

The United States Colored Troops at New Market Heights

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As the early morning fog swirled around the bottomlands of New Market Heights on September 29th, 1864, a single division of United States Colored Troops (hereafter cited as USCT) moved towards the Confederate positions in front of them. Their goal was to punch through the enemy defenses and open the road to the Confederate capital, Richmond, about seven miles away. If Richmond fell, the end of the Civil War was inevitable. Roughly three hours after the first shots were fired the battle was over; the USCT had control of New Market Heights. Almost as soon as the battle was over, the controversy of who won began to circulate; some claimed the USCT, others that the rebels had fallen back on their own free-will, and handed the Federals a victory. In the aftermath of the battle, fourteen USCT soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor, and others proclaimed that the awards were politically motivated. This paper will attempt to prove that the Battle of New Market Heights was won by the USCT with their tenacious attacks against the Confederates, and their medals were justly earned.

The Petersburg-Richmond Siege had begun in mid-June when the Army of the Potomac had crossed the James River and attacked the city of Petersburg.¹ For the next nine months, the Army of the Potomac would attack and maneuver around Petersburg. It is the Army of the James, however, that this paper is interested in. While the Army of the Potomac would attack Petersburg, the Army of the James would push against Richmond on numerous occasions. The USCT division at New Market Heights came from the XVIII Corps of the Army of the James.²

This division had three brigades, though only two would take part of the assault at New Market Heights. The two brigades numbered some 3,000 men and officers, and only some of

¹ Edwin C. Bearss, *The Petersburg Campaign: Vol 1*, (El Dorado Hills: Savas and Beatie, 2012), 35-36.

² Richard J. Sommers, *Richmond Redeemed: The Siege at Petersburg* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1981), 461.

these troops had seen combat before.³ Though they had been untested in combat, it would be a mistake to say they were unready. One officer of USCT wrote, “The short time...between the organization of the command and its departure...to become a part of the Army of the James, was spent in drill, in which most of the regiments were exceptionally proficient.”⁴ Why did the regiments prove so adept at soldiering? Another officer wrote, “They saw that the day of their redemption had arrived.”⁵

These USCT indeed had a redemption coming; during the Civil War about 180,000 black men fought for the Union cause- one author estimates that 150,000 were ex-slaves.⁶ The 4th USCT, one of the regiments to take part in the Battle of New Market Heights, was nearly half ex-slave.⁷

In charge of the 3,000 colored troops was a man named Charles J. Paine, a brigadier general, who, like his men, had not seen much combat. He served on the staff of Benjamin Butler, the commander of the Army of the James, and the close connection got his promotion to division command. He was thirty-nine years old.⁸

Opposing the Federals at New Market Heights were approximately 1,800 Confederates under the command of Brigadier General John Gregg, who was one day past his thirty-sixth birthday on the day of the battle.⁹ The gray-clad soldiers in this sector had a pivotal role in the fighting to come; Richmond was only seven miles and 70% of Robert E. Lee’s force was some

³ Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler’s Book* (Boston: A.M. Thayer’s, 1892), 721.

⁴ Solon A. Carter, “Fourteen Months’ Service with Colored Troops,” in *Civil War Papers: Read before the Commandery of the State of Massachusetts, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States. Vol. 1.* (Boston: Commandery of the State of Massachusetts, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1900) 157.

⁵ Norwood P. Hallowell, *The Negro as a soldier in the War of the Rebellion* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1897), 29.

⁶ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *General Lee’s Army: From Victory to Collapse* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 305.

⁷ Edward G. Longacre, *A Regiment of Slaves: The 4th United States Colored Infantry* (Mechanicsville: Stackpole Books, 2003) xii.

⁸ James S. Price, *The Battle of New Market Heights* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011) 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

twenty miles away at Petersburg.¹⁰ Though outnumbered, the Confederates had two pivotal equalizers; the Texas Brigade and earthworks.

The Texas Brigade was arguably one of the best-fighting unit in the entire Confederacy during the Civil War. It started out as a unit composed entirely of Lone Star troops in the early spring of 1862, and had fought in some of the toughest engagements of the war; at Antietam the 1st Texas alone lost 80% of its men in twenty minutes of fighting.¹¹ Though the Texans were supported by seven pieces of artillery and some dismounted cavalry, they would face the brunt of the fighting on September 29th.¹²

