

NEGRO TROOP ACTIVITY IN INDIAN TERRITORY, 1863-1865

By Lory C. Rampp*

At noon, July 1, 1863, the long column of black infantry was halted. Their white commander, Union Colonel James M. Williams, broke away from the main body of resting troops and moved his horse ahead to meet his two returning scouts. He was informed that the opposite bank of the nearby Cabin Creek was held by Confederate troops of an undetermined, but large number. The Confederate enemy soldiers were so positioned as to command the ford and the fortified encampment located there. Colonel Williams wheeled his mount around and returned to his command where he ordered the regiment to fall in back on the Texas Road.¹

Major John A. Foreman, commanding officer of the Third Indian Home Guard Regiment, had already moved forward through the parallel woods and pastures to make contact with the entrenched Confederates at Cabin Creek. When he came within sight of the banks of Cabin Creek, Confederate pickets began to harass his line with scattered musket fire. One com-

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¹Williams to Phillips, July —, 1863, U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (70 vols., 128 books in U.S. Serial Set, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1850-1901), I, XXII, Pt. 1, pp. 372-380. Hereinafter cited as *Official Records*; series cited in small case Roman numeral; volume cited in large case Roman numeral; part of each volume cited as "Pt." Blunt to Curtis, July 13, 1863, *ibid.*, Pt. 2, p. 307; Lory C. Rampp, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865" (Unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1968), pp. 28-29; Walter Hanson Hathaway, "Brigadier General Stand Watie, Confederate Guerrilla" (Unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1968), pp. 51-52; Barney King Neal, Jr., "Federal Ascendancy in Indian Territory, 1862-1863" (Unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1966), pp. 69-67, 96-103; Sharon Dixie Wyatt, "Colonel William A. Phillips and the Civil War in Indian Territory" (Unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1967), pp. 41-42, 46-53; Annie Rosser Cudage, "Engagement at Cabin Creek, Indian Territory," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, X (March, 1932), pp. 44-51; James G. Blunt, "General Blunt's Account of His Civil War Experiences," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, I (May, 1932), pp. 243-246; Wiley Britton, *Memoirs of the Rebellion on the Border, 1863* (Chicago: Cushing, Thomas and Co., 1882), pp. 342-343; Charles R. Freeman, "The Battle of Honey Springs," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XIII (June, 1935), p. 164.

pany of the Third Indian Home Guard Regiment surged forward into a forward protective line of skirmishers and engaged the enemy pickets, killing three and capturing three more. Being overrun by the pressing Union skirmish line, the remaining Confederate pickets retired across the creek and merged with the main Confederate troops.¹

Union horse artillery was ordered to deliver a covering fire while a depth sounding was taken of the rain-swollen creek. Finding it too high for fording by his colored infantry, Colonel Williams posted a heavy line of pickets along the creek banks and moved back out of range to organize the attack for the morrow. The wagon train was posted two miles back from the ford and secured in a temporary park on an open prairie. Holding conference with his staff, Colonel Williams laid out his plan of attack: The Union flanks would be secured by detached portions of the attached Indian Battalion. The ten companies of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment were to make up the main attack force, along with parts of the Third Indian Home Guard Regiment and a battalion of Second Colorado Infantry Regiment.²

At dawn the troops were roused from a fitful sleep and moved anxiously into their assigned combat positions. By eight o'clock that morning the troop placements had been made ready. Colonel Williams, locating himself at a vantage point in the center of the line behind his black regiment, ordered the artillery on the wings to commence firing. For forty minutes the Second Kansas Artillery Battery poured solid shot and shell upon the entrenched Confederates across Cabin Creek. Believing that the cannonade had driven the enemy from their placements, Williams ordered Major Foreman forward with one company of the Third Indian Home Guard Regiment. Major Foreman rose to his feet, saber in hand, and yelled for his men to charge. As one unit, the entire company quickly moved to the banks of Cabin Creek. Meeting no serious defensive fire from the opposite shore, the Indian company negotiated the steep bank and moved into the deep water. By holding their weapons and ammunition above their heads, these articles were kept operative and dry. As the attack force from the Third Indian Home Guard Regiment neared the enemy shore, concealed Confederates began to pour a merciless fire upon them. On a horse, Major Foreman was a prime target. He was one of the first to be hit. After five musket balls had hit his mount, two balls found Major

¹ Hays, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," pp. 28-29; Cabbage, "Engagement at Cabin Creek, Indian Territory," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, X, pp. 40-47; Williams to Phillips, July —, 1863, *Official Records*, I, XXII, Pt. 1, p. 380.

² *Ibid.*

Foreman, pitching him violently into the water. Seeing their gallant major taken from the fighting, the Indian troop quickly lost all heart for combat and began a confused withdrawal back across Cabin Creek.

Colonel Williams immediately ordered forward reinforcements. The First Kansas Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, waiting a short distance back from the creek, rushed to the edge of the bank and began a covering fire, trying to mask the fire of the Confederate musketry. Three companies of the colored troops were maneuvered to the right of the Union center and there began to lay down a permanent blanket of covering fire for the second attack column. The Federal artillery also began tearing away at suspected Southern positions in an effort to dislodge them from the far bank. Colonel Williams ordered the artillery to cease firing and instructed the company officers to take their commands across the creek.

Before the din of the artillery pieces had completely stilled, the black troops began moving down the banks of Cabin Creek and into the murky waters. All of these black companies were plunging on across the creek trying to be the first unit to get ashore on the far side. Confederate musket fire began to tear small holes in the emerged double blue line when the three reserve black units returned the enemy fire and completely masked it. Climbing up the slippery banks the colored units quickly resigned and began moving forward in regimental front.

Cavalry rushed across the creek and took up a position on the right flank of the long Union line. Another mounted unit, commanded by Lieutenant Philbrick, moved through the advancing colored infantry, assembled into a heavy skirmish line and with a yell of command and encouragement charged the Confederate secondary entrenchment across the prairie, pistols blazing, sabers held high. The weight of the cavalry attack, along with the heavy infantry musket fire of the black soldiers was too much for the Confederate line to bear. It fell apart and Southern troops ran for their lives, oblivious to their officers' entreaties to stand and fight.

Seeing the Confederate line put to flight, Colonel Williams stopped the infantry pursuit and ordered forward his reserves of cavalry to continue the chase. Despite the heavy firing on both sides only fifty-one soldiers were killed and seventy wounded. Of these figures, one killed and twenty wounded belonged to the Union casualty list. Putting his column into line and returning to his parked wagon train, Colonel Williams pushed on to Fort Gibson, his mission being accomplished.*

* *Ibid.*, pp. 380-381.

Ever since the first gun sounded the beginning of the Civil War, interested people north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line continually asked about the role the Negro was to play in the War. The Negro, in general, was individually quick to catch the war fervor. Upon learning of the massacre of Sixth Massachusetts Volunteers in the streets of Baltimore, Maryland, April 19, 1861, a large group of Negroes rented a public hall in which they practiced drill and manual of arms hoping to thereafter enlist.

