FAYETTE COUNTY'S
AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLDIERS
DURING THE CIVIL WAR:
THE 59th and 61st REGIMENTS USCT

TENNESSEE
CIVIL WAR
NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

Cheri LaFlamme Szcodronski
Graduate Research Assistant
Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area

August 2011
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF THE
59th INFANTRY REGIMENT and 61st INFANTRY REGIMENT
UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS (USCT)

At the outbreak of the Civil War, African Americans throughout both the North and the South offered their services to the Union army. Although they were not permitted to carry arms, they often served as cooks, teamsters, and personal servants. As the Union army marched deeper into the South, slaves came to the Union lines in large numbers. These “contrabands” were organized into camps where they were removed from the soldiers and cared for by the army. One camp formed at Grand Junction, Tennessee, in the southwest corner of Hardeman County. Some of the men from this camp traveled to LaGrange in Fayette County, just a few miles west, to enlist in the Union army. Others were recruited at the camp and surrounding plantations by white soldiers who later became their commanding officers. These men formed the 59th Infantry USCT and the 61st Infantry USCT.

Joining the Union army allowed enslaved African Americans to actively fight for their freedom, provided opportunities to prove their equality with whites, and aided their transition from slavery to freedom after the war. Although many white army officers treated African Americans as child-like, simple people, participation in the activities of citizens – like being a soldier – began to teach former slaves how to behave like citizens instead of slaves.¹ In part because of racial stereotypes commonly accepted at the time, many white soldiers questioned the bravery of the black race, expecting former slaves to be frightened away from battle. The African American soldier welcomed the opportunity to prove himself equal to the white soldier, willing to “lay down their lives on behalf of their country, for the restoration of the union and the termination of slavery.”²

¹ Keith P. Wilson, Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers During the Civil War (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2002), xii.
A BRIEF HISTORY of the 59th INFANTRY REGIMENT
UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS (USCT)

The 59th Infantry Regiment mustered in at LaGrange, Tennessee, on June 6, 1863, and June 27, 1863. It was initially named the 1st United States Tennessee Volunteers (African Descent), then later the 1st West Tennessee Infantry Regiment (African Descent). After a major reorganization within the Union army, General Lorenzo Thomas issued General Orders No. 7 from Vicksburg on March 11, 1864, renaming the regiment for the last time: the 59th Infantry Regiment, United States Colored Troops.³

Robert Cowden, who served as one of the officers of the regiment, recalled the selection of officers for the unit:

Plans of procedure in the formation of colored regiments were to detail from the various commands in the division enlisted men or commissioned officers of subordinate grade, who had distinguished themselves and were deserving of advancement, and who would be competent officers in the new command. The recruits were collected from plantations and from camps by these detailed officers and men; and as fast as companies and regiments were filled they were mustered in with their officers, who took rank from that date. All the field and staff, commissioned and non-commissioned, as well as all the line officers and first sergeants of companies, were white men, and the musicians, privates, and non-commissioned officers of companies, except first sergeants, colored.⁴

Sam Evans, a soldier with the 70th Ohio Infantry, accepted a position as an officer in the 59th Regiment. He described the process of recruiting soldiers in a letter to his father: "The way we recruit [is to] mount a squad of about 50 men, ride out into the country where the darkies are, take all the negroes [sic] (able bodied), all their mules (able bodied) and any gun that can be found in the hands of Citizens."⁵ Evans was stationed at Moscow, Tennessee, and reported


⁴ Cowden, A Brief Sketch, 36.

recruiting soldiers from the contraband camp located at nearby Grand Junction.\textsuperscript{6} He later was appointed 2\textsuperscript{nd} Lieutenant of Company B.\textsuperscript{7}

The field officers included Colonel Edward Bouton, Lt. Colonel Robert E. Phillips, and Major Robert Cowden (later promoted to Lt. Colonel). The regiment included companies A through I, and the captains of these were James C. Foster (later promoted to Major), Henry W. Johnson, Henry Fox, Christopher Fox, Noah R. Smock, Albert O. Marsh, Samuel Martin, Jesse H. Darnell, George W. Strong, and Henry W. Hobbs.\textsuperscript{8} The regiment spent its term of service in West Tennessee and northern Mississippi performing garrison duties, suppressing guerrilla activity, and protecting transportation corridors.

