

The Twenty-second United States Colored Infantry

“Excellent Discipline and Good Soldierly Qualities”

The Twenty-second USCI was organized at Camp William Penn, outside Philadelphia, in January of 1864. With 681 Jerseyans on its rolls, the Twenty-second was the most “Jersey” of all USCT outfits. The regiment, under the command of Colonel Joseph B Kiddoo, left Philadelphia for Virginia at the end of January and was initially stationed at Yorktown, where it joined the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth USCI and a number of white soldiers in a Federal enclave within striking distance of Richmond. For the next month the regiment drilled, trained and worked on fortifications.

On February 26, 1864, the black Jerseymen of the Twenty-second were deployed on picket duty near Fort Magruder at Williamsburg, keeping company with the ghosts of the white Jerseyans of the Second New Jersey Brigade who had been killed there in a bloody encounter in May 1862. The regiment often marched through Williamsburg, a far cry from the prime tourist destination it is today. An officer from the Sixth USCI reported that the nondescript and seedy former Virginia capital was “a half mile long and seemed to have only one street.” When a black regiment swung through town, with fifes shrilling and drums tapping, however, that street magically came to life, lined with cheering and dancing local African-American civilians.ⁱ

In March 1864, the Twenty-second played a support role in a plan advanced by a fellow Jerseyan, self-promoting and bombastic Brigadier General Judson Kilpatrick of Sussex County. Kilpatrick proposed leading his cavalry division in a raid on Richmond to liberate Union prisoners of war. The raid, which many senior officers thought a harebrained scheme, originated within the Army of the Potomac’s lines in northern Virginia and was supposed to come to a successful end within the Federal lines at Yorktown.

Unfortunately, mismanagement, bad luck, and the near impossibility of the task resulted in operational failure. On March 1, as the raiders turned away from the Confederate capital, the Twenty-second and two other black infantry regiments began a thirty-three mile march down a muddy road in rain and snow to meet them. Although the black troops “plunged knee deep in mud and water, still not one man murmured nor complained.” The following day the regiment reached Baltimore Crossroads, sixteen miles from Richmond, linked up with Kilpatrick’s sodden and demoralized horse soldiers and escorted them back to Yorktown. One veteran officer in the Twenty-second was deeply impressed by the regiment’s hard marching under horrible conditions. Noting that not a single man fell out on the march, he wrote “I wish I could tell all our ‘Anti-colored soldiers’ friends at home something of the haughty, proud doggedness, with which these brave fellows marched thought mud cold and rain, and some of them almost bare footed as their shoes were literally torn apart by the thick clay....” Following the Kilpatrick disaster, the Twenty-second returned to drilling and digging, and conducted several reconnaissance missions to show the flag in surrounding King and Queen County and Mathews and Middlesex Counties.ⁱⁱ

In early May, the regiment was assigned to Colonel Samuel A. Duncan’s brigade of Brigadier General Edward W. Hinks’ Division, an entirely USCT organization. Hinks’ division was attached to Major General Benjamin Butler’s Army of the James, a force created in April 1864 in the Union controlled area surrounding Yorktown and Williamsburg and named after the nearby James River. Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant ordered Butler’s new army to threaten the Confederate capital and draw troops away from General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern

Virginia, in coordination with the Army of the Potomac's massive thrust southward from the Rapidan River line in May, 1864.

On May 5 the Army of the James sailed up the James to Bermuda Hundred, a peninsula between its namesake and the Appomattox River. The Twenty-second was the first Federal regiment to land at Wilson's Wharf, where it spent the next month constructing fortifications and providing security for other Union forces operating along the James. While serving on the James line, the men of the Twenty-second got a chance to use their Springfield rifle muskets on the enemy, decisively repulsing Confederate cavalry probes in several skirmishes. General Hinks was impressed by the regiment's performance and commended Colonel Kiddoo, who he believed "well prepared for any attack of the enemy, and equal to any emergency that is likely to occur at that point."ⁱⁱⁱ

General Butler's operations against Richmond failed when his white troops, including the Ninth New Jersey Infantry, were defeated at Drewry's Bluff in May. Following that debacle, the Army of the James withdrew entirely into Bermuda Hundred where, according to General Grant, it was effectively "bottled up." Butler's army was ordered back into action in support of the Army of the Potomac on June 13, however, as that force moved south from Cold Harbor to cross the James and outflank the Army of Northern Virginia.

