



VBA TODAY

V E T E R A N S B E N E F I T S A D M I N I S T R A T I O N

BUFFALO SOLDIERS TWENTY-FIFTH INFANTRY REGIMENT

Each February we celebrate Black History Month, and given the contributions Black Americans have made to American society, we have a lot to celebrate. African Americans have served in every war the United States participated in; however, it wasn't until January 1, 1863 that the first officially recognized African American military unit was organized; the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. Congress reduced the size of the military at the end of the Civil War, as they have done at the end of most wars, only to pass legislation in 1866 to increase the size of the military due to the threat of Mexico in the southwest and Indian uprisings in the west. This legislation created six regiments of African American troops. The six units would eventually be reduced to the four that would come to be known as the Buffalo Soldiers.

The Buffalo Soldiers were comprised of four regiments, the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries, and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry. The units were active between 1869 and 1942, during which time upwards of



25,000 men served in their ranks. Although the Buffalo Soldiers are most remembered for their contributions in quelling Indian uprisings in the

western United States, they also distinguished themselves in the Spanish-American War with service in Cuba, and in the Philippines in 1899.

Initially, two of the units were part of the occupation forces in the post-Civil War south, being stationed in North Carolina and Louisiana. However, because of intense opposition by white southerners, and under enrollment in

the two units, the units were combined, redesignated the Twenty-fifth Infantry and transferred to the Texas frontier. Infantry units stationed in Kansas and New Mexico were also combined due to under enrollment, becoming the Twenty-fourth Infantry, and subsequently transferred to Ft. McKavett, Texas.

Men of the Twenty-fifth Infantry arrived at their Texas outpost in 1870, and spent ten-years fighting Indians, making brief incursion into Mexico in pursuit of Mexican and Mexican-American desperados, as well as providing escort for Butterfield stagecoaches. They also assisted the Tenth Cavalry in their mission to rid eastern New Mexico of Native Americans. Although the six-month sweep of the plains was unsuccessful in removing Native Americans from the region, it was successful in surveying and mapping the area for the first time.

In 1880, the Twenty-fifth was reassigned to the Dakota Territory. Scouting patrols and stagecoach escort duties were traded for construction and repair of telegraph lines, and the guarding of railroad workers. The unit also assisted local communities when needed, such as providing disaster relief to 800 flood victims along the Keya Paha River in the spring of 1881. On a lighter note, the Twenty-fifth Infantry Regimental Band performed concerts in local towns, fostering goodwill between the unit and local residents.

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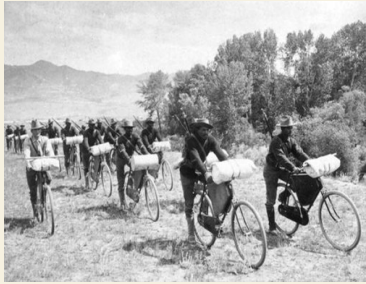
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T W E N T Y - F I F T H I N F A N T R Y R E G I M E N T

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The late 1880s brought with it another transfer for the Twenty-fifth, this time to Montana. During their assignment at Ft. Missoula, the unit tested the feasibility of using bicycles as transportation for infantry troops for the War Department. Nine men from the Twenty-fifth were assigned to the newly organized Infantry-Bicycle Corps, and sent on a 1900 mile, six-week excursion from Missoula, Montana to St. Louis. The War Department decided



against adopting the Infantry-Bicycle idea.

The onset of the Spanish-American War resulted in the transfer of the Twenty-fifth to Florida, and eventually Cuba. Racial tensions still ran high in the south, and the unit's

brief stay in Florida was not without incident. When tensions came to a head, it was not due to civilians, but white soldiers. A heinous act committed by members of an Ohio volunteer unit led members of the Twenty-fifth to forcibly intervene, leading to bloodshed on both sides. On June 6, 1898, both units boarded troop transports and left for Cuba.

For 56-days, the unit endured the sweltering heat, quickly realizing their wool and flannel uniforms would prove to be a liability in the tropical environment. Nevertheless, in spite of the many hardships they endured, the unit played a pivotal role in the battle at El Caney. The Twenty-fifth was also present at San Juan Hill, where the unit suffered more casualties than any other unit participating in the battle. By late August they were back on the mainland, landing on Long Island, with orders to return to the west. Companies were assigned to Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico.

Not long after the men of the Twenty-fifth arrived at their new assignments, they were once again reassigned; this time to quell the insurrection in the Philippines. Some Black leaders in the U.S. objected to using Black troops for suppressing Filipinos in their quest for independence. Filipino insurrectionist tried to elicit support from members of the Twenty-fifth by distributing pamphlets comparing their struggle for independence with the Black Americans' struggle for equality, but to no avail. The men of the Twenty-fifth performed their duty admirably, in spite of the fact that segregation and Jim Crow laws in the U.S. denied African American citizens of their rights.

Three years later, in 1902, the Twenty-fifth returned stateside, and was once again stationed in the western U.S.; this time in Nebraska and the Oklahoma Territory. Then, in 1906, they were reassigned back to Texas,

with units assigned to Ft. Bliss, Ft. McIntosh and Ft. Brown. Troops stationed at Ft. Brown became embroiled in what came to be known as the "Brownsville Affair."

