

Tales of a Buffalo Soldier

T. Anthony Bell, Senior Writer/Special Projects | Posted: Thursday, February 4, 2016 12:00 am

FORT LEE, Va. (Feb. 4, 2016) -- The Buffalo Soldiers' enduring legacy was borne out of the exploits of those audacious and daring enough to ride into a largely unknown and dangerous western frontier, represent a government that considered them second-class citizens and risk their lives as a down payment toward their dignity and freedom.

One hundred and fifty years after the first Buffalo Soldiers rode from stables at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and later fought in several wars and battles leading up to World War II, their noble deeds are largely confined to black history month events and somewhat are ignored in school history books, according John Nichols.

He is a 22-year Army veteran who knows a bit about the Buffalo Soldiers. The 90-year-old former mounted horseman wore the patch of the first Buffalo Soldier unit – the 10th Cavalry Regiment – during World War II and is well-versed on the lives of black fighting men during the era, which he described as subservient and often degrading. He also said he has seen enough dereliction, death and destruction among his fellow Soldiers to be a loud and adamant voice for educating Americans about the famed black cavalrymen.

“We had men of honor who sacrificed their lives for this country and for black people – to allow them to raise their heads in dignity,” said the Chesterfield Country resident and one of the founders of the Mark Matthews Chapter Petersburg, Virginia Inc., 9th and 10th (Horse) Cavalry Association “Buffalo Soldiers” based in Petersburg.

The 6-foot, 170-pound Nichols, whose smooth, golden brown skin and limber movement belies his age, was reared under circumstances that made it difficult to cultivate any sense of self-worth. The three-fourths Native American and black youngster grew up in a multi-racial neighborhood of quasi-integrated Colorado Springs, Colo., trying to find comfort in his racial identity while navigating his way through a social climate that closely resembled a caste society, he said.

Furthermore, Nichols' family was destitute, and he began working at the age of five, collecting firewood and doing other odd jobs to help support his family.



Buffalo Soldier

John Nichols, standing to the left of his platoon sergeant, former boxing champ Joe Louis, at Fort Riley, Kan.

After hearing President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Dec. 8, 1941, radio address that encouraged citizens to defend their country, and comprehending he would never gain economic prosperity or full citizenship in his hometown, Nichols quit his job at Camp Carson, Colo., to join the Army. He also naively thought it would offer some resolution to the uneasy racial climate in which he lived.

"As I and my forefathers did, we figured if we showed our hearts to the American people and did the American thing, they would overlook our blackness, quit rejecting us and accept us," he said. "This was a dead dream."

Soon after enlisting in 1942, Nichols said he was shipped to Camp Forsythe (now a part of Fort Riley, Kan.), where he learned horsemanship and cavalry tactics. His platoon sergeant was famed boxer Joe Louis and also met fellow Buffalo Soldier Jackie Robinson on a few occasions, he said.

"Jackie Robinson intimidated me," said Nichols, noting the man who broke baseball's color barrier was smart, well-spoken and dignified.

Nichols, who could read and write unlike many of his fellow, more-experienced Buffalo Soldiers, was advanced to specialist four within a short time as a result and assigned duties as an orderly room clerk. This made him the envy of many and a target of harassment for a few who resented his ascension and authority. He became defensively resistant, however, eventually gaining a reputation as someone who would stand his ground if challenged.

"I definitely had a temper, and I was tired of being pushed on and beat on," he said, raising his voice, wagging his index finger and lowering his brow.

Nichols' temper eventually got him demoted, but he was assured he could regain his rank if he took charge of the worst platoon. His strapping credibility and his desire to succeed preceding him, the baby-faced 18-year-old not only took charge of the group but turned it around.

"I couldn't shave," he laughed while clenching his fist, "but they knew I had good overhead right."

Nichols' commanding officer rewarded him with the rank of staff sergeant, he said, making him the youngest of that rank in the regiment.

In 1944, the regiment was deployed to North Africa to support allied forces. Three days into the cruise across the Atlantic, Nichols was given yet another group to rehabilitate. This time, some of his subordinates were Soldiers so dangerous they required shackles. Nichols at some point requested removal of the irons by a Soldier charged with the custodial transfers.

It was a mistake.

"Three of those men looked at him, looked at me and dove overboard," he said. "They died out there. They knew they were going to die. They didn't care. I shook in my boots."