On June 15, 1864, the Twenty-second and its division, attached to the Eighteenth Army Corps, advanced on the outer defenses of Petersburg, a vital rail center south of Richmond. That morning the black Jerseyans, supported by the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth USCI, successfully overran a Confederate forward trench line at Baylor's Farm and their regiment suffered its first combat casualties of the war. Although a member of the African-American Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry alleged that his unit broke the enemy line, Sergeant Major Christian A. Fleetwood of the Fourth USCI later set the record straight in the *Anglo-African* newspaper. Fleetwood wrote the home folks "it was the 22nd U. S. Colored Troops that took the work when we fell back, and not the 5th Cavalry."^{iv}

At around 11:00 AM, the white troops of the Eighteenth Corps and the black soldiers of Hinks' Division came up against "the Dimmock Line," a series of impressive earthworks surrounding Petersburg and built by slave labor under the direction of Confederate Engineer Captain Charles H. Dimmock in 1862. The line was manned by a little more than 4,000 men, half of them local militia, as compared to Eighteenth Corps commander Major General William F. "Baldy" Smith's 14,000 man Union force. In the first of a series of delays, however, Smith halted the advance until he could complete a personal reconnaissance of the enemy position, a task that took him the rest of the day. As Smith reviewed his options, his men lay under an enemy artillery barrage with little cover available, taking casualties.^v

General Smith, whose specialty was military engineering, eventually perceived that the enemy defenses, although inherently strong, were undermanned, and ordered an all out attack all along the line. The Twenty-second was assigned to take Battery Number Seven, a position defended by both artillery and infantry. The regiment was deployed with the First and Fourth USCI on its flanks and the Fifth and Sixth USCI in support. Other USCI units prepared to attack further to the right, with the Eighteenth Corps' white soldiers assaulting the Rebels still further to the right.^{vi}

At sunset, half the Twenty-second, deployed in a loose "skirmish" formation to lessen casualties, circled to the left and infiltrated the Rebel rear through a gap in the defenses. The regiment's remaining men, also in a looser than usual formation to limit casualties from artillery fire, sprinted for the Confederate fort as fast as they could to get "under the guns" where the

enemy artillery barrels could not be depressed enough to hit them. When they arrived at the fort, they found their skirmishers already in possession.

The black Jerseymen immediately began to take fire from nearby Battery Number Eight, however. Colonel Kiddoo quickly rallied his men and ordered another charge. In an ad hoc attack formation, Captain Albert Janes led Company A, followed by the rest of the regiment, toward the Rebel position through a narrow swampy ravine swept by “a storm of leaden hail” and up a fifty degree hill obstructed by brush and cut down tree *abatis*. The Twenty-second’s color sergeant, James Woby of Allentown, miraculously unhit in a blizzard of Rebel bullets, led the assault, spinning around and waving his flag to encourage his comrades until the black tide rolled, shooting and stabbing, over the Rebel earthworks. According to Kiddoo, his men faltered once under the heavy fire, but “seeing their colors on the opposite side of the ravine, pushed rapidly up” after Woby. The enemy beat a rapid retreat, leaving their dead and the fort and its guns to the bloodied and battered New Jerseyans. Captain Janes, who lost five men killed and nine wounded out of the seventy-eight he took into combat, was fired up with the frenzy of the fight. The captain wrote home that evening, after the whole Rebel defensive line crumbled following the Twenty-second’s break through, that his men were “going to whip these rebs beautifully soon.”^{vii}

The regiment left a total trail of eleven dead and forty-three wounded soldiers on its way to victory at Batteries Number Seven and Eight. Among the dead were Jerseymen Henry Brooks, Henry Johnson, Charles H. Conover, William Davis, William Grant, Thomas Price and Charles Young. One black sergeant was found alongside a Rebel sergeant -- the two had bayoneted each other to death. The Twenty-second’s total casualty list that day was 143 men killed and wounded. In his report, Colonel Duncan praised the “men of the Twenty-second Regiment,” noting that “to this regiment belongs the chief credit of this affair.” A white reporter who witnessed the attack wrote, “the colored troops...won for themselves a fame which will have a record among the many splendid achievements of the Union army.”^{viii}

