



The Buffalo Soldiers carved a route
to the summit of Mauna Loa and paved the way
for African-Americans in Hawai'i

Trailblazers

Courtesy Kathryn Waddell Takara

STORY BY KATHRYN WADDELL TAKARA

It is 1915. In a rugged, parched terrain, a work crew labors, clearing a trail. They toil partway up the flank of a massive volcano, breaking lava rock with picks. They angle their mules for protection against the cutting winds and the burning sun. Draw closer and you see

they are all black (except for their white supervisor, who casually leans against a wagon, directing them). The men sing a work song as they hack at the bare lava. Closer still, and you can see that the men wear uniforms. They're soldiers. Buffalo Soldiers.

From 1913 to 1918, the US Army's 25th Negro Infantry Regiment was headquartered in Hawai'i. At that time, just two decades after the overthrow of Queen Lili'uokalani, few in Hawai'i had heard of the Buffalo Soldiers or knew their distinguished history. Even today not



US Army Museum of Hawai'i

much is known about the Buffalo Soldiers' contributions in Hawai'i, and little documentation survives in the state, if it ever existed. We do know that beginning in 1913, they built an 18-mile trail to the summit of Mauna Loa. They also built a cabin so that scientists could spend extended periods of time studying the volcano. The trail and cabin, which are still in use today, are perhaps the only visible signs of the Buffalo Soldiers' presence in Hawai'i.

Even as far back as the War of Independence, black soldiers had served in the military while struggling to overcome prejudice, discrimination and invisibility. Not only did they fight with distinction, they helped open the American West after the Civil War. Yet their contributions often appear as little more than marginalia in the annals of military history.

“Buffalo Soldier,” a phrase made world famous by Bob Marley's song, is a term for any black soldier who served in the segregated troops from just after the Civil War until the integration of the armed forces during the Korean War. They served primarily in the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry divisions, fighting in numerous wars including the Civil War, the Indian Wars and in the Spanish-American conflicts in both the Caribbean and the Pacific.

Some were sent west (sometimes transported in cattle and freight cars because blacks were banned from traveling in passenger cars) to carry out work considered too menial or laborious for whites. With secondhand, obsolete equipment and horses rejected by the white cavalry also

stationed on the frontier, they built roads and outposts, escorted wagon trains, monitored watering holes, safeguarded railroad crews and constructed telegraph lines. They secured the Mexican and Canadian borders, defending white settlers from marauders and bandits. They patrolled, protected and sometimes subdued ninety-nine Native American tribes scattered over the thousands of miles between Montana, the Dakotas and Mexico.

It was after skirmishing with the black troops that one of those tribes, the Cheyenne, dubbed them “Buffalo Soldiers.” Many black soldiers had “wooly” hair and dark skin like the buffalo, but the name also connoted courage, spirit and fighting prowess. The name, which caught on with other Plains tribes, was considered an honor: Buffalo were sacred to the Native Americans. Though they often fought with the tribes, the Buffalo Soldiers also enjoyed a respectful relationship with them, learning how to survive the harsh winters; how to use buffalo for food, clothing and shelter; how to scout. Some Native Americans became guides for the black soldiers and taught them their guerrilla combat style and their stealth and skill on horseback.

With their distinguished performance in harsh conditions, the Buffalo Soldiers challenged racial stereotypes; for example, they debunked the myth that blacks could not survive in extreme cold climates. Again and again, black soldiers performed admirably under difficult circumstances, exceeding expectations. It is not surprising, then, that they were tapped to build an 18-mile trail up a barren volcano.

When the Buffalo Soldiers arrived in Hawai'i in 1913, no one had yet written a history of blacks in the Islands. The soldiers probably had not heard of Anthony Allen, the ex-slave who arrived on a whaling ship more than a century earlier and settled in Hawai'i, becoming a successful entrepreneur and an informal adviser to King Kamehameha I. Allen built a hospital for sailors as well as the first carriage road into Mānoa Valley. Nor would they have known of Betsy Stockton, a black missionary, teacher and ex-slave who arrived in the Islands in 1823. She established the first school on Maui for Hawaiian commoners. The Buffalo Soldiers in Hawai'i probably weren't aware that Honolulu once had a small but vibrant community of black businessmen, many of them musicians who played in King Kamehameha's band before the Civil War. Most of those men married Hawaiian women, had children and blended into the community after a couple of generations.

It's unfortunate but perhaps not surprising, then, that when the black soldiers of the 25th Infantry arrived in the Territory of Hawai'i, they encountered hostility and Jim Crow attitudes—even though they'd fought with distinction in the Philippines and with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders in Cuba. Even other minority groups had more privileges than blacks; the census classified Portuguese and Puerto Ricans as white for election purposes and special status. By 1918 the Selective Service classified Native Hawaiians as white for the WWI draft. But the black soldiers were tough men who were used to segregation, poor living conditions, dangerous assignments and hostile environments.

