



Kelly D. Mezurek. *For Their Own Cause: The 27th United States Colored Troops.* Kent: Kent State University, 2016. 368 pp. \$37.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-60635-289-2.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Kelly D. Mezurek's *For Their Own Cause* breaks away from traditional all-white regimental histories by examining one of two black regiments raised in Ohio during the Civil War. Drawing from pension files, soldier service records, and personal correspondence, Mezurek argues that service in the Union Army equipped members of the 27th United States Colored Troops (USCT) with the necessary tools to retain their hard-won citizenship rights in the Civil War's wake.

Beginning in the antebellum era and moving chronologically, chapter 1 illustrates how racism plagued the lives of free black Ohioans. Mezurek then reveals how free black men volunteered their services early in the war, but were shunned from joining the ranks due to racial prejudice. It was only when Union recruiters struggled to find new soldiers that the Federal government finally allowed the state of Ohio to muster in black troops. The USCT was officially formed in 1864, and the newly minted troops marched to Virginia to begin their duties with the Army of the Potomac. Chapter 3 explores the USCT's military campaigns. The USCT performed poorly in the Battle of the Crater as a result of lack of training but redeemed themselves by helping to secure a Confederate defeat at Fort Fisher. Despite their participation in these battles, Mezurek finds that

the 27th USCT saw less combat than other black regiments, the 4th USCT being one example. Instead, men of the 27th USCT were mostly assigned fatigue duties that took a heavy toll on their mental and physical state.

Mezurek humanizes the wartime experience of the USCT in chapters 4 and 5 but falls short in arguing for its uniqueness. The author contributes little new information to the existing literature detailing camp life among both black and white Union regiments. Scholars will find the discussion of forced manual labor, racist attitudes of white soldiers, illness, and suffering endured by the USCT all too familiar. As military historians are now becoming increasingly interested in the intersection of war and society, these sections could have benefited from a discussion of how home front issues affected soldier morale. Mezurek missed an opportunity to expand on how families left behind on the home front and irregular pay led black soldiers to desert the Union Army because they "had a higher duty to their families than their government" (p. 192). Further research into this topic would have set Mezurek's work apart from the prevailing narrative, but desertion is only given a passing mention.

In her final and most convincing chapter, Mezurek illustrates how veterans adjusted to civilian life, how they maneuvered their way

through hostile veterans organizations to obtain military benefits, and their successes and failures in claiming pensions for themselves and their families. She contends here that the masculine soldier identity gave USCT veterans the confidence to assert their influence in the postwar political sphere and helped secure rights for other African Americans. To buttress this original claim, Mezurek skillfully incorporates sources showing black community mobilization, organized meetings, and petitions to the government. This evidence offers compelling proof that members of the USCT used their veteran status to encourage Congress to protect their Fifteenth Amendment rights, which ultimately led to black male suffrage.

For Their Own Cause reminds readers that regimental histories are still valuable. Recovering individual contributions of men belonging to the 27th USCT adds an essential dimension to military history that is largely absent in Civil War memory. That dimension is best described by 41st USCT veteran George Washington Williams: “when the history of this country is written in truth ... the negro will be there” (p. 260). Mezurek sets a positive directive for scholars interested in African American men’s martial involvement in the Civil War and their stake in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century US politics.

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