White soldiers stationed at the nearby Union Fort Pocohontas quickly heard of the success and, no doubt inspired by the tales of proud black soldiers who had bested the Rebels in their first real fight, reported it to white folks at home. One, Private Isaac P. Farmer of the 143rd Ohio National Guard Infantry, advised his local newspaper that:

The infantry fighting was done principally by the black troops... Men who were in the fight told me that they charged several times to the mouths of the cannon in a Rebel fort and had to fall back. At the fifth charge they carried the works. The fort was in plain view of where I stood and I watched the volumes of white smoke it belched forth all day. The last charge was made after dark and during the time the sides of the fort seemed to be a sheet of flame. In five minutes all was dark and silent. The blacks had carried the works and a well credited camp report says that its garrison, over 200 in number, shared the fate of the garrison of Fort Pillow.^{ix}

Farmer’s reference to the Fort Pillow massacre of April 12, 1864, in which a large number of black Union soldiers had been killed by Confederates after the Tennessee fort’s surrender, is of interest. There is no doubt that USCT troops used the Fort Pillow incident as an angry battle cry for the rest of the war, and Captain Albert R. Arter of the 143rd, another white

Union soldier relating the story of the June 15 fight, escalated the number of Confederates allegedly killed in retaliation at Petersburg as he described the attack:

...Rebs yelling to them to come on and they would make another Fort Pillow case. the Blacks could not see it that way. on the taking of the fort the Blacks murderd every Reb that was left supposing to be some 4 or 5 hundred. I saw and talked with quite a number of blacks that was in that engagement they say when they took the fort the Rebs begged of them to spare their lives but their orders was to remember Fort Pillow. and that was the way they remembered it.^x

While both of these accounts describe what can only be described as a retaliatory massacre of Confederate defenders, there is no corroborating evidence such an incident occurred. Some defenders were killed or captured in the fighting, but most of them fled. No doubt rocketing morale, enthusiasm and the sweetness of success led to exaggeration on the parts of both black soldiers describing the attack and white soldiers who were passing the stories on based on a "camp report." In addition, the men who relayed the story were not seasoned soldiers. They were both members of a regiment enlisted for 100 days of emergency service. An army thrives on rumors, and green troops are more susceptible than most.

The ultimate Union failure to capture Petersburg on June 15 did not rest on the hard fighting men of the Twenty-second and the rest of the USCT Division, who had performed extremely well in their first major battle. Unfortunately, General Smith threw away the advantage his soldiers gave him by halting the attack short of complete success. Smith's delay gave the Confederates time to rush reinforcements to Petersburg. Despite an attempt to explain his failure to follow through with an implicitly racist and totally untrue claim that his black soldiers "could barely be kept in order" following the evening attack of June 15, Smith was relieved from command and sidelined for the rest of the war.

After the Yankee commander snatched stalemate from the jaws of victory, Confederate reinforcements poured into Petersburg, and Union forces under the overall command of General Grant settled down opposite them in siege lines that soon extended from the "Cockade City" to Richmond. As summer slipped into autumn, the Jerseymen of the Twenty-second endured the dreary danger of siege warfare, living a subterranean life sloshing through foul smelling muddy trenches and dodging sniper bullets.

In a series of operations over the next ten months, Grant lengthened and thus weakened the Confederate lines by threatening the flanks of the defense. One of these operations, launched in late September, was also intended to prevent the Rebels from sending reinforcements to the Shenandoah Valley, where the First New Jersey Brigade and the rest of Union Major General Philip Sheridan's army was battling Confederate Major General Jubal Early's forces. The move got the men of the Twenty-second out of their trenches and on the march towards New Market Heights and Richmond. The Confederate defenses on the Heights had been attacked twice before by white troops, who failed to capture them. This time General Butler decided to give his black soldiers a chance.

When the African-American division advanced on the strong Confederate defenses at New Market Heights on September 29, 1864, the Twenty-second, led that day by Major J. B. Cook, was deployed on the left flank of the division. The initial assault was conducted by the

Fourth and Sixth USCI. Despite almost superhuman efforts to capture the defensive works, both regiments were halted and then driven back by heavy enemy fire.

The men of the Fifth, Thirty-sixth and Thirty-eighth USCI were ordered to make a second attack, which also stalled and devolved into a small arms slugfest mere yards from the enemy fortifications. As some of the Rebels left to rush westward to stop another Yankee breakthrough, however, the black brigade rallied and surged into the enemy works, with four of its companies, all of their white officers down, commanded by black sergeants. The Twenty-second, forcing its way through thickets and a swamp under heavy fire, pushed forward as well, reaching the New Market Road behind the first line of Confederate trenches as the defense collapsed.

