"I DRILLED THEM WITH CORNSTALKS:" WILLIAM H. SINGLETON, A BLACK SOLDIER'S STORY
TEACHER TOOL 3: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SERVICE IN THE CIVIL WAR

While many Americans are aware of African American involvement in the Vietnam, the Gulf War, and Iraq War, few are aware that African Americans played a vital military role in the struggle to end slavery and to overthrow the Confederacy. Of the black regiments who served in the Union Army, there were nearly 179,000 enlisted men and over 7,100 officers. This figure, of course, does not include men who served by passing as white. According to historian James M. McPherson in his *Marching Toward Freedom: Blacks in the Civil War, 1861-1865*, black troops "fought in 449 engagements, 39 of which were major battles. Approximately 37,000 black men lost their lives for the Union; and 17 black soldiers and four sailors were awarded Congressional Medals of Honor."[1] By the end of the war, black soldiers comprised 10% of the Union forces.

Blacks wanted to fight on the side of the Union Army as soon as the war began, but they were not initially allowed to serve. They were, however, allowed to be in the Union Navy from the beginning of the Civil War and 10,000 African Americans did join. Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass repeatedly urged President Abraham Lincoln to permit black men to enlist in the army. Not willing to accept no for an answer, groups of black volunteers organized themselves and began training in northern and mid-western states, but encountered much opposition from government officials and the white populace. A group of black Home Guards in Cincinnati tried to organize so that they could protect the city, if needed, but they were told by police, "We want you d---d niggers to keep out of this; this is a white man's war."[2] Despite the racism toward blacks who wanted to serve in the Union forces, individuals like William Henry Singleton persevered in their efforts and continued to train black men. Singleton formed a group of 1000 blacks in North Carolina and drilled them "with cornstalks for guns" once a week.

Enslaved men sometimes accompanied slaveholders as they went off to war and worked as their servants, as was the case with William Henry Singleton. There were also many enslaved laborers who worked for the Confederate Army. Confederate leaders briefly considered using African Americans as troops, but decided against it. African American men who escaped from slavery by crossing over battle lines to the Union Army were labeled "contrabands" and were generally put to work for Union troops. Many served as spies and provided useful information to Union military officers unfamiliar with the terrain in which they had to fight. Some enslaved as well as free black people helped Union soldiers caught behind enemy lines, giving them food and helping them to remain safe until they could rejoin the Union forces.

Black men and women often risked their lives to support the Union cause, through bold and daring acts. Robert Smalls, an enslaved steamboat captain, piloted a Confederate steamer, the Planter, past Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor to Union ships that had blockaded the harbor. William Tillman, the black steward and cook of the S. J. Waring, overpowered Confederate privateers who had captured the ship, while it was en route to South America from New York City. The privateers had planned to take the ship to Charleston and to sell Tillman into slavery. Tillman returned the ship to New York where he received a reward for rescuing it.

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[1] James M. McPherson. *Marching Toward Freedom: Blacks in the Civil War, 1861-1865*. (New York: Facts on File, 1994), 90.
[2] Ibid., 6.

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In 1863, the large-scale recruitment of African American troops began. The Corps d'Afrique from New Orleans was formed and General N. P. Banks recruited almost 15,000 troops from Louisiana. These troops were led by white officers, and the pattern of whites leading black troops continued. Robert Gould Shaw, a white man, led black soldiers in the Massachusetts 54th regiment. The 54th regiment performed heroically in a battle on July 18, 1863, spearheading an assault on Fort Wagner near Charleston, South Carolina. Shaw was killed, as were one hundred and sixteen men of the 54th. Over 150 others were wounded or captured. In all there were 272 casualties. The fierceness and valor of the 54th at Fort Wagner was widely publicized and helped create greater public support for black military service.

African American troops who followed the 54th also proved that they could fight as well as any other group of men. The troops won the respect of some military leaders, but there was still racial prejudice. African Americans were paid less than white soldiers and many families of African American men had suffered because they received $10.00 a month and a clothing allowance was taken out of that. White soldiers received $13.00 a month and an additional clothing allowance. It was not until January 6, 1864 that pay for black soldiers was equalized. Few African American men received promotions to commissioned officer ranks higher than lieutenant, and there were no naval officers.

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REFERENCES

McPherson, James. *Marching Toward Freedom: Blacks in the Civil War, 1861-1865*. New York: Facts on File, 1994.

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