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## Article Title: Ten Troopers: Buffalo Soldier Medal of Honor Men Who Served at Fort Robinson

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Article Summary: Ten of the twenty-three buffalo soldiers who received the Medal of Honor for actions in frontier conflicts or the Cuban Campaign of 1898 served at Fort Robinson. These included Ninth cavalymen Emanuel Stance, George Jordan, Thomas Shaw, Henry Johnson, Augustus Walley, Brent Woods, and John Denny, William O Wilson, William H Thompkins, and George H Wanton.

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Photographs / Images: Historical Marker to the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, Fort Robinson; Detail from group portrait of Troop K, Ninth US Cavalry: George Jordan and Henry Johnson identified; Thomas Shaw and a group of Ninth Cavalry noncommissioned officers; Squadron of the Ninth Cavalry at Fort Robinson about 1892; Frank N Schubert at August Walley's grave, Reisterstown, Maryland

# TEN TROOPERS



*Buffalo Soldier Medal of Honor Men Who Served at Fort Robinson*

*By Frank N. Schubert*

There are many reasons to be fond of Fort Robinson, and for me one of the most remarkable things about the post is that so many of the buffalo soldiers who received the Medal of Honor served there. Ten of the twenty-three who received the medal for actions in frontier conflicts or the Cuban Campaign of 1898 served at the post. Seven of them had already earned the medal. These included Ninth cavalymen Emanuel Stance, George Jordan, Thomas Shaw, Henry Johnson, Augustus Walley, Brent Woods, and John Denny. An eighth, William O. Wilson, earned the medal while assigned there. Two of these men, Jordan and Denny, even retired to the nearby town of Crawford, although Denny ultimately moved back east and died at the Soldiers Home in Washington, D.C. Another, William H. Thompkins, served there first, then received the medal for valor in Cuba later, and the last, George H. Wanton, received the medal in Cuba and then served there with the Tenth U.S. Cavalry. Incidentally, an eleventh, Moses Williams of the Ninth U.S. Cavalry, served down the road at Fort Niobrara. But ten of the twenty-three—ten of nineteen if we count only the regulars and leave out the Seminole-Negro Scouts, were there, and this fact about Fort Robinson makes it a singular place to me.

So who were these heroes, these black men who were singled out for recognition because of valor in combat by

a society that only rarely and begrudgingly honored black achievement? Readers familiar with Edward M. Coffman's *The Old Army*, or maybe my book on Fort Robinson, already have a pretty good idea of the shape of the buffalo soldier community from whence the twenty-three came. For them soldiering was a more attractive occupational choice than it was for whites, so they tended to stay in the United States Army longer. Consequently they more often tended to be married and have children than other soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

The twenty-three holders of the Medal of Honor shared these character-

istics of the buffalo soldier community. Most were career soldiers: thirteen of the nineteen regulars and two of the four Seminole-Negro Scouts served twenty-five years or more. Of the rest only scout Adam Paine and deserter William Wilson served less than five years. Despite their long service and retirements before the age of fifty, early in life by civilian standards, few lived long enough to enjoy their retirements much. They had lived and worked hard under austere and perilous conditions, indulged in the normal amount of carousing along the way, and survived only a few years beyond retirement age. Only



In April 1997 at the Second Fort Robinson History Conference a cadre of reenactors helped dedicate a historical marker to the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry. William W. Gwaltney (left) of Fort Laramie, Wyoming, and Hank Reynolds of Mesa, Arizona, who portrayed buffalo soldiers, flank the marker. Photograph by Michael Farrell

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George Wanton and Augustus Walley reached what could be considered a ripe old age. A large portion of the group was also married, at least thirteen and perhaps as many as fifteen. So in major ways the group fit the expected profile of black soldiers at large. They were family men and inclined to stay in the U.S. Army.

Overall, the twenty-three made up a group of heroes, not a group of saints. People who want to use buffalo soldiers as role models and examples for young people to emulate have to understand that the troopers at Fort Robinson were human beings, and even though black soldiers tended in general to represent less of a discipline problem than whites, reflecting their more durable commitment to the army, these men were a rough-and-tumble bunch in a wild-and-woolly environment. There were some very good citizens among them. You could look long and hard at the records of George Jordan and Thomas Shaw and never find a blemish. But to a large extent they fought and brawled, and drank and whored. After turn-of-the-century service in the Philippines introduced many to new vices, they might also have gone into town for a snort of cocaine or a toke on an opium pipe every once in a while, just like lesser soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Sgt. Emanuel Stance, the first black regular to receive the Medal of Honor, stands out in his duality as the bully and hero. But there was also William Wilson, who earned the medal for valor at Drexel Mission, South Dakota, during the Pine Ridge Campaign of 1890–91 and who deserted while still on his first enlistment. Wilson's daughter Anna once attributed his reluctance to talk about his time in the army to his natural modesty. I think deserters tend to be modest about their military service for other reasons.