As the remaining Rebels broke and ran, the black Jerseymen wheeled left and cleared the road, sweeping fleeing Confederates before them. In later fighting, the soldiers of the Twenty-second repulsed a Rebel counterattack and chased an Alabama regiment back to a second enemy line, holding their own against four Confederate regiments in a hot firefight before withdrawing in good order. The little victory did not come without cost, however. The Twenty-second lost six men killed in action and sixty-eight wounded. Among the dead were Privates Joseph H. Brown and Robert C. Goldsborough, both Jerseymen.^{xi}

October 27, 1864 found the soldiers of the Twenty-second on the grounds of the 1862 battle of Fair Oaks, with the Army of the James' Tenth Corps ordered to press the Confederate positions while the Eighteenth Corps attempted to outflank them. Both Union corps included USCI units. Major General Godfrey Weitzel, commanding the Eighteenth Corps, with which the Twenty-second marched, moved slowly and deliberately over some rough terrain, concerned that he might be cut off himself. Although he actually reached the far end of the Confederate lines, Weitzel failed to exploit his advantage.

Detached for a reconnaissance in force, the Twenty-second, along with the First and Thirty-seventh USCI, all under the command of Colonel John H. Holman, encountered a dismounted Confederate cavalry unit dug into defensive positions along the Williamsburg Road. Ordered to attack alongside the First, the Twenty-second almost lost its reputation as a crack fighting outfit when Colonel Kiddoo led it in the wrong direction. Seven of Kiddoo's officers later alleged that the colonel, whose mood that day fluctuated between elation and panic, was drunk and alleged that his confusing orders that day were "the sublime views and plans of a whisky-crazed brain." The confusion in the regiment's ranks was exacerbated when Kiddoo was badly wounded, and compounded by the fact that it had been sent into action with a number of new, barely trained recruits who panicked when they received flanking fire from Confederate skirmishers.^{xii}

Although most of the Twenty-second's bewildered troops stood fast or fell back, those soldiers closest to the First USCI, including Captain Janes' crack Company A, charged alongside that regiment. The little force overran the Rebel earthworks, captured several artillery pieces and managed to disable them, but was driven back as Rebel reinforcements launched a counterattack. The men of the Twenty-second who got into the fight at Fair Oaks fully sustained their regiment's reputation. John Loveday, the Jerseyman first sergeant of Company A, refused attention when badly wounded, instead urging his men forward in the attack. Colorbearer Corporal Nathan Stanton was another heroic Jerseyman who, although wounded, continued to carry a regimental flag. Yet another New Jersey soldier, First Sergeant William F. Robinson of Company E, was cited by his brigade commander as "especially distinguished for gallant conduct." The regiment lost one officer and four men killed and forty-four men wounded.^{xiii}

After another tentative attack, Weitzel ordered a retreat, and the Jerseymen slipped and slogged through rain and mud back to their starting point. In the words of one junior officer present, the whole movement turned into a “grand fizzle.”^{xiv}

By November 4, the Twenty-second was skirmishing again in the vicinity of Chaffin’s Farm. In December 1864, the regiment was assigned to the newly formed Twenty-fifth Corps, the only all black army corps in United States military history. From then through April, the soldiers of the Twenty-second remained in the trenches before Richmond, dodging bullets and shells and fighting lice and rats as well as Rebels. In February the regiment, recovering from the trials of the fall campaign, well drilled and disciplined, and brigaded with the Thirty-sixth, Thirty-eighth and 118th USCI under the overall command of Brigadier General Alonzo G. Draper, marched in review and conducted a complicated series of drills before its commanders. African-American war correspondent Thomas Morris Chester was thrilled by the sight and took the occasion to refer to the Twenty-second as “among the best in the service.”^{xv}

With spring 1865 came the final Union push on the Richmond-Petersburg line, which cracked on April 2. As the Confederates fled Richmond on April 3, elements of the Twenty-fifth Corps marched into the former Confederate capital. Trudging along in the wake of the African-American horse soldiers of the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry, who dashed through the streets of Richmond singing “John Brown’s Body” at the top of their lungs, the black Jerseymen of the Twenty-second were among the first foot soldiers to enter the city. They were put to work immediately extinguishing fires set by retreating Confederates.

