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The Buffalo Soldiers

Kennneth E. Hall

Despite the great success of the Civil War epic *Glory*, the story of the black troops during and after the War is not well known. This lack of exposure to popular familiarity is especially true of the Buffalo Soldiers who served on the frontier in the late 19th century, chiefly but not exclusively in the Indian Wars. The Buffalo Soldiers were instrumental in campaigns against the Apaches, the Comanches, and other tribes of the Southwest. They also carried out important duties in non-Indian related enterprises such as the pacification of the area affected by the notorious Lincoln County War, in which Billy the Kid played a famous part.

After the Civil War, Congress authorized the creation of new black regiments. Two new cavalry regiments were formed, both to be commanded by white officers, the Ninth, under Captain Edward Hatch, and the Tenth, under Colonel Benjamin Grierson (Leckie and Leckie 6–8). Soon they were on the Western frontier dealing with Indian disturbances. Here they received from the Plains Indians their nickname of "Buffalo Soldiers":

> The reasons are not entirely known, but Frances Roe, the wife of Lieutenant Washington Roe of the Third Infantry, gave this explanation in correspondence to relatives back east. In June 1873 she wrote from Camp Supply that the Indians called the black soldiers buffalo soldiers because "their wooly heads are so much like the matted cushion that is between the horns of the buffalo." (Leckie and Leckie 26–27)

Whatever the reason for the nickname, it became part of American lore, and the excellent made-for-TV film *Buffalo Soldiers* (Charles Haid, 1997) refers directly to the name's connection with the soldiers' hair.[1] In this case, the explicating reference is made by one of the black soldiers in a self-deprecating fashion. In fact, the film, ably directed by actor-director Charles Haid, cleverly turns the platoon film subgenre on its head. While the platoon film has usually been a "melting-pot" showpiece, demonstrating how several immigrant groups can work together as assimilated Americans,[2] in this case the platoon is only multiethnic because of its command structure – a white commander was requisite – and for one other reason: the presence of a "half-breed" Seminole scout. So, instead of the unit having to learn to work together, the commanders – more than one serves in sequence – and the support personnel must learn to work with a unified platoon.

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[1] A different reason is adduced in Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge*. According to this film, the buffalo coats worn by the soldiers led to the name.

Or at least the platoon appears unified. Underneath the monochrome skin color are very personal concerns and rivalries. The elimination of the usual multiethnic banter and stereotypes allows the film to concentrate on the personalities of the black soldiers and their relationships with the white (and the Indian) world around them. In this sense the scout John Horse (Carl Lumbly)[3] functions as an interface between the two (or three) worlds. Just as the buffalo soldiers must endure racist slurs from some white soldiers, the scout is subjected to prejudice from some of the buffalo soldiers, thus serving as a mirror to reflect their own racism. The leader of the buffalo soldiers is also suspicious of the scout because he seems to have allied himself with the white command structure and particularly with an intolerant commander, General Pike (Tom Bower). John Horse claims that he has allegiance to no particular group, noting that the buffalo soldiers answer to the army while he is a free man. This barb rankles particularly in men who had once been slaves. Additionally, the scout is half-Seminole. This is a significant fact (although the script does not develop the point), as the Seminoles have always claimed to maintain their independence, since they never formally surrendered to the United States.[4] Eventually, John Horse proves himself to the buffalo soldiers as a trusted colleague.

The soldiers' acceptance of the scout accompanies their ambiguous success with Victorio. Rather than kill Victorio and all his people, whom they have surrounded, Sgt. Wyatt decides to let them cross the border into Mexico.[5] Hence, the buffalo soldiers are shown to have chosen a third way of making war, compromising with facts on the ground instead of rigidly adhering to protocol as a white officer might have done. In any event, the buffalo soldiers have discovered themselves, and with this new pride, they return to the fort mounted. Protocol demands that they dismount when passing through the fort in deference to the whites, but Wyatt and his men decide not to do this, and the whites actually honor them.

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[2] See Richard Slotkin, "Unit Pride; Ethnic Platoons and the Myths of American Nationality," *American Literary History* 13.3 (2001): 469–98.

[3] Of Jamaican origin, Lumbly is most well-known as one of the chief colleagues of Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner) on the cult TV series *Alias*.

[4] For the Seminoles, see Thom Hatch, *Osceola and the Great Seminole War: A Struggle for Justice and Freedom* (New York: St. Martin's, 2012).

[5] Victorio was in fact killed in Mexico October 14, 1880, by Mexican troops led by Col. Joaquín Terrazas, following joint actions with United States forces (Leckie and Leckie 231).

