

Soldiers in the Army of Freedom: The 1st Kansas Colored, the Civil War's First African American Combat Unit

Greg Jones

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Jones, Greg (2015) "Soldiers in the Army of Freedom: The 1st Kansas Colored, the Civil War's First African American Combat Unit," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.1.11

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss1/10>

Review

Jones, Greg

Winter 2015

Spurgeon, Ian Michael *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom: The 1st Kansas Colored, The Civil War's First African American Combat Unit*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780806146188

Fighting for Survival and Freedom in the West

Ian Michael Spurgeon's *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom: The First Kansas Colored, the Civil War's First African American Combat Unit* provides some fantastic insights into an under-investigated aspect of the Civil War. Not only does the book address a specific unit of black soldiers, it highlights several smaller engagements that most scholars do not know like Island Mound, Cabin Creek, Honey Springs, and Poison Spring. Spurgeon makes the case convincingly that these locations, particularly the latter, ought to have a more prominent position in our collective understanding of the Civil War. The African American soldiers of the First Kansas Colored Infantry risked life and limb, many sacrificing their own bodies just to enlist for the cause of freedom.

Throughout the book, Spurgeon gives life to the soldiers from the unit. Utilizing sources from postwar memoirs and pension records, the author gave sufficient detail and dialog to make the ample battle stories emerge as vivid and engaging. The First Kansas Colored Infantry had an area of operations largely in Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Indian Territory. There they fought mostly against Missouri and Texas guerrillas. Although the battles were not always massive pitched battles, they still contributed substantially to the outcome of the war. Spurgeon relays the contemporary argument that the combat success of the First Kansas Colored directly influenced President Abraham Lincoln's decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. (273)

The book is organized chronologically, focusing on each of the turning point engagements that the unit faced. From its recruitment, it is evident that the First Kansas Colored Infantry stood in opposition to much prejudice, even in their pro-Union state. Spurgeon gives the historical context of race relations in both

Kansas and Missouri in an effort to shape the readers' understanding of the world that the First Kansas Colored Infantry inhabited. Merely their subversive act of fleeing slavery or surrendering relative "freedom" as free blacks made the soldiers of the unit susceptible to harsh treatment by their Confederate opposition. One of the most pointed episodes in the book came at Honey Springs in the Indian Territory in the summer of 1863. Spurgeon writes, "An investigation of the Confederate supply base uncovered a cache of five hundred pairs of iron shackles. The purpose of these cold metal chains was not lost on the men of the First Kansas Colored Infantry." (173) This powerful anecdote perfectly illustrated the reality of the Civil War for these men. They were not merely fighting for a "cause" or an ideal. They were fighting literally for their lives and their freedom.

Spurgeon draws readers' attention to a massacre of black troops much like the famed Fort Pillow massacre in Tennessee. This event, at an ominously-named place called Poison Spring, was the low point for the First Kansas Colored Infantry. There in southern Arkansas after fighting against five-to-one odds, the First faced nothing short of a massacre. The wounded were shot, mutilated, and some scalped by Indian soldiers fighting with the Confederacy. Spurgeon reminds his readers that the execution of black soldiers was "not an impulsive outburst of vengeance." (215) It was calculated and intentional. Confederate soldiers made a point of denying quarter to black soldiers. The First took 182 casualties, a rate of about thirty-nine percent. The more stunning statistic from the battle was that of those 182 casualties, 110 were killed or mortally wounded, a rate of sixty percent. This was a brutal moment in a vicious war. It should not go unnoticed in our coverage or understanding of the war.

This book compliments other pioneering monographs on African American soldiers in the Civil War from scholars like Dudley Cornish, Noah Trudeau, and James McPherson. What Spurgeon's book does extremely well is accent for readers a new and important context of multiracial warfare. The interactions between African American and Native American soldiers on the frontier provides an unsettling lesson for Civil War scholars about the brutality of guerrilla combat. Although the book would not offer an introduction to the field overall, it is an impressive focus on one significant unit and their experience in the West. For scholars of black soldiers in the Civil War, the book is a must read. More scholars need to know about the lives and sacrifices of the soldiers from the First Kansas Colored Infantry and their first combat at Island Mound in

October of 1862.

Dr. Gregory Jones is instructor of history and humanities at Geneva College. He is currently editing a manuscript on soldiers and their families in southeastern Ohio during the Civil War.