As for the others, generally the group had its share of problems with military discipline. Eight of the nineteen regulars had court-martial convictions, and six were reduced to private at least once. At least two, William McBryar and

George Wanton, also contracted a venereal disease.

Not surprisingly, most of the recipients came from the Ninth Cavalry. In campaigning against the Apache Indians between 1877 and 1881, the Ninth saw the most severe and protracted fighting experienced by any of the four black regiments. The nature of the combat against these fierce and tenacious native fighters, with small detachments engaged in long pursuits and short, violent skirmishes in which quick reaction sometimes meant the difference between life and death, put a premium on sound judgment and unflinching courage. The struggles with Victorio and Nana, also in the Southwest, tested the soldiers of the Ninth repeatedly and when they met the challenge, brought them the most recognition. But, it should be noted, the number of medals awarded to the regiment also said a great deal about their officers. They cared about the men who served under them and saw that they received the recognition that they earned.

The buffalo soldier heroes showed an enduring patriotism that withstood long years of second-class citizenship. The few who lived to see the onset of World War I volunteered their services to the army, despite their advanced age. None were quite as persistent as George W. Ford, the old cavalryman who had joined the Tenth when it was organized in 1866 and still volunteered for duty in 1917 at the age of sixty-seven.<sup>3</sup> But Augustus Walley was over sixty and William McBryar was in his late fifties, when both volunteered and were rebuffed because of their age.

None of the medal recipients achieved any postmilitary successes. Most were essentially used up by their service, and all were affected by the lack of opportunity in the pervasively racist environment of their time. But there may have been more to their overall lack of accomplishment than general exhaustion and discrimination. Columnist Murray Kempton observed, just one year before his death in 1997, that he

"cannot think of an enlisted man, tried in the line and certified a hero, who was ever afterward rewarded with large honors in peacetime." Kempton was thinking in particular of political success, but there may be something in the perspective gained by willingly putting one's life at great risk that makes other striving less important or meaningful.<sup>4</sup>

The careers of these men throw important light on the relations between blacks and Indians on the frontier. Sixteen of the twenty-three received their medals for actions in wars against Indian peoples. This fact clashes with the expectation of some people today that the mere fact of nonwhiteness should constitute the *prima facie* basis for an alliance or common cause among people of color against a white oppressor. It cannot be overemphasized that the soldiers were Anglophones. They spoke English and represented a sedentary, agrarian-industrial, English-speaking culture. Many were recently freed and new citizens in this framework, eager to validate their claims on citizenship by wearing the uniform of the United States Army. Very few looked across the cultural chasm that separated them from the semi-nomadic warrior-hunters with whom they did battle and perceived any similarity between their respective conditions. Culture created a gap that was virtually unbridgeable. This fundamental opposition may be frustrating and even seem incomprehensible to people seeking to impose a Rainbow Coalition frame of reference on the past, but it existed all the same. It was basic to the world view of virtually all who claimed American citizenship. As William W. Gwaltney, himself a descendent of buffalo soldiers, said, "Buffalo Soldiers fought for recognition as citizens in a racist country and . . . American Indian people fought to hold on to their traditions, their land, and their lives."<sup>5</sup>

Even today, the huge gap between the soldiers and the warrior tribes of the West sometimes influences perceptions. In the summer of 1995, I took a busload of tourists to the Pine Ridge Reservation,

## Buffalo Soldier Medal of Honor Men



Detail from a group portrait of Troop K, Ninth U.S. Cavalry, showing two recipients wearing their Medals of Honor: George Jordan (bottom row, second from left) and Henry Johnson (standing, second from right). NSHS-R659-2599

South Dakota, to view the scene of William Wilson's brave dash for help in December 1890. For the previous three days, I had been unable to convince some of the people on that bus, particularly a skeptical black reporter, that the Plains Indians and the buffalo soldiers viewed each other across a cultural abyss. Then everything cleared up for him and the others who shared his view. At the base of the hill on which sits the Wounded Knee Cemetery, a Sioux woman stopped her car and asked my journalist friend, who was walking with my wife, what he was doing at Wounded Knee. When he said he was on a buffalo soldier tour, she replied:

Buffalo Soldiers and the white man killed my people. My ancestors are up there. And I don't appreciate you being here. Why don't you go visit Abraham Lincoln's grave?