On August 15, 1906, a white bartender was shot and killed, and a police officer was wounded. The soldiers of the Twenty-fifth were accused of the violent acts, and "evidence" was found by the townspeople to support their allegations. The soldiers insisted on their innocence. Because no one in the unit would identify the perpetrator, President Theodore Roosevelt ordered 167 men of the Twenty-fifth dishonorably discharged. Although national protests ensued, President Roosevelt did not reverse his order, barring the soldiers from payment of their pensions. In 1970, justice was finally served when a publication about the Brownsville Affair led the U.S. Army to reopen their investigation of the incident, finding all of the accused innocent. President Richard Nixon later pardoned all 167 men. On December 6, 1973, Congress passed legislation granting any surviving member of the Twenty-fifth Infantry who was dishonorably discharged a \$25,000 payment, and surviving widows eligible for a payment of \$10,000, imposing a five-year time limit for filing a claim.

In 1907, the unit was again transferred to the Philippines, for what was an uneventful assignment. They returned stateside in 1909, to an assignment in the Pacific Northwest, where they assisted in fighting a number of forest fires. With the outbreak of WWI, the unit received orders to Schofield Barracks, Hawaii Territory where they remained for the duration of the war. The



Some of our brave colored boys who helped to free Cuba.
Copyright 1906 by J. W. Davis

Twenty-fifth's final reassignment came in 1918, when the unit transferred to Ft. Huachuca in Arizona. The onset of WWII marked the end of the Twenty-fifth. It was absorbed into the U.S.

Ninety-third Infantry Division, along with two other regiments, creating the first all African American division in the U.S. Army.

The Twenty-fifth Infantry has a long an illustrious history. Comprised of soldiers, who themselves were treated as second-class citizens, the unit repeatedly rose above the slights and indignities they were subjected to and served their country in an exemplary manner. Their story is a testament to dedication to duty and selfless service. It is a model we, as American citizens, should all strive to emulate.

Reference: Buffalo Soldier Regiment, by John N. Nankivell, University of Nebraska Press, 2001

Post 9/11 GI Bill Update

Since its inception in 1944, the GI Bill has undergone several iterations, and the newest version of the Post 9/11 GI Bill has made additional and substantive changes. On January 4, 2011, President Obama signed "The Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010," ushering in a number of changes aimed at providing Veterans with more choices in educational opportunities, as well as extending those opportunities to certain National Guard members.

The payment of tuition and fees has been simplified; the benefit now covers all in-state tuition and fees at public schools, to include graduate training. Tuition and fees at private universities and foreign schools are capped at out-of-pocket expense, or \$17,500 annually, whichever is less. However, the Yellow Ribbon program still exists, so if a school participates in that program, tuition and fees exceeding the cap may be covered. Veterans who choose to attend non-degree, on-the-job or flight training, rather than an institution of higher learning, may now use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit to do so. In addition, fees paid for national admissions examinations, such as the SAT, LSAT, GRE, etc., are now reimbursable, as are fees for multiple licensing and certification tests.

Changes have also been made to the housing allowance benefit. One change that has created considerable discussion is the elimination of break or interval pay. This is no longer available under any VA education program; however, students do not simply lose this allowance, the entitlement that would be used for break pay is available for use in future enrollment. In addition, Veterans enrolled in Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) programs, but otherwise eligible for Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits, may choose to receive the Post 9/11 GI Bill housing allowance rather than the subsistence pay offered through the VR&E program. All of the discussed changes are effective August 1, 2011.



Other changes to the housing benefit, but not effective until October 1, 2011, include paying a reduced housing allowance to students enrolled exclusively in online classes. This allowance is $\frac{1}{2}$ the national average BAH for an E-5 with dependents, currently \$673.50. Prior to this change students enrolled exclusively in online classes were not eligible for a housing allowance. Students attending "brick and mortar" schools will also see a change in how their housing allowance is allocated. Those attending at greater than $\frac{1}{2}$ time will have their housing allowance prorated based on their enrollment hours rounded to the nearest tenth. For instance, students attending full-time will receive all of their allowance, but

if only enrolled $\frac{3}{4}$ time, they would receive 80% of their housing allowance.

Also effective October 1, 2011, National Guard members who serve full-time for the purpose of organizing, administering, recruiting, instructing, or training the National Guard, commonly known as Active Guard Reserve (AGR) and National Guard members who were mobilized on certain Title 32 orders will now be eligible for Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits, and any qualifying Title 32 service may be used to increase the percentage of eligibility. Finally, active duty members are now eligible for a book stipend. The new Post 9/11 GI Bill has a lot going for it. Veterans can now prepare for the career of their choice, whether that means attending a university, vocational training or apprenticeship, knowing all of their school related financial concerns are covered. For more information about the changes to the Post 9/11 GI Bill visit www.gibill.va.gov.

66th Anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima



On February 23, 1945 five Marines and a U.S. Navy corpsman raised the American flag atop Mount Suribachi on