
Baptism of Fire: In Defense of Colonel Fribley and the 8th USCT

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When a regiment suffers great losses in its first battle, its baptism of fire, many blame the regiment and its commander. The 8th United States Colored Troop (USCT) suffered the heaviest regimental loss in the battle of Olustee in the Civil War, yet this regiment and its colonel showed great courage under fire. According to Carlton McCarthy, a private in the Richmond Howitzers, a soldier must be brave in battle: “His courage must never fail. He must be manly and independent.”¹ Black troops fought for more than manliness and independence; they fought for freedom.

At the beginning of the Civil War, the War Department felt blacks had no part in a “white man’s war.” Lincoln feared recruiting blacks would drive the border states into the Confederacy. After the First Battle of Bull Run, Lincoln allowed blacks to join the army as laborers and in other non-combat roles. In his book, *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell*, Lt. Col. Michael Lanning explained, “African Americans were ready and willing to serve in the military where needed. This time, the war was *about*, and *over*, them.”² The War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops in May 1863. Although the army organized a few black regiments prior to this date, most black regiments formed after this date. These soldiers faced discrimination in pay and promotion. White privates received \$13 a month, with pay increasing with rank. All black soldiers received only \$10 a month, regardless of rank. White officers commanded black troops, while black soldiers could only become non-commissioned officers. Black soldiers proved to be well disciplined and served honorably. “While denied the rank of officer, black soldiers nonetheless displayed their leadership abilities under fire. . . . The African-American soldiers willingly assumed the responsibility of proving themselves, freeing their brothers, and preserving the Union.”³ To create fear in Union black troops, the Confederate Congress approved the death penalty for captured white officers of black troops and allowed states to punish the black soldiers. “Within three months of this congressional report, President Lincoln . . . vowed to execute one Confederate officer for every Union commander of black troops whom the Rebels might put to death and to sentence to hard labor one captured southern soldier for every black

Union trooper sold into slavery. The threat did not have to be carried out.”⁴ The Army established Camp William Penn, under the command of Louis Wagner, in Pennsylvania as the first U.S. black soldier recruiting and training center. Recruiting for the 8th USCT began in September 1863.⁵

Charles Wesley Fribley was an experienced soldier, who became commander of the 8th USCT.

Fribley grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania and attended Dickinson Seminary in Williamsport. He moved to the West in 1857 to seek his fortune as a ferry boatman, schoolteacher, Overland Mail conductor, and fighter between “bleeding Kansas” and border ruffians. Fribley returned to Pennsylvania and became a teacher. A few days after the attack on Fort Sumter, Fribley answered Lincoln’s call for volunteers and joined a three-month regiment – the Woodward Guards (Company A of the 11th Pennsylvania infantry).

In mid-October 1861, Fribley enlisted in Company

F of the 84th Pennsylvania Infantry. “Felt that I could not be satisfied at the old and harassing business of today and furthermore that it was my duty to be with those of my countrymen who were in arms in defence [sic] of our flag.”⁶ On December 10, 1861, Fribley married Katherine “Kate” Ault. Colonel Samuel M. Bowman commended Fribley for his assistance as staff officer during the Chancellorsville Campaign in 1863: “The following staff officers of this command – Capt. Charles W. Fribley, Eighty-fourth Pennsylvania Volunteers, acting assistant adjutant-general; . . . rendered me the most valuable assistance on more than one



Figure 1 Charles and Kate Fribley, 1861. From the author’s personal collection.

trying occasion, and in the discharge of their duties displayed the utmost coolness and bravery.”⁷

In 1863, Fribley made two major decisions, changing his life forever. Realizing that death might happen soon, Fribley settled his account with God in April 1863: “Read . . . ‘How to Turn a Christian’. Did me much good. I this day choose to be and resolve to be a Christian.”⁸ On July 8, 1863, Fribley applied to the War Department for command of a black troop. The War Department established examination boards to qualify black troop officers: “The army hoped to assure the Union leadership that if the USCT regiments performed poorly, it was not because of any fault of their officers. The test examined the officers in six areas: tactics, regulations, general military knowledge, math, history, and geography.”⁹ On July 27, Fribley sent an additional application to report for the examination. On August 20, he received permission to report for the examination in Washington. He spent the next week studying and left August 31 for Washington. Candidates usually waited an additional week before appearing before the board: “Candidates reported promptly each morning and learned whether or not they would be tested that day. If they were too far down the list, the officer merely dismissed them for the day, and the process repeated the next day, Monday through Friday.”¹⁰ Fribley appeared before Major General Casey on September 19 and passed the board as “Colonel of first class.”¹¹ On September 26, he received orders to report to Lieutenant Colonel Wagner. Fribley took command of the 8th USCT October 3.

