

Young Readers

The Buffalo Soldiers

Courage Under Fire

Early in 1867 a new breed of soldier was seen on the plains of Kansas. African American men once enslaved in the South and free blacks from the North came west to join six new army regiments. Unofficially, these men became known as “buffalo soldiers.” In Kansas they were put to work guarding travelers on the Santa Fe Trail and construction workers of the Kansas Pacific Railway.

Native Americans nicknamed the black troops “buffalo soldiers.” The buffalo was a sacred animal to the Indians, and the new troops saw this name as quite an honor. The men of the Tenth Cavalry liked it so much that it became the main feature on their regimental emblem.

In 1867 the first outfit of buffalo soldiers, Company A of the Tenth U.S. Cavalry, left Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for the frontier. This company, consisting of just under one hundred men, was stationed at Fort Larned, Kansas. While there they escorted wagons on the Santa Fe Trail and patrolled the area around the fort. Cavalry soldiers were the most mobile troops in the army because they were mounted on horseback. All other troops stationed at Fort Larned were infantry soldiers, who marched on foot. Being the only black troops at the fort, Company A suffered much discrimination: white infantry soldiers were ordered not even to look at Company A as they went through dress parade exercises.

The Tenth Cavalry also served at other Kansas forts. Fort Hays was the home of Company F. Under the command of Captain George Armes, a white officer, this company was the first outfit of Tenth Cavalry soldiers to see combat. In August 1867 thirty-four buffalo soldiers and

two officers held off a party of three hundred Cheyennes in a fight that lasted six hours over a distance of fifteen miles. Sergeant William Christy was the first buffalo soldier to die in combat and the only soldier to die in this skirmish.

A squad of ten men from Company G, also from Fort Hays, were assigned to guard a camp of railroad workers forty-five miles west of the fort. When a Private Randall and four civilians left the camp area, they were attacked by seventy Cheyennes. Sergeant Ed Davis and his buffalo soldiers charged out to assist their comrades. They were able to save two of the civilians and Private Randall.

It was Company H of the Tenth Cavalry, stationed at Fort Wallace, who helped save the command of Major George Forsyth. Under attack by six to seven hundred Cheyennes from September 17 to 25, 1868, Forsyth's fifty men had dug in on a sandy island on the Arikaree River. The men of Company H came to their rescue, saving the command from almost certain death.

Many buffalo soldiers were stationed at Kansas forts during the next several decades. These men were an important part of the army of the West, doing the work of soldiers but receiving very little credit for it. At these isolated Kansas posts, African Americans faced discrimination but proved themselves capable and courageous soldiers.



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Geared Up for a Gallop!

SOLDIERS ON HORSEBACK

A soldier on horseback (cavalry) had to carry all his gear on his horse or himself and yet stay light enough to move quickly and not tire his horse. Below is a picture of a buffalo soldier on horseback. Can you match the following descriptions with the items in the picture?

___ 1. The buffalo soldier wore a tight-fitting blue coat called a **SHELL JACKET**. It had a high collar and was trimmed with yellow; the yellow trim designated cavalry. Made of wool, the jacket came down only to the soldier's waist so it wouldn't get caught on his saddle or his gear.

___ 4. In the soldier's left hand he held the **REINS**, which were attached to the bit inside the horse's mouth. By using the reins the soldier could guide his horse.

___ 5. Over his shoulder the soldier wore a **CARBINE SLING**. This was a leather belt that crossed the chest and went to the opposite hip. The soldier's carbine (his weapon) was hooked onto the sling so if the soldier were thrown from his horse, he would still have his carbine with him.

___ 6. Hanging in front of the saddle was a cloth and leather **FEED BAG** filled with grain. When the soldier stopped to rest and eat, he placed the bag over his horse's mouth and nose so horse and rider could eat at the same time. Cavalry horses could not survive long just eating the wild grasses of the Kansas prairie.

___ 2. Hooked to the soldier's sling was his **CARBINE**, which was a short rifle. This was the buffalo soldier's main weapon. Tenth Cavalry soldiers in Kansas in 1867–1868 carried Spencer repeating carbines.

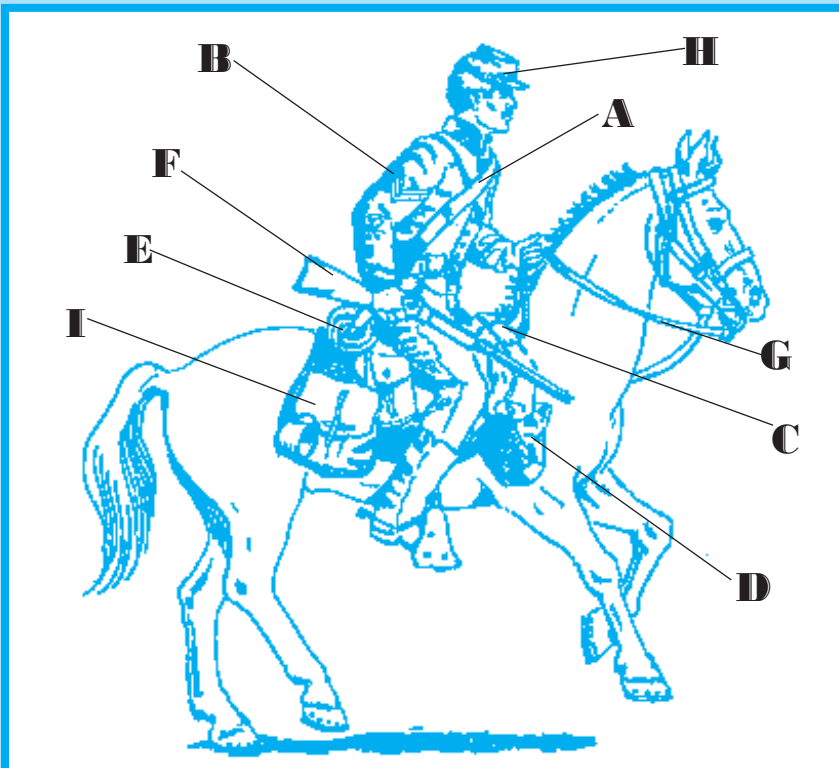
___ 3. The buffalo soldier rolled and tied his **GREAT COAT** to the front of his saddle. In cold or rainy weather he would put it on over his shell jacket. At night it became his pillow.