Then she sped off. The reporter said that he left Wounded Knee with "a dull, sick, guilty feeling at the pit of my stomach."<sup>6</sup> He also learned something about imposing present-day values and expectations on the past.

The experiences of one of the Medal of Honor recipients, Henry Johnson of the Ninth Cavalry, shows us that even people who are not separated by long periods of time can bring widely differing perceptions to bear on the same event. Johnson received his medal for valor during the fight with Ute Indians on Milk River in Colorado during September 1879. The circumstances that led to the battle involved a familiar process: white encroachments onto Ute lands and the efforts of an Indian agent to force children into schools and adults onto farms caused increasing native anger, confrontations, and finally a panicky call for troops.

Maj. Thomas T. Thornburgh rushed to the rescue, got himself killed, and left his command in serious trouble. The first troops to arrive on the scene, three days after the Utes sprang their ambush and trapped the soldiers behind mounds of rotting horse carcasses, were Capt. Francis S. Dodge and the veteran buffalo soldiers of D Troop, Ninth Cavalry. Dodge's arrival has been immortalized

by Frederic Remington in the painting, *Captain Dodge's Troopers to the Rescue*, but a strange kind of rescue it was. The Utes watched in astonishment as Dodge charged right into the trap! He did contribute fresh rifles to the defense and ultimately received a Medal of Honor for coming to the rescue, but the basic situation after his arrival remained unchanged. The Utes still surrounded the soldiers, and the dead horses continued to pile up. There was reason for the Indians to be amazed at this display of soldier behavior.

Henry Johnson ultimately received the Medal of Honor for his efforts on Milk River. He was cited for two actions in particular, leaving his position under heavy fire to make the rounds of the forward detachment and check on his men, and risking his life to fill canteens for the wounded from Milk River.

Milk River was near, but the Utes were always watching. Only at night did soldiers sneak down to the river to fill canteens for the command, especially the wounded, some of whom suffered greatly from thirst. Johnson went to the river on October 4, making sure that there was enough water for the wounded by doing so.<sup>7</sup>

There are three views of what happened that night, when Dodge sent him and a party of troopers to the river. First there is Johnson's. He later remembered that the Indians had fired on them, but they had fought their way to the river, filled their canteens, and returned safely.

Others disagreed, and two alternative explanations of the dash for water emerged. Caleb Benson, a young buffalo soldier of D Troop who had lied about his age to enlist and who retired from Fort Robinson to nearby Crawford, reminisced about the White River Campaign fifty-five years later in an interview with a Nebraska newspaper. Benson remembered an affinity between the black cavalrymen and the Indians. He claimed—erroneously—that two white soldiers were killed while getting river water for coffee, although Ninth Cavalry cooks had done so without harm.

Benson recalled that "the Indians never shot a colored man unless it was necessary. They always wanted to win the friendship of the Negro race, and obtain their aid in campaigns against the white man."<sup>8</sup> According to Benson's view, Johnson made it to the river without drawing fire because the Indians sympathized with the blacks.

Another view, expressed by Robert Emmitt in his book on the Utes, also held that the Utes did not expend much ammunition on the black troopers. However, Emmitt did not attribute this one-sided truce to racial empathy. He claimed that the Indians were contemptuous of the buffalo soldiers because they carried water for the white soldiers. "All soldiers were funny" to the Utes, according to Emmitt, but these buffalo soldiers "were the funniest soldiers [Chief] Colorow or any man had ever seen." According to this view, the Utes were not impressed with the water detail. They watched as two of the troopers came out of the impromptu fort, and warriors "began to wave and shout at them." To the amazement of the Utes, the buffalo soldiers carried buckets instead of rifles. They were going down to the river for water and did not wave back. In fact, they acted as though they did not even hear the shouting from the hills. "The Buffalo Soldiers," it seemed to the Utes, "had not come to fight; they had come to work for the white soldiers," making the young Ute warriors "very disappointed."<sup>9</sup> They did not waste bullets on such people.

Whatever the Utes thought, the soldiers who went out for water felt positively threatened when they left their makeshift defenses. Johnson convinced the War Department that his actions were indeed heroic, and he received his Medal of Honor at Fort Robinson on September 22, 1890. According to the citation, he had voluntarily left fortified shelter and under heavy fire at close range made the rounds of the pits to instruct the guards, and had fought his way to the creek and back to bring water to the wounded. But there were at least three conflicting views of what actually happened.