For the next few months, Fribley drilled his regiment. “During drill the men had to learn various military commands that they would need in combat. They also had to be able to understand and execute commands quickly. On the battlefield, not following an order immediately could mean injury or death.”¹² Fribley held Marshal and Sergeant’s school in the evenings of November. After recruiting ten companies, Fribley officially received his appointment as colonel on November 23 and spent that day mustering in and purchasing his new uniform. The next few days, he raised money for supplies for the regiment and found musicians for the band. The 8th USCT moved into wooden army barracks in December 1863. Fribley purchased musical instruments and two howitzers, organized companies, and continued drills throughout December. “The sham battle was quite good indeed considering the fact of there being no artillery.”¹³ January 7 brought frustration to Fribley and his wife when they went to Philadelphia by train for business and to run errands. Fribley felt disappointed by the amount of his pay. He

and his wife got separated. Fribley spent a lot of time searching for her and finally found her in the train cars. Later that day, a conflict arose between Fribley and Wagner: “Had unpleasant words with Col. Wagner.”¹⁴ The band made their first appearance at dress parade on January 8, 1864. That same day, Lieutenant Colonel Louis Wagner charged Colonel Fribley with disobedience of orders “beating calls for Church, Drill and Tattoo at unestablished hours” and conduct “unbecoming an officer and a gentleman” for his response to the original charges: “tell Col. Wagner to attend to his own business and he [Col. F.] would attend to his.”¹⁵ The Acting Judge Advocate did not feel the charges important enough to warrant a trial before him.

On January 9, the regiment received marching orders. They left camp on January 16 for New York, where they boarded two transports, the *Prometheus* and the *City of Bath*. The *City of Bath* arrived at Hilton Head, South Carolina on January 22. The *Prometheus* encountered stormy weather, causing many officers including Fribley, to become seasick. The *Prometheus*, after a stop at Fort Monroe, arrived at Hilton Head on January 24. The 8th USCT was assigned to Howell’s Brigade, Seymour’s Division, Gillmore’s Department. Fribley continued to drill his men with a dress parade on January 27, inspection on January 28, brigade drill on January 29, and battalion drill on January 30. Kate accompanied her husband to Hilton Head and stayed until the regiment left for Florida on February 6. Gillmore planned to secure Florida: to gain supplies of cotton, turpentine, and timber; to cut off enemy supplies; to obtain colored recruits; and to restore Florida to the Union.

The regiment arrived in Jacksonville on February 8. The next day at Camp Finnegan, three companies of the 8th USCT captured one prisoner and many Rebel stores. The regiment was placed on duty guarding and repairing railroad bridges at Finnegan’s, Picket House, Baldwin, and Barbour’s. General Gillmore met with Seymour at Jacksonville on February 14 and ordered the brigade to stay at Baldwin and not to advance without his consent. After Gillmore’s departure, Seymour sent word that he intended to destroy the railroad bridge at the Suwannee River. Gillmore sent General John Turner to stop him, but thunderstorms delayed Turner by two days. The battle of Olustee occurred before Turner arrived. On February 16, Fribley expressed his disapproval of this trip to Florida in a letter to his wife: “We don’t know how long we will remain here. We can’t tell much about what will be done, when I am well satisfied that the head bosses are not certain as to what they want to do themselves. I have but little confidence in the show they

are making. It is all show.”¹⁶ Seymour disobeyed orders, disregarded his staff’s advice, and failed to heed a warning that a large Rebel force was lying in wait at Olustee.

