

**SIDELIGHTS ON
NEGRO SOLDIERS**

BY

CHARLES H. WILLIAMS

Dedicated to the Memory of

My Mother

and to

My Aunt

Mrs. Maria Burnside

PREFACE

It is the purpose of this book to tell something of the achievement of the Negro soldier in the World War and to describe the conditions under which he lived as these were seen by the writer, who for eighteen months investigated conditions in America and France under the auspices of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America and of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, with the recommendation of the Secretary of War and the Adjutant General of the United States Army. Most of the information was secured by visits to the soldiers in the camps, by interviews with thousands of them, and by personal investigation in the communities adjacent to the camps, as well as by the study of records and documents. Camp commanders, officers in charge of Negro troops, representatives of all the welfare organizations, city officials, and both Negro and white civilians were consulted in the effort to secure the facts concerning the fighting record, the work, the conduct, and the treatment of Negro soldiers in the course of the war.

I am indebted to the Historical Branch of the War Department for access to its records on the operations of Negro combatant troops, to the office of the Adjutant General for special information, and to many friends for suggestions and help in the preparation of the material; and it is hoped that the book now offered to the public may in some small way help the American people better to understand not only the perplexing situation but also the signal achievement of Negro men working and fighting in behalf of their country and in defence of the highest ideals of life.

CHARLES H. WILLIAMS.

*Hampton Institute,
December 15, 1922.*

INTRODUCTION

It gives me great pleasure to write a word of introduction to this interesting and important book that Mr. Williams has written. The story of the Negro soldier is one of the romances of American history. Even in the days of the Revolution and the War of 1812 he played an honorable part; but it was the Civil War that gave him his first large opportunity, and at Port Hudson, Fort Wagner, or Fort Pillow he passed through the baptism of fire, striving that the emancipation of his people might be guaranteed and the integrity of his country preserved. We also remember another war, and Santiago and San Juan Hill, and not only how Negro men went gallantly to the charge but also how the soldiers in a black regiment faced pestilence and fever that their white comrades might be saved. Then came Carrizal, strange prelude of the great conflict to come; and once more, at an unexpected moment, the soul of the nation was thrilled by the courage of the Tenth Cavalry. "Theirs not to make reply; theirs but to do and die." So in the face of odds they obeyed orders and died beneath the Mexican stars.

The recent World War, however, brought to the Negro people of the United States an interest and an anxiety surpassed only by the expectant hope in the days of the Civil War. They had come to the end of an era, and all the incidents and problems of their life in America were suddenly brought to the testing. Vast forces beyond their control were changing the destinies of thousands—in migration, in economic freedom, and even in spiritual outlook; and unhappy events at East St. Louis and Houston but made the situation more critical. They were eager to serve, but at once they

came face to face with questions that concerned the very foundations of their citizenship. Would the men of the race, or would they not, be permitted to train and serve as officers? If so, would they be dealt with as a distinct and separate race, as was the case with no other race in the country, or simply on the basis of physical and mental fitness? Why, moreover, on the registration card for the draft should the Negro be singled out for a special corner? To some people such questions may have seemed unimportant, but to the Negroes themselves they meant nothing less than life itself, and they followed the fortunes of their sons and their husbands accordingly.

In the recent war then, as in no other, the social as well as the military phases of the life of the soldier assumed a new importance. Wherever he went, with whomever he came in contact, in America or in France—in the life of cantonment cities, in his dealing with his comrades in arms, in his contact with the people of France—the Negro in uniform met situations that had definite bearing upon his health, his conduct, and his morale. Frequently these came to the attention of the War Department, and sometimes also they received prominence in the public press. Of such sort were the vexatious discussions that sometimes arose in the Y. M. C. A. and other welfare organizations, the reports reflecting on the character of Negro men, and the complaints not only about the actual operation of the draft but also about the conditions under which the soldiers, especially those in stevedore units, sometimes lived and worked. Of distinct service to the country accordingly was the decision of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, working in co-operation with the Phelps-Stokes Fund, to appoint two field secretaries, one to study the situation in so far as it had to do with Negro churches, and the other to study and report on every

phase of the life of the Negro soldier in camps and cantonment cities, both in the United States and abroad.

For this latter service Mr. Charles H. Williams was chosen. His work for several years as Physical Director at Hampton Institute had not only brought him to the very front in his chosen field, but had also given him special insight into the temperament, the physical prowess, and the social outlook of Negro men. His special task moreover had not only the approval but also the co-operation of the Secretary of War and the Adjutant General of the Army of the United States, and in the course of his work he spent a total of eighteen months visiting every place where Negro soldiers were gathered, in both America and France. His endeavor was as painstaking as his mission was unique.

