

1970

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Recommended Citation

Gatewood, Jr., Willard B. (1970) "Negro Troops in Florida, 1898," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 49 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol49/iss1/4>

NEGRO TROOPS IN FLORIDA, 1898

by WILLARD B. GATEWOOD, JR. *

THE OUTBREAK OF THE War with Spain in 1898 elicited a mixed reaction among Negro Americans. Enthusiastic pro-war advocates viewed the conflict in terms of its benefits to Negroes. Their argument maintained that the black man's participation in the military effort would win respect from whites and therefore enhance his status at home. They also emphasized that the islands likely to come under American influence would open economic opportunities for black citizens. Opposing such views were the highly vocal anti-war, anti-imperialist elements within the Negro community. Though sympathetic with the plight of Cuba and especially with Negro Cubans, these black Americans argued that the Spaniards, for all their cruelty, at least had not fastened upon the island a system of racial discrimination comparable to that in the United States. Many contended that only when the American government guaranteed its own black citizens their full constitutional rights would it be in a position to undertake a crusade to free Cuba from Spanish tyranny.¹ Confronted by lynching, disfranchisement, and segregation at home, Negroes had little difficulty in appreciating the attitude of the black Iowan who declared: "I will not go to war. I have no country to fight for. I have not been given my rights here."²

The extreme positions of anti-war and pro-war spokesmen did not, however, represent the predominant sentiment among the black population. A majority of Negroes seemed to consider participation in the military struggle an obligation of citizenship and manifested an intense pride in the black units of the regular army called to take up "the white man's burden" in

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1. Topeka *Colored Citizen*, February 24, March 3, 1898; Indianapolis *Freeman*, February 26, 1898; Washington *Colored American*, March 19, April 30, 1898; Richmond *Planet*, March 26, April 2, 23, 1898; Washington *Bee*, March 5, 29, 1898; Springfield *Illinois Record*, March 12, April 23, 1898.
2. Des Moines *Iowa State Bystander*, May 20, 1898.

Cuba. Yet, they recognized the irony and incongruity of a policy to liberate a foreign people, especially "little brown brothers," when so many "Americans of color" remained oppressed. Although Negroes hoped that a display of patriotism would help dissipate prejudice against them, they were never free of misgivings about a war launched in the name of humanity by a nation so enamored of Anglo-Saxon supremacy.³ The experience of Negro soldiers stationed in Florida in 1898 only served to increase their doubts about the war blotting out prejudice against black Americans.

Negro troops concentrated in the South during the Spanish-American War were of two types, regulars and volunteers. Although most volunteers did not enter federal service until mid-1898, the four black regiments of the regular army—Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry and Ninth and Tenth Cavalry—were among the first units dispatched to southern camps in preparation for the invasion of Cuba. Commanded by white officers and long stationed in the West, these regiments began to arrive at Chickamauga Park, Georgia, and at Key West, Florida, even before the official declaration of war. During the first two weeks in May 1898, all black units of the regular army, including the infantrymen originally sent to Key West, arrived at Tampa, Florida, the port selected as the one best suited for embarkation to Cuba.⁴ During the next month of what the correspondent Richard Harding Davis called "the rocking chair period" over 4,000 Negro troops were among the invasion army concentrated in the area around Tampa. Chaos and confusion prevailed in every quarter, and as one historian has noted, the "logistics snarl was too complicated" for the commander, General William R. Shafter, to unravel.⁵ At Tampa, as at Chickamauga, the Negro units continued to receive an influx of new

3. Baltimore *Ledger*, April 23, 1889; Coffeyville (Kansas) *American*, June 11, 1898; Washington *Colored American*, April 9, May 23, June 25, 1898; Cleveland *Gazette*, April 23, 30, May 14, 1898; Milwaukee *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate*, May 7, 14, 1898; Mifflin W. Gibbs, *Shadow and Light: An Autobiography* (Washington, 1902; reprinted New York, 1968), 283-84.