President Abraham Lincoln in 1861 was very reluctant to use Negroes as troops. His hesitance was due to the fear of alienating the border states. Lincoln's Secretary of War, Simon Cameron actively advocated the use of Negro troops but because of his ineffectiveness as a cabinet member, was removed before he could lay any groundwork on enrolling Negro regiments.⁵ Major General David Hunter, Commander of the Department of the South, was the first military man to take any direct action in the recruitment of Negroes. On May 9, 1862, General Hunter called together his staff and issued orders that all able-bodied Negro males capable of bearing arms were to be sent, under guard to departmental headquarters. Hunter formed these men into the First South Carolina Colored Volunteers Regiment, but due to political pressure and lack of Federal recognition for the black regiment by the government, it was disbanded in August, 1862. Though not sanctioned officially, the First South Carolina Volunteers Regiment was the first actual recruitment and arming of Negro men.⁶

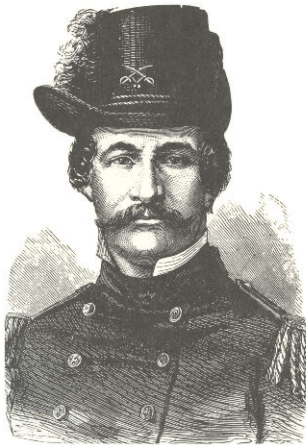
Activity for Negro recruitment was present in the trans-Mississippi area as well as in the Department of the South. The pro-Union state of Kansas did not lag behind in the recruiting of Negroes for military purposes. A discussion of the military uses of the Negro would not be complete without a mention of James Henry Lane. Lane, a United States Senatorial candidate representing Kansas, was elected in 1861. Speaking in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, early in 1862, Lane said, "I do say that it would not pain me to see a Negro handling a gun and I believe the Negro may just as well become food for powder as my son."⁷

Actual recruitment of colored men in Kansas began on July 22, 1862. It was on this date that Lane was designated recruiting agent in the Union Department of Kansas. Because his commission did not mention the particular race to be recruited in

⁵ Thomas J. Boyd, "The Use of Negro Troops by Kansas During the Civil War" (Unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Kansas State Teachers College, Pittsburg, Kansas, 1950), pp. 1-2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.



(Lindie's: *Portrait Gallery of Civil War*, 1894)

MAJOR GENERAL DAVID HUNTER

Federal Commander of the Department of the South was the first military officer in the Civil War to order the recruitment of Negroes for military service May 9, 1862.

the enrollment of enlistees for United States infantry regiments, Senator Lane signed up colored as well as white recruits. The actual enrollment of Negroes into the army brought forth many objections: Sympathizers for the rebellion feared the addition of the Negro manpower to the reserves of the United States. Some just disliked the race as a whole. Making the Negro a soldier gave him undeserved social stature and a few believed that enrollment in the army would not be in the best interest of the Negro. Still others were present who believed that the Negro did not have the necessary qualifications to make a courageous and efficient soldier.⁸

Colonel Williams was placed in charge of raising the first regiment of colored troops. He was hampered at every opportunity by resentful civilians. His recruits were arrested and jailed on fraudulent charges by county officials, and the white officers of the proposed regiment were harrassed with trumped-up charges, such as unlawfully depriving a person of his freedom.⁹

By January 12, 1863, the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, as the colored unit was called, was ready to be mustered in, comprising six of the ten companies necessary to make up an infantry regiment. By May 2, 1863, the remaining four companies were filled and mustered in, filling the regiment completely.¹⁰ Before the new companies had time to pitch tents alongside their sister companies, the commanding general of the Kansas department, Major General James G. Blunt, ordered the entire colored command to report to Baxter Springs located in southeastern Kansas. Baxter Springs was less than a day's ride from Indian Territory.

Colonel Williams was to open up a permanent line of communication with the outmost Federal post in Indian Territory, Fort Gibson. Being so close to Indian Territory, it is doubtless that many Negro scouting patrols weaved back and forth across the Kansas and Indian Territory border. The regiment of colored soldiers occupied the Baxter Springs fortification and vicinity until June 26, 1863. On this date instructions were received from departmental headquarters stating that the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment would form part of an escort to a very important supply and provisions wagon train. Because of the rough topographical features in eastern Indian Territory the only dependable route of supply to Fort Gibson and the

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17, 20-21.

Union garrison stationed there was the Texas Road.¹¹ The post and troops stationed at Baxter Springs testified to the value of the dusty artery. On June 26, 1863, the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment was joined by Major Foreman and his reinforced Union Indian Brigade. Forming his column into line and throwing out flankers Colonel Williams, the commander of the train by seniority of rank, ordered the train and cavalry escort southward. The wagon train and escort was spread over a two mile stretch of the Texas Road. Sometimes on rough portions of the Texas Road, the length of the train extended up to three miles. The infantry would stretch along both sides of the road and keep a watch for Confederate snipers. The cavalry scoured the point, both flanks and rear for signs of enemy troop movements. The train entered Indian Territory on the night of June 30 or early morning of July 1. All was quiet for the Union train until midday July 2. Major Foreman, commander of the point and reinforced vanguard, sent back a message to Colonel Williams who was riding with the main body that a Confederate force of an undetermined number had been encountered on the south bank of Cabin Creek. The skirmishing of Foreman's point resulted in three Confederate dead and a like number captured; no Union soldiers were killed or wounded.¹²

Receiving word of the encounter, Colonel Williams moved forward with a twelve pound field howitzer. This gun joined the lighter artillery of Foreman's Brigade and together they began to probe the opposite bank of Cabin Creek for Confederate emplacements and trenches. Solid shot and salvos of canister forced the Confederates to call in their skirmishers and consolidate their fortifications leaving the Federal colored troops in command of the north bank of Cabin Creek and the surrounding woods. After making a reconnaissance of the creek and discovering it to be too deep for his infantry force to ford, Colonel Williams decided to hold off on an immediate attack and ordered his colored regiment into camp a safe distance from the Confederate fire. The attack was scheduled to begin at dawn. The black regiment posted a strong security on the banks of Cabin Creek and then retired back from the bank and set up camp. While his colored troops were preparing for the next morning's fight, Colonel Williams ordered the bugler to sound an officer's call as he planned that evening a war council.

¹¹ The Texas Road was also known as the "Military Road" though the former name was by far the more familiar. The Texas Road ran roughly in a north-south direction bisecting the eastern part of Indian Territory. Hamann, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," p. 46.

¹² Phillips to Hunt, July 7, 1863, *Official Records*, I, XXII, Pt. 3, pp. 378-379; Cubage, "Engagement at Cabin Creek, Indian Territory," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, X, pp. 47-48.

Colonel Williams outlined his plan to his staff and line officers as thus: Lieutenant Colonel L. H. Dodd, commander of the original wagon train escort, would remain in that position and remove his wagons to a point two miles to the rear of the Cabin Creek ford. The prairie located there would offer enough space to corral the entire train; a minimum guard escort would accompany Lieutenant Colonel Dodd. The artillery sections would be positioned on both flanks of the enemy not more than two hundred yards from their entrenchments. Two six-pounder cannons would be located on the left flank, one twelve-pound howitzer and one mountain howitzer would hold down the right flank. These artillery pieces would lay down a cover of fire while the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, supported by Foreman's Union Indian Brigade troops, made an attempt to force a crossing, having the intention of routing the Confederate soldiers located there. Following this general operation order, Colonel Williams issued his attack order: Major Foreman and one company of his Indian Home Guards Regiment would lead the attack; Lieutenant Colonel John Bowles would lead the ten companies of the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment; behind Lieutenant Colonel Bowles would be one battalion of the Second Colorado Infantry Regiment, commanded by Major J. Nelson Smith. In reserve and guarding the Union flanks would be the three companies of Wisconsin and Kansas cavalry; included in this reserve was the remainder of Major Foreman's Indian Brigade, having the secondary mission of being infantry flank guards.¹³

On July 2, 1863, the Negro and Indian soldiers broke camp and by daylight, the long swaying columns were marching to their assigned positions. The Confederate troops across the creek were greeted at dawn with an alarming sight. Cannons, caissons, and outriders were surging back and forth along the rear of the forming Union battle line with reckless abandon. From the dense woods near the creek emerged a long column of colored soldiers. On reaching the designated position for the infantry line to begin the attack, Lieutenant Colonel Bowles stood up in his saddle, saber aloft, shouting orders and giving instructions. Like the ribs of a mammoth fan, the columns of infantry separated from the main body, stopping with the completion of the double rank formation, of linear tactics used by Civil War infantry units. Mounted officers rode up and down the lines, filling gaps, offering encouragement, and straightening the battle formation where nec-