Trouble with white officials begins early in the film for the buffalo soldiers. They come upon a village of Apaches held prisoner by some white men who are hanging some of the tribe. As they are about to hang a teenaged Apache, the soldiers intervene. They discover that the whites are Texas Rangers pursuing renegade Victorio. The hangings are essentially the Rangers' method of obtaining information about Victorio. Sgt. Wyatt rescues the boy and arrests the Rangers for murder, taking them back to the fort, where he encounters stiff resistance from the fort commandant, General Pike, and the obviously racist Major Carr (Timothy Busfield), who objects strenuously to blacks having any authority over whites. Usually in Westerns, the Texas Rangers are presented positively, as a force for order on the frontier, and as part of the foundational ethos of the Texas Republic. Even in the more modern-day crime film *Public Enemies* (Michael Mann, 2009) – a Western in more ways than one – Texas lawmen are seen as a support for the activities of the FBI in stopping Dillinger and his gang. As experienced and ruthless lawmen, led by Major Winstead (Stephen Lang), they are more effective in tracking and confronting Dillinger and his men than the agents led by Melvin Purvis (Christian Bale), who requests their assistance. In *Buffalo Soldiers*, however, the Rangers are released and put back on the trail of Victorio, only to be captured, tortured, and killed by him, as Wyatt and his men discover when on patrol. One of the Rangers begs a buffalo soldier to kill him, forgetting *in extremis* his racial prejudices.

One of the white officers in the film who has shown particular empathy for the buffalo soldiers is their commanding officer, Col. Benjamin Grierson. The leader of the famous raid through Mississippi during the Civil War (the basis for Ford's *The Horse Soldiers*), the former music teacher was clearly a natural leader of men and became an accomplished cavalry commander despite an aversion to horses. His perspective on black soldiers was probably not too unusual for the period, but his flexibility about them was: "Although he had expressed prejudice against blacks early in the war, his combat experiences convinced him that African Americans were valiant soldiers worthy of respect" (Leckie and Leckie 7–8). In the film, he is played by the redoubtable Bob Gunton and is shown to be a quizzical, prickly opponent of the intolerant attitudes expressed by his colleague Major Carr and by his commanding officer General Pike.[6] He is shown in one scene directing some of the buffalo soldiers in a Schubert performance. In response to a query about whether or not the performance was voluntary on the part of the buffalo soldiers, Mr. Gunton, an actor who does his historical research, expressed to me his admiration for Grierson:

> "I loved that character ... a true hero of the Civil War, a real citizen soldier, very cultivated and remarkably enlightened for his time and setting. He was a good commander and culturally sophisticated. Of course, the scene you referenced is (most likely) fictional, but we tried to convey that even in the barbaric setting of the Indian wars, both black and white, officer and soldier, could mutually bond in the shared glory of Schubert. Given what I know of Grierson, he would not compel his men but, rather, offer them access to the same solace in music which he sought." (Gunton)

In scenes important to the resolution of the Victorio War, Grierson engages in contentious exchanges with Pike and Carr about command of the buffalo soldiers. Carr does not think that Sgt. Wyatt is qualified to lead the soldiers and insists on commanding one of the troops of the Tenth Regiment. Grierson is put in command of the other. On the expedition to find Victorio, Grierson is wounded and must return to the fort, so that command devolves upon Wyatt.

Wyatt has a somewhat contentious relationship with his friend Corporal Christy (Mykelti Williamson), a repeat troublemaker whose stripes are removed and restored rather frequently. Additionally, he and the other soldiers distrust the scout, whom they see as not only racially suspect but as a kind of mole planted by the white commanders. As the patrol gets closer to Victorio, it comes under fire, and Christy is killed, a convenient plot device to remove a rebellious element from the regiment and to clear the way for a reconciliation between Wyatt and the scout. The thrust in the film is towards assimilation of the buffalo soldiers into the majoritarian white army. For this to be accomplished, dissension within the regiment must be quelled, and the threatening ethnicity of the buffalo soldiers must be made acceptable by the banishing of their mirror-image, Victorio and his band.

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[6] The film pays little attention to the Ninth Cavalry commander, here named Major Carr. In actuality Colonel Edward Hatch was a very capable commander and played an important role in the war against Victorio. Historically Grierson received little credit for his command of the Tenth Cavalry, but the Leckies state that "Grierson's campaign had been a model of its kind and a masterpiece of counter guerrilla warfare," as one might expect from a commander with Grierson's Civil War record. The Leckies observe that "Hatch and Grierson were objects of bitter criticism, and the latter has sometimes been pictured as little more than a buffoon," although this opinion was not shared by the Department commander, Brigadier General John Pope (Leckie and Leckie 232, 55).