4. Regimental Records, Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry Regiments, "Record of Events," April-June, 1898, National Archives, Record Group 94. For a description of Tampa during the Spanish-American War, see Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, 1950), 206-11.

5. Richard Harding Davis, *The Cuban and Porto Rican Campaigns* (New York, 1962), 49.

recruits, because the war department had ordered all regiments to have three battalions of four companies, which meant an additional 750 men for each regiment. The arrival of so many raw recruits only compounded the confusion at the embarkation point. The Negro troops of the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry pitched camp at Tampa Heights, and the Ninth Cavalry was located nearby. But when the Tenth Cavalry arrived, it could find no suitable camping-ground, and it was ordered to Lakeland along with several white cavalry units.⁶

Scarcely had the first companies of black soldiers arrived in the Tampa area when white citizens began to lodge complaints against them. Undoubtedly earlier reports from Key West that the Negro infantrymen had forced the release of one of their fellows from a local jail enhanced the existing antipathy toward black soldiers.⁷ Indicative of the atmosphere in Tampa was the hostile attitude of the local press. Within a few days after the arrival of the Negro troops, the *Tampa Morning Tribune* reported: "The colored troopers are splendid horsemen and show off to great advantage. The colored infantrymen stationed in Tampa and vicinity have made themselves very offensive to the people of the city. The men insist upon being treated as white men are treated and the citizens will not make any distinction between the colored troops and the colored civilians."⁸ While the *Tribune* treated the rowdiness of white soldiers with tolerance or levity, it viewed similar behavior by Negroes as evidence of their immunity to military discipline. Almost daily, from the time they arrived until they departed for Cuba, the local press gave front-page coverage to every incident involving Negro troops. Sensational accounts of "rackets" and "riots" by "these black ruffians in uniform" appeared regularly in dailies throughout the South.⁹

White citizens in Tampa, disturbed by "the insults and mendacity perpetrated by the colored troops," demanded that the city provide them greater police protection against so many

6. Marvin Fletcher, "The Negro Soldier and the United States Army, 1891-1917" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1968), 187, 191-92; John Bigalow, Jr., *Reminiscences of the Santiago Campaign* (New York, 1899), 33.
7. William J. Schellings, "Key West and the Spanish-American War," *Tequesta*, XX (1960), 25-26.
8. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 5, 1898.
9. *Ibid.*, May 7, 10, 12, 1898.

undisciplined black soldiers "with criminal proclivities." Although the new recruits obviously did not display the same degree of discipline as the veterans, there was little inclination by whites to accord either a semblance of the tolerance shown white soldiers. Negro troops resented what they interpreted as deliberate attempts to malign them and to cast aspersions upon the distinguished record which they had compiled during the Indian wars in the West.¹⁰ In a letter to a friend, a black infantryman in Tampa declared: "Prejudice reigns supreme here against the colored troops. Every little thing that is done here is chronicled as Negro brazenness, outlawry, etc. An ordinary drunk brings forth scare headlines in the dailies. Some of our boys were refused a drink at one of the crackers' saloons . . . and they politely closed him up. That was put down as a 'nigger riot' and the commanding general was appealed to in the interest of the 'respectable white citizens.'" ¹¹ From the beginning the Negro troops in the Tampa area made it clear that they had no intention of submitting to the discriminatory treatment accorded black civilians.

The black soldiers in Lakeland, no less than those in Tampa, were convinced that they had been stationed in the midst of "a hotbed of rebels." Within a few days after their arrival in Lakeland, the Negro cavalymen demonstrated their unwillingness to abide by local racial customs. Angered by the refusal of the proprietor of Forbes Drug Store to serve one of their comrades at the soda fountain, a large group of armed black soldiers returned to the store and to a barbershop next door. When the white barber yelled obscenities at a Negro trooper who requested a shave, they "shot up the barbershop." Moving into the streets where a sizeable crowd had assembled, the soldiers began to fire indiscriminately and to threaten anyone who challenged them. Joab Collins, a white civilian in the crowd, was killed. Although Collins had been hurling insults at the troops, his death was apparently caused by a stray bullet. Several white officers of the Tenth Cavalry arrived on the scene and finally quieted the disturbance. After an investigation, they turned over two black cavalymen, James Johnson and John Young,

10. *Ibid.*, May 10, 12, 18, 1898; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*, May 13, 1898.

