

THE COLORED SOLDIERS by Paul Laurence Dunbar

Dunbar, the first well-known African American poet, wrote this work in 1894. He only lived to be 33, but his prolific work is still considered to be some of the best poetry of his time. He wrote in two different voices – standard English and the dialect of African Americans of the time – and he often focused on the plight of African American before and during the Civil War. As you read “The Colored Soldiers”, note that Dunbar throws some actual history into his ode to the African American fighting man of the Civil War.

There are ten stanzas, or verses, to Dunbar’s work. Briefly describe the main message for each of the ten stanzas in the space below. One sentence per stanza is sufficient. An example is provided – use it as a model!

If the muse were mine to tempt it
And my feeble voice were strong,
If my tongue were trained to measures,
I would sing a stirring song.
I would sing a song heroic
Of those noble sons of Ham,
Of the gallant colored soldiers
Who fought for Uncle Sam!

**If I could, I would
tell the story of the
honorable and brave
USCT**

In the early days you scorned them,
And with many a flip and flout
Said "These battles are the white man's,
And the whites will fight them out."
Up the hills you fought and faltered,
In the vales you strove and bled,
While your ears still heard the thunder
Of the foes' advancing tread.

Then distress fell on the nation,
And the flag was drooping low;
Should the dust pollute your banner?
No! the nation shouted, No!
So when War, in savage triumph,
Spread abroad his funeral pall --
Then you called the colored soldiers,
And they answered to your call.

And like hounds unleashed and eager
For the life blood of the prey,
Spring they forth and bore them bravely
In the thickest of the fray.
And where'er the fight was hottest,
Where the bullets fastest fell,
There they pressed unblanched and fearless
At the very mouth of hell.

Ah, they rallied to the standard
To uphold it by their might;
None were stronger in the labors,
None were braver in the fight.
From the blazing breach of Wagner
To the plains of Olustee,
They were foremost in the fight
Of the battles of the free.

And at Pillow! God have mercy
On the deeds committed there,
And the souls of those poor victims
Sent to Thee without a prayer.
Let the fulness of Thy pity
O'er the hot wrought spirits sway
Of the gallant colored soldiers
Who fell fighting on that day!

Yes, the Blacks enjoy their freedom,
And they won it dearly, too;
For the life blood of their thousands
Did the southern fields bedew.
In the darkness of their bondage,
In the depths of slavery's night,
Their muskets flashed the dawning,
And they fought their way to light.

They were comrades then and brothers.
Are they more or less to-day?
They were good to stop a bullet
And to front the fearful fray.
They were citizens and soldiers,
When rebellion raised its head;
And the traits that made them worthy,--
Ah! those virtues are not dead.

They have shared your nightly vigils,
They have shared your daily toil;
And their blood with yours commingling
Has enriched the Southern soil.
They have slept and marched and suffered
'Neath the same dark skies as you,
They have met as fierce a foeman,
And have been as brave and true.

And their deeds shall find a record
In the registry of Fame;
For their blood has cleansed completely
Every blot of Slavery's shame.
So all honor and all glory
To those noble sons of Ham --
The gallant colored soldiers
Who fought for Uncle Sam!

Sons of Ham – name given to African Americans based on the Bible

Wagner – South Carolina fort and site of the first battle fought by the 54th Massachusetts

Olustee – Florida site of a battle

Pillow – Tennessee battle in which surrendered USCT members were massacred by Confederate troops

THE UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS

Highlight or underline and number EIGHT (8) to TEN (10) essential facts that everyone should know about the USCT

By incorporating the United States Colored Troops (USCT) into the Union Army during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln's administration bolstered its war effort with additional manpower. This revolutionary move strengthened African-American demands for equal rights by giving blacks a chance to prove their courage and patriotism. It also inflamed Confederate racial fears, inspiring a string of atrocities and reprisals that intensified the savagery exhibited by both sides.

When the Civil War began, Lincoln rejected any thought of abolishing slavery or tapping black military assistance. He feared that such policies would alienate the border states, arouse the prejudices of Northern whites, and stiffen Confederate resistance. By the summer of 1862, however, Lincoln had come to realize that one way to weaken an unexpectedly resilient Confederacy was to undermine slavery. He also looked the other way as isolated Union commanders started forming black units to augment their forces in Kansas and occupied portions of Louisiana and South Carolina.

Lincoln inserted a guarded endorsement for arming African Americans in his Emancipation Proclamation, which was broadcast on January 1, 1863. The Union Army soon launched a vigorous recruitment drive that ultimately raised 166 black regiments, 145 of infantry, seven of cavalry, 12 of heavy artillery, one of light artillery, and one of engineers. A total of 7,122 officers and 178,895 enlisted men served in the USCT. More than 80% of the rank and file came from Confederate states, and most were former slaves.

On May 22, 1863, the Union War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops to oversee black recruitment and assemble examining boards to screen applicants for commissions in black regiments. The vast majority of USCT officers were white. Only about 110 African Americans obtained commissions, and more than 70 of them were harassed by their own superiors until they resigned. This surrender to racial prejudice sprang from the recognition that few white Union soldiers would willingly take orders from black officers. Ironically, racially biased officer procurement provided black regiments with a higher quality of leadership than that originally enjoyed by their white counterparts. Ninety percent of the USCT's white officers were combat veterans, and most obtained their commissions after passing rigorous examinations. Because the creation of black regiments increased the likelihood of promotion, white junior officers and enlisted men throughout the Union Army came to accept the experiment as a sensible war measure.

4th USCT Regiment - Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division



Even so, black soldiers encountered discrimination in various forms from the very government they sought to preserve. All black enlisted men, including noncommissioned officers, were paid \$10 a month, \$3 less than white privates. As a further insult, black soldiers had \$3 deducted from their monthly pay to cover the cost of their clothing. Congress voted equal pay for the USCT on June 15, 1864, but the pay increase applied only to men who had been free at the war's start. This petty restriction remained in force until March 3, 1865.

In addition to discrepancies in pay, black soldiers usually had to perform a greater share of fatigue duty than their white comrades. Many Union generals thought USCT units should be used exclusively as labor and garrison battalions. When African-American troops were finally thrust into combat, they often carried inferior weapons. Furthermore, black regiments lost 29,000 dead to disease, nine times as many as perished from wounds and a much higher proportion than the number of white troops who died in Union hospitals. Part of the problem was that Federal commanders tended to assign USCT units to their most unhealthy posts. Regardless of where they served, African-American soldiers had to put up with inferior medical facilities and care.

As if the USCT did not suffer enough slights at the hands of the Union Army, they faced extra peril whenever they met the enemy on the battlefield. Confederate officials warned that captured black soldiers would be re-enslaved or executed and that USCT officers could expect treatment as war criminals for allegedly fomenting servile insurrection. President Lincoln threatened to retaliate against Confederate prisoners of war, which caused authorities at Richmond to back away from their draconian policy. Nevertheless, nothing could stop some Confederate commands from murdering any black Federals who fell into their hands. Atrocities bred reprisals as some USCT regiments refused to spare captured Confederates.

By the end of the Civil War, African Americans composed 12% of the Union Army. They had participated in 41 major battles and 449 smaller actions. Thirty-seven thousand black soldiers died in service. Sixteen received the Medal of Honor, and many others performed unrecognized feats of valor and endurance that contributed to the destruction of the Confederacy.