By this point in the war, both armies had turned to extensive use of earthworks and other fortifications. Gone were the neat battle lines blazing away at each other until one fell back in confusion. Trench warfare, foreshadowing of the First World War, had begun to take over Virginia, and New Market Heights was no different. The defenses constructed by the Confederates went such: at the edge of their redoubt was a small ditch, then fifty yards in front to an abatis, “composed of heavy trees laid down or felled around a fort... and the branches sharpened and so interlaced that men cannot crawl through them...”¹³ Along with the abatis, Confederates had constructed devices known as *chevaux-de-frise*, “each section typically sixteen feet long. The central log had holes every twelve to sixteen inches...with stakes seven feet long sharpened at each end shoved through the holes.”¹⁴ From that line of fortifications the Confederate line extended downhill one hundred yards to another line of abatis. From there the hill descended one-hundred and fifty yards to a thick stand of trees and a marshy bottom. Thus,

¹⁰ Sommers, *Richmond Redeemed*, 9.

¹¹ Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam* (Boston: First Mariner Books, 2003) 200.

¹² Price, *The Battle of New Market Heights*, 25.

¹³ Butler, *Butler's Book*, 731.

¹⁴ Earl J. Hess, *In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications and Confederate Defeat* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2009) 60.

the advancing Federals would have to attack through the marsh, up to the first line of abatis, break through those, charge into the *chevaux-de-frise*, cut them open, and then the final fifty yards over the ditch and into the redoubt. All the while under the trained musketry of the Texas Brigade.

Paine's division advanced at 5:30 AM on September 29th, into the early morning fog and mist. Sunrise would not reach Richmond until 6:00 AM, and in the darkness Paine assembled his division for the assault. But the untested commander decided to send in one brigade at a time; breaking a fundamental rule of combat He simply did not bring enough of men forward; one historian has said that, "to achieve success, the attacker should have a three-to-one numerical advantage."¹⁵ Yet Paine's first brigade, under the command of Samuel Duncan, only had 750 men.¹⁶ Duncan's men moved forward without the rifles capped to prevent them from stopping to fire.¹⁷

Duncan's advance was shattered. The Confederate musketry tore the USCT to pieces but still the Federals struggled forward. Canister, lead-filled tins that exploded like shotgun shells, erupted from the Confederate artillery and chopped more USCT down. Federal officers were killed or wounded, and private soldiers took command of their units; contrary to War Department officials who did not allow blacks to become officers out of fear that they would not know how to lead, the privates led with ability and steadfastness. No matter how much steadfastness or bravery the USCT displayed however, the Federals could carry no further. The

¹⁵ Brent Nosworthy *The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003) 385.

¹⁶ Price, *The Battle of New Market Heights*, 55.

¹⁷ Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1956) 280. During the Civil War, most soldiers used muzzle-loading muskets or rifles. To make the weapon fire, soldiers would have to prime with a percussion cap atop a firing cone. Without the cone covered with a cap, even with a charge loaded into the barrel, the weapon was useless. David J Eicher, *The Longest Night: A Military History of the Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001) 411.

assault had advanced with 750 men, and Duncan's men broke to the rear after suffering 387.¹⁸ One Confederate wrote, "In effect, it was a massacre."¹⁹

Paine reeled back from losing so many in his first assault. He brought up his second brigade, commanded by Colonel Alonzo Draper. Draper had 1,300 men under him, almost double that Duncan had brought forward. Aligning his regiments one behind another, Draper set off at 7:30 AM. His men carried over the exact same ground that Duncan had deployed, and while the Texans opened fire, again tearing great gaps open in the lines, Draper's regiments charged forward. They, unlike Duncan, had their rifles capped and their volleys began to take a toll on the Confederate lines. For thirty minutes the two lines fired back and forth, before Draper began to realize that the Confederate fire was breaking off. Ordering a last charge, his men stormed and captured the works.²⁰

Why had the Confederate fire slackened? Was the shooting of the USCT taking that heavy of a toll? Had the Confederates run out of ammunition? In fact, it was neither. At the same time that Paine was attacking at New Market Heights, other Federal units were advancing against other portions of the Confederate lines. Mainly at a location named Fort Harrison, Federal units pressed against the Confederates. Fort Harrison was closer to Richmond, and its capture directly threatened Richmond. Brigadier General Gregg, the Confederate in charge of the New Market Line, began to send reinforcements towards Fort Harrison.²¹

Some historians like to point out that Gregg sending men away makes the case that the USCT at New Market Heights was of little consequence. However, that is not true. Had Gregg

¹⁸ Price, *The Battle of New Market Heights*, 66.

¹⁹ J.B. Polley, *Hood's Texas Brigade* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1910) 253.

²⁰ William Glenn Robertson, "From the Crater to New Market Heights" in *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War era*, ed. John David Smith (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002) 191.