Once the regiment formed, it remained at LaGrange where the new recruits were drilled daily in the basics of soldiering, including how to use a gun and bayonet, to clean to military standards, and to march and salute. Lieutenant Evans wrote to his father that the regiment “is doing very well, still doing a great deal of guard duty about town [LaGrange] and other places adjacent, all is still quiet here.” In July and August the regiments suffered heavy casualties, possibly resulting from heat, inadequate medical care, and poor diets. Many of the new soldiers took unauthorized leave during this time, but Colonel Cowden reported that almost all returned once the heat had passed.\textsuperscript{9}

Guerrilla warfare remained a constant nuisance to Union troops in West Tennessee, and in August, Lieutenant Evans reported an attempt by guerrillas to get past his picket post outside LaGrange. The twenty soldiers of the 59\textsuperscript{th} successfully drove off forty men, killing one and

\textsuperscript{6} Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, May 17, 1863, in Their Patriotic Duty, 141.
\textsuperscript{7} Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, June 28, 1863, in Their Patriotic Duty, 165-166.
\textsuperscript{8} Civil War Centennial Commission, Tennesseans in the Civil War, 407; Cowden, A Brief Sketch, 40-42.
\textsuperscript{9} Cowden, A Brief Sketch, 47-48; Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, July 12, 1863, in Their Patriotic Duty, 170-172.
wounding another, with only one injury among themselves.\textsuperscript{10} Guerrillas remained the principle concern of the 59\textsuperscript{th}, as there was very little military action in the vicinity of LaGrange.

In September of 1863, the regiment moved to Corinth, Mississippi, to protect contraband camps in northern Mississippi and Alabama.\textsuperscript{11} Four companies were sent twenty miles west of Corinth to protect the bridge crossing the Tuscumbia River until General Ulysses S. Grant's troops could pass on their way to Vicksburg. Once these companies rejoined the regiment in Corinth, they maintained a number of outposts. About the same time, arrangements were made between Union and Confederate forces to exchange prisoners, however, Confederate army officials refused to exchange African American soldiers or their officers in an attempt to prevent former slaves from enlisting in the Union army. Lieutenant Evans wrote to his father, "I am of the opinion if the government employ black men to fight, they ought to have some protection. If the rebels will not exchange for them, the government should retaliate if any of the officers or men are mistreated."\textsuperscript{12}

In December, Lt. Colonel Phillips resigned, so Colonel Cowden and Major Foster received promotions to Lt. Colonel and Colonel, respectively.\textsuperscript{13} The regiment moved to Memphis in January 1864, and set up camp two miles south of city, and this remained their permanent camp until the regiment mustered out. The soldiers continued drilling and cut timber to build barracks and cook-houses. The militia in Memphis had the 59\textsuperscript{th} regimental band play for their parades. They also built a schoolhouse where Chaplain Benjamin F. Kephart and his wife taught spelling, reading, and writing. The Kepharts provided daily instruction to enlisted men as well as African American women and children who lived near the camp. The soldiers also attended church with their officers on Sundays, either in a grove of maple trees near the camp.

\textsuperscript{10} Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, August 16, 1863, in \textit{Their Patriotic Duty}, 184-185.


\textsuperscript{12} Cowden, \textit{A Brief Sketch}, 48-50; Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, September 17, 1863, in \textit{Their Patriotic Duty}, 196-197.

\textsuperscript{13} Cowden, \textit{A Brief Sketch}, 48-50.
or in the schoolhouse. Lt. Colonel Cowden described the scene: "Their assembling by companies was so prompt and orderly, their attention so close, their singing so lusty, and their responses so heartily given as they sat, their dusky faces up-turned in the light of the moon, that it was hard to tell who enjoyed it most, or who was most converted, - the preacher or his hearers."\(^{14}\)

In June, they joined the 55th USCT and 2nd US Artillery (Colored) to form the First Brigade USCT under Colonel Bouton. The First Brigade joined additional forces under General Samuel D. Sturgis, forming the Third Division, to advance into Mississippi to "whip and disperse [General Forrest's] forces" there and destroy the Mobile and Ohio Railroad that was supplying them. On June 1, 1864, the regiment left Memphis, taking the train to Lafayette, Tennessee, then marching south through Lamar and Ripley, Mississippi, toward Guntown, where they intended to destroy the railroad and the bridge crossing the Tuscumbia River.

