

James G. Hollandsworth. *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience during the Civil War.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995. xvi + 140 pp. \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-8071-1939-6.



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There are few scholarly monographs that deal exclusively with the many African Americans who joined the Union Army during the Civil War, but those that have appeared thus far stand as rock-solid contributions to the historical literature of that conflict. Dudley Taylor Cornish established a high standard for the field forty years ago with his ground-breaking study, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (1956). Cornish's book, still available in paperback from the University Press of Kansas, is institutional history at its best. Cornish describes the various forces and strong-willed individuals who compelled the Lincoln Administration to adopt the revolutionary policy of recruiting free blacks and runaway slaves for military service, the formation of the 166 regiments that made up the United States Colored Troops (USCT), and the performance of many of those units in combat. Over a generation later, Joseph T. Glatthaar examined the USCT with the penetrating eye of a social historian. Glatthaar's *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officer* (1990) humanized the Union's black defenders in the same way that Bell Irvin Wiley's *The Life of Johnny Reb* (1943) and

The Life of Billy Yank (1952) did for their white comrades and foes. Hailed as landmark works by other historians, *The Sable Arm* and *Forged in Battle* can be classified as broad overviews, which treat the U.S. Colored Troops as a single entity. Both Cornish and Glatthaar attempted to draw generalizations that would fit the 186,017 officers and men who came from all over the United States and a wide variety of backgrounds. It is now time for scholars interested in the USCT to adopt a narrower focus and write the divisional, brigade, and regimental histories that will put the findings of Cornish and Glatthaar to the test. Like their white counterparts, USCT regiments were raised on the state level and then turned over to national authorities. It might surprise some to learn that Louisiana, a charter member of the Confederacy, supplied the Union Army with thirty-seven black regiments, more than any other state. In *The Louisiana Native Guards*, James Hollandsworth Jr. tells the story of the state's first three black regiments in blue, while admirably explaining the aspirations, achievements, and fate of their members. It is an absorbing tale, complete with all the elements that characterized one of the

most important racial experiments in American history –high hopes and frustration, courage and cowardice, dedication and incompetence, idealism and expediency, promise and betrayal. When the Civil War broke out in April 1861, hundreds of free blacks living in New Orleans formed a pro-Confederate military unit. Governor Thomas D. Moore accepted this regiment of "Native Guards" (p. 3) as part of the Louisiana militia on May 2. Black soldiers had helped hold Louisiana for France and Spain in the 18th century, and in 1815, local slaves and free men of color stood by Andrew Jackson as he crushed a British attempt to seize New Orleans. The heirs of this distinguished military tradition who stepped forward to defend Confederate Louisiana acted out of a mixture of motives. As members of a prosperous and well-educated community, they had a stake in the status quo. Some believed that they might forfeit their lives or property if they hesitated to support the Southern rebellion. Others feared that invading Yankees might molest them and strip them of their belongings. Many New Orleans blacks had European blood coursing through their veins, and they identified more with their white relatives than darker-skinned slaves. Although Louisiana authorities were happy to publicize the existence of the Native Guards to foster an impression that Southern blacks favored Southern independence, the regiment was not entrusted with a mission of any real importance. The Native Guards were not even issued weapons until a year after their inception, when a Union fleet was about to descend on the Crescent City. At that critical juncture, they received an insufficient number of obsolete muskets. When New Orleans surrendered without a fight to Captain David G. Farragut on April 29, 1862, the Native Guards quietly disbanded. Major General Benjamin F. Butler, the commander of the Union occupation forces that settled in and around New Orleans, eventually decided that blacks could better withstand the rigors of garrison and fatigue duty in his department's "unhealthy positions" (p. 19) than white troops. On

August 22, 1862, he invited the state's free black militia to switch sides and join the Union Army. In less than six weeks, the 1st Regiment of Native Guards, the first officially sanctioned black regiment in the Union Army, was mustered into federal service. Butler organized the 2nd and 3rd Native Guards before the year's end. Aside from the officers, the majority of the men who enlisted in the Union Native Guards were recently liberated slaves. In other USCT regiments, officer commissions were almost always monopolized by whites, but such was not the case in Butler's black regiments – at least not on the company level. All the original captains and lieutenants in the 1st and 2nd Native Guards were African Americans; the 3rd Native Guards had both white and black company officers. For the most part, Butler's black officers represented the elite of Louisiana's black Creole population and included such future political leaders as P. B. S. Pinchback, Emile Detiege, Robert H. Isabelle, William B. Barrett, and Ernest Morphy. Although Union forces in Louisiana needed the extra manpower, many of Butler's Northern troops resented serving alongside African Americans. White enlisted men refused to salute or obey orders from black officers, and a large number of white officers refused to regard black men as their military or social equals. Major General Nathaniel P. Banks, who succeeded the controversial Butler in command of the Department of the Gulf in October 1862, was deeply disturbed by this situation. His solution was to pressure officers of color into resigning their commissions. Within a few months of his arrival at New Orleans, Banks tricked the black officers of the 3rd Native Guards into leaving the service. He managed to do the same thing to all but one black officer of the 1st Native Guards and one in the 2nd during the year that followed. Despite such hostility and treachery from the very men they were striving to aid, the black soldiers of the 1st and 3rd Native Guards proved their valor in a bloody but futile assault on Port Hudson, Louisiana, on May 27, 1863. For much of the rest of the Civil

War, however, these combat-ready USCT units found employment primarily as labor battalions, thus freeing more white outfits for active campaigning. Samuel M. Quincy, the enlightened lieutenant colonel of the 1st Native Guards, complained bitterly about this discriminatory policy: "Colored troops . . . are mostly employed in the dirty work of the army & not given a chance to fight" (p. 98). In the waning stages of the conflict, the 1st Native Guards (having been redesignated as the 73rd U.S. Colored Troops) participated in the siege of Mobile, Alabama, and led the way in the successful Union attack on Fort Blakely, April 9, 1865. Brimming with pride, 250 of these victorious veterans celebrated their discharge by parading through New Orleans on September 23. The veterans of the Native Guards not only raised their self-esteem by serving in wartime, but they came home determined to fight for black suffrage and other rights during Reconstruction. Especially prominent in this effort were former black officers, who had been treated so shabbily by the Union Army. Political activism turned many of these men into targets of white terror and other forms of repression, but they still managed to win some impressive, if short-lived, victories. P. B. S. Pinchback, formerly a captain in the 2nd Native Guards, became Louisiana's lieutenant governor in 1870, and he was the state's acting governor for thirty-five days in December 1872 and January 1873. Hollandsworth, a professor of psychology and associate vice president for academic affairs at the University of Southern Mississippi, has reconstructed the history of Louisiana's first three black Union regiments with commendable skill and objectivity. *The Louisiana Native Guards* is a worthy addition to the pioneering work of Cornish and Glatthaar. Exploiting previously unconsulted sources, Hollandsworth corrects many false impressions that exist about both the Confederate and Union Native Guards. For instance, he is the first historian to correctly identify all the black officers commissioned in Butler's 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Native Guards. He also reveals many per-

sonal details concerning these men, which illuminate the impact that African Americans had on the Civil War in Louisiana and how that experience changed them and their country. It can only be hoped that the monographs on the USCT regiments of Tennessee and Arkansas currently under preparation will take Hollandsworth as their model. *The Louisiana Native Guards* not only offers new insights pertaining to Union military affairs in the lower Mississippi Valley, but it also highlights the social and political implications of emancipation and Reconstruction.

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