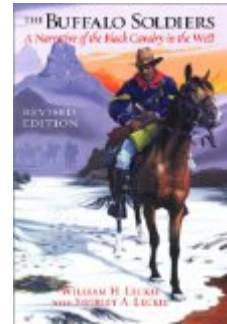
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William H. Leckie Leckie, with Shirley A. *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Black Cavalry in the West*. Normal: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. x + 319 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3523-6.

Reviewed by Ernie Teagarden (Emeritus, College of Business and Information Systems, Dakota State University)

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The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of Black Soldiers in the West is not a new book. Most of the text can be found in a first edition published in 1967 under the title *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West*. A reader of the new edition gets the results of thirty-six years of between-edition research conducted by a variety of writers and historians. The Leckies' first edition was a groundbreaker because it opened a new chapter in the military history of the Western frontier, which emphasized the role of black soldiers in shaping the modern West. The first edition sold 75,000 copies, a fantastic "read" for a book that many readers would, by title and publisher, consider "academic." This means the script would be enlightening but turgid, contain a forest of footnotes, and possess a bibliography with virtually no end. The updated edition contains a reasonable number of footnotes at the bottom of the page, instead of at the end of the chapter, as is currently in vogue. Most of the books listed in the bibliography can be obtained with a minimum of effort. Maps are provided in the text along with an acceptable index at the end of the book. The real merit of both editions is the easy and interesting flow of the Leckies' prose. At times the reviewer found the book hard to put down. In toto it is a "good read," an expression often found at the conclusion of book reviews in newspapers and popular journals.

In August 1866, General U. S. Grant directed Generals William T. Sherman and Philip Sheridan to organize and equip a regiment of black cavalry in each of their military responsibilities. The Ninth Cavalry was placed under the command of Colonel Edward Hatch of Iowa and the Tenth Cavalry under Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson of Illinois, something of a popular hero after his fa-

mous raid through Mississippi in 1863. Following a year of recruiting white officers and black troopers and the purchase of healthy horses, both regiments moved westward during the spring and summer of 1867. The Ninth went into Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, the Tenth to the Central Plains. The term "Buffalo Soldiers" was first given to the Ninth Cavalry by Indian opponents but, eventually, this sobriquet was applied to all black troops. The Tenth added the figure of a buffalo to its regimental crest. The Leckies can give no precise reason for this nickname.

The Ninth faced raiding Apaches, Cheyennes, Comanches, and Kiowas as well as rampaging outlaw groups and roving Mexican revolutionaries who occasionally crossed the border to create havoc on the American side. The Ninth was expected to return off-reservation Indians to their reservations. Forts and outposts were to be constructed where required, protection was to be afforded stage and mail routes, and the Ninth was counted upon to perform other functions as they occurred, provided they fell within its competence. Finally, officers and enlisted personnel had to cooperate with the civil authorities, often in an antagonistic or downright hostile environment. The Leckies are especially good when covering such situations, e.g., the Lincoln County War. Their treatments of military movements and combats are also well done.

After a few years of trying to maintain tranquility in a vast region running from the arid Staked Plains to El Paso in the southwest to the Valley in the southeast, the Ninth was moved to the District of New Mexico. Here they joined in the struggle to consolidate the

independent-minded Apaches and resettle them on a desolate reservation at San Carlos, Arizona. Participation in this chore allowed the Ninth to make the acquaintance of such warrior chiefs as Geronimo, Victorio, Nana, and Skinya. Some of the Leckies' best writing concerns the now famous fight between two mercantile groups, Murphy and Dolan versus Chisum, McSween, and Tunstall, over the economic control of Lincoln County, New Mexico. Both sides employed hired guns, including William Bonney, a.k.a. Billy the Kid, by the Tunstall faction. Order No. 49 from Washington directed all American troops not to intervene in the Lincoln County "war." In time the fighting became so fierce that eccentric Lt. Col. N. A. M. Dudley, Commander at Fort Stanton, took two companies of the Ninth, a howitzer, and a Gatling gun, and rode to the scene of action. They were not needed, for after a few days of fighting in July 1878, McSween was killed and lay for two days in his front yard before burial.

In 1881 the Ninth was assembled from its various posts and relocated to Kansas. Headquarters were established at Fort Riley. Here they were charged with the unpleasant duty of preventing "Boomers" from settling in the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) and evicting those already settled. They often dealt with parties of several hundred persons and sometimes more than once. Many soldiers sympathized with the plight of these people.

By the middle of 1885 the "Boomer" trespass had lessened and the Ninth was moved to Wyoming, Utah, and Nebraska, notably to Forts Robinson and Niobrara in Nebraska. To the north, the Sioux or Lakota tribes seemed in a desperate state. They were victims of dishonest government agents, were hungry, and were subject to diseases attributable to a weakened physical condition. They were also subject to the religious influence of Wovoka, a Paiute Indian who taught that God would return the Indian world to what it had been before the advent of the white man. This goal could be achieved through the influence of "ghost dancing," ghost-song singing, and the wearing of ghost shirts, which would repel the white man's bullets.