By June 9th, the front of the column had marched approximately twenty-three miles south of Ripley, Mississippi, slowed by heavy rains. On the 10th, when they broke camp, the 59th Regiment was approximately thirteen miles south of Ripley, at the rear of the Third Division. After marching a few miles, fighting broke out between the Union column and Confederate cavalry marching parallel to Colonel Bouton's lines near Brice's Crossroads. He sent the 55th forward, supported by the 59th, and by late afternoon the entire line was engaged in heavy fighting and losing ground. At dusk, the 59th charged with bayonets and, using their guns as clubs, they pushed back the Confederate troops. However, the line was in danger of being surrounded, and Colonel Bouton ordered a retreat. He described the scene in his report, saying "My men, gathering around me, fought with terrible desperation. Some of them, having broken up their guns in hand- to- hand conflict, unyielding, died at my feet, without a thing in their hands.

\(^{14}\) Cowden, A Brief Sketch, 51, 59-65; Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, May 22, 1864, in Their Patriotic Duty, 254-255.
for defense." At about eleven o'clock, the Third Brigade rejoined the rest of General Sturgis's retreating forces on the Ripley Road.\textsuperscript{15}

The next day, the Third Brigade was positioned at the rear of the column and found themselves again under attack approximately five miles from Ripley. Although low on ammunition from the previous day's fighting, they were able to pick up discarded ammunition along the roadside while marching overnight. They successfully repulsed the Confederate forces, and under the cover of cavalry retreated into Ripley. As Colonel Bouton began to re-form his lines, Confederate troops charged the town. Still low on ammunition, the Federals used their muskets as clubs and bayonets to repel the enemy, but they were overwhelmed and scattered. Colonel Bouton escaped with 170 men, many severely wounded. They traveled east and then south on the Salem Road, then turned northwest and arrived in Collierville, Tennessee, outside Memphis, on June 12. Colonel Cowden, commanding the 59\textsuperscript{th} Regiment, was wounded during the fighting at Brice's Crossroads, so Captain Foster took command in his place. Captain Foster led the majority of the Third Division west on the Lamar Road and arrived in Collierville on June 13. Captain Reeve of the 55\textsuperscript{th} Regiment arrived on June 15 with the remaining scattered survivors.\textsuperscript{16}

Known as the Battle of Brice's Crossroads (or Battle of Toshomingo Creek), the 8,000 men under General Sturgis were soundly defeated by General Forrest's 3,500 men. The Third Division alone suffered 110 killed, 247 wounded, and 171 missing: approximately 528 of the 1,350 men engaged. The Federal forces suffered a total of 2,240 killed, wounded, and missing, while the Confederates reported only 493 casualties. Confederate commanders reported "the rout is complete" and praised General Forrest's success as a "great diversion" for General Joseph E. Johnston's movements against General William T. Sherman's advance on Atlanta,

\begin{center}

\end{center}
Georgia. The expedition was viewed as a complete Union failure, and a Board of Investigation convened in Memphis on June 27 “to investigate and report the facts connected with the disaster to the late expedition under Brigadier-General Sturgis,” concluding with a thorough report of events on June 30. Colonel Bouton commended his troops, saying, “The officers and men of my entire command are deserving of great credit for the bravery with which they fought in the main engagement, considering the unfavorable circumstances under which they were thrown into action and the overwhelming numbers against whom they contended.” Colonel McMillen also praised the 59th in his official report, saying, “I desire to bear testimony to their bravery and endurance, as well as the gallantry of Colonel Cowden and Major Lowe, commanding regiments.”

Controversy surrounded the events at Brice’s Crossroads, not only in the investigation of General Sturgis, but also concerning the treatment of African American troops by the Confederate Army. Following the massacre of surrendered USCT soldiers at Fort Pillow by General Forrest’s command on April 12, 1864, a number of African American soldiers in Memphis vowed to “avenge Fort Pillow” and to show Forrest’s men “no quarter” if they should meet in battle. Many of the USCT soldiers captured by Forrest’s command at Brice’s Crossroads indicated they were certain they would be executed if captured. With both sides certain the other would show no mercy to surrendered enemy soldiers, the result was disastrous. Forrest wrote to General Cadwallader C. Washburn, General Sturgis’s superior officer and commander of the District of West Tennessee, that “the recent battle of Tishmongo Creek was far more bloody than it would otherwise have been put for the fact that your men evidently expected to be slaughtered when captured, and both sides acted as though neither felt safe in surrendering, even when further resistance was useless.” General Washburn responded