When Johnson pinned on the medal, he was a private in K Troop. He had risen back up to sergeant for the third time by 1889, but tangled with the bartender at the Fort Robinson post canteen after the latter cut him off, so he lost his stripes again.

In addition to Johnson, K troop had two other Medal of Honor heroes, 1st Sgt. George Jordan and Sgt. Thomas Shaw. Thirty-year men like Johnson, they both got the award for leadership in battle during the Apache wars. Jordan retired from Robinson and remained in Crawford; Shaw left the army at Fort Myer, across the river from Washington, and stayed in suburban Virginia. Unlike Henry Johnson, these two fine soldiers had unblemished records and long uninterrupted tenures as noncommissioned officers. Both retired as sergeants.

Shaw was one of the first-generation buffalo soldiers who staked their claim on citizenship by taking up its responsibilities as a soldier. A broad-shouldered, bewhiskered, and mature noncommissioned officer when he served at Fort Robinson, Shaw had nothing about him or his manner to suggest that he had once been a slave. But he had started out in the U.S. Army after walking away from his master during the Civil War and into a Union recruiting station. A soldier from that time on, Shaw possessed an upright posture and firm gaze. One look at him tells you that you are in the presence of a tough, seasoned veteran, experienced, poised, and dignified. George Jordan was also a well-liked and highly-respected old trooper with the bearing of a professional soldier.

Emanuel Stance, who served at Fort Robinson too, has intrigued me ever since I started researching buffalo soldiers nearly thirty years ago. The first buffalo soldier to receive the Medal of Honor, for his leadership against Indians in Texas in 1870, Stance was barely twenty years old and just over five feet tall. He was also a harsh and violent disciplinarian. He had a string of court-martials that started in 1869, when an argument with Saddler John Graves over a

misplaced currycomb escalated quickly to threats, with Stance warning Graves that he would "mash his mouth," and finally both men throwing punches. Capt. Henry Carroll, defending Stance at the court-martial, called him "one of the best sergeants I have in my company," and said that he had "always been attentive to duty . . . and shown a wish to improve himself in tactics." Then Stance got into a nasty brawl with 1st Sgt. Henry Green of his troop in December 1872. In the course of that fray Stance bit off part of Green's lower lip, resulting in a mayhem charge that cost him his stripes and six months in the guardhouse. From that time on, it was chutes and ladders for Stance, regaining his stripes, getting busted, and regaining his stripes, at least five times until he arrived at Fort Robinson with his troop in 1885 as first sergeant.

When he got there, he had already survived an attempt on his life by a trooper at Fort Reno, Indian Territory, in 1883. Stance had dropped his pipe on the barracks floor, and someone had accidentally kicked it under a bunk. Stance accused Pvt. Moses Green, drew his saber, and threatened to run him through. After others separated them, Green went outside to the wood pile, selected a thick log, returned to the barracks, and waited for his tormentor. When Stance returned to the squad room, Green struck, hard, laying open Stance's head and breaking his arm. As Green said at his court martial, "I knew that if I hadn't struck Stance a strong blow he'd injure me as it is his habit of striking men with a carbine and I knew that if I didn't give Stance a strong blow he'd get up and injure me, because it is his custom to strike men." Private Green got ten months, a pretty light sentence for almost crushing a sergeant's skull, because the court, referring to Stance's threat with his saber, acknowledged "the unreasonable and ill-advised conduct of Sergeant Stance towards the prisoner."

Old habits die hard, and Emanuel Stance never got the message. At Fort Robinson, he continued to browbeat

## Buffalo Soldier Medal of Honor Men



Sgt. Thomas Shaw (standing, second from right) and a group of Ninth Cavalry noncommissioned officers. A broad-shouldered, bewhiskered, and mature noncom, he had nothing about him or his manner to suggest that he had once been a slave. Courtesy of United States Military Academy Museum

and terrorize his soldiers. For all of his experience and age, he was still the Emanuel Stance who had taken a bite out of a sergeant's lip, wiry, battle-hardened, and belligerent. As first sergeant, he became the center of a series of disputes and brawls which hit F Troop during the last half of 1887.

Ten disturbances in that period involved eight of the forty-five or so privates and four of the ten noncommissioned officers. Stance, the senior sergeant in the troop, was himself involved in four confrontations. Overall, F Troop was a tense and volatile environment, in which sergeants and privates were frequently at

odds, sometimes violently so, while the troop commander, Capt. Clarence A. Stedman, watched and at least tacitly approved this style of leadership.