¹³ Willy Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War* (Kansas City, Missouri: Franklin Hudson Publishing Co., 1922), pp. 258-262; Phillips to Blunt, July 7, 1863, Williams to Phillips, July —, 1863, Foreman to Phillips, July 5, 1863, *Official Records*, I, XXII, Pt. 1, pp. 878-879, 360-361, 382.

essary. By eight o'clock that morning all was ready. With a deafening roar the Union artillery on the flanks began to lay down heavy covering fire. For forty minutes the artillery barrage barked at the Confederate ditches; both solid shot and infantry-killing canister hurtled toward the Confederate positions. Colonel Williams ordered soundings taken of the creek; upon satisfactory reports that the creek had fallen sufficiently to allow fording, he prepared to attack. After a last-minute conference with his staff, he ordered these officers to post. The attack was about to begin. The colored soldiers knelt in position waiting for the word to move forward, involuntarily flinching with each artillery report. There was neither fear nor demoralization in these black troops since they had been bloodied in Kanawha and they were prepared to die for the Union.¹⁴

Colonel Williams ordered the artillery to cease firing and instructed Major Foreman to move on the Confederate positions. Company officers carried these orders to the men in the ranks. As one entity the Indian units rose to their feet and rushed forward, yelling and screaming. Jumping into the chest-high waters, these soldiers fighting the sharp current crossed the creek. Holding guns and ammunition above their heads, the Indian troops kept these invaluable supplies dry and usable. As the Northern Indian forces neared the opposite shore, concealed Confederate Indian troops opened up on the vulnerable Union Indian Brigade. Major Foreman was shot twice by musketry, and his horse receiving five wounds was shot out from under him. The fall of their commander was too much for the Indian company to bear; they began a perfidious retreat back across the creek to their former positions.¹⁵

Colonel Williams immediately issued instructions which would send his own regiment across the creek. The awaiting colored soldiers, upon receiving the order to advance, leaped to their feet with a yell and dashed to the creek bank. Once in the creek the black unit pursued the opposite shore and the Confederates hidden there. To prevent a similar surprise volley on the black regiment Colonel Williams pulled three companies of the Kanawha First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment out of the main attack column and stationed them along the Union bank of Cabin Creek to the right of the Union column. These troops began firing at the far bank in an effort to force the Confederates down behind their entrenchments until the rest of the regiment could overrun the position. The artillery fired

¹⁴ Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, pp. 261-262; Williams to Phillips, July —, 1863, Foreman to Phillips, July 5, 1863, *Official Records*, I, XXII, Pt. 3, pp. 380, 382.

¹⁵ Williams to Phillips, July —, 1863, *Official Records*, I, XXII, Pt. 3, p. 380.

salvos again and the vicinity of Cabin Creek echoed and re-echoed with the din of cannon reports. The Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment quickly and without serious casualties cracked the Southern earthworks and secured the far bank. The black regiment displayed superb discipline in the manner they responded to the orders of their officers. New lines were formed on the enemy's side of the creek and the colored Union regiment moved out on the nearby prairie to offer battle to the Confederates drawn up on the far side.

Lieutenant R. C. Philbrick, commander of Company C, Ninth Kansas Cavalry Regiment, moved segments of his mounted unit across the creek to the support of the vulnerable flanks of the long Union line. With less than 400 yards separating them, the two lines of infantry faced each other. The Negro troops knew that only complete vanquishment of the enemy would do; it was a well known fact that no prisoners or quarter was given when colored troops were involved in an engagement. The deathly quietness hanging over the Confederate and Union lines was broken with the renewed fire of the Union artillery and the three companies of black infantry renewing their covering fire. The aligned Federal infantry did not attack as expected; instead the center portions of the colored line fell back, allowing two companies of Captain John E. Stuart's cavalry through. One company moved to the left; the other column dashed to the right forming a single line of horsemen. Halting long enough to align, the Kansas horsemen drew sabres and giving a piercing yell, lunged toward the Confederate line. Opening fire, the Confederates tried to unsaddle the charging Union Cavalry. The colored troops began to give a supporting fire which had an immediate and revealing effect. Charging cavalry on the Southern Indian was too much to bear. The Confederate line fell apart under the weight of the mounted assault and the men in the ranks made for the rear and safety. Colonel Williams ordered fresh cavalry to pursue the defeated Southerners and moved up his black regiment to secure the abandoned Confederate positions and care for the wounded enemy.¹⁶

The Federal pursuit was called back after a five mile chase. Union losses included only one colored soldier killed and twenty Indian and colored troops wounded. The Confederate loss was estimated at fifty killed, a comparative number wounded, and nine prisoners. From the captured Confederate soldiers, information was learned that the leader of the enemy attacking force had been Colonel Stand Watie, the most able Confederate Indian in Indian Territory. With a force of only 900 men Colonel Williams had beaten off a serious attack of a Confederate force

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 390-391.

numbering close to 2,200 men. The Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment and attached units had definitely proven their mettle in battle. Sending for the parked supply train, Colonel Williams put his victorious column on the Texas Road and continued south toward Fort Gibson. The victory at Cabin Creek had a noticeable effect on all the Union forces concerned; the morale was high, the step lively and the spirit of soldierly unity grew.¹⁷

The action at Cabin Creek proved without a doubt that the Negro troops were good fighters. They had fought and defeated a superior foe who did not give quarter. Colonel Williams had a regiment he could be proud of and depend on in tough situations. Action and combat is what these colored troops hungered for and within a few days all appetites would be satisfied.

The addition of the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment to the Indian and white units already stationed at Fort Gibson now made it possible for the Union forces to assume an offensive attitude. Word was filtering back across the Arkansas that the Confederates were massing for a big offensive campaign. This push would have to be stopped whatever the cost or everything that the Union presence represented in Indian Territory would be obliterated. On July 11, 1863, Fort Gibson was surprised by an unannounced visit of their Commanding General, Major General Blunt. Accompanying him were six hundred cavalry troopers, representing various Kansas and Wisconsin cavalry units.

Major General Blunt went into immediate conference with all of the company and staff officers about the impending campaign he planned to launch below the Arkansas River. Blunt organized his mounted troops and infantry companies into two Brigades. The First Brigade, commanded by Colonel William R. Judson, held the colored regiment; the Second Indian Regiment dismounted as infantry and various sections of artillery. The Second Brigade made up of mostly white soldiers, was commanded by the Fort Gibson commander, Colonel William A. Phillips.¹⁸

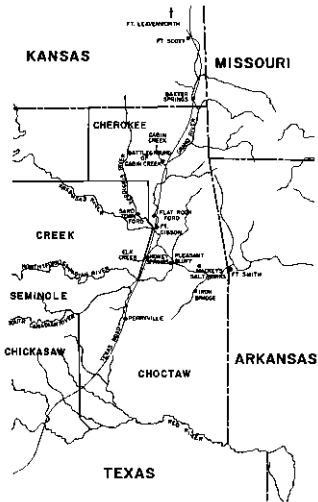
Because of the July rains the Grand River was quite swollen and impassable. Major General Blunt began constructing rafts which were to be used to transport his units at the earliest opportunity. On the evening of July 15, 1863, scouts reported that the Grand River was fordable a short distance above the juncture point with the Verdigris River. At midnight on July 15, Major

¹⁷ Neal, "Federal Ascendancy in Indian Territory, 1862-1863," pp. 102-103; Phillips to Blunt, July 7, 1863, Williams to Phillips, July —, 1863, *Official Records*, I, XXII, Pt. 1, pp. 370, 380-381.

¹⁸ Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, p. 273.