A large number of Confederate skirmishers encountered Seymour’s brigade in a swamp thirty-five miles west of Jacksonville. Henry’s Mounted Brigade, the cavalry, and the 7th Connecticut went into battle first. The 7th New Hampshire was deployed to the right and the 8th USCT to the left, between artillery regiments. A few days before the battle, Seymour forced the 7th New Hampshire to exchange their Spencer carbines for unfamiliar Springfield muskets, many lacking bayonets and some inoperative. Colonel Hawley ordered the 7th New Hampshire near the Pond; however, the order was misunderstood and the regiment broke into confusion, refusing to rally. Lieutenant Oliver Norton described how the 8th USCT faced the enemy:

Military men say it takes veteran troops to maneuver under fire, but our regiment with knapsacks on and unloaded pieces, after a run of half a mile, formed a line under the most destructive fire I ever knew. We were not more than two hundred yards from the enemy, concealed in pits and behind trees, and what did the regiment do? At first they were stunned, bewildered, and knew not what to do. They curled to the ground, and as men fell around them they seemed terribly scared, but gradually they recovered their senses and commenced firing. And here was the great trouble – they could not use their arms to advantage. We have had very little practice firing, and though they could stand and be killed, they could not kill a concealed enemy fast enough to satisfy my feelings.¹⁷

The 8th USCT maintained their position “before a terrible fire, closing up as their ranks were thinned out, fire in front, on their flank, and in the rear, without flinching or breaking.”¹⁸ This regiment performed “with a courage worthy of veterans.”¹⁹ Captain John Hamilton of the Third U.S. Artillery valued the sacrifice of the 8th USCT: “My heart bled for them; they fell as ten pins in a bowling alley; but everything depended on their sacrifice and that of my battery until we could be relieved or the new line formed.”²⁰ The Confederates charged the left flank of the 8th USCT. As he ordered his men to continue firing as they slowly fell back, Fribley was shot in the chest. He told his men to carry him to the rear and died a few moments later. His body was placed on the footboard of one of Hamilton’s limbers.²¹ Major Burritt took command, but soon fell wounded (both legs broken). The regiment slowly retreated to the rear.

The 8th USCT carried two flags at the battle of Olustee: the national colors and the regimental flag. The sergeant carrying the regimental flag “was hit in his right hand by a ball which nearly tore off the hand. Rather than let the flag fall, the sergeant calmly seized the staff with his left hand and retained possession of the flag until he found a corporal to give the flag to for safekeeping.”²² The regimental colors were carried to the rear. Three color sergeants and five corporals of the color guard fell saving their national colors. Lieutenant Lewis carried the national colors to a battery on the left. A fragment of the regiment rallied around the flag. The horses started to the rear but soon stopped. Enemy fire forced the men to retreat, and in the confusion, the men unfortunately left the colors behind. Captain Hamilton ordered Fribley’s body removed from the limber, so he could move one of his guns. “He was placed about twenty-five feet to the right and rear of my right piece, where I think he was left.”²³

Other regiments entered the battle, including the 54th Massachusetts (another black troop). The battle lasted from three o’clock p.m. until dark. The Union suffered heavy losses. The Confederates retreated at dark. The Union carried their wounded to Baldwin or Barbour. Dr. Alex. P. Heickhold, Surgeon of the 8th USCT,

was particular in collecting the colored troops who were wounded, and placed them in his ambulance and pushed on for a place of safety. Some one thought the white troops should be brought away also; but Dr. H. said: ‘I know what will become of the white troops who fall into the enemy’s possession, but I am not certain as to the fate of the colored troop,’ and pushed with alacrity towards Baldwin. He also dressed the wounds of all the Eighth that came into camp at Barbour, and a great many others belonging to white regiments. It looked sad to see men wounded coming into camp with their arms and equipment on, so great was their endurance and so determined were they to defend themselves to the death. I saw white troops that were not badly wounded, that had thrown away everything.²⁴

General Seymour advised the Sanitary Corps to abandon the wounded; however, they continued to transport wounded to the safety of railroad cars. Confederates captured some of the wounded. A flag of truce brought news that all prisoners were being treated alike; however, Confederate regiments killed many wounded black soldiers:

A young officer was standing in the road in front of me and I asked him, “What is the meaning of all this firing I hear going on.” His reply to me

was, "Shooting niggers Sir. I have tried to make the boys desist but I can't control them." I made some answer in effect that it seemed horrible to kill the wounded devils, and he again answered, "That's so Sir, but one young fellow over yonder told me the niggers killed his brother after being wounded, at Fort Billow, and he was twenty three years old, that he had already killed nineteen and needed only four more to make the matter even, so I told him to go ahead and finis [sic] the job." I rode on but the firing continued.²⁵

The 8th USCT entered this battle with twenty-one officers and 544 men, a total of 565. The regiment suffered great losses—sixty-six killed (one officer and sixty-five men), 262 wounded (wounded and missing—one officer and forty-nine men; other wounded—eight officers and 204 men), and fifteen missing men, a total loss of 343.²⁶ The Confederates stripped the dead of their clothing. Seymour requested the Confederates mark Fribley's grave for later reburial; however, Finegan denied his request. Seymour also requested the return of Fribley's effects to his widow. Finegan felt compassion for the widow and returned an ambrotype,²⁷ his watch, a letter, and Fribley's diary.²⁸ A letter published March 30, 1864 in the *Savannah Daily News* showed no compassion: "The black-hearted Frieble had a dog's burial. A leader of a horde of infuriated negroes, on a mission of murder, robbery and rape, ought he not have been left to rot on the plain, to the obscene birds to fatten on his vitals, and the great wolves to gnaw on his bones?"²⁹ Confederates probably buried Colonel Fribley in a mass grave with his men. Officers and men who survived the post-battle slaughter were imprisoned at Andersonville—stripped of their uniforms, forced to wear castoff clothing, denied medical treatment, and forced to work around the prison. "These black soldiers represented everything the South was fighting against Persons just marched them into the stockade, where they congregated in their own little encampment near the south gate—ignored by everyone, including the doctors."³⁰ Many of these soldiers died from their wounds.

The Olustee disaster enraged the public. Newspapers and racists denounced the black troops for running away. Seymour claimed the 54th Massachusetts was the only good black regiment under his command. As the facts became evident, it was clear that, "the African-American troops in Seymour's command, even the inexperienced Eighth USCT, acted with extraordinary heroism."³¹ Seymour was blamed for disobeying orders, leading the men into a trap, and for changing the weapons of 7th New Hampshire prior to battle. He put

black regiments into battle and “forgot” about them. Some blamed President Lincoln for sacrificing these men. To prevent a negative effect on black enlistments, the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War downplayed these stories when they investigated this battle. The Committee exonerated the president but did not blame any commander for his actions. Seymour, however, received orders to the Army of the Potomac.

The Eighth USCT fought bravely, “but the stupidity of a Commanding General is a thing that the gods themselves strive against in vain.”³² Seymour’s glory seeking led to disaster for this regiment. Fribley’s death was a great loss to the regiment. “Had Colonel Fribley been in command of that expedition, many dear lives might have been saved.”³³ The commander of Camp William Penn,

Louis Wagner, deserves blame for the lack of proper weapons training. Norton commented that, “Colonel Fribley had applied time and time again for permission to practice his regiment in target firing, and been always refused.”³⁴ The regiment



Figure 2 “Hymn of the Freedman,” by George H. Boker, 1864. <http://jhir.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/5689>. Lithograph cover illustration of sheet music to 'Hymn of the Freedman,' depicting black soldiers of the Union 8th U.S. Colored Troops and their commanding officer, Colonel Charles W. Fribley, killed in the Battle of Olustee, Florida. Original Artwork: Lithograph by P S Duval & Son.

did not blame their colonel for their losses. They named their next principal fort outside of Jacksonville Redoubt Fribley in his honor. Today, visitors can view Fribley's name on the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C. and on the soldier's monument in the Muncy Cemetery in Pennsylvania. After the war, "the North sent 'Yankee schoolmarms' to the South to educate the newly freed slaves."³⁵ Kate honored Charles by becoming a "Yankee schoolmarm" in Tennessee. Pennsylvania named the GAR post (in Williamsport, Lycoming County) in his honor —Col. Chas. W. Fribley Post No. 390.