Stance's behavior had tragic consequences. Just one year after sewing his fourth gold, five-year chevron on his right sleeve, on Christmas morning 1887,



Squadron of the Ninth Cavalry at Fort Robinson, about 1892. This photograph was taken west of the fort.  
NSHS-R659-4569

he was found on the road to Crawford, shot dead with a service revolver. All of the circumstantial evidence pointed to men in Stance's own troop.

Who did it? Perhaps it was Pvt. Lewis Glenn, who once warned Stance that he was "tired of you bulldozing me, Sergeant Stance." Or it could have been Blacksmith George Waterford, who growled at Stance that "anyone who approaches me this morning is tired of living." Or Pvt. Miller Milds, the soldier with chronic syphilis who was charged but ultimately freed because witnesses could not be found. We know Stance browbeat and terrorized the soldiers under him, that some warned him to back off and he did not, and that Pvt. Simpson Mann, who arrived the year after Stance was murdered, told historian Don Rickey many years later that he had heard that the victim had been "dirty mean" and that the men of F Troop had done him in. No one was convicted of the crime, but Stance most likely was killed by one of his own men in the ultimate protest against the kind of leadership that he embodied and that

Captain Stedman and the regimental officers condoned.

Stance's personal effects were as intriguing as the man himself. He apparently left his Medal of Honor and an autobiography, never found as far as I know, among his possessions. He also left his pipes, a gold watch and chain, and an Indian beaded necklace, suggesting the tantalizing picture of a frontier dandy to go along with the image of the mercurial little tyrant.

Emanuel Stance left an ambivalent legacy. As the recipient of the first Medal of Honor awarded to a black regular, he was the original, officially recognized hero in a new phase of the history of black soldiers in the service of the United States. His small physical stature and youth at the time of the award provide attractive material for modern motivational speakers to use with juvenile audiences, and at least one children's book celebrates his bravery. The reason for this appeal is clear. Stance's decisive and bold behavior in the face of an armed enemy represents the finest tradition of the American sol-

dier. But his leadership at other times showed serious shortcomings. Stance was an imperfect, flawed hero.

But the same could be said, albeit less emphatically, of most of the buffalo soldier recipients of the Medal of Honor. With Thomas Shaw and George Jordan at one end of the scale and Emanuel Stance at the other, the rest lived somewhere in between. They came down occasionally with what was euphemistically called "a loathsome disease" or forfeited their stripes for losing their temper, getting drunk, and starting a fight. But such transgressions do not diminish their achievements or their stature. The fact is that you can find plenty of heroes in the frontier army. It is just not a good place to look for saints. And these buffalo soldiers were by and large singular heroes, emerging from slavery, overcoming huge obstacles, and gaining the respect of the soldiers who followed them into battle and the officers who trusted them with independent commands. They were heroes, and they deserve to be remembered.





The author at Augustus Walley's grave, Reisterstown, Maryland.  
Photograph by Erwin A. Schmidl

### Notes

Unless otherwise indicated, this essay is based on Frank N. Schubert, *Black Valor: Buffalo Soldiers and the Medal of Honor, 1870–1898* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1997).

<sup>1</sup> Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784–1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 309; Frank N. Schubert, *Buffalo Soldiers, Braves, and the Brass: The Story of Fort Robinson, Nebraska* (Shippensburg, Penn.: White Mane Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), 61–63.

<sup>2</sup> Schubert, *Buffalo Soldiers, Braves, and the Brass*, 144–46.

<sup>3</sup> Schubert, *On the Trail of the Buffalo Soldier: Biographies of African Americans in the U.S. Army, 1866–1917* (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1995), 147.

<sup>4</sup> Murray Kempton, "The Beat of War," *New York Review of Books* 43 (Febr. 15, 1996):40.

<sup>5</sup> William W. Gwaltney, "The Making of Buffalo Soldiers West," *Colorado Heritage*, Spring 1996:47.

<sup>6</sup> M. Dion Thompson, "Visiting the World of the Buffalo Soldiers," *Baltimore Sun*, Apr. 21, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Historians generally accept this version of what occurred. See William H. Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 207; Fairfax D. Downey, *The Buffalo Soldiers in the Indian Wars* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 73.

<sup>8</sup> *Northwest Nebraska News* (Crawford), Aug. 9, 1934.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Emmitt, *The Last War Trail: The Utes and the Settlement of Colorado* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 221.