11. Quoted in *Baltimore Ledger*, June 4, 1898.

to local authorities for trial.¹² Although the incident gave the Tenth Cavalry a "bad name" and inspired numerous reports of misconduct by the black soldiers, Corporal John Lewis later explained that the shooting of "Collins, the white bully" was an "act of Providence" because it taught the white people of Lakeland to respect black men in uniform.¹³ But clearly whatever respect they displayed was based upon fear rather than upon any basic change in racial views.

Accurate information about clashes involving Negro troops in the Florida camps was all the more difficult to obtain because of the rigorous censorship exercised by the war department over all telegraphic news involving military personnel. It appears, however, that such clashes usually resulted either from insults by whites or from attempts by black soldiers to break segregation barriers. The mere sight of smartly dressed, precision drilled Negro soldiers was sufficient, it seemed, to arouse envy and hostility among some whites. But animosity toward black troops was even more evident whenever they were placed in positions to exercise authority over white soldiers. White citizens protested loudly, for example, when Negroes on military patrol duty arrested white soldiers.¹⁴ Regularly taunted by epithets such as "all niggers look alike to me," the black soldiers quickly concluded that nowhere was anti-Negro prejudice more virulent than in Florida. In time they also came to understand that such prejudice was by no means confined to whites from the South. A committee of city officials from Philadelphia, in Tampa to inspect Pennsylvania volunteers, publicly expressed concern about the "continual fighting" between white and black soldiers which they blamed upon "the insolence of the negroes" who were trying "to run Tampa."¹⁵ In the opinion of black soldiers, racism even pervaded the gospel dispensed to the troops by Dwight L. Moody and other northern evangelists. "Dwight Moody is here galore," a Negro soldier wrote home, "but the colored boys care nothing for his color prejudiced religion."¹⁶

12. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 18, 19, 21, 25, 1898; *Springfield Illinois Record*, June 11, 25, 1898; Bigalow, *Reminiscences*, 36-37.

13. Corporal John E. Lewis to editor, *Springfield Illinois Record*, June 25, 1898.

14. Fletcher, "The Negro Soldier and the United States Army," 191; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*, May 31, 1898.

15. *Atlanta Constitution*, June 13, 1898.

16. "Letter from Tampa," *Baltimore Ledger*, June 4, 1898.

Those black troops unaccustomed to the racial mores of the South were appalled at the humiliating treatment to which all Negroes were subjected. Some expressed utter dismay at learning that many mercantile and business establishments in Tampa refused to allow Negroes to make purchases across the same counters as whites. Saloons and cafes which insisted upon maintaining the color line became the special targets of the black soldiers' ire, and several were forced to close "to prevent bloodshed."¹⁷ John Bigalow, white captain of a black cavalry unit, claimed that the white Floridian's lack of subtlety in race relations was the principal cause of friction with the black troops. He insisted that if whites treated colored soldiers with civility, "however much they might discriminate against them," there would be little trouble. Whether or not his analysis was correct, there seems to have been little inclination for white merchants to accept his substitute, "we don't deal with colored people," for their more customary, "we don't sell to damned niggers."¹⁸ Regular encounters with such prejudice solidified the determination of black troops to force whites to respect them as soldiers and as men. A Negro soldier in Tampa wrote a friend: "Our fellows think it is h--- to have a fight in defense of people who are so prejudiced. They are determined to make these crackers 'walk Spanish' while here or else be treated as men."¹⁹