Something of the result of this first-hand study will be found in the pages that follow. Mr. Williams, it will be observed, has not undertaken to write a history of Negro soldiers in the war. Instead he has given us "Sidelights"; and I think the reader will agree with me that what is more unpretentious than a history is also of more interest than many a formal work, and valuable by reason of the authority with which the author speaks. Before one has finished reading he will probably be impressed with the fact that the work is indeed not only a consideration of the Negro soldier but also a vital contribution to the social history of the Negro people in America. It has been eagerly awaited by those who knew of the unusual opportunity for study that Mr. Williams had, and now that it is given to the people of the country I bespeak for it a generous welcome.

BENJAMIN BRAWLEY.

Cambridge, January 1, 1923.

CONTENTS

- I. THE CALL TO THE
COLORS
- II. IN CAMP
- III. THE NEGRO OFFICER
- IV. HOPES AND FEARS
- V. THE LURE OF THE
UNIFORM
- THE "Y" AND OTHER
- VI. WELFARE
ORGANIZATIONS
- VII. THE STEVEDORE
- VIII. THE NINETY-SECOND
DIVISION
- IX. THE NINETY-THIRD
DIVISION
- X. HOME-FIRES

CREDENTIALS

WAR DEPARTMENT
Washington

February 11th, 1919.

*To: Officers Commanding Colored Units from
Over Seas Service*

From: The Secretary of War.

Subject: Interview.

This will introduce to you Charles H. Williams, who desires to interview both colored officers and men who have seen over seas service. I desire that every practical facility be afforded Mr. Williams in carrying out the work.

Sincerely,

[SIGNED] NEWTON D. BAKER,

*Newton D. Baker,
Secretary of War.*

WAR DEPARTMENT
THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE
WASHINGTON

March 7, 1918.

From: The Adjutant General of the Army.

To: The Commanding Generals of all Army Camps and Cantonments.

Subject: Social and Religious Conditions in Communities Adjacent to Camps and Cantonments.

This will introduce to you Mr. C. H. Williams, representing the Federal Council of Churches and the Phelps-Stokes Fund.

Mr. Williams has been appointed to observe social and religious conditions in communities adjacent to camps and cantonments where colored troops are stationed.

The Secretary of War desires that every practicable facility be afforded to Mr. Williams in carrying on his work.

[SIGNED] H. P. McCAIN.

GENERAL HEADQUARTERS

AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES
PROVOST MARSHAL GENERAL'S OFFICE
A. P. O. 706

May 17, 1919.

From: Provost Marshal General, A. E. F.

To: Whom it May Concern.

Subject: Special Travel Permit.

1. Charles H. Williams, Associate Member, ARMY EDUCATIONAL COMMISSION, Y. M. C. A., holder of Red Worker's Permit No. 32133, is authorized to travel in:

(a) Any part of France except Alsace-Lorraine.

(b) Any part of the 3rd Army Area.

2. This permit, which is valid until July 17, 1919, will be returned, upon expiration, to the office of the Provost Marshal General, A. P. O. 706.

*H. H. BANDHOLTZ,
Provost Marshal General.*

[SIGNED] JOHN W. NOBLE,

for

*By: JAMES T. LOREE,
Executive Officer.*

[OFFICIAL SEAL]

CHAPTER I

THE CALL TO THE COLORS

Little did the American Negro think, as he struggled with his own problems in the early days of the World War, that he would be called upon to aid his fellowmen three thousand miles away. He looked with interest upon the conflict in Europe, his adventurous spirit was quickened by the accounts of heroism and sacrifice, and he could but marvel at German efficiency as he watched the great war machine crush its way through Belgium. As the German armies marched across the fields of France, however, leaving suffering and sorrow in their wake, the Negro found his sympathy going out to the French people; and when it became evident that America also would be drawn into the fighting, like the other citizens of the country he girded himself for the contest.

When war was declared on April 6, 1917, the American army numbered 75,000 officers and men, only a nucleus for the stupendous task now on hand. As the country marshalled its forces the question arose in some sections as to the use of a tenth part of its man-power. Some alarmists feared that if the Negro were trained in the science of modern warfare, not only would there be industrial and agricultural stagnation, but, even more important, peaceful relations after the war would be difficult if not indeed impossible. It was true that black men had gone to the aid of France and England, not as black men but as Frenchmen and Englishmen, and their names had been written in gold at the Marne and at Verdun, in Mesopotamia and in Africa. They too had wielded the cold steel, faced gas and liquid fire, and passed into the

jaws of death. America, however, it was felt by some, had her own special problems and difficulties, and it was debatable if she could adopt a similar policy. On the other hand, throughout the country orators and the press alike proclaimed the patriotism of the Negro and his willingness to shed his blood for the Stars and Stripes. The heroism and loyalty of the race were recounted from the Revolution to Carrizal; whatever else might be said, the Negro's hand had never been raised against the flag, nor had treason been found in his breast; and when the call for American manhood came, it was for all men from twenty-one to thirty-one years of age, regardless of color.