---

asking for clarification in Confederate policy and informing General Forrest that “if it is contemplated by the Confederate Government to murder all colored troops that may be the chance of war fall into their hands, as was the case at Fort Pillow, it is but fair that it should be freely and frankly avowed.” He further indicated that he expected any African American soldiers captured by General Forrest’s command would be executed, and asked him to confirm or deny this policy, promising to inform the USCT regiments under his command and to order them to act accordingly. General Forrest’s response indicated he was greatly insulted by the implications of General Washburn’s letters, and while he informed Washburn that Confederate Army policies were “a subject upon which I did not and do not propose to enlighten you,” he did indicate that both white and black prisoners were, and would continue to be, turned over to the Confederate government.\(^{18}\)

Concerned about General Forrest’s activities in Tennessee, General Sherman, in command of the Union’s Western Theater, ordered troops to pursue him: “I will order them to make up a force and go out and follow Forrest to the death... There will never be peace in Tennessee till Forrest is dead.” On June 28, 1864, the 55\(^{th}\), 59\(^{th}\), 61\(^{st}\), and 68\(^{th}\) USCT regiments joined under Colonel Bouton as the First Brigade USCT. On July 5, 1864, they started their pursuit of General Forrest with General J.A. Mower’s First Division, Colonel D. Moore’s Third Division, and General B.H. Grierson’s cavalry, all commanded by General Andrew J. Smith.\(^{19}\)

They marched from LaGrange, Tennessee, on July 5, 1864, positioned at the rear of the advancing column to guard the supply trains. They reached Pontotoc, Mississippi, on July 11\(^{th}\) with no resistance from enemy troops. The following afternoon, a small group of bushwhackers attacked the USCT camp, firing on soldiers from the 59\(^{th}\) Regiments who were picking berries


and wounding one of them. Colonel Bouton sent Company C of the 59th to drive them off, which they did without difficulty or casualties.\textsuperscript{20}

July 13\textsuperscript{th} the column resumed its advance on Tupelo, and the soldiers met their first major resistance from Confederate forces. That morning, the rear of the column was attacked, and Colonel Bouton sent the 61\textsuperscript{st} Regiment to serve as the rear guard. Later in the day, about five miles from Pontotoc, the Confederate forces came against the column much more heavily, and Colonel Bouton sent the 59\textsuperscript{th} Regiment to reinforce the 61\textsuperscript{st}. The two regiments held off the enemy troops allowing the column to continue marching toward Tupelo. Colonel Bouton finally withdrew one wing of the 59\textsuperscript{th}, leaving the other concealed by the brush to ambush the advancing Confederates. The unexpected fire from the hidden USCT line sent the Confederates into confused retreat. As the column continued its march toward Tupelo, Colonel Bouton continued to use the 59\textsuperscript{th} and 61\textsuperscript{st} regiments to ambush, pushing the Confederates back long enough to rejoin the advancing column and prepare for another ambush. The First Brigade was relieved in the evening by two regiments of cavalry, and they reached camp at Tupelo around 9 o'clock that night, having suffered one killed, seven wounded, and nine missing but presumed dead.\textsuperscript{21}

The fighting continued the next morning, and the First Brigade took position on a nearby ridge to protect the supply wagons. For most of the day, only the 61\textsuperscript{st} Regiment was engaged in heavy fighting, and the 59\textsuperscript{th} reported only one soldier killed, ten wounded, and three missing after the battle. On July 15\textsuperscript{th}, the Union troops began their withdrawal to Tennessee, with the First Brigade positioned at the rear of the column and often engaged by the Confederates.

\textsuperscript{20} Cowden, A Brief Sketch, 124-133; Official Records, Series 1, vol. 39, part 1, 300-301; Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, July 24, 1864, in Their Patriotic Duty, 274-276.

\textsuperscript{21} Official Records, Series 1, vol. 39, part 1, 300-303.
during the march. The column reached LaGrange, Tennessee, on July 20th, and in Memphis on July 22, 1864.\textsuperscript{22}

Unlike the Battle of Brice's Crossroads, Union troops prevailed at Tupelo, and General Forrest himself was wounded in the battle. Colonel Bouton praised the efforts of his men, saying, "I think the work done by my brigade in rear of column, on the 13th, was a severe test of the soldierly qualities and power of endurance of my men." Lieutenant Evans also praised the expedition, writing to his father that "it was entirely successful, Gen Smith out maneuvering Forest in evry [sic] instance." He reported several bridges destroyed as well as five miles of the railroad. A correspondent from The Cleveland Leader described the fierce fighting and commended the actions of the soldiers of the 59th, concluding that, "Great were the sufferings which the colored people had to endure for their fidelity to liberty and the Union during the Rebellion."\textsuperscript{23}