The black troops were obviously in a more favorable position than others of their race to insist upon equitable treatment. They not only possessed arms and whatever legal protection was inherent in their uniforms but also existed in sufficient numbers to risk forceful action against their detractors. Yet their display of restraint was perhaps more remarkable than their occasional use of force to combat discrimination and to retaliate against insults. At least one factor which helped prevent more frequent

17. Chaplain George W. Prioleau, Ninth Cavalry, to the editor (May 13, 1898), *Cleveland Gazette*, May 21, 1898; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 12, 1898; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*, May 13, 1898; Washington *Colored American*, August 20, 1898, declared: "The trouble between the Negroes and whites at Tampa . . . is due almost without exception to the fact that narrow-minded cads and short-sighted shop-keepers insisted upon making a difference in the treatment of U.S. soldiers when the law did not recognize any. The black boys stood upon their rights, and the blame for the disorder rests wholly upon those who denied them what was legally theirs."

18. Bigalow, *Reminiscences*, 36-37.

19. "Letter from Tampa," *Baltimore Ledger*, June 4, 1898.

and violent reactions on their part was their feeling of being on trial and the conviction that their actions had consequences for all black Americans.²⁰ Because of this belief, Negro soldiers were all the more resentful of what they considered the sensational and distorted publicity lavished upon "every little thing" done by them.

For the black troops nothing so clearly dramatized the paradox and incongruity bred by racial prejudice as the experience of the men of the Twenty-fourth Infantry in charge of Spanish prisoners during their transfer from Tampa to Fort McPherson, Georgia. In several towns along the route crowds of whites gathered presumably to view the Spaniards, but what attracted their attention and became the target of their insults and taunts were the Negro soldiers. A Catholic priest from Atlanta, who was granted permission to minister to the Spaniards at Fort McPherson, concisely expressed the sentiments of those disturbed by the appearance of black soldiers in a position of authority over white men, even though such men were prisoners of war. "It is an outrage," the priest declared, "that white men [Spaniards] have been subjected to the humiliation of having negro guards over them."²¹ Such venting of prejudice by white Americans, according to Chaplain George W. Proileau of the Ninth Cavalry, served to emphasize the hypocrisy involved in the American crusade in behalf of Cuba, a nation whose population was "predominantly colored." "Talk about fighting and freeing poor Cuba and of Spain's brutality . . .," the black chaplain observed, "is America any better than Spain?"²² The recognition of such hypocrisy which became evident in the expressions by Negro soldiers in Florida clearly had a psychological impact. The restraint of these troops in the face of continued discrimination and insults wore increasingly thin.

On the eve of the army's embarkation for Cuba, Tampa was the scene of the most serious racial clash that occurred in a

20. The Negro editor of the *Savannah Tribune* concisely expressed a view common among Negroes when he wrote: "Our colored soldiers must be very careful of their actions. They must keep in mind that they are on trial and more is expected of them than any other class." See *Savannah Tribune*, December 3, 1898.

21. Quoted in *Savannah Tribune*, May 21, 1898; see also Omaha *Afro-American Sentinel*, May 7, 1898.

22. Chaplain George W. Proileau, Ninth Cavalry, to editor, May 13, 1898, Cleveland *Gazette*, May 21, 1898.

military encampment during the Spanish-American War. Known as the Tampa riot, this disturbance on the night of June 6, 1898, came as a climax to the tension that had been steadily mounting for over a month. The arrival in the city of large contingents of free-wheeling white volunteer regiments only served to worsen the situation. Although the war department's heavy handed censorship of military news made it difficult to ascertain the details of the riot, the story ultimately seeped through the censor and appeared in the press throughout the nation. Letters from black soldiers in Tampa published in Negro newspapers presented their version of the affair. Apparently the riot was triggered by a group of intoxicated white volunteers from Ohio who "decided to have some fun" with a two-year old Negro boy. The child was snatched from his mother by a white soldier who entertained his comrades by holding him in one hand and spanking him with the other. Then, held at arm's length with his head down, the child served as a target for several soldiers to demonstrate their marksmanship. Presumably the winner was the soldier who sent a bullet through the sleeve of the boy's shirt. Having had their "fun," the soldiers returned the dazed child to his hysterical mother. Already angered by an accumulation of "outrages," the black troops of the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry regiments viewed the behavior of the Ohio volunteers as anything but sporting. In fact, the incident set them off on a wild destructive rampage. They stormed into the streets firing their pistols indiscriminately, wrecking saloons and cafes which had refused to serve them, and forcing their way into white brothels.²³ Apparently they clashed not only with white civilians but also with white soldiers. The reaction of the *Tampa Morning Tribune* to reports that black soldiers had "outraged" white prostitutes was ironic in view of its disregard for the legal rights of Negroes. "While these women are of the lowest type," the *Tribune* editorialized, "the law gives them protection."²⁴

