

BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

The United States Colored Troops (USCT) at the Battle of Fort Blakeley

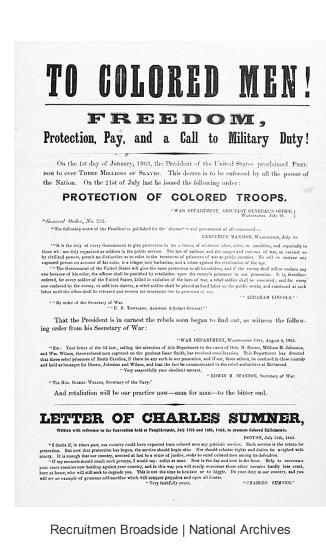
By Mike Bunn, July 10, 2020

blueandgrayeducation.org



The Battle of Fort Blakeley is remembered as the decisive fight in the combined-forces Campaign for Mobile in the spring of 1865. But many people are unaware that the battle featured one of the largest concentrations of African-American soldiers anywhere during the Civil War. Approximately 5,000 troops from nine different regiments—nearly a third of the entire Union force at Blakeley—took part in the siege and assault.

Officially designated at the time as United States Colored Troops, the USCT were regiments of the U.S. Army composed of African-American soldiers. While the majority of the men in the ranks of USCT regiments were former slaves, white officers commanded all units in combat. The Federal government had first authorized acceptance of small numbers black regiments in specific locations in the fall of 1862, but after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, it began actively recruiting African-American soldiers. Organization of these units was overseen by the Bureau of Colored Troops, formed later in 1863, which arranged for the enlistment, outfitting, and training of numerous new black regiments. By April 1865 there were over 180,000 USCT troops in the Federal army, which comprised about 10 percent of its total manpower. USCT regiments participated in most of the major campaigns of the final two years of the Civil War, often being relegated to service as supply and guard details or as manual labor. USCT units did take part in heavy fighting at several notable battles, however, including at Port Hudson, Louisiana; Petersburg, Virginia; and Nashville; in addition to Blakeley.



there from Pensacola as a division of troops led by Gen. Frederick Steele. They were to join other forces under Gen. Edward S. Canby for a move against Mobile. Brig. Gen. John P. Hawkins held overall command of the division, which he organized into three brigades led by Gen. William A. Pile, Col. Hiram Scofield, and Col. Charles W. Drew. USCT units including the 47th, 48th, 50th, 51st, 68th, 73rd, 76th 82nd, and 86th Infantries comprised these brigades. The majority of these men had enlisted in Louisiana, with one unit having formed in Missouri. The USCT division was positioned on

The USCT units at Blakeley marched

besieged Blakeley, a 3-mile-long line of interconnected earthen fortifications anchored at the north and south ends by the Tensaw River. There were nine redoubts, or heavily fortified positions, along this line where men and artillery could be massed. USCT troops were posted in an area fronting Redoubts 1 and 2, the northernmost along the line at Fort Blakeley. As the siege progressed from April 1 to April 8, 1865, Hawkins' men advanced steadily closer to the Confederate position while under fire, ultimately digging multiple lines of trenches and advanced rifle pits where skirmishers could be posted. By the morning of Sunday, April 9, their lines lay

the right flank of the Union army that

within just a few hundred yards of the Confederates, close enough for an overwhelming assault that would end the siege. Federal commanders began planning such an operation that morning with a sense of urgency, as they feared the severely outnumbered garrison might attempt a stealthy withdrawal via the Tensaw River (some 3,500 Confederates were in the trenches at Blakeley attempting to hold off over 16,000 Federals). Such a move would lead to a hollow victory indeed, for it was the Rebel army, not the earthworks they stood behind, the Union army was after. USCT officers volunteered to probe the Confederate left on the afternoon of April 9, 1865, to determine if an evacuation was underway and thereby provide invaluable information to army leadership. Small units became involved in heavy, prolonged skirmishing by early afternoon, not

only confirming the Confederates planned to make as obstinate a defense as possible, but essentially forming the vanguard of the general assault undertaken by the entirety of the besieging army at 5:30 p.m. It was a short but bitter affair, featuring a grand, open-field charge

through a storm of artillery and small arms fire and isolated pockets of fighting all across the 3mile line. By 6:15 p.m. the last shots of the battle had been fired, and Fort Blakeley lay in the possession of the victorious Union Army. During the battle, USCT units captured over 200 men and several pieces of artillery and sustained some of the heaviest casualties of any unit engaged. Over 30 troops were killed and nearly 150 wounded in the assault. USCT units suffered nearly 400 casualties during the entirety of operations. Observers noted the black regiments performed bravely during the assault, with Brig. Gen. Christopher Columbus Andrews writing that "greater gallantry than was shown by officers and men could hardly be desired. The (troops) were burning with an impulse to do honor to their race, and rushed forward with intense enthusiasm, in face of a terrible fire."



act of surrendering during the chaotic last moments of the fight. One Union officer was killed and another wounded by their own men as they attempted to prevent additional shootings. Order was quickly restored, however, and there was no coordinated or sanctioned massacre as some have later alleged. The USCT's participation in the Battle of Fort Blakeley is an important aspect of this forgotten battle. It is also a poignant reminder of the remarkable transition from slavery to freedom made by millions of African-Americans as a result of the war. Historic Blakeley State Park, which

preserves and interprets the story of Fort Blakeley, shares the story of the USCT with its visitors

in its guided tours, cruises, and interpretive signage. It looks forward to developing more educational efforts helping people understand the USCT's pivotal role in the fighting of

Alabama's largest open-field Civil War battle. Adapted from Mike Bunn's forthcoming book, "The Thunder and Lightning of Battle," A Short History and Guide to the



This Civil War Dispatch has been brought to you by the Blue and Gray Education Society, a non-profit 501-3C educational organization. Please visit us at www.blueandgrayeducation.org.

Subscribe to our email list.



Share this email:





Battle of Fort Blakeley."

Manage your preferences | Opt out using TrueRemove® Got this as a forward? Sign up to receive our future emails.

View this email online. P.O. Box 1176

Chatham, VA | 24531 US

This email was sent to .

To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.