About 800 black soldiers settled in at Schofield Barracks (named for Lt. Gen. John McAllister Schofield, whose younger brother, Maj. George Wheeler Schofield, had commanded the all-black 10th Cavalry in the Indian Wars and had led them against the Mexicans in a border skirmish in 1875). Lt. Gen. Schofield was a friend of Hawai'i businessman Lorrin A. Thurston, who in turn was a friend of the famous volcanologist Thomas Augustus Jaggar, founder of the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory. Jaggar had tried to lead several expeditions to the top of Mauna Loa in 1914 but was unsuccessful due to the elevation (13,678 feet) and the harsh conditions: rough lava, violent winds, noxious fumes, shifting weather, extreme temperatures and a lack of shelter, water

Dr. William H. Waddell (opening spread) was one of the last living Buffalo Soldiers; he died last year at the age of 98 in his home on O'ahu. In the five years the Buffalo Soldiers were in Hawai'i, they won over the local population with their precision marching in parades (like the one on the previous page in downtown Honolulu), and with their talented baseball team, pictured here in 1915.



Hawai'i State Archives

and food. The ancient 34-mile 'Ainapō Trail was in poor condition, unsuitable for transporting cumbersome scientific equipment. So, Thurston asked the military to build a better trail and campsites in the desert of Mauna Loa. Who better than the Buffalo Soldiers, who had already built trails through the difficult terrain of the high Sierra, in Yosemite and Sequoia national parks?

In October 1915, about sixty black soldiers in Company E shipped out for Hilo. They set up camp near Volcano House among the mist-hung 'ōhi'a forests. In a little more than two months, Company E completed the Mauna Loa trail and built the ten-man Red Hill Cabin and a twelve-horse stable. Of their work on the mountain and the hardships they endured, no record—either photographic or written—has yet been discovered. Only a cabin, a stable and a trail winding silently up to a summit survive.

But one account of the soldiers' experience in Hawai'i does exist. In 1917, two years after the project's completion, George Schuyler, a famous black writer of the Harlem and Chicago Renaissance who served in the 25th Infantry at Schofield, returned to the Big Island. He recorded the soldiers' fascination at the strange volcanic landscapes they encountered. "H Company spent a pleasant week on the island of Hawaii, camped in a barrack on the rim of the Kilauea volcano. We traveled by inter-island steamer to Hilo, then by wide-gauge railroad to the railhead at the foot of Mauna Loa mountain, the twin of Mauna Kea, and from thence we

hiked up to the 4,000 foot plateau where the fiery crater of Halemaumau was inside the Kilauea volcano. We passed through the fantastic fern forest, saw the gardens where Russians raised strawberries as large as crab apples in steamheated soil, visited the petrified forest and went over the whole volcano area. We journeyed through the Devil's Throat connecting two small volcanoes, scrambled the 900 feet to the bottom of the crater, Kilauea-Iki, which was as flat as a tennis court, sweated in Pele's bathhouse, a deep cave in which volcano steam rose every fifteen or twenty minutes."

By the time Company E returned to Honolulu from Mauna Loa, the local community's attitudes about the Buffalo Soldiers had begun to change. Crowds started showing up to support the black soldiers: In the military band their musical talents were admired, their precision marching attracted spectators and their baseball team was reputed to be one of the best in the nation. Before departing the Islands in 1918 for reassignment in Arizona, some of the soldiers of the 25th served in the honor guard at Queen Lili'uokalani's funeral.

It would be decades before black soldiers in Hawai'i regained the acceptance of the Island community. In the years after 1918, when Jim Crow laws ensured segregation, many Buffalo Soldiers coming through Hawai'i on their way to the Philippines experienced blatant discrimination. At the outbreak of WWII, there was a mass movement to keep a black

labor battalion of 600 men out of Hawai'i. During the war, several thousand black military and civilians came to the Islands to help with the war effort, but most facilities off base were closed to blacks, even in Waikiki. After the world wars, a few black soldiers stayed on in Hawai'i and helped to slowly dispel negative stereotypes as they assimilated into the local communities, mostly on the Leeward coast of O'ahu. Their work to overcome more than a century of racism in Hawai'i continues to this day.

In 1972 a former Buffalo Soldier named William Waddell retired in Honolulu with his wife. He had distinguished himself as the first black veterinarian to graduate and pass the Pennsylvania state board exam in 1935. He had co-founded the School of Veterinary Medicine at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he worked with George Washington Carver on peanut research and oil therapy. He joined the Reserves and served in the 9th Cavalry. After the death of his wife, he moved to Ka'a'awa, on the Windward side of O'ahu, where he happily spent the remaining eighteen years of his life with his family. Dr. William H. Waddell, one of the last living Buffalo Soldiers, was my father.

While living in Hawai'i, he maintained his connection with the 25th Infantry (now integrated) and was often invited to speak at ceremonies at Schofield Barracks. Until three months before his death in January 2007, at the age of 98, he continued to address military audiences with words of courage, patriotism and hope. He told riveting stories of his days on the Mexican border, and of his adventures in North Africa and Italy, where he was the veterinarian responsible for the care of 10,000 horses and mules. He accepted the military's invitations to speak even when he could no longer walk. After his speeches, he would treat his escorts to lunch at the Crouching Lion Inn, where he was a welcome icon.

My father was a humanist who challenged injustice and believed that through service to his country, he could gain acceptance for himself and others. He opened doors for minorities in federal hiring, promotions, housing, education and science. He was both an inheritor and a torchbearer of the legacy of the Buffalo Soldiers: He and all the others excelled in the face of overwhelming odds to blaze a trail to the summit ... for anyone who might come after. **HH**