Something like a ghost dance craze developed in southwestern Dakota. Indian agents on the Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Standing Rock, and Cheyenne River reservations, at first not too excited about the ghost dance phenomenon, soon became very concerned and fearful. Pine Ridge Agent Daniel Royer on November 15, 1890, asked for protection. The Leckies present a fairly succinct but powerful account of the events leading up to Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890, an event researched and

written about time and time again. Area Commander General Nelson Miles hastened a force, eventually including most of the Ninth, from Fort Robinson. Other units were sent including eight companies of the Seventh Cavalry.

On December 15, Sitting Bull was killed during an Indian Police arrest procedure along the Grand River. A band of Sioux under Big Foot removed themselves from this area and started south. Major Guy Henry was ordered to take several companies of the Ninth and intercept Big Foot. He never did find Big Foot. Eventually Colonel James Forsyth, with four howitzers and eight companies of the Seventh Cavalry, surrounded Big Foot near Wounded Knee Creek. An attempt to disarm Big Foot failed and a sometimes hand-to-hand combat ensued. Killed were 146 Indian men, women, and children, and 50 were wounded. The Seventh lost 26 dead and 39 wounded. The Ninth was not involved in the Wounded Knee combat, but the next day rescued Forsyth near Drexel Mission. Within a month, 4,000 Lakota returned to Pine Ridge. On January 21, Miles held grand review and the Buffalo Soldiers were given a victory salute.

In 1875 the headquarters of the Tenth relocated to Fort Concho, Texas, with personnel stationed at several regional forts. They were undermanned and the Red River War left their horses in poor condition. Nevertheless, as the Leckies emphasize, Colonel Grierson, in addition to clearing his district of raiders, insisted upon his troops mapping streams, mountain passes, and water holes in the district. In 1878 Grierson with twenty troopers carried through a "long scout" and recorded the geographical features of his command: flora and fauna, fish and animals, geological formations, and any other unusual phenomena encountered on the route. Apache raids kept the Tenth continually on the alert. The Tenth also ran into jurisdictional conflicts with elements of the Texas Rangers, fortunately settled without bloodshed. By guarding water holes Grierson kept hit-and-run Indian and Mexican raiders in partial check. In particular Chief Victorio and his band of renegade Apaches, off their New Mexico reservation, engaged the Tenth on several occasions.

Eventually Grierson's control of waterholes drove Victorio into Mexico. On October 14, 1880, they were engaged by Mexican troops and Victorio and seventy-eight of his band were killed. However, in the relentless pursuit of Victorio by the Tenth and Ninth regiments, the Apaches were out-skilled and out-endured by the Buffalo soldiers. The latter received virtually no credit for

their efforts, as was, sadly, their usual state of renown after a military success. In 1885 the Tenth was removed to Arizona where they dealt with such warriors as Geronimo and Magnus. In 1891 they went to the Dakotas and Montana and remained there until the Spanish American War.

Certain military actions for the Buffalo Soldiers have made it into print but day-to-day soldiering was usually repetitive, consisting of mundane tasks coupled with constant vigilance. The Ninth and Tenth regiments rarely received credit for successes. Their living conditions were less desirable than their white comrades-in-arms. They received fewer Medal of Honor awards per regiment than did white troops. As a rule, the Buffalo Soldiers were not so well received by the civil populace as were the white soldiers. The Leckies cover these issues throughout the text. In their preface to the second edition the Leckies note that they were faulted for not covering the Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Fifth Infantry Divisions in their text. They counter by pointing out that these units got their due in Arlen Fowler's *The Black Infantry in the West, 1869-1891* (1971). The Leckies also were charged with giving inadequate space to black Medal of Honor winners, or not publishing enough photographs of Buffalo Soldiers. In both respects the second edition is more complete than the first, as nearly forty years separate the two editions. There was time to pluck additional manuscript and photographic materials from archival and private collections as they became available.

The obvious change in the two editions is an attached

epilogue chapter at the conclusion of the regular text. It concerns the level of respect in which the black soldier was held from the frontier days right into the twentieth century. The respect of civilians for black soldiers was, as mentioned, not high in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The Jim Crow laws, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and a decline in recruiting black soldiers did nothing to improve their social position during the first half of the twentieth century. The Leckies believed that a turnaround came in 1948, when President Harry Truman, by executive order, ended discrimination in the armed forces. Some change may have come a bit earlier. The writer can recall returning from a stint in the occupation army in Japan and finding both black and white soldiers placed together on the same barrack floor at Fort Lawton in Seattle. Such was not the case a year earlier when the writer departed for Japan from Fort Ord, California.

The Leckies' bibliography lists most of what has been published on Buffalo Soldiers up to the year 2003. Suggested readings include Monroe Lee Billington's *New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers, 1866-1900* (1991) and Charles L. Kenner's *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867-1898* (1999). The Leckies' bibliography contains a complete list of pertinent writings. Monuments to Buffalo soldiers have been sculpted in recent years and erected in several locations.

Certainly the Leckies, William and Shirley, can be proud of giving the Buffalo Soldier some well-deserved recognition after years of neglect.

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