After the Battle of Tupelo, the regiment returned to its camp south of Memphis where daily drilling and the construction of permanent barracks resumed. By January 1865, garrison life had become routine for the regiment, and there was little military action near Memphis. In February, the regiment was ordered to New Orleans with the 61st Regiment, but the order was revoked; Colonel Bouton and the 59th remained in Memphis while Colonel Kendrick and the 61st marched south to New Orleans. Lieutenant Evans believed the 59th should have been allowed to go as well, and he suspected their removal from the campaign was an underhanded effort by Colonel Kendrick to seek promotion, since Colonel Bouton outranked him and would have been

\textsuperscript{22} Official Records, Series 1, vol. 39, part 1, 300-303; Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, July 24, 1864, in Their Patriotic Duty, 274-276.

placed in command of the expedition over Kendrick. However, the Official Records indicate that the requested quota of troops could be filled without sending the 59th.\textsuperscript{24}

Over the summer, the 59th witnessed worsening relations between the white residents and the freedmen of Memphis. Lieutenant Evans wrote that “almost all of the negros [sic] have a strong hatred against their old masters, and, in some cases, a fear that the Rebels will not treat them [fairly]. In many places in the South, Rebles [sic] are trying to impress [on] their old slaves (or rather formerly slaves) that they are not free, that the Government has no power to liberate them.”\textsuperscript{25} He also described the relationship between employer and employee:

The Rebs employ them [Freedmen] to work and after they get in debt to the darkies, try to drive them off with out paying them. The military have taken it in hands and hear their cases and decide the cases without the civil having anything to say about it. The Citizens, a great portion of them, are continually complaining [about] the negros [sic] being freed and always saying that the negro cannot be made to do any good with out a driver. There are some cases where the Employer endeavors to exercise that privilege and have had to pay some pretty high fines. It seems that they are determined to defeat the policy of the government.\textsuperscript{26}

Several companies of the 59th were assigned to General E.D. Osband in April 1865, and with approximately 800 white cavalryman, they were ordered to Brownsville, Tennessee, to combat guerrilla activity in the area. Severe flooding made their landing at Brownsville difficult, and the guerrillas escaped except one, Wilcox, who was known as J.M. Luxton. Wilcox was tried by court-martial and hung. His body was “left hanging as a warning to his brethren in crime.” On April 23, 1865, the soldiers of the 59th USCT returned to their camp near Memphis.\textsuperscript{27}

In September, Lieutenant Evans was transferred from Memphis to Jackson, Tennessee, to serve as Provost Marshal of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. He described his responsibilities to his father: “I am working hard to make the labor question here in my district a

\textsuperscript{24} Official Records, Series 1, vol. 48, part 1, 965; Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, February 28, 1865, in Their Patriotic Duty, 328-330.

\textsuperscript{25} Sam Evans to Will Evans, July 21, 1865, in Their Patriotic Duty, 357-358.

\textsuperscript{26} Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, August 18, 1865, in Their Patriotic Duty, 361-363.

success... I, for one, am put here to see that they (the Col[ore]d people) do justice and receive justice in return. If the present system of labor should prove to be a failure, you could hardly estimate the suffering condition of the Freedmen."28

In the fall of 1865, with the war over, the 59th moved its camp into the city of Memphis where it was responsible for guarding military stores until they could be moved. The regiment then moved into Fort Pickering, on a bluff south of the city, until it mustered out on January 31, 1866. On February 3rd, the paymaster gave the soldiers and officers their final payments, and, after two years and eight months of service, the men returned to their homes.29

28 Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, September 16, 1865, and October 16, 1865, in Their Patriotic Duty, 369, 375-376.

29 Cowden, A Brief Sketch, 134-139; Civil War Centennial Commission, Tennesseans in the Civil War, 407-408; Sam Evans to Andrew Evans, October 2, 1864, October 25, 1864, and January 12, 1865, in Their Patriotic Duty, 295-299, 317-318.
Composite of the officers of the 1st Regiment Tennessee Infantry, Volunteers of African Descent, U.S. Army (Civil War)
c.1860s
TN State Library and Archives, Tennessee Historical Society Picture Collection, Nashville, TN

[Note: Images may only be reproduced for personal use. For publication, please contact the repository institution directly]
"The Camp of the Contrabands on the Banks of the Mississippi, Fort Pickering, Memphis, Tenn."
November 22, 1862

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Duke University, Durham, NC
Head-Quarters, 1st Division, 16th Army Corps.