While the unit was temporarily stopped in Tunisia, Nichols said he came across a young Arab boy

who lay dying from a gunshot wound. He commandeered a truck and rushed the boy to a hospital. The child lived and his tribe's elders thanked him personally, said Nichols.

Despite his less-than-ideal upbringing and his temper, Nichols said he wanted to do good and was always searching for the humanity in people and endeavors.

"I always thought that every cloud had a silver lining," he said, "and I was always looking for it."

By the time Soldiers had reached Italy in 1944, Nichols said the 10th had been broken up and most of its Soldiers assigned to the 92th Infantry Division. Nichols was now a member of 317th Engineer Battalion and, because of the work he had done, was promised a promotion to E-7.

In the meantime, a call came for volunteers to serve under Gen. George Patton, whose campaign needed reinforcements. Nichols, who said he always wanted to fight, eagerly volunteered, but there was only one caveat: he had to give up his rank.

"White Soldiers will not take orders from black NCOs," he said one of the clerks announced during the sign-up. "In fact, they didn't like taking orders from black officers, either, which is why there were no black cavalry field officers."

Nevertheless, Nichols signed documents relinquishing his rank. He was again a private but one who was about to fulfill a long-held dream, and one who reasoned his current unit was only trouble for a hothead such as himself due to its low morale.

"I wanted to go because Roosevelt said he wanted fighting men," explained Nichols. "That's why I quit my job – the best good job I ever had – to join in the first place."

As it turns out, the unit never had intentions of sending the troops to Patton, said Nichols, so he and two others went absent without leave. "They didn't respect anything they agreed to," he said, lowering his voice and shaking his head. Nichols and two cohorts spent three days in Rome then returned, were court-martialed and then jailed, he said.

While confined, Nichols was offered his freedom if he agreed to fight. He was assigned to the 365th Infantry Regiment in northern Italy where he saw extensive combat action and where many men were lost. He literally stood in the moment of his own realization, finally feeling whole and doing what he sought out to do.

"I felt proud," he said, "and I didn't care if I was a private. I was doing the job I was trained to do."

Nichols, who said he specialized in conducting operations at night, said his combat service was also a political statement.

"I wanted to make them out as liars and make them know they were lying," he said, referring to the notion black Soldiers lacked fighting abilities, courage and trustworthiness. "For me, I had

proved myself as a man.”

When the war ended, Nichols returned to Colorado Springs with the intent of getting out of the Army but quickly realized home harbored realities he had trouble dealing with. He rejoined the ranks and wound up wearing the uniform another 19 years, serving mostly in Germany in special services, forerunner of the Army Family and MWR.

Since his retirement in 1964, Nichols has been a sporting arms and insurance salesman, entrepreneur, philanthropist and businessman, to name a few. He is currently an evangelist and has invested in community facilities for the homeless.

His kindheartedness notwithstanding, Nichols remains a fighter. For years now, he has been involved in efforts to reinstate the E-7 rank he gave up in Italy to fight for Patton. “I worked for it, I earned it and I should have it,” he said, noting he doesn’t want any money only “honor.”

He is also a warrior on the front to preserve the Buffalo Soldier history. Armed with the triumphs and tribulations of his time with the 10th Cavalry, he tends to the business of the Mark Matthews chapter, frequently attending speaking engagements, visiting schools and giving media interviews.

Trooper Aubrey T. Phillips Sr., president of the chapter, said Nichols is the only original Buffalo Soldier in the chapter and he brings a wealth of living experience to whatever he does. Nichols is especially effective when speaking with adults, he added.

“They tend to listen more and want to know the next time he speaks so they can bring their children,” said Phillips. “The problem (with the history of the Buffalo Soldier) is not so much the children, but the generation of adults who never learned about these men. If the adults didn’t get it, you know the kids didn’t either.”

Nichols said there is so much more to the Buffalo Soldier history than can be covered in the shortest month of the year. For that reason and more, he said it is important to stand for the men whose voices went silent during the war but continues to echo through the annals of American history.

“I always stand for what’s right, no matter the cost,” he said.

The contributions the Buffalo Soldiers made to the nation and to future generations is a recognition the men so well deserve, said Nichols, but theirs is a debt that can never fully be repaid.

Nichols is married to Marion Nichols, an Air Force veteran. His 92-year-old brother, Stilkirtis, is also a Buffalo Soldier and fellow combat veteran.