___ 7. The soldier tied his **BLANKET ROLL** on top of the back of his saddle. Rolled up inside one wool blanket were the soldier's tent (with poles and stakes), a change of clothes, and any personal items he chose to carry.

___ 8. A **HIVERSACK** hung from the back of the saddle. It usually had a tin cup attached to it, and it carried the soldier's food ration and cooking/eating utensils. Inside you might find a small frying pan, a knife and fork, twelve to sixteen ounces of salt pork, twelve hardtack crackers, and coffee beans.

___ 9. On his head the buffalo soldier wore a **FORAGE CAP**. This was mainly made of wool and had a leather visor to shade the soldier's eyes. On top of the cap were three pieces of brass. One was shaped like two sabers (swords) crossing each other. This meant the soldier was in the cavalry. Another piece was the number "10," which identified that the soldier was in the Tenth Cavalry. A letter was also on the cap designating the soldier's company.

Items not seen in this picture, but part of the soldier's standard equipment, are a **CANTEEN**, **SABER**, and **PISTOL**.



ANSWERS
1.B 2.F 3.C 4.G 5.A 6.D 7.E 8.I 9.H

Making Ready for a March!

SOLDIERS ON FOOT

In addition to horse soldiers, black troops also served in the infantry in Kansas. They did not ride horseback, but instead they marched on foot everywhere they went. In 1867 some of these soldiers made up the Thirty-eighth U.S. Infantry, and many were stationed in Kansas at Forts Hays and Wallace. Their main duties were to guard the construction of the Kansas Pacific Railway and to escort traffic on the Smoky Hill Trail until the railroad was completed. Infantry soldiers did not have the luxury of carrying their gear on horseback. They had to carry everything themselves! Below is a drawing of an infantryman. Match the following descriptions with the gear shown in the picture.

___ 1. The soldier on foot wore a blue **SACK COAT**. This wool coat came down slightly below his hip. If the soldier had earned any stripes by being promoted in rank, they would be light blue, the color of the infantry.

___ 2. The **RIFLE** was the infantry soldier's weapon. It was longer and heavier than the cavalry soldier's carbine, but it could shoot farther. The soldier in the picture carries a Springfield Rifle.

___ 3. Like the cavalryman, the infantry soldier also wore a **FORAGE CAP**. On top of the cap was a small brass piece that looked like a hunting horn. Wearing this symbol meant he was in the infantry. The number "38" designated that he was in the Thirty-eighth Infantry. A brass letter identified his company.

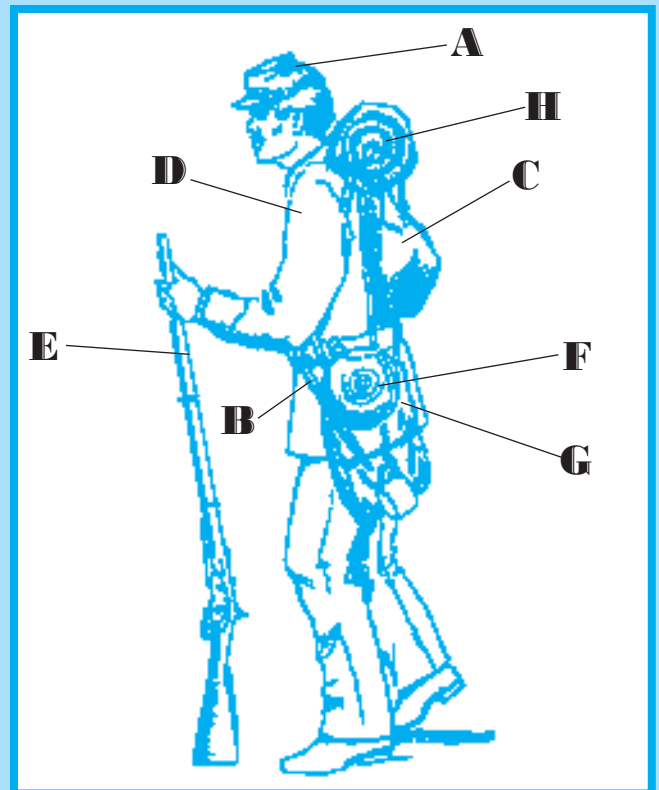
___ 4. Over his hip the soldier carried a **CANTEEN**, which held drinking water.

___ 5. A soldier carried his **KNAPSACK** on his back. Similar to a backpack, it contained a change of clothing and other personal items.

___ 6. A **HAVERSACK** contained the same items as a cavalry soldier's haversack.

___ 7. A **BAYONET** also hung from the soldier's hip in a leather scabbard. This weapon could be attached to the top of the rifle for hand-to-hand fighting. A bayonet was rarely, if ever, used in the West. Instead, it often became a candle holder around the campfire at night.

___ 8. A **BLANKET** was tied on top of the knapsack. Either in the knapsack or in the blanket the soldier carried his tent, poles, and tent pegs.



ANSWERS:
1.D 2.E 3.A 4.F 5.C 6.G 7.B 8.H

Illustrations on pages 15 and 16 are by Phillip R. Burtin, from Dave Webb's *Fort Larned Adventures* (1996).