Fribley knew the risk of commanding a colored regiment— "he was actuated by the desire of aiding the emancipation of an oppressed race, and of fighting the battle of Freedom. . . . His blood has been poured out with that of his black compatriots, upon a rebellious soil. They rest together in a common grave. And when, hereafter, a grateful nation shall gather the commingled dust of these her brave defenders, no name shall be more honored than that of the gallant young soldier who believed that the cause of his country was the cause of Human Rights."³⁶ Although this regiment did not receive Medals of Honor for their bravery, the "wounds they bore would be the medals they would show their children and grandchildren by and by."³⁷ Many gave their lives for the cause of freedom.

Notes

1. George F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 7.

2. Lt. Col. Michael Lee Lanning, Ret., *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Company, 1997), 34.

3. *Ibid.*, 51.

4. Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 45.

5. Soldiers for the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th USCT needed to be immune to tropical diseases since they would be sent to the swampy regions in the South; however, this requirement did not apply to white officers.

6. Charles Wesley Fribley, October 4, 1861, Charles Wesley Fribley diary, Manuscripts – Civil War Miscellaneous Collection, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

7. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* Vol. 25/1, no. 39 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880), 500, reproduced in *The Civil War CD-ROM [CD-ROM]* (Carmel, Ind.: Guild Press of Indiana, 1996).

8. Charles Wesley Fribley, April 15, 1863.

9. Versalle F. Washington, *Eagles on Their Buttons: A Black Infantry Regiment in the Civil War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 19.

10. Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 48-49.

11. "Recollections of Col. Charles W. Fribley," From The October 25, 1870 and November 1, 1870 issues of the Muncy *Luminary* (transcribed by David L. Richards, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania December 6, 1994), 6.

12. Joyce Hansen, *Between Two Fires: Black Soldiers in the Civil War* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1993), 86.

13. Charles Wesley Fribley, December 25, 1863.

14. *Ibid.*, January 7, 1864. The diary does not provide the reason for this conflict, but it may be related to Wagner not allowing the regiment to receive proper weapons training.

15. Military Service File for Charles Wesley Fribley, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

16. "Recollections of Col. Charles W. Fribley," 6.

17. Richard A. Sauer, *Advance the Colors!: Pennsylvania Civil War Battle Flags*, Vol. 1 (Harrisburg: Capitol Preservation Comm., 1987), 48. Oliver Norton was the bugler who helped General Butterfield write *Taps*. Norton became quartermaster for the 8th USCT.

18. William Wells Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1971), 218.

19. Samuel P. Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5*, Vol. 10 (Wilmington, North Carolina: Broadfoot, 1993), 966.

20. *Official Records*, Vol. 53, no. 111: 25.

21. A limber is a two-wheeled horse-drawn carriage used to haul a cannon and its accessories.

22. Richard A. Sauer, 49.

23. *Official Records*, Vol. 53, no. 111: 25.

24. Edwin S. Redkey, ed., *A Grand Army of Black Men* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 42.

25. "Excerpt from the *Reminiscences of William Frederick Penniman*," accessed 7 June 2002, <http://extlab1.entnem.ufl.edu/olustee/letters/penniman.html>.

26. The mascot of the 8th USCT, “Lion” – an old white dog, was wounded in the foreleg, yet he continued to be ready to march at any moment and to be first on board a vessel.

27. An ambrotype is an early photograph in which a glass negative is backed by a dark surface.

28. Fribley’s 1862 diary was lost either prior to this time or was not returned to Kate.

29. William H. Nulty, *Confederate Florida: The Road to Olustee* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1990), 190. This letter also questioned the color of Fribley’s wife, whether she was white or black. A photo of the couple showed they were both white.

30. William Marvel, *Andersonville: The Last Depot* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 41- 43.

31. Donald Yacovone, ed., *A Voice of Thunder: The Civil War Letters of George E. Stephens* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1997), 69.

32. John McElroy, *Andersonville: A Story of Rebel Military Prisons* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1962), 53.

33. “Recollections of Col. Charles W. Fribley,” 7.

34. William H. Nulty, 143. This may have led to the conflict between Wagner and Fribley.

35. William A. Gladstone, *Men of Color* (Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1993), 100.

36. “Recollections of Col. Charles W. Fribley,” 15.

37. Gerald F. Linderman, 32.

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