Lagrange, Tenn.  May 16th, 1863.

Special Orders
No 123


By order of

Brig. Gen. Geo. Smith

Commanding Division

W. H. Harlan

Capt. H. Str"
A BRIEF HISTORY of the 61st INFANTRY REGIMENT
UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS (USCT)

The 61st Infantry Regiment mustered in at LaGrange, Tennessee, on June 30, 1863, and August 27, 1863. It was initially named the 2nd United States Tennessee Volunteers (African Descent), then later the 2nd West Tennessee Infantry Regiment (African Descent). The regiment was renamed the 61st Infantry Regiment, United States Colored Troops on March 11, 1864, after a major reorganization within the Union army. The regiment spent its term of service in West Tennessee and northern Mississippi, performing garrison duties, suppressing guerrilla activity, and protecting transportation corridors.

The field officers included Colonel Frank A. Kendrick, Lt. Colonel John Foley, and Major Edmund R. Wiley, Jr. The regiment also included companies A through K, and the captains of these were Lorenzo Jean, Walter W. Kelley, Jacob Gruse, Malte Stuth, Thomas O. Hoss, Samson Harris, Henry Sturges, Daniel W. Roberts, Charles S. Graff, and Charles McDowell. Charles R. Riggs replaced McDowell as Captain of Company K on August 27, 1863, and on March 30, 1864, McDowell was reduced to the ranks for drunkenness on duty.

After their muster, the troops were trained and drilled at LaGrange, Tennessee. In September, they were sent to Moscow, Tennessee, to relieve the 7th Iowa Volunteers stationed there. By October, the regiment included 610 men. That December, they came under enemy fire for the first time. Approximately 3,000 Confederate cavalrmen under Generals Stephen D. Lee and James R. Chalmers attempted to take the bridge crossing the Wolf River, hoping to allow General Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry to return to West Tennessee from Mississippi along the Collierville Road. Colonel Kendrick's camp was located about 300 yards southwest of the

---

30 Civil War Centennial Commission, Tennesseans in the Civil War, 408.
31 Civil War Centennial Commission, Tennesseans in the Civil War, 408.
32 Certification of Rank, November 6, 1863, Charles Randal Riggs Collection of Civil War Papers and Artifacts, State Historical Society of Iowa Special Collections, Iowa City, Iowa. (Hereafter referred to as Riggs Papers.); Special Orders No. 50, Headquarters 61st U.S. Infantry (Colored), March 30, 1864, Riggs Papers.
bridge, and he made it “the object of especial vigilance.” The afternoon of December 3rd, a small Confederate cavalry detachment tested the strength of the defenses on the bridge, and finding them to be too strong for their numbers, retreated. The following day, the 6th Illinois Cavalry crossed the bridge and encountered the Confederate forces a short distance from it. The 61st USCT, 6th Illinois Infantry, and 2nd Illinois Cavalry fought the advancing Confederate forces with assistance from artillery positioned in an unfinished fortification nearby. After a few hours of skirmishing, Generals Lee and Chalmers retreated. The 61st suffered only three killed and twelve wounded, while the Confederate troops lost at least twenty-two killed, four wounded, and eight captured. Kendrick reported, “The majority of the men were for the first time under fire, but their conduct did not disappoint my most sanguine anticipations, as, after the first few rounds, they received and returned the enemy’s fire with the steadiness and deliberation of veterans.” Generals B.H. Grierson, J.D. Stevenson, and S.A. Hurlbut also commended the regiment in their official reports, and especially the work of the officers in preparing their untested troops for battle. There was much concern within the Union army that African Americans were not suited to serve as soldiers, and many feared they would run once they came under fire, but Hurlbut concluded that:

The recent affair at Moscow, Tennessee, has demonstrated the fact that colored troops, properly disciplined and commanded, can and will fight well, and the general commanding corps deems it to be due to the officers and men of the Second Regiment West Tennessee Infantry, of African Descent, thus publicly to return his personal thanks for their gallant and successful defense of the important position to which they had been assigned, and for the manner in which they have vindicated the wisdom of the Government in elevating the rank and file of these regiments to the position of freedmen and soldiers.33