²¹ J. Tracy Power, *Lee's Miserables: Life in the Army of Northern Virginia from the Wilderness to Appomattox* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1998) 205.

abandoned New Market Heights wholesale, the Federals in Paine's division and other supporting elements would have had a clear road into Richmond. While Fort Harrison was closer to Richmond, and had to be defended, Gregg had to defend *both* locations; it was not a preference left up to him. The Federal advance at New Market Heights may have in fact weakened other portions of Gregg's line, as one historian says, because while Paine was attacking, other units to his right were able to puncture through the Confederate line that was suffering remarkably few casualties.²² In his final assault, Draper lost 450 soldiers.²³ Without Draper's tough stand against the Confederates' fire, the Federals would not have captured New Market Heights.

In total, Paine's division suffered close to 800 casualties for the possession of New Market Heights.²⁴ On the other hand, it is hard to know how many Confederate casualties there were because numbers recorded were of the entire Fifth Offensive, of which New Market Heights was only one battle. It cannot be assumed to be much, because Gregg had taken some of his men away for the defense of Fort Harrison and one Federal officer himself admitted, "The rebels retreated rapidly and we secured but few prisoners."²⁵ The Battle of New Market Heights brought the Federal forces closer to Richmond and had finally captured the bastion that had repulsed the Union armies on two separate occasions.²⁶

The legacy of the Battle of New Market Heights without a doubt is the fact that fourteen Medals of Honor were awarded to the USCT. To put that into perspective, only eighteen black

²² William A. Dobak, *Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops* (Washington D.C: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2011) (376).

²³ Noah Andre Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War* (Edison: Castle Books, 2002) 293.

²⁴ Noah Andre Trudeau, *The Last Citadel: Petersburg, Virginia* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1991) 209.

²⁵ Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, 293.

²⁶ Sommers, *Richmond Redeemed*, 37.

soldiers were awarded the Medal during the war and two of those came from state units.²⁷ Much like the earlier controversy of who truly won the battle, historians disagree over whether or not the USCT recipients actually deserve their award.

In a report dated October 11th, Benjamin Butler, the commander of the Army of the James, wrote, “The colored soldiers by coolness, steadiness, and determined courage and dash have silenced every cavil of the doubters of their soldierly capacity...”²⁸ In that same report, Butler named dozens of soldiers for commendation to the War Department, and out of that list, fourteen would be chosen for the Medal of Honor. The first twelve Medals were issued in April, 1865, three days before Robert E. Lee even surrendered at Appomattox.²⁹

Others, however, were not as keen on the idea that the USCT rightfully deserved their awards. Recently, one of them wrote, “Ben Butler and his apologists hailed the action at New Market Heights as a great victory for the black troops. It was not that at all...”³⁰ That same historian claimed that the recipients of the Medal of Honor actually did “nothing extraordinary.” Another historian wrote, “it would be difficult to identify a major engagement in which black

²⁷ The difference between a United States Colored Troop regiment and a state unit is that a USCT regiment may be raised from several states and paid for by the Federal government. A state unit, for example the most-famous 54th Massachusetts, would be paid for by the governor of the state it hailed from. Thus, of the 18 awards, only 16 came from USCT, and of those, 14 were from New Market Heights. James Price, “How Many Black Union Soldiers Won the Medal of Honor?” *The Sable Arm: A Blog dedicated to the United States Colored Troops of the Civil War Era*. (February 25, 2011), <http://sablearm.blogspot.com/2011/02/how-many-black-union-soldiers-won-medal.html> (accessed December 4, 2012)

²⁸ U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901) ser. 1, vol. 42, pt 3, 169.

²⁹ Price, *The Battle of New Market Heights*, 95.

³⁰ O. Lee Sturkey, *A History of the Hampton Legion Infantry* (Wilmington: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 2008) 89, 553, n 175. However, any proclaimed historian who addresses historical figures without their full name, as if they were best friends, should be taken with a grain of salt. What of a historian who were to say, “Rob Lee was a bad commander at Gettysburg”?

soldiers played a crucial role.”³¹ It can be assumed with a comment like that, the author does not believe that the Medals of Honor were justly awarded.

It is not the purpose of this paper to index every single award, but two would suffice to show that the USCT did in fact deserve their medals. First is Sergeant Major Christian Fleetwood, of the 4th USCT, one of the regiments in Duncan’s failed assaults. Fleetwood went into action and witnessed two color bearers shot down. Without delay, Fleetwood grabbed the Stars and Stripes and carried them through the rest of the fight.³² The second instance came from Private James Gardiner, of the 36th USCT, part of Draper’s assault. Gardiner’s act of bravery came during the final charge on the Confederate redoubt; his citation reads, “Rushed in advance of his brigade, shot a rebel officer who was on the parapet rallying his men, and then ran him through with his bayonet.”³³ Though extremely violent, Gardiner’s citation also reveals that he was unafraid to close in with the enemy and eliminate a target that was helping the Confederates rally.