23. For several somewhat different versions of the Tampa riot see *Atlanta Constitution*, June 12, 13, 1898; *Augusta Chronicle*, June 11, 1898; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 8, 1898; *Cleveland Gazette*, June 25, July 2, 1898; *Richmond Planet*, June 18, 1898.

24. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 8, 1898. Actually, the account of the riot in the *Tribune* was not totally biased against the black soldiers. A front page story, entitled "Inhuman Brutes," told how the Ohio

The provost guards and the Tampa police tried in vain to restrain the rioters. Finally, troops from the Second Georgia Volunteer Infantry, a white regiment, were assigned the job of restoring order. The relish with which the Georgia soldiers performed the task was equalled only by their deadly efficiency. Near daybreak on the morning of June 7 the riot was quelled. The Tampa paper which published the highlights of the disturbance came to regret the publicity given the affair, apparently out of fear that it would reflect adversely upon the city. The newspaper later denied that there had been any riot and classified as "sheer rot" reports that the streets of Tampa "ran red with negro blood."²⁵ Yet, twenty-seven black troops and several white Georgia volunteers from Tampa, all with serious wounds, who were transferred to Fort McPherson near Atlanta, corroborated rumors of a bloody race riot.²⁶

Despite the sketchy nature of the news reports, the disturbance in Tampa played into the hands of whites who objected to the use of Negro troops in the war with Spain. White Southerners, as well as other Americans, contended that the decision to mobilize black troops was a serious error because it made the Negro "forget his place" and presume "that he was changed or benefitted his social condition by wearing a blue coat and carrying a gun."²⁷ The *Atlanta Constitution* argued that the Tampa affair clearly demonstrated that "army discipline has no effect on the negro." "There was no need to send Negro troops to Cuba," the *Constitution* concluded, "and now to send them, after this event, is criminal."²⁸ Other white Southerners who objected to the use of black soldiers were nevertheless uneasy about sending only whites off to war lest the Negroes at home

volunteers amused themselves by shooting at the child. An editorial criticized the behavior of the volunteers as compared to regular army units; nothing was said about race. The story on the race riot appeared on page four of the paper, and the headlines referred both to Negro and white soldiers as participants.

25. *Ibid.*; June 8, 25, 1898.

26. *Atlanta Constitution*, June 11, 1898.

27. *Memphis Commercial Appeal* quoted in *The Voice of Missions*, VII (January 1899), 1.

28. *Atlanta Constitution*, June 12, 1898. The *Constitution*, June 14, 1898, urged that in view of the "wild and demoniac conduct of the negro regulars at Tampa" they should be "ordered back to the Indian reservations" lest they "assault white Cubans."

seize the opportunity to stage a mass uprising in their absence.²⁹ A white West Virginian resolved the dilemma by suggesting that “all niggers ought to be sent to Cuba where they will be killed.”³⁰