In January 1864, the regiment reported to Memphis, where it established camp a few miles outside the city. They spent the spring there guarding the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. The regiment left Memphis on May 2, 1864, with General Samual D. Sturgis for northern Mississippi. Fifteen miles from Ripley, Sturgis learned of a large Confederate force in

the town and returned to LaGrange for supplies. The regiment then returned to Memphis. On June 18, 1864, they took the railroad to LaFayette Station, Tennessee, then to LaGrange, arriving on June 28th. Here, 1,899 men and officers of the 59th, 61st, and 68th US Colored Infantry Regiments and Battery I of the 2nd US Colored Artillery joined together to form the First Brigade USCT under Edward Bouton, colonel of the 59th.35

The First Brigade USCT was ordered on the July pursuit of Forrest’s cavalry with General J.A. Mower’s First Division, Colonel D. Moore’s Third Division, and General B.H. Grierson’s cavalry, all commanded by General Andrew J. Smith. They departed LaGrange on July 5th, and advanced unopposed for several days. On July 12th, a small group of bushwhackers attacked the USCT camp, but they were driven off by a company of the 59th. On July 13th the column had nearly reached Tupelo, with the First Brigade serving as the rear-guard, protecting the supply train. The 61st was positioned on a ridge to cover the column’s advance along the Okolona Road. They were soon engaged by Confederate troops advancing along this road, but repulsed the attack and rejoined the rest of the column, leaving the cavalry to protect their retreat. The cavalry was attacked by a much stronger force, and the 61st came to their aid, ambushing the Confederate forces and forcing them to retreat. As the column continued on to Tupelo, they were attacked by the advancing Confederates again and again. Colonel Bouton reported that he “continued forming lines and holding the enemy in check, and ambushing him at very favorable points, using the Fifty-ninth and Sixty-first Regiments.” When they arrived in Tupelo, they were relieved by the 9th Illinois Cavalry and 2nd Iowa Cavalry and were able to move into camp to rest. The First Brigade lost one killed, seven wounded, and nine missing and presumed dead.36

34 Civil War Centennial Commission, Tennesseans in the Civil War, 408; Cowden, A Brief Sketch, 67-100, 124-133; The War of the Rebellion, series 1, volume 39, part 2, 121; McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 748-749; Lovett, “The Negro in Tennessee,” 307.
The following morning, the First Brigade took position on a ridge to protect the supply train. Only the 61st was engaged during the hardest fighting this day, as it was in the line of fire of Confederate artillery. After dark, the Confederate forces pushed back the USCT line, until Colonel Bouton ordered a bayonet charge up the hill, regaining their former position. On the morning of the 15th, the USCT withdrew to the supply train and were engaged there by Confederate forces. The 61st was ordered to hold the line, and Colonel Bouton ordered another bayonet charge that pushed the Confederate troops beyond the ridge again. He reported, “This charge was made in splendid style by Sixty-first and four companies of Sixty-eighth.” Colonel Bouton reported one officer killed, seven men killed, four officers wounded, twenty-eight men wounded, and sixteen missing.37

The following day the column received orders from General Smith to return to LaGrange because of an expected shortage of rations and ammunition. They arrived in LaGrange on July 20th, and the First Brigade returned to Memphis two days later. In his official report, Colonel Bouton praised his men, saying “I think the work done by my brigade in rear of column, on the 13th, was a severe test of the soldierly qualities and power of endurance of my men.” General Smith also praised the unit in his reports, concluding that “the colored brigade, under Colonel Bouton, fought excellently well, and showed the effect of discipline and drill, and I am free to confess that their action has removed from my mind a prejudice of twenty years’ standing.”38

General Forrest raided Memphis on August 21, 1864, and surprised a detachment of the 61st Regiment. Colonel Kendrick was wounded in the attack, and Captain Charles Riggs took command. The detachment included five officers and two hundred men, and Captain Riggs reported that only one-third of that number was fit for duty. They were overrun, but only suffered three men killed, eight wounded, and five missing.39
On September 30, 1864, the regiment boarded four transports and, with three gunboats, departed for Johnsonville, Tennessee, where they arrived on October 4th and proceeded along the Tennessee River to Eastport, Mississippi. They arrived there on October 10th and were attacked by Confederate forces under Colonel D.C. Kelley’s 3rd Tennessee Cavalry. The Confederates set one gunboat and two transports on fire, and the 61st was unable to land. The regiment suffered eighteen killed, twenty-one wounded, and three missing. General Forrest reported, “I have still 500 men on the north side of the river who have gone to the hills. I think them safe... Kelley drove [the Union forces] back and captured their artillery.”