General Blunt led 250 cavalry and supporting artillery, taken from the First Brigade, out of Fort Gibson to force a passage across the Grand River. The remainder of the Union offensive force could then cross safely, opening the campaign. The remainder of the First Brigade under Colonel Judson, including the First Kansas Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, and the Second Brigade under Phillips, also moved out of Fort Gibson taking a more direct route to the ford selected as the point of crossing. Arriving at the ford, near the mouth of the Grand River, the Negro troops settled down to await the outcome of vanguard on the enemy side of the river. Scattered shots and infrequent volleys could be heard all the rest of the night.

By early morning Union soldiers appeared opposite the waiting Federal columns and waved for them to cross. The barges were brought forward, the infantry units were ferried across, and the opposite shore and vicinity was tightly secured, allowing the rest of the column to be poled across. This ferrying maneuver was not completed until well after dark. By 10 o'clock the night of July 16, all of the Federal troops and their equipage were on the hostile side of the Grand River. Choosing not to encamp for the night the Negro and Indian companies formed up in the stealth of the darkness in their marching order and immediately began to trek southward. The entire Union force numbered only slightly less than 3,000 men. The Confederate force was estimated by the reports of spies to surpass 6,000 men, all heavily armed and deeply entrenched on the banks of Elk Creek. Marching throughout the night, the long Federal column lumbered toward its objective on Elk Creek. By daylight the point squad brushed with the forward element of the Confederate outpost. Quickly reinforced, the Federals drove the Southern soldiers back on their own column and entrenchments which were formed in attack order on the south side of Elk Creek. The Confederate emplacements extended their lines for one and a half miles on either side of the Texas Road. Leaving orders to close up the column which had become strung out in the darkness, Major General Blunt took a small escort and moved to the front to examine the defenses of the waiting Confederate force. Blunt was close enough to the concealed Confederate's trenches that he could tell they were ready for an attack. He could not locate the Southern artillery and in an effort to move closer and pinpoint it, the small mounted party was spotted and drew musket fire from Confederate outposts. Withdrawing to a



MAP

Area of Operations for Negro Troops in Indian Territory
1862-1865

place of safety one of Blunt's escorts, shot dead, was toppled from his horse.¹⁹

Returning to his fast-approaching column, Blunt found his men and horses exhausted from their all night forced march. He directed them to take cover behind a nearby ridge to rest and eat some food from their haversacks before going into battle. Men of the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment ate a quick lunch and then readied their weapons for the coming fight. Major General Blunt issued an officers' call and when all the company commanders were assembled, he outlined his plan to them. The column would be divided into two parts: The First Brigade under Colonel Judson would form up on the west or right side of the Texas Road and the Second Brigade under Colonel Phillips would position itself on the east or left side of the Texas Road. Both columns would have their infantry formed by company, the cavalry in platoons, and artillery stationed by sections. All units would keep a tight and closed formation so as to deceive the Confederate forward observers of the Federal strength.

Having issued these instructions and cleared away any questions, Blunt ordered his officers to post and prepare to march. As if on parade the one large column broke into two smaller ones, one on either side of the road. The columns moved out rapidly and closed the distance from the enemy to less than one-quarter mile. As soon as Blunt began receiving musket fire from Confederate outposts, he ordered his columns into a battle line of two ranks. Without halting, the battle formation was formed. Similar to spokes of a wheel emanating from a central point, the ranks broke from the main body and moved forward in double ranks. Skirmishes were thrown out in front of the main line in order to probe the enemy defenses for a weak point. The secreted Confederate artillery revealed its location when it opened fire on the Union skirmish line.²⁰

¹⁹ Blunt to Schofield, July 26, 1863; Phillips to Blunt, July 7, 1863, *General Report, Brigadier General W. L. Cabell, December 7, 1863, Official Records, i, XXII, Pt. 1, pp. 447, 370, 804*; Blunt to Curtis, July 13, 1863, *ibid.*, Pt. 2 p. 807; Wiley Britton, *The Civil War on the Border, II* (2 Vols., New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1890-1894), pp. 100, 115-116; Raup, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," pp. 29-30.

²⁰ Cabell to Davall, December 7, 1863; Blunt to Schofield, July 26, 1863, *Official Records, i, XXII, Pt. 1, pp. 804-447*; Phillips to Blunt, July —, 1863, *ibid.*, Pt. 2, pp. 355-350; Britton, *The Civil War on the Border, II*, pp. 115-119; Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, p. 273; Nenn, "Federal Ascendancy in Indian Territory, 1802-1803," p. 100; Wyant, "Colonel William A. Phillips and the Civil War in Indian Territory," p. 54; Charles R. Freeman, "The Battle of Honey Springs," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XIII (June, 1935), p. 163.

Colonel Williams, previous to forming a line of battle, spoke to his colored troops encouraging them to fight for honor, duty and country. Williams told his troops, "I want you all to keep cool, and not fire until you receive the command; in all cases aim deliberately and below the waist. I want every man to do his whole duty, and obey strictly the orders of his officers."²¹ Receiving orders to be in the right column on the west side of the road, Colonel Williams moved his regiment into line with precision and accuracy. The Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, 500 men strong in this engagement, was to support Captain E. A. Smith's artillery located also on the right flank; as a secondary mission the colored troops were to seek out a weak point in the Southern line and exploit the enemy weakness, if located. The men in the ranks were nervous, but anxious to meet the enemy across the prairie and finish the task of liquidation they had begun at Cabin Creek. Once in position these black troops fixed bayonets and knelt in the dew laden grass to await the word of attack. The colored regiment held the most important point of the Federal line, the center portion of the line astride a section of Smith's artillery.

The battle opened with a deafening roar as the Union cannon blazed into life, pouring shot and canister into the Confederate positions. After a period of bombardment, Lieutenant Colonel Bowles, commanding this section of the Federal line, rode his horse out in front of the black regiment and ordered them forward. The entire regiment stepped out and marched with perfect alignment toward the concealed enemy. The 300 yard gap between the two positions began rapidly closing. The Confederate artillery began pounding the black phalanx, tearing huge gaps in the oncoming Union line. Seeing this courageous example of daring, several of the other Federal units marched out to offer battle. The Second Colorado Cavalry Regiment (dismounted) joined with the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment's right. The Second Indian Home Guards Regiment, commanded by Colonel W. F. Schaut, moved up on the black regiment's left. Pushing through the tall prairie grass and isolated islands of trees and brush, the colored unit moved up to within forty yards of the enemy line. Lieutenant Colonel Bowles halted the unit and ordered it to, "ready, aim, fire."²²

Instantly, two long rows of smoke and flame blazed forth as the double rank of the Union line erupted with a volley of musketry. At the same moment the Confederate line returned the Union volley with one of their own. Both lines loosed their fire at the same instant making it appear that the Confederates

²¹ Bowles to Jackson, July 20, 1863, *Official Records*, I, XXII. Pt. 1, p. 440.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 450.

thought the command to fire given by Union Lieutenant Colonel Bowles was given by their own commander. It was at this point that Colonel Williams, now located on the extreme right of the Federal line, was felled, severely wounded on the face, breast and hand. Lieutenant Colonel Bowles upon receiving word of the wounding of Colonel Williams, assumed command and pushed the attack of the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment along all the line. Due to over enthusiasm, the Federal Second Indian Home Guard Regiment mistakenly placed itself between the Union and Confederate fields of fire. Lieutenant Colonel Bowles immediately ordered a cease fire of his units and yelled at the Union Indian command to fall back out of the line of fire.