The Charge of the Buffalo Soldiers

Like Haid's film, "Incident of the Buffalo Soldier," an episode from the third season (1961) of the popular television series *Rawhide*, deals with the race question, but in a different context. While the Haid film focuses on the conflict between the Buffalo Soldier regiment and the white command structure, as well as the war with the Apache, the TV episode examines the difficulties faced by a black man who does not seem to fit in either society. Corporal Gabe Washington (Woody Strode) is sent to the camp of Rowdy and his trail friend to guide them to the fort where they will sell cattle to the army. From the start, the Corporal is defensive and hostile, suspecting every polite overture from Rowdy as a hypocritical trap. His pride is constantly on display, not allowing him to relax in the white environment. When the men reach the fort, the situation is no better; in fact, it is openly worse, within the Buffalo regiment, where Washington has a reputation as a fighter and troublemaker. He soon gets into a fight with his nemesis Lardface, who tries to kill him. The fight results in the death of Lardface. Washington flees the fort, and a detail is sent to capture him, accompanied by Rowdy, who is riding as a civilian under military command. Eventually, he is captured by Rowdy but escapes, injuring Rowdy in the process. He leaves to run away, muttering that he can't trust anyone, but has a change of heart and comes back to take Rowdy to safety. He is shot dead by one of the white troopers who sees him carrying a rifle and acts under shoot to kill orders.[7] This ending was probably necessary aside from plot considerations because, despite the loosening of the code for films (the famous Hays code, which yielded to self-censorship at the studios),[8] the tendency in 1961 would likely still have been for a murderer to die or to be punished otherwise. In terms of the general thrust of the episode, Washington has to die, or perhaps be locked up, because he can really find no place in either world. The episode is very much of its period, dealing with race in a "controversial" manner, like Martin Ritt's *Edge of the City*, Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *No Way Out*, Robert Wise's *West Side Story*, John Huston's *The Unforgiven*, and John Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge* (in which Strode also appeared).

A little later in the decade, Woody Strode was to appear in Richard Brooks's *The Professionals*, where he forms part of an elite squad tasked with a difficult – and mendacious – rescue over the Mexican border. In fact, he fills the role of the Indian, at least insofar as his contribution to the squad goes – he is an expert archer and tracker – so that, in a cleverly scripted fashion, he is like a Buffalo Soldier turned Apache who fights the Mexicans, blending the roles of the opponents in a film such as *Buffalo Soldiers*. The subject of his race is dealt with quite early in the film and then is no longer an issue, when Mr. Grant (Ralph Bellamy) asks Fardan (Lee Marvin) if he has objections to working with a Negro. Fardan basically ignores the question as if somewhat embarrassed that Grant would even ask such a thing. The exchange should have raised a red flag for Fardan, as it indicates the kind of narrow-minded, bigoted person who tries to hire them – clearly Grant is projecting his own racism onto Fardan. As we have seen, Haid's film does present white racism very clearly, but it also deals with gradations of prejudice and mistrust within the Buffalo Soldiers themselves, including the reactions of some of them towards John Horse.

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[7] This ending to the Washington story, with his death occurring because of a misinterpretation of his intentions, is so similar to the tragic ending of Butch Haynes (Kevin Costner) in Eastwood's *A Perfect World* (1993), where Haynes is killed by an overzealous FBI marksman despite his peaceful intentions, that one might speculate that Eastwood recalled how effective the *Rawhide* ending was and decided to reprise it in his own film years later.

[8] For a brief sketch of early Code history, see Schatz 167.

Strode's substantial role in *Sergeant Rutledge* highlights racial prejudice against a buffalo soldier unjustly accused of terrible crimes. He is reluctant to tell the truth about what happened because he is certain that he will not be believed. Through flashbacks at his trial and the narrative technique of gradual revelation, the truth slowly emerges. Two sympathetic whites assist greatly in this revelation: Lieutenant Cantrell (Jeffrey Hunter), his defense attorney, and Mary Beecher (Constance Towers), an important witness. The Top Sergeant's troop is fiercely loyal to him, and this faith as well as the trust shown him by Cantrell help to carry him through the crisis. Eventually he is acquitted, the crimes having been committed by the camp sutler. In true John Ford style, the film has its share of bibulous officers (the judge [Willis Bouchey] is one of them), gabby wives (led by the incomparable Billie Burke), and beautifully staged and filmed Monument Valley scenes. Like the much later *Buffalo Soldiers*, this film displays the buffalo soldiers as personalities, although it does not dwell on rivalries or discipline problems as does the later film. One of the memorable black characters is Sergeant Skidmore (Juano Hernandez), a man of indeterminate age – over 70, although he is not sure himself – who is the voice of experience and confidence in the troop. He serves as mentor to the white Lt. Cantrell as well as to the younger buffalo soldiers, and despite his lack of formal education, he is very well-spoken and articulate, and possesses an excellent memory, as his scene at the trial demonstrates. Strode was very powerful as the accused officer, breaking into tears as he reveals his great loyalty to the Ninth Cavalry. Strode told an interviewer that on the first take of this scene, he cried unintentionally, or at least excessively for the take:

> And I stood up, and the water started. And I got mad, because I was embarrassed, and I hit the seat and broke the seat in the first scene. And John Ford said, "Woody, that's it. Now hold the tears back. Complete crying is a weakness." And that was in session five hours. (Strode 42)

Strode said of this scene in retrospect:

> I still feel it ... Because it was true. Because at that moment I had never been in the South in my whole life, but I had to become a Southern black, because I'm Western. No white man had kicked me that I couldn't punch back, but I had to become Sergeant Rutledge, and John Ford got it out of me ... I didn't realize what I really had. John Ford saw it in me. (Strode 42)

A lesser-known item in the Ford canon (Manchel), *Sergeant Rutledge* is a fine example of an early 1960s thesis film.

After the end of the 19th century, the Buffalo Soldier units were disbanded, and their contributions were nearly forgotten for a time. Only in the 1950s did interest in blacks in the military reawaken (Leckie and Leckie 282).

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