The following day they returned to Johnsonville and then continued to Memphis. In December, Colonel Kendrick was charged with the defense of that city and given command of the First Brigade USCT, and Lt. Colonel Foley assumed command of the 61st in his place. In January, Captain Charles R. Riggs and one hundred soldiers from the 61st began work on defensive entrenchments within their Memphis camp. The work was severely slowed by inadequate tools, heavy rains, and frost. As a result, Captain Riggs was relieved February 10, 1865, and ordered to serve ten days with the train guard as punishment. He immediately requested to be relieved of the punishment and his command overseeing the fortifications. His request was granted, and he returned to Company K. Captain Riggs further requested to be relieved as captain of Company K on February 22, 1865, which was denied.

The regiment was ordered to Louisiana on February 23, 1865, with 724 effective soldiers of 817 total present and absent. On February 28, 1865, the regiment was temporarily

---


43 Special Orders No. 28, Department of Mississippi, January 15, 1865, Riggs Papers; Special Orders No. 13, Extract, Headquarters District of Memphis, January 15, 1865, Riggs Papers.

44 Charles R. Riggs to F.W. Fox, February 13, 1865, Riggs Papers.

45 Charles Riggs to Lorenzo Thomas, February 22, 1865, Riggs Papers; War Dept. A.G. Office, March 8, 1865, Riggs Papers.
transferred to the Department of the Gulf and reported to Morganza, Louisiana. On March 12, 1865, the 61st, 65th, and 67th USCT regiments joined under Colonel Kendrick to form the First Brigade. They set out for New Orleans on March 17, 1865, to obtain transport to Barrancas, Florida.\[46\]

In April, the regiment was ordered to Alabama. Throughout the South, in areas occupied by Union troops, African American refugees fled their homes for Union encampments. The presence of large numbers of refugees among the enlisted men often resulted in increased disease, decreased discipline among soldiers, and difficulty advancing the army. An influx of refugees to the lines of the 61st near Montgomery resulted in General Orders No. 20: “Commanding Officers will order out of their camps all women that may be in them... The practice of soldiers, or others, persuading persons unfit for the military service to leave their homes or to follow the army will be discouraged.”\[47\] On April 30, 1865, Major General Frederick Steele reported the regiment was part of the 1st Brigade, 1st Division USCT in the U.S. Expeditionary Force he commanded. The Expeditionary Force was ordered to move to the Rio Grande that May, but may not have actually gone.\[48\]

Captain Riggs took over command of the post at Bellevue, Louisiana, by August of 1865. He issued General Orders No. 1 on August 3, 1865, asserting his authority to moderate cases of “wrongs between employers and Freedmen,” and calling on employers to “adjust all difficulties amicably and justly without maltreatment or unkind words.”\[49\] When his commanding officer at Minden, Louisiana, was ordered to Shreveport that October, Captain Riggs assumed command of that post.\[50\]

--


\[47\] General Orders No. 20, Headquarters 1st Division U.S. Colored Infantry, May 1, 1865, Riggs Papers.

\[48\] *Civil War Centennial Commission, Tennesseans in the Civil War*, 408.

\[49\] General Orders No. 1, Headquarters Post of Bellevue, Louisiana, August 3, 1865, Riggs Papers.

\[50\] A. Rumpf to Charles Riggs, October 14, 1865, Riggs Papers.
The 61st Regiment mustered out on December 30, 1865. It appears that at least one member of the unit returned to LaGrange, Tennessee, and was able to purchase land. Christmas Hurt is buried in a lone plot about two miles south of LaGrange. The land is swampy and adjacent to the African American part of the town; it is also next to a historic road bed leading from LaGrange to Holly Springs, Mississippi.

Discharge Papers for Captain Charles R. Riggs, Company K
December 30, 1865
Charles Randal Riggs Collection of Civil War Papers and Artifacts
State Historical Society of Iowa Special Collections, Iowa City, IA
Christmas Hurt Grave
Cheri LaFlamme Szcodronski, photographer, 2011

Site of Christmas Hurt Grave
Cheri LaFlamme Szcodronski, photographer, 2011
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Charles Randal Riggs Collection of Civil War Papers and Artifacts, State Historical Society of Iowa Special Collections, Iowa City, Iowa.

George W. Strong Papers, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa.

Tennessee Historical Society Picture Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.


Secondary Sources