The Confederates thought the withdrawal command was meant for all of the Northern forces to their front and immediately moved to take advantage of the black regiment. Colonel Charles DeMorse, commanding the Confederate's Twenty-Ninth Texas Infantry Regiment, ordered his companies forward to press the supposed retreat. Meantime the Indian troops had removed themselves from the line of fire and the colored troops steadied themselves for the onrushing Confederate Twenty-Ninth Texas. On command the double line of the black soldiers delivered two calm volleys into the charging Southern troops. Having reached a distance of only twenty-five paces from the Union line, the fire of the Federals was disastrous. The first rank of the Twenty-Ninth Texas simply disappeared, and the second Federal volley tore huge holes in the next rank and the Southern attack slowed. The line stalled and with the firing of another volley, it stopped completely and began a disorganized retreat. Momentarily the screams of the wounded and triumphant yells of the black troops rose above the din of gunfire signifying all up and down the line that a Federal victory was within their grasp. The entire Union front seemed to gather courage and strength from the colored soldiers' coup and surged forward. The pressure of the combined Union attack was too much; the Confederate troops broke ranks and made for the rear and safety. All along the mile and a half front, the Southerners began breaking contact; the battle of Elk Creek was a decisive Union victory.²¹

Major General Blunt ordered in cavalry to push the Confederate rout to the utmost. The retreating Confederates made several counterattacks, but all proved too feeble to stall their vigorous pursuers. Regaining their unit integrity, the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment secured the battle-

²¹ *Ibid.*; Neal, "Federal Ascendancy in Indian Territory, 1862-1865," pp. 107-109; Rupp, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," pp. 31-32.

field and pushed on to the supply depot located two miles further south at Honey Springs. The Confederates, seeing the tide of battle change against them, set fire to their commissary building destroying practically all edible supplies. Moving past the smoldering buildings and dropping off a detachment of Union troops to secure the Southern supply depot, Blunt continued the chase for three more miles before he ordered recall. The terrain prevented further pursuit with artillery; the cavalry horses were in a jaded state and the black infantry was short of ammunition and exhausted. Blunt moved up his orderlies and staff stationing field headquarters at the Honey Springs compound. Colonel Williams' soldiers found many sets of shackles amid the ruins of the Confederate depot. Captured Confederate prisoners reported that the shackles were to be used to secure any black soldiers captured during the fight and subsequent return to his Southern master.¹⁴

Union losses at Honey Springs amounted to seventeen killed in the fighting and sixty wounded, most of which were superficial. The Southern casualties were much greater, having 150 killed and buried on the field, 400 wounded and seventy-seven captured. Also taken from the Confederate force were one artillery piece, one stand of Confederate colors, 200 stand of arms and fifteen wagons found at the Honey Springs depot, which were later burned on Blunt's orders. Major General Blunt praised his entire command for its actions at Elk Creek and the Confederate supply depot at Honey Springs. He singled out the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment for singular courage and valor saying they "particularly distinguished . . ." themselves. "They fought like veterans, and preserved their line unbroken throughout the engagement. Their coolness and bravery I have never seen surpassed . . ."¹⁵

The defeat of the Confederate forces at Honey Springs, June, 1863, marked the twilight of the Southern dominance in Indian Territory. The valor and fighting ability of the Negro troops greatly helped in pushing and containing the Confederate forces below the Arkansas River. For the remainder of the war in Indian Territory these black units would again meet Southern Indians on the field of battle and prove to all doubters their victory at Honey Springs was not chance. The Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment moved to Fort Gibson and was temporarily attached to the permanent garrison there. The Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment

¹⁴ Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, pp. 292-293.

¹⁵ Blunt to Schofield, July 26, 1863, *Official Records*, I, XXII, Pt. 1, p. 448; Neal, "Federal Ascendancy in Indian Territory, 1862-1863," pp. 109-110.

remained at Fort Gibson the entire month of August, 1863, performing routine patrol and garrison duties.²⁶

On September 14, 1863, the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment joined its sister regiment, the newly formed Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment at Fort Smith, Arkansas.²⁷ Both Negro regiments were then attached to the Second Division, Army of the Frontier. For the next two and one-half months these two units conducted various operations deep in Confederate Indian Territory. Several of their combat raids ventured as far south as Perryville, deep in the Choctaw Nation. On December 1, 1863, the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment and the Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment were transferred to Arkansas to operate against Confederate Major General William Steele, who was launching a counterattack against Federal Major General Fredrick Steele. The Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment remained in Arkansas after the Confederate thrust had been thwarted and was involved in heavy fighting until May, 1864, when it was transferred back to temporary garrison duty and fatigue detail at Fort Smith, Arkansas.²⁸

On June 15, 1864, the Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment became involved in a brisk skirmish with Brigadier General Watie at Iron Bridge, Choctaw Nation. The Federal general headquarters at Fort Smith had decided to experiment with supplying the Union outpost of Fort Gibson by water. Usually summer rains raised the Arkansas River enough to allow shallow draft craft through to the upper parts of this important tributary. In early June the craft, *J. R. Williams*, was selected and loaded with basic condiments and other important necessities. In planning the re-supply of Fort Gibson by water the escort assigned to guard the valuable supplies was much too small. Upon arrival at the steamer, only twenty-six men comprised the entire guard mount. The cargo had an assessed value of over \$120,000, and seemingly deserved more security than twenty-six men could supply if difficulty arose.

²⁶ Joseph Thomas Wilson, *The Black Phoenix: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1775-1812, 1861-1865* (Hartford, Connecticut: The American Publishing Company, 1888), p. 234; Boyd, "The use of Negro Troops by Kansas During the Civil War," p. 36.

²⁷ Authorization to raise a second regiment of Negro troops came from the War Department in June, 1863. The completion of this second regiment, the Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Regiment, was reached in November, 1863, having ten infantry companies. Boyd, "The Use of Negro Troops by Kansas During the Civil War," pp. 31-36, *passim*.

²⁸ Wilson, *The Black Phoenix: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1775-1812, 1861-1865*, pp. 234-240.

Arriving at a point five miles below the mouth of the Canadian River, the *J. R. Williams* was brought under Confederate artillery fire. Lieutenant Horace A. B. Cook, Company K, Twelfth Kansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment was taken by complete surprise and his men managed to return only a scattered ineffective volley of musket fire before the Southern cannon had completely disabled the Union ferry craft. The captain of the *J. R. Williams* managed to manuever and ground the disabled craft on the far shore of the Arkansas River, opposite the Confederate artillery and infantry entrenchments.²⁹

Believing the situation aboard the *J. R. Williams* hopeless, Lieutenant Cook moved his men off the steamer to a nearby sandbar. Outnumbered, and having no known relief in the vicinity, Cook soon decided to break contact with the entrenched Confederates. He would try to reach Fort Smith and come back with reinforcements to retake the ferry boat. A party of Cook's command, which had become separated from the main body made its way about ten miles distant from the disabled steamer to Mackey's Salt Works, where Colonel John Ritchie had a command of 800 men from the Second Union Indian Regiment. Ritchie moved a part of his force to the crippled *J. R. Williams* and quickly brought the looting Confederate Indian troops under fire. During the interval of Cook's retreat and the arrival of Ritchie, Colonel Watie had towed the Union steamer across the river.³⁰ By evening of June 16, Watie was informed that a large force of Union Negro troops, with several pieces of horse artillery, was coming up from the direction of Fort Smith. This unit was the Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment,

²⁹Maxey to Kirby-Smith, January 16, 1864, Samuel Bell Maxey Papers, Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma; Phillips to Curtin, March 7, 1864, *Official Records*, I, XXXIV, Pt. 2, pp. 624-626; Cooper to Scott, June 17, 1864, Watie to Cooper, June 17, 1864, Watie to Cooper, June 27, 1864, *ibid.*, Pt. 1, pp. 1011-1012, 1013; Thayer to Steele, May 23, 1864, Thayer to Rosecrans, May 26, 1864, Durbin to Heintson, June 14, 1864, *ibid.*, Pt. 4, pp. 11, 50, 687; Civil War Claims, Foreman Papers, Indian Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; James D. Morrison, "Capture of *J. R. Williams*," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XLII (Summer, 1964), pp. 107-108; Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, p. 401; Joseph B. Thoburn and Muriel H. Wright, *Oklahoma: A History of the State and Its People*, I (4 Vols., New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1929), pp. 361-362; Joseph B. Thoburn, *A Standard History of Oklahoma*, I (6 Vols., Chicago: The American Historical Society, 1916), pp. 326-327.