If the Tampa riot allowed whites to vent their prejudice against black troops, it served to magnify misgivings about the war among Negroes, especially those whose support of the military effort had rested upon the conviction that black citizens would benefit by participating in it. The Negro press generally accepted without question reports that the streets of Tampa “ran red with Negro blood” and that “many Afro-Americans were killed and scores wounded.” Convinced that the white press had unjustly blamed black troops for precipitating the disturbance, Negro newspapers hastened to point out that the unbelievably crude behavior of white volunteers had been the source of trouble and condemned the “slaughter of black troops” by the Georgia regiment as “inhuman and uncalled for.”³¹ “Spaniards have done about as badly at times with Cubans,” a Negro editor in Cleveland observed, “and the country is waging war with the former because of it. Our door sill seems to be equally as bloody, at least the Southern half.”³² Other Negroes who speculated about the meaning of the Tampa riot were no less concerned about the display of prejudice by northern white soldiers than about the “slaughter” perpetrated by the Georgia troops. They were particularly disturbed by the fact that white volunteers from Ohio had caused the fracas and that white soldiers from Michigan had openly expressed disappointment that a Georgia unit, rather than themselves, had been chosen “to get the niggers.”³³ Increasingly, Negroes came to agree with the view expressed by a black editor in Norfolk, Virginia, who insisted that “the closer the North and South get together by this war,” the harder Negroes “will have to fight to maintain a footing.”³⁴

29. New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, June 11, 1898; *Savannah Tribune*, April 30, August 20, 1898.

30. Martinsburg (West Virginia) *Pioneer Press* quoted in *Cleveland Gazette*, September 17, 1898.

31. *Ibid.*, June 25, July 2, 1898; *Savannah Tribune*, July 2, 1898; *Richmond Planet*, June 18, 1898; Parsons (Kansas) *Weekly Blade*, August 23, 1898.

32. *Cleveland Gazette*, July 2, 1898.

33. *Augusta Chronicle*, June 11, 1891.

34. Quoted in *Cleveland Gazette*, August 13, 1898. See also *Richmond Planet*, July 9, 1898.

Within a week after the riot, the troops in Tampa embarked for Cuba. With the exception of a few units of new recruits which remained in Florida, the Negro regiments formed a part of the invasion force. Despite the confusion which attended the departure from Tampa, the color line was rigidly maintained. A white officer of the Tenth Cavalry tried in vain to make arrangements for his men to secure meals in local restaurants prior to sailing for Cuba. The typical response to these enquiries was voiced by a lady proprietor who refused on the grounds that "to have colored men eat in her dining room would ruin her business."³⁵ Even on board the transports arrangements were made for the segregation of the black soldiers, who were invariably assigned to the lowest decks. On at least one vessel the color line was maintained by placing white troops on the port side and the men of the Twenty-fifth Infantry on the starboard side.³⁶

Despite such conditions, or perhaps because of them, the Negro troops distinguished themselves in combat during the Santiago campaign. Their performance, according to Professor Rayford W. Logan, "not only gave to Negroes a much needed feeling of pride" but also gained from "some other Americans a respect for Negroes that was rarely manifested."³⁷ Few black Americans, however, were misled by the momentary praise heaped upon the Negro troops for their part in the Santiago campaign and insisted that words of commendation would have meaning only if followed by promotions and rewards. Convinced that black soldiers failed to receive recognition commensurate with their combat record, many Negroes despaired that patriotism and valor counted for so little in improving the plight of the race.³⁸ In fact, a black Georgian insisted that the bravery of Negro soldiers in the war had intensified, rather than lessened, prejudice against black people.³⁹ To support his contention he had only to call attention to the situation in Flor-

35. Bigalow, *Reminiscences*, 50.

36. Fletcher, "Negro Soldier and the United States Army," 195.

37. Rayford W. Logan, *The Great Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York, 1965) 335.

38. Hiram Thweat, *What the Newspapers Say of the Negro Soldier in the Spanish-American War* (Thomasville, Georgia, n.d.); *New York Age*, May 11, 1899; *Richmond Planet*, April 22, 1899; Emma L. Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana Before 1900* (Indianapolis, 1957), 314-15.