During this period there were those among the Negroes themselves who thought that at last the time had come to demand once for all the full rights of American citizens. A larger group, however, maintained that when the country was in danger the first duty of every citizen was to remove the danger and then to settle domestic problems. A program was adopted which resulted in the holding of great mass meetings throughout the country. The young men of the race were urged to enlist in the army or navy, and this they did with enthusiasm. The rush to the colors was unprecedented. The American Negro Loyal Legion proposed to raise 10,000 men in answer to the President's call for 75,000 men. In sections where national guard units existed for colored men, these were the first to raise their units to war strength, as was demonstrated by the old 15th New York. Often in the registration booths new records of enlistments were made, so much so that at one time the War Department issued orders to "take no more colored men." Boys in their teens and men beyond the draft age answered the call. Students left school or college to take up the knapsack and the gun. In the Southern states there was special eagerness to enlist, and in

Florida there were petitions to the Governor for the privilege of raising “regiments of colored militia officered by men of the race.”

In some quarters it was said that Negroes would not register and that arrests would have to be made. Especially in country districts not reached by publicity campaigns there was not a thorough understanding of the requirements. This fact resulted in the arrest of a few men as slackers, but investigation showed that what seemed to be negligence was due to ignorance rather than to any definite intention to dodge the draft. Some who were beyond the age limits registered because they did not know their exact age, and some other older men believed that they would be sent to jail if they failed to appear.

When soon after registration day reports were sent out from Washington that Negroes would be sent to the various camps, a vigorous protest was made in some Southern states against placing them in the local camps, the strongest objection coming from South Carolina. Elsewhere, however, the opposition did not appear so violent; thus the *Atlanta Constitution* took the position that Negro soldiers should be trained in Camp Gordon along with other soldiers and felt that this could be done without friction. In Alabama there was an expressed feeling against “strange Negroes in large numbers,” and throughout the South it was believed that separate camps would be preferable. Objections grew less and less, however, as reports of the Negro’s enthusiasm for the draft came from all parts of the country.

The Negro went to camp willingly and those who remained gave him up whole-heartedly, sending him away with feasting and speech-making, songs and cheers, as well as with prayers and tears. Not only his kinsmen, but white citizens as well, vied with one

another in their endeavor to do him honor and make him proud that he was going to serve his country. Sometimes a governor would address the draftees, and, as was often the case, parades would be led by mayors, chiefs of police, and city councilmen. Often the stores would close in honor of those called to the colors, and in one case an entire town turned out to see its only colored draftee leave for service. At such times the Negro's patriotism reached its highest point. Not only those summoned but every Negro present was filled with intense emotion. Especially was this demonstrated when the colored contingent from Thomas County, Ga., assembled prior to movement to Camp Gordon. One farmer who had not harvested his crop made a final appeal for respite. The exemption officer called for a volunteer to take his place from the other men who were certified but not yet called. It is said that there was a stampede for the place.

The selective draft was fair in its inception, including all citizens alike, but unfortunately it did not always operate impartially when Negroes were involved. In Fulton County, Ga., the draft board had to be ordered dismissed for "unwarranted exemptions and discharges." Out of 815 white men called by this board 526 were exempted, 44 per cent on physical grounds. At the same time 202 Negroes were called and only 6 exempted. The action of this board was by no means typical, but it illustrates what the Negro draftee sometimes had to contend with. In the determination of claims there appeared to be no discrimination, according to the report of the Provost Marshal, yet those called sometimes told sad stories as they were being led away to camp. Sometimes it would be the story of a man with a wife and five children, with ages from seven years to six months, who had been changed from Class 4 to 1-A. Sometimes Negro men living on their own farms, with crops

growing and livestock to be cared for, were sent away to camp, while single men working for large planters were put in Class 4. All told it appears that many Negroes who had sufficient claim for exemption were drafted and sent away to camp. The figures taken from General Crowder's report show that of the 1,078,331 colored men who registered, 556,917, or 51.65 per cent, were placed in Class 1, while 521,414 were in the deferred class. Of the 9,562,515 white men who registered, 3,110,659, or 32.53 per cent, were in Class 1, while 6,451,856 were in deferred classes. The numbers selected for full military service were 342,247 colored men and 1,916,750 white, or 31.74 per cent and 26.84 per cent respectively. The report further showed that 74.60 colored and 69.71 white out of every 100 men called were physically able to serve the country. Such figures were a revelation.

Various explanations were offered to account for this discrepancy. It was noted that voluntary enlistment was not open in the South to Negroes as to white men; thus it was estimated that 650,000 white men enlisted in this section and only 4000 colored men. Moreover pleas or excuses for deferment were not so readily accepted in the case of Negroes. Some also were regarded as delinquents and brought to camp as such when they really did not belong in this class. Migration complicated the situation and cards notifying Negro draftees of their call were often delayed and occasionally not even sent to them. The result was that men who had no intention of wrongdoing were sometimes arrested and treated as deserters. For each such case the local officer received fifty dollars. This practice became so profitable that camp authorities found it necessary to intervene to protect the well-intentioned draftee whom circumstances had unfortunately placed in the clutches of the law. If everything is considered, the evidence is conclusive that the

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