³⁰Cooper to Steele, June 17, 1864, *Official Records*, I, XXXIV, Pt. 1, p. 1012; Thayer to Steele, June 23, 1864, Maxey to Boggs June 26, 1864, *ibid.*, Pt. 4, pp. 564, 686; Special Orders Number 171, Adjutant and Inspector General's Office, July 21, 1864, *ibid.*, XLI, Pt. 2, p. 1019; Hampp, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," pp. 92-98.

an infantry regiment of about 700 men under the command of Colonel S. J. Crawford. Colonel Crawford had thrown to his front an extended line of skirmishers and it soon brushed with elements of Watie's security net. Receiving reports of contacts with Confederate personnel, Crawford ordered a harder push along the front in order to ascertain their numbers. The colored skirmish line attacked the task with vigor and peppered the encountered Confederate patrols with musket balls.

The Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment easily pushed the Confederate scouts aside, and when they came within sight of the Iron Bridge, Crawford ordered a halt. Colonel Crawford put his troops into a battle formation of double lines of infantry with the artillery and cavalry in support, positioned to the rear of the massed infantry. So aligned, the colored troops moved forward keeping precision combat alignment. When well within musket range, the Confederates opened a heavy fire in an effort to break the black Union line. Crawford ordered the fire returned and sent for the Federal artillery section, stationed in the Union rear. The center of the Union line broke open momentarily as the artillery caissons raced forward to their position in front of the Union formation. After a few well placed rounds of solid shot and canister, the Confederate cavalrymen broke ranks and fled to the rear for their horses. The exhausted condition of the Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment prevented any prolonged pursuit of the retreating Southern raiders. Colonel Crawford ceased the forward movement of his troops, put them into column formation and moved them to the Arkansas River where he allowed them to rest. Infantry cannot effectively follow cavalry; thus, there was no need to exert his tired men unnecessarily. That same evening, after their much needed rest, the colored troops moved back to the Federal post at Fort Smith, elated over their victory.³¹

In September, 1864, the Southern high command launched the largest raid-invasion into Federally held Indian Territory since July, 1863. Vied against this Confederate thrust was the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment. On September 16, the Confederate columns filed out onto the Texas Road at Sand Town Ford and began their trek northward. In command of this raiding force were two of the most distinguished officers in the Confederate army stationed in the trans-Mississippi West, Brigadier General Watie and Brigadier General Richard Gano from the Texas Confederate sub-district and commanding officer, by date of rank, of the combined units being used on the raid.

³¹ Watie to Cooper, June 27, 1864. Watie to Cooper, June 37, 1864, *Official Records*, I, XXXIV, Pt. 1, pp. 1013, 1012; Hathaway, "Brigadier General Stand Watie, Confederate Guerrilla," p. 74; Rampen, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," pp. 94-95.

The force was made up of an 800 men brigade commanded by Watie and 1,200 men, cavalry and infantry, from various Texas units under Brigadier General Gano; 2,000 men totaled the count. Marching in single column formation on the Texas Road, the Confederate force stretched out for over two miles. Proceeding northeast, the raiders made their way to their first objective: the haying station reported to be on the prairie located near Flat Rock. A patrol of scouts had been sent ahead, and it was soon confirmed that a party of Federals lay to the Confederate immediate right front. Gano and Watie proceeded to the top of a nearby ridge for a better vantage point. Using spy glasses, they watched the Federals making hay.³³

The Union haying operation at Flat Rock was commanded by Captain Edgar A. Barker. Captain Barker had only two reinforced companies of his regiment with him at the haying station, the Second Kansas Cavalry Regiment and four companies of the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, a total force of only 125 men. Barker's Union colored scouts returned to camp and reported that a large force of Confederates had crossed the Verdigris River and was advancing on his camp from the southwest. The first intelligence reports from the colored scouts set the Confederate party as numbering approximately 200 men. With his command only slightly smaller, Captain Barker elected to fight the advancing enemy force. When recall was sounded by the bugler, the black soldiers out on the prairie hurried to camp to erect a defense.

With his men assembled together, Barker formed them in a half circle formation in a ravine to the rear of his camp. Taking a small mounted detachment of men, the Federal captain moved forward to reconnoiter the exact number and designs of the Confederates advancing on his front. Captain Barker and his Negro escort detachment met Gano's command two miles southwest of his camp. Here he correctly estimated the Confederate host at being near 2,000, vastly outnumbering the previously reported 200. The flat prairie also disclosed the six pieces of

³³ Organization of the Army of the Trans-Mississippi Department, Kirby-Smith, C. S. Army, commanding, September 30, 1864, Gano to Cooper, September 29, 1864, Watie to Heiston, October 3, 1864, Johnson to Hoyt, September 25, 1864, Maxey to Rogers, October 7, 1864, Maxey to Boggs, September 16, 1864, *Official Records*, I, XLI, pt. 1, pp. 637, 788-789, 780, 775-776, 760, 777; Hathaway, "Brigadier General Stand Watie, Confederate Guerrilla," p. 77-78. Flat Rock is located on the prairie near the mouth of Flat Rock Creek on the west side of Grand River about five miles northeast of present-day Wagoner, in Wagoner County; Muriel H. Wright and LeRoy H. Fischer, "Civil War Sites in Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XLIV (Summer, 1966), p. 212; Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, pp. 437-440, 426-429, 434-435; Norman F. Morrow, "Pierce's Missouri Expedition, 1864" (Unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, 1940), pp. 158-159.

field artillery the Confederates had with them. Barker made his intended reconnaissance on the enemy flanks and immediately fell back when approached by a Confederate advance party. He skirmished with this advance patrol all the way back to the Federal haying camp. Arriving at the ravine, to the rear of the Union camp, Barker dismounted the patrol detachment and prepared to meet the Confederate attack.¹¹ For the Negro troops with Captain Barker, it would be a fight to the death, and the Negro soldiers intended to make the Confederates pay dearly for their lives. A well known fact to the Federals, white and black, was that the Confederate forces did not take prisoners.¹²

General Gano could see from his vantage point that the Confederate party sent to cut off the escape of the Federal haying detail were in position. Captain S. M. Stayhorn of the Thirtieth Texas Regiment, sent with the advance element to aid in cutting off the Union party was beginning to advance his skirmishers; the engagement at Flat Rock Ford had begun. Watie and his entire brigade, minus the First Cherokee Regiment, which was with Lieutenant Colonel C. N. Vann at the rear of the Union camp, advanced to the left of the field. Gano dispatched Lieutenant Colonel William G. Welch with a cavalry column to the right. It was composed of Colonel DeMorse and the Twenty-Ninth Texas Cavalry Regiment and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Hardeman of the Thirty-First Texas Cavalry Regiment. Welch advanced to a position about 200 yards to the right of Gano and halted. Gano and the remainder of the Confederate cavalry force, including the artillery, made up the center. Increasing musketry fire to the Federal rear indicated that Lieutenant Colonel Vann was advancing in force. Gano gave the order, and the V-shaped formation of the Southern units began to move in on the haying camp. The infantry accompanied by Gano, advanced to within 200 yards of Captain Barker and his besieged Negroes and white soldiers and opened fire. Watie and Welch with their cavalry forces charged the flanks of the Fed-

¹¹ Baker to Adjutant General, September 20, 1864, *Official Records*, 1, XLI, Pt. 1, pp. 771-772; Britton, *The Union Brigade in the Civil War*, p. 438; Hathaway, "Brigadier General Stand Watie, Confederate Guerrilla," p. 78; Rapp, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," pp. 116-117.