39. *Savannah Tribune*, March 18, 1899.

ida at the time of the black soldiers' return from Cuba. The white volunteers stationed in Jacksonville, Miami, and other cities in the state, who were disappointed at being denied opportunities to share in the glory of combat, seemed to take out their frustrations upon black civilians. A Negro paper in Jacksonville noted that "the cry of 'lynch him' is heard often here issuing from the throats of certain U. S. volunteer soldiers in this city."⁴⁰ White volunteers in Miami virtually terrorized the black population of the city. Reports claimed that they "had shot down Negroes like dogs and driven others from their homes."⁴¹

Under the circumstances it was hardly to be expected that the black veterans of the Cuban campaign would receive a heroes' welcome in Florida. During August 1898, when these troops returned to Tampa and Lakeland prior to permanent assignment elsewhere, they were involved in racial incidents almost daily. The attitudes of both white civilians and Negro soldiers seemed to have undergone changes that made such clashes inevitable: the determination of whites to keep black troops "in their place" obviously had become more pronounced, while the soldiers displayed more aggressiveness in combatting what they considered racial injustices. The local white press, less restrained in its treatment of Negro soldiers, described them as "ruffians" and as "black brutes dressed in the uniform of United States soldiers."⁴² Such rhetoric scarcely improved the relationship between local whites and the Negro troops. A black cavalryman wrote: "It is hard to submit to all that is published about us, not one word of which is contradicted, yet our officers [white] know it is not so."⁴³ Captain John Bigalow of the Tenth Cavalry claimed that the gallantry of the black troops had enhanced "the self-respect and stimulated the aspirations" of colored people in general and of black soldiers in particular.⁴⁴

At any rate, Negro soldiers were obviously in no mood to tolerate abuses of themselves or of black civilians. With greater regularity than earlier they defied Jim Crow restrictions on public transportation and in cafes, saloons, and similar estab-

40. *Florida Evangelist* quoted in *Cleveland Gazette*, August 27, 1898.

41. "Letter from Lakeland," *Springfield Illinois Record*, August 20, 1898; Helen Muir, *Miami, U.S.A.* (New York, 1953), 78-79.

42. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 7, 1898.

43. "Letter from Lakeland," *Springfield Illinois Record*, August 20, 1898.

44. Bigalow, *Reminiscences*, 36-37.

lishments. Their activities assumed even more serious proportions in the view of white Floridians when they involved the defense and protection of Negro civilians. For example, a group of men from the Tenth Cavalry in Lakeland became concerned about the fate of a Negro arrested for violating the liquor laws. While he was in the company of Sheriff J. D. Tillis on a train bound for Bartow, the soldiers came aboard and restrained the sheriff so that the prisoner was allowed to escape.⁴⁵ At about the same time in Tampa the arrest and imprisonment of a member of the Ninth Cavalry for carrying a concealed weapon created much excitement within the regiment. The consensus was that he had been arrested on a trumped-up charge. Succinctly expressing the sentiment of his comrades, a Negro soldier declared: "He is black [and] that is enough to convict him."⁴⁶ On the eve of their departure for Montauk Point, New York, the cavalrymen stormed the county jail and rescued their comrade. A large crowd of white citizens and policemen who arrived at the jail thought better of attacking "five companies of well-armed negroes." Reports that the Tenth Cavalry in Lakeland planned to stage a similar rescue in the Polk County jail prompted Circuit Court Judge Barron Phillips to order the prisoner's transfer to another undisclosed location. Some whites objected to the court order on the grounds that it indicated "to the negro soldiers that they are feared."⁴⁷ Disclaiming any intention of condoning "lawless action" of any kind by black or white soldiers, a Negro clergyman in Baltimore noted with regret that the incidents in Tampa and Lakeland only proved "how well colored men have learnt the oft-repeated lesson taught them by brutal and coarse white men of the South who have made a 'fine art' of the mob business."⁴⁸

The bold activities of the black troops prompted the white citizens to begin in earnest a search for means of maintaining "law and order." In the vanguard of this movement was the *Tampa Morning Tribune* which warned that "the citizens of Hillsborough and Polk counties are getting tired of the lawless

45. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 10, 1898. As it turned out, Sheriff Tillis had also arrested a white man on a similar liquor charge that same day.