Historians will differ on whether or not the USCT deserved the medals they were awarded, but there is one source that prevails over all. When the Medal of Honor was created in 1862, it was the only medal available for distribution, and thus during and after the war it was awarded with little thought to the actions behind the citation, as opposed to today when the Medal is only awarded to those acts of extreme courage and selflessness. As part of the National

³¹ Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, 467.

³² N.a, n.p, n.d, *Fleetwood, Christian A.* Congressional Medal of Honor Society. <http://www.cmohs.org/recipient-detail/445/fleetwood-christian-a.php>. (Date retrieved: Nov 11, 2012). During the Civil War, every regiment carried two flags- the Stars and Stripes and a state flag, or in the case of the USCT, a Federal service flag. The role of the color bearer was a cherished role, and a very deadly one. During a battle, when smoky discharges curtained the battlefield, the flag served as a rallying point and also as a magnet for the enemies’ bullets. By picking up the flag, Fleetwood showed remarkable courage.

³³ N.a, n.p, n.d, *Gardiner, James*, Congressional Medal of Honor Society, <http://www.cmohs.org/recipient-detail/479/gardiner-james.php>, (Date retrieved: Nov 11, 2012).

Defense Act of 1916, Section 122 orders, “A board to consist of five general officers...shall be convened...for the purpose of investigating and reporting on past awards.” The act went on, “this with a view to ascertain what medals of honor... have been awarded...for any other cause other than distinguished conduct.”³⁴

The review board came back with its findings on February 5th, 1917, and with its report, struck nine-hundred and eleven names from the Medal of Honor roll. Of these 911, none of the USCT recipients from the Battle of New Market Heights lost their medals. With the Review Board’s finding, the critiques of today’s historians have little grounding.³⁵

The Battle of New Market Heights proved to the untested USCT of Charles Paine’s division that they were capable of going up against some of the best Confederate forces. Their tenacity, their bravery under fire, and their ultimate victory over their foes proved to many that they were a force to be reckoned with. They won the battle, no matter what many historians have to say, and finally, the fourteen soldiers who were awarded the Medal of Honor were justly recognized.

³⁴ N.a, n.p. *Public Laws of the United States of America passed by the Sixty-Fourth Congress: 1915-1917* (Washington, 1916) 238.

³⁵ N.a, n.p, n.d, *History*, Congressional Medal of Honor Society, <http://www.cmoHS.org/medal-history.php>. A search of the exact report wound up empty-handed. An inquiry to the National Archives unfortunately returned a letter dated Oct. 19th, 2012, which said, in part, “We have carefully searched our holdings...but we were unable to locate the report about which you inquired.”

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The United States Colored Troops (USCT) was a branch of the United States Army founded in 1863 to recruit, organize, and oversee the service of African American soldiers during the American Civil War (1861–1865). USCT regiments consisted of black enlisted men led in almost all cases by white officers. Black soldiers at New Market Heights and Fort Gilmer earned fourteen of the sixteen total Medals of Honor awarded to African American soldiers during the Civil War. Of these fourteen Medals of Honor, five went to Virginians: Powhatan Beaty (5th USCT), James Gardiner (36th USCT), Miles James (36th USCT), Edward Ratcliff (38th USCT), and Charles Veal (4th USCT). Agreed. The oft-overlooked Battle of New Market Heights was a clear demonstration of that morale and determination. But although it may have been a strategic error not to put more USCT troops in combat, it was a political reality. Most white Americans just didn't believe that blacks would make good soldiers. They fought well and left many dead on the field I have not been much in favor of colored soldiers, but yesterday's work convinced me that they will fight. So Hurrah for the colored troops!" - Elisha Hunt Rhodes, June 19, 1864. Source: All for the Union: The Civil War Diary & Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes - Elisha Hunt Rhodes - Google Books. The United States Colored Troops (USCT) were regiments in the United States Army composed primarily of African-American (colored) soldiers, although members of other minority groups also served with the units. They were first recruited during the American Civil War, and by the end of that war in April 1865, the 175 USCT regiments constituted about one-tenth of the manpower of the Union Army. About 20% of USCT soldiers died, a rate about 35% higher than that for white Union troops. Despite heavy