¹² For further information on the treatment of the Negro soldier by Confederate forces in Indian Territory and the trans-Mississippi Department, see Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, pp. 380-373, 455-459 and Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army* (New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1955), pp. 145-147.

erally-held ravine repeatedly, but on each assault the Negro troops effectively repulsed them.³⁵

The Negro troops under Captain Barker held their ground well for a half-hour, but the Federal position grew more untenable as the Confederates began gaining ground and moving in closer. With the Confederate Indian troops positioned as they were, the Federal haying party was assailed from five directions at once. Barker knew by the disproportioned odds it would be only a short time before his command would be overwhelmed and wiped out to the last man. With Negroes in the Federal party, the Confederate force around him would not be inclined to show much mercy to any person in the unit, white or black. Barker spotted a weak point on the Confederate left in Watie's section of the line and decided to mount all those of his party who had horses, break through if he could and attempt to save at least a portion of the doomed command. Mounting sixty-five men, he charged the Confederate left. Watie in command of that portion of the line ordered reinforcements in, and all but fifteen of the Federal cavalry were captured or killed. The colored soldiers and some white infantry left in the ravine rallied under Lieutenant Thomas B. Sutherland, a company commander of the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment.

For two more hours the repeated Confederate charges were successfully repulsed. On their knees and bellies the black soldiers volleyed the Confederate advances into oblivion. When the ammunition supply became exhausted, Sutherland told his colored troops they would have to save themselves as best they could. Thirty-seven colored troops had been at the hay camp when the engagement started at noon and by that evening only four remained alive. These four colored soldiers had secreted themselves in the prairie grass or in the nearby pools of water which were runoff areas of the Grand River. When darkness came, these four survivors crawled between the Confederate sentries and mounted patrols and wormed their way to Fort Gibson to relate their story.

The Confederates moved about the camp looting and observing their captured prize. The hay—exceeding 3,000 tons—was burned in its ricks. Destroying all they could not use, the Confederate commands of Watie and Gano spent the night at

³⁵ Watie to Cooper, September 23, 1864, Gano to Cooper, September 23, 1864, Watie to Heiston, October 3, 1864, Baker to Adjutant General, September 26, 1864, *Official Records*, I, XL2, Pt. 1, pp. 734, 748-749, 745, 771-772; Hatheway, "Brigadier General Stand Watie, Confederate Guerilla," p. 78; Hatups, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," pp. 119-120; Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, p. 438.

Flat Rock. The next morning, September 17, 1864, the Southern cavalry and infantry units with the artillery sections stationed to the rear formed into column and began their trek anew in a northerly direction.¹⁶

The Federal forces stationed in Indian Territory knew that the large Confederate Force reported in the area was out to break the all-important supply line between Fort Scott, Kansas, and Fort Gibson. Should the Texas Road be effectively blocked for any length of time, Fort Gibson, without a doubt, would fall. Since the experiment with *J. H. Williams* had failed miserably, the only alternative was to keep the Texas Road functioning as a Federal supply line. On September 14, 1864, the entire command of Colonel Williams, the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, was sent to Fort Gibson to ensure that Confederate raiders making sorties through the Cherokee Nation would not break the vital supply artery.¹⁷

By September 14, Major Henry Hopkins, Second Kansas Cavalry Regiment, commander of the supply train then making its way to Fort Gibson, was putting forth every effort to prevent a surprise attack on his little command. On September 17, Major Hopkins was located approximately fifteen miles north of Cabin Creek. He had received an additional one hundred men from Baxter Springs to add to his 260, totaling 360 men, white and Indian. The Federal train, consisting of 300 wagons, 205 of which were government wagons, four ambulances, and ninety sutler wagons, was immense for a military supply convoy. Hopkins received word from Colonel Stephen Wattle, the new commander of Fort Gibson, that a hostile force of more than 1,500 Confederates was headed in his direction and accordingly ordered Hopkins to move his train with all possible dispatch to the safety of the Federal stockade at Cabin Creek.¹⁸

Major Hopkins acted immediately and began moving toward the Union fortification and safety. To increase the speed of the train, the wagons were put into double column formation. Traveling throughout the pre-dawn and early morning, the train covered the fifteen miles to the Cabin Creek stockade in six hours. The train arrived at Cabin Creek at 9:00 a.m. on the morning of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 439-440; Maxey to Boggs, October 7, 1864, Cooper to Scott, September 14, 1864, Cooper to Scott, September 24, 1864, *Official Records*, I, XLI, Pt. 1, pp. 780, 781, 782.

¹⁷ Thayer to Steele, September 8, 1864, Thayer to Wattle, September 14, 1864, Thayer to Wattle, September 18, 1864, *ibid.*, Pt. 3, pp. 106-109, 187-188, 238-239.

¹⁸ Report of Hopkins, September 22, 1864, Gano to Cooper, September 28, 1864, Wattle to Helston, October 3, 1864, Jenkinson to Hampton, September 22, 1864, *ibid.*, Pt. 1, pp. 790-797, 799-790, 786, 772-773; Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, p. 441.

September 18, 1864. Reinforcements were waiting there and with these additional units, the entire escort numbered 150 cavalry and 460 men acting as infantry. Patrolling that same afternoon, the Confederate advance party was sighted in a gully three miles south of the stockade. Instead of waiting for a new day to dawn, the Gano and Watie commands began their attack shortly past midnight. Forming their battle line in the dark, the attack was started with great enthusiasm on the part of the Confederate Indians. General Gano held the Confederate center and right wing of the line, and General Watie fastened down the left section of the battle formation. Furious fire fighting ensued for the duration of the night and extended well into the next morning without a letup. By 9:00 a.m. September 19, the engagement at Cabin Creek was over.

The Federal forces had been, after a tenacious defense, pushed back out of the stockade and finally routed and scattered throughout the woods surrounding the fortification. The retrograde movement, started by the Federal commander, quickly evolved into a race for safety when the wagon teams, composed of both horses and mules, usually six to eight animals per team, began to go berserk and charge aimlessly around as a result of the dirt created by the fighting and discharging of muskets. When the musketry had died down to scattered shots and volleys, the booty left on the field and in the possession of the Confederate forces was enormous. The Confederates had salvaged 130 Federal supply wagons and herded together 740 Union mules and horses suitable for service. Although over one hundred wagons had been burned, the remaining wagons and their cargoes were valued exceeding \$1,500,000. The casualties had been unusually slight for the number of engaged men and the viciousness of the fighting between the rival units. The Confederate loss was no more than forty-five men, killed, wounded, and displaced. The total Federal casualties was not in excess of fifty-four men.¹⁹

By 10:00 a.m. General Gano had all of the captured wagons in line, his men positioned in columns on either side of the wagons and was ready to return to Confederate Indian Territory below the Arkansas River. After moving for an hour, scouts re-

¹⁹ Marvin J. Hancock, "The Second Battle of Cabin Creek, 1864," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXXIX (Winter, 1961-62), pp. 415-418, 420; Report of Hopkins, September 22, 1864. Watie to Helton, October 3, 1864. Gano to Cooper, September 29, 1864. Jonnison to Hampton, September 22, 1864. Watie to Cooper, September 23, 1864. Return of casualties to Gano's brigade, September 19, 1864. Hopkins to Thomas, September 25, 1864. Sykes to Charlot, September 25, 1864. Oliver to Bell, September 25, 1864. Hildebrand to Cooper, September 26, 1864. Mazy to Reggs October 8, 1864, *Official Records*, I, XLI, Pt. 1, pp. 767, 786, 789, 778, 784, 792, 770-771, 764-765, 778, 779, 760; Hanup, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," pp. 129-136; Hathaway, "Brigadier General Stand Watie, Confederate Guerrilla," pp. 78-81.

