Primary Source Adventures: Buffalo Soldiers


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Camping on Patrol

A SCOUT WITH THE BUFFALO-SOLDIERS. 905

Pipes were filled, smoked, and returned to that cavalryman's grip-sack, the boot-leg, and the game progressed until the fire no longer gave sufficient light. Soldiers have no tents in that country, and we rolled ourselves in our blankets and, gazing up, saw the weird figure of the sentinel against the last red gleam of the sunset, and beyond that the great dome of the sky, set with stars. Then we fell asleep.

Water: A buffalo soldier's best friend on patrol in the west.

A SCOUT WITH THE BUFFALO-SOLDIERS.

But for all that Fort Thomas is an awful spot, hotter than any other place on the crust of the earth. The siroccos continually chase each other over the desert, the convalescent wait upon the sick, and the thermometer persistently reposes at the figures 125° F. Soldiers are kept in the Gila Valley posts for only six months at a time before they are relieved, and they count the days.

On the following morning at an early hour we waved adieu to our kind friends and took our way down the valley. I feel enough interested in the discomforts of that march to tell about it, but I find that there are not resources in any vocabulary. If the impression is abroad that a cavalry soldier's life in the South-west has any of the lawn-party element in it, I think the impression could be effaced by doing a march like that. The great clouds of dust choke you and settle over horse, soldier, and accouterments until all local color is lost and black man and white man wear a common hue. The \textit{chug, chug, chug} of your tired horse as he marches along becomes infinitely tiresome,
Cavalry sortie in column


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How a cavalry trooper treats his horse

*A SCOUT WITH THE BUFFALO-SOLDIERS.*

The soldier will steal for his horse, will share his camp bread, and will moisten the horse’s nostrils and lips with the precious water in the canteen. In garrison the troop-horses lead a life of ease and plenty; but it is varied at times by a pursuit of hostiles, when they are forced over the hot sands and up over the perilous mountains all day long, only to see the sun go down with the rider still spurring them on amid the quiet of the long night.

Frederic Remington. “A Scout with the Buffalo-Soldiers”

**A CAMPFIRE SKETCH.**

An illustration of buffalo soldiers around a campfire.
That night we were forced to make a "dry camp"; that is, one where no water is to be found. There is such an amount of misery locked up in the thought of a dry camp that I refuse to dwell upon it. We were glad enough to get upon the trail in the morning, and in time found a nice running mountain-brook. The command wallowed in it. We drank as much as we could hold and then sat down. We arose and drank some more, and yet we drank again, and still once more, until we were literally water-logged.
An illustration of a Comanche warrior

The morale of the buffalo soldiers

The lieutenant and I discussed the climb, and my voice was rather loud in pronouncing it "beastly." My companion gave me no comfort, for he was "a soldier, and unapt to weep," though I thought he might have used his official prerogative to grumble. The negro troopers sat about, their black skins shining with perspiration, and took no interest in the matter in hand. They occupied such time in joking and in merriment as seemed fitted for growling. They may be tired and they may be hungry, but they do not see fit to augment their misery by finding fault with everybody and everything. In this particular they are charming men with whom to serve.

Frederic Remington. "A Scout with the Buffalo-Soldiers"  

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An illustration of an Indian scout with a Buffalo Soldier.

An accident on patrol

In course of time I came up with the command, which had stopped at a ledge so steep that it had daunted even these mountaineers. It was only a hundred-foot drop, and they presently found a place to go down, where, as one soldier suggested, “there is n’t footing for a lizard.” On, on we go, when suddenly with a great crash some sandy ground gives way, and a collection of hoofs, troop-boots, ropes, canteens, and flying stirrups goes rolling over in a cloud of dust and finds a lodgment in the bottom of a dry watercourse. The dust settles and discloses a soldier and his horse. They rise to their feet and appear astonished, but as the soldier mounts and follows on we know he is unhurt.

Frederic Remington. “A Scout with the Buffalo-Soldiers”
Frederic Remington. “The Essentials at Fort Adobe”


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Remington answers the question, “Will they fight?”

As to their bravery, I am often asked, “Will they fight?” That is easily answered. They have fought many, many times. The old sergeant sitting near me, as calm of feature as a bronze statue, once deliberately walked over a Cheyenne rifle-pit and killed his man. One little fellow near him once took charge of a lot of stampeded cavalry-horses when Apache bullets were flying loose and no one knew from what point to expect them next. These little episodes prove the sometimes doubted self-reliance of the negro.