46. "Letter from Lakeland," *Springfield Illinois Record*, August 20, 1898.

47. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 7, 12, 1898; *Atlanta Journal*, August 8, 1898.

48. *Baltimore Ledger*, August 20, 1898.

manner in which the negro soldiers . . . are acting and another attempt to rescue a prisoner from a county or city jail will result in the shooting of one or more of the rescuing party.”⁴⁹ Groups as well as individuals appealed in vain to Governor William D. Bloxham, the war department, and the white officers of the Negro units. Finally, on August 12, 1898, the white citizens of the Tampa area held an “indignation meeting.” A succession of speakers who indulged in a great deal of inflammatory rhetoric made ominous threats against the black soldiers and bitterly denounced Governor Bloxham for his failure to take effective action against their “lawlessness.” Florida Congressman Stephen M. Sparkman who presided at the gathering promised to lay the matter before the war department in person and if necessary to seek relief from Congress.⁵⁰ But the departure of the Negro troops for Montauk Point on August 17, 1898, five days after the mass meeting, relieved Sparkman of the necessity of taking up the matter in Washington. Whether their transfer to New York was a source of greater satisfaction to the black soldiers or to white Floridians is difficult to determine. From Montauk Point, a black cavalryman wrote of his pleasure at having finally escaped the repressive environment of Florida. “On every side,” he declared, “you hear Cuba in preference to the South as the boys all dread that section of Uncle Sam’s domain.”⁵¹

The presence of Negro troops in Florida during the Spanish-American War had a significant impact upon the attitudes of both black and white Americans. The Jim Crowism which the troops encountered especially after their return from Cuba tended to undermine the optimism of Negroes who had predicted that the war would emphasize their “title to all the privileges of citizenship.” Even the usually cautious Booker T. Washington expressed doubts that the Negro’s contribution to the war effort had made any headway “in blotting out racial prejudice.”⁵² Other prominent Negroes, particularly those who had never been enthusiastic about the policy of imperialism, maintained that the treatment of the black soldiers in

49. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 12, 1898.

50. *Ibid.*, August 13, 1898.

51. Quoted in *Illinois Record*, October 8, 1898.

52. *Ibid.*, October 22, 1898.

Florida was but a sample of what the colored populations of Cuba and the Philippines could expect under American rule. In the words of a Negro chaplain, who had experienced the discrimination against black soldiers, the Cuban Negro faced the "glorious dilemma" of being relieved of Spanish tyranny in order to be pushed "into the condition of the American Negro."⁵³

If the treatment of black soldiers affected the view of Negroes toward the war and imperialism, their presence in Florida contributed to the final capitulation of the white South to extreme racism. Restraints against blatant Negrophobia had deteriorated throughout the decade prior to 1898. During the war the nation's commitment to the white man's burden marked the end of any external restraints⁵⁴ and the presence of so large a contingent of Negro soldiers in the South hastened the collapse of whatever remained of internal resistance to racism. The tendency of the black troops to resist discrimination and to defy regional customs regarding race conjured up frightful prospects in the minds of white Southerners. The notion that the behavior of the black soldiers had disturbed "the peaceful race relations" of the region won widespread acceptance and was used to justify lynchings and other crimes against Negroes.⁵⁵ In mid-1898 a Negro editor in Virginia scarcely exaggerated when he declared: "Negrophobia is getting as prevalent here as is the yellow fever in Cuba."⁵⁶ In such an atmosphere racist demagogues throughout the South came into their own.

53. Chaplain T. G. Steward of the Twenty-fifth Infantry quoted in *The Nation*, LXVI (May 5, 1898), 335.

54. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1955), 51-55.

55. *Washington Bee*, March 25, 1899; *Savannah Tribune*, April 1, 1899; *Des Moines Iowa State Bystander*, March 24, 1899.

56. *Richmond Planet*, June 18, 1898.