After General Robert E. Lee’s April 9 surrender at Appomattox and the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, the Twenty-second, chosen “on account of its excellent discipline and good soldierly qualities” was ordered to Washington to participate in Abraham Lincoln’s funeral procession. Following the funeral, the regiment was deployed along the Potomac River and Maryland’s Eastern Shore as the army hunted John Wilkes Booth and his co-conspirators. Color Sergeant Woby remembered that “the men of the regiment were extended out in a long line with a space of several yards between each other, and that the country and buildings were thoroughly searched.” With Booth’s capture and death, the men of the Twenty-second no doubt thought their war was over. Unfortunately, there was yet another dirty job to do for the black soldiers of the Twenty-fifth Corps.^{xvi}

During the Civil War French Emperor Napoleon III had invaded Mexico to install the “Emperor” Maximilian and then prop up his unpopular government. Preoccupied with its own problems, the United States government had largely ignored this blatant violation of the Monroe Doctrine. With the end of the conflict, however, Washington turned its attention, and a part of its army, towards Mexico. Thousands of troops, among them the men of the Twenty-fifth Corps, were soon on their way to Texas. This force served to intimidate the French in Mexico, as well as occupy and pacify the former Confederate state. After landing in Texas, the Twenty-fifth patrolled the border along the Rio Grande River until October 1865, when the regiment returned to Philadelphia and was mustered out of service.

Although in combat less than a year, the Twenty-second USCI lost two officers and seventy enlisted men killed in action or mortally wounded. One officer and 144 enlisted men died of disease.^{xvii}

ⁱ Quoted in Paradis, *Strike the Blow for Freedom*. p. 41.

ⁱⁱ *Newark Advertiser*, March 15, 1864.

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- iii *OR*, Ser. I., Vol. XXXVI, Pt. 2, p. 167.
- iv Quoted in Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, p. 222.
- v Earl J. Hess, *In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications & Confederate Defeat* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 19.
- vi Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, p. 223.
- vii James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), pp. 228-229; "A Colored Civil War Vet," *Allentown Messenger*, January 28, 1915. At the time of the writing, the then seventy-seven year old Sergeant Woby was described as the town's "oldest colored resident." After the war he became a teamster, at one point hauling merchandise from Branchport to Ocean Grove. He later worked for many years as the driver of the Allentown mail stagecoach. *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. XL, Pt. 1, p. 725; Albert Janes to "Friend Lizzie," September 11, 1864, Hattie Burleigh Papers, USAMHI.
- viii Binder, "Pennsylvania Negro Regiments," p. 411. Binder does not mention the proportion of Jersey men in these regiments. Stryker, *Officers and Men*, pp. 1508, 1510, 1512, 1514, 1516, 1519; *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. LI, Pt. 1, 267; quoted in Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, p. 227.
- ix I[saac] P. Farmer to the *The Buckeye State*, July 7, 1864, <http://www.fortpocahontas.org/>
- x A[lbert] R. Arter to "Dear Father," <http://www.fortpocahontas.org/>
- xi *OR*, Series I, vol. 42, Pt. 1, pp. 817-818; Blackett, *Chester*, p. 151; Stryker, *Officers and Men*, p. 1518.
- xii *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. p. 42, Pt. 1, pp. 815-816, Pt. 3, pp. 762-764; Blackett, *Chester*, p. 179. Kiddoo had been in the army since April 1861, and had an outstanding record, but his combat tolerance may have about run out. Their superiors, who expressed utmost confidence in Kiddoo, disregarded the complaint lodged by his officers. He never returned to the Twenty-second, but remained in the regular army, retiring as a brigadier general in 1870. Mark M. Boatner, III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York: David McKay, 1959), pp. 458-459.
- xiii *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. 42, Pt. 1, pp. 816-817; Stryker, *Officers and Men*, pp. 1507, 1513.
- xiv Quoted in Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, p. 308.
- xv Blackett, *Chester*, pp. 261-262.
- xvi Bates, *Pennsylvania Volunteers*, Vol. V, p. 992; *Allentown Messenger Press*, *op. cit.*
- xvii Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines, Iowa: Dyer Publishing Co. 1908) p. 1729.