turned to the Confederate column and reported that a Federal force, a large one, was in front of the Confederate raiders and was at that moment pressing the Confederate advance party. Gano reacted immediately. He ordered his entire command forward, except the security party left with the wagons and retinue. Placing his men in double ranks, Gano massed onto the prairie in such a position that he intercepted the path of the pursuing Federals. Gano, by his show of force and aggressiveness, held the Union relief brigade at a respectable distance.⁴⁹

The advancing Union brigade was commanded by Colonel Williams and his Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, recently changed to the Seventy-Ninth U. S. Colored Troops (new). Williams had crossed Pryor's Creek and his point element had brushed with Confederate General Gano's advance party; the Confederates quickly fell back to warn the recently captured Union supply train. Colonel Williams ordered his command in battle formation of double ranks, with his artillery moved to the rear and flanks. The discipline of the colored regiment and skill in moving from the column formation to the battle line was a sight to behold. Functioning as a well-oiled cog the colored infantry companies smoothly took their respective slots on the combat line. With their Federal colors and standards flashing and flapping in the wind, the line began to advance. Skirmishers moved out ahead of the first line to test the enemy defenses as the main body marched at a slightly slower pace. When in range of the Confederate musketry, the quarter-mile-long blue line was halted and given parade rest. Because of the exhausted condition of his men and a total lack of cavalry, Colonel Williams elected to permit the enemy to approach him. Putting his colored troops at rest, Williams reinforced his skirmishers to the front, moved skirmish elements to secure the flanks and rested his men for the Confederate attack.

The Confederate and Union skirmishing continued until 4:30 p.m. that afternoon when the noise of increased firing and activity from the Southern line told the colored veterans an attack was in the making. Ordering his rear sections of artillery forward, Williams directed them, as well as the artillery sections posted on the flanks, to open fire with shot, shell and canister

⁴⁹ Williams to Haly, September 20, 1864. Gano to Cooper, September 29, 1864. Hilschbrand to Cooper, September 26, 1864. Maxey to Boggs, September 26, 1864. Cooper to Scott, September 24, 1864. Cooper to Scott, September 27, 1864. Cooper to Scott, October 1, 1864. Wattle to Cooper, September 23, 1864. Wattle to Heintzen, October 3, 1864. *Official Records*, I, XLII, 14, 1, pp. 765, 799-791, 779, 782, 783, 778, 784, 787-788; Hancock, "Second Battle of Cabin Creek, 1864," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXXIX, pp. 421-423; Hathaway, "Brigadier General Stand Wattle, Confederate Guerrilla," p. 80; Rupp, "The Twilight of the Confederacy in Indian Territory, 1863-1865," pp. 137-138.

as the enemy infantry came within range. The combined fire of the Federal guns drove back the massed ranks of Confederate troops, showering them with huge clumps of prairie. The Confederates made no further efforts to advance and the skirmishing resumed as the Federal colored scouts began anew their probing of the Southern position, continuing actions until dusk. Colonel Williams bivouacked on the prairie in line of battle to prevent any surprise attack by the Southern units. The next morning, September 20, the Confederate units and all of the captured Federal wagons and valuable supplies were gone, slipping across the Verdigris to the west. During the night the wily Gano and Watie had tricked Williams and his colored regiment. The exhausted condition of Williams's infantry prevented any pursuit of the retreating Confederates.⁴¹

The engagement at Cabin Creek was the last serious employment of the Negro as a fighting man within the confines of Indian Territory. The Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment did not stop serving the trans-Mississippi district as a capable fighting unit, nor did the black enlisted man stop functioning as a Federal combat soldier. Immediately after the Cabin Creek action of September 18, 1864, most of the colored units were transferred out of Indian Territory to adjacent states. The Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment was transferred into the Second Brigade, Frontier Division. Colonel Williams, commanding the brigade, remained in that position for a short time before being transferred again. Colonel Williams was rotated back to direct command of his colored regiment and then the entire unit was sent briefly to Little Rock, Arkansas, and later was sent to a permanent duty station at Fort Smith. The black regiment remained at Fort Smith engaged in heavy escort duty and fatigue calls until it was mustered out by the Federal government on October 30, 1865. It received its final muster pay and was discharged at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.⁴²

The sister regiment to the Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, the Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, officially the Eighty-Third U. S. Colored Troops (new), served most of her remaining active military life as a fighting unit outside the borders of Indian Territory. During the early months of 1865, the Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment did garrison duty in Little Rock, Arkansas. In August the regiment was moved to Camden, Arkansas where it was mustered out, October 9, 1865. Because of the

⁴¹ Wilson, *The Black Phalanx: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1775-1812, 1861-1865*, p. 240.

⁴² Boyd, "The Use of Negro Troops by Kansas During the Civil War," pp. 47-48.

location of the Federal paymaster the unit was again moved, this time to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where it received its severance pay and discharge, October 27, 1865.⁴¹

An accurate and definitive evaluation of the Negro as a soldier in the Civil War is virtually impossible in a project of this size. But a few observations can be made without stepping out of the realm of pure objectivity. The reason for the difficulty in evaluation is because the Negro was not used uniformly by the Union army. Negro units were used in labor battalions, garrison duty, pioneer units, construction gangs and as combat soldiers. Usually the employment of these black soldiers depended on the desires of their commanding general. For the most part, the colored soldier was an integral part of the Union fighting team in the trans-Mississippi West, particularly the Kansas-Arkansas-Indian Territory area. The Kansas First Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment was employed as a separate and independent fighting entity, and on occasion was fused with a larger component for combat missions, such as the Army of the Frontier, in 1863. In both instances this black regiment, and her sister regiment, the Kansas Second Colored Volunteers Infantry Regiment, served with valor and distinction, being specifically praised by their field commanders on several occasions.

While the Negro soldier was helping the Union suppress the rebellion of the Southern states they were also doing great benefit for themselves. It was while the black ex-slaves were in the blue uniform that they learned how to accept the reins of authority and how to properly serve in positions of responsibility and leadership within their regiments, usually as non-commissioned officers. Many Negroes had their first opportunity to learn to read and write while in the Federal armed services. It was not unusual for a white company commander to drill his black recruits in the manual of arms during the work day and drill these same men in their letters at night while off duty.

The fighting ability of the Negro soldier can be demonstrated in one respect by their long casualty list. The losses among black units were very high. It is reported from figures available that out of all the black troops enrolled in the ranks, over one third of these were reported killed in battle. This figure would be higher when applied to the trans-Mississippi West because all the black soldiers in that department were used as combat troops, while most of the colored units east of the Mississippi River were utilized proportionally less as fighting commands. The desertion in the Negro units was also much less than in the white companies. Taken as a whole, the colored units had a

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

seven per cent desertion rate while the overall white desertion figure was nineteen per cent.⁴⁴

One of the most important results of the using of the Negro fighting man was in changing the white man's attitude toward the black man. Doubtless if the Negro had sat on the sidelines of the Civil War the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments would have been a very long time in coming. As it was, the Negro did not sit idly by, letting someone else fight his battles for him. He formed drill units on his own, flocked to the recruiting stations to enlist, and hung on the fringes of the Union armies helping the war effort in every way possible; menial or otherwise. After the Civil War the citizens of the trans-Mississippi West no longer considered the Negro an animate piece of chattel property, but began to think and trust the black Union veteran as a man. The Civil War for the Negro was the stepping stone from slave to citizen, in less than five years. For a decade or two he would be granted wide political, economic, and social opportunities and responsibilities. Though political motives would remove the privileges that attend citizenship, no selfish move could remove the pride the Negro had gained in himself and his race for his part in the Civil War.

⁴⁴ Dudley Taylor Cornish, "Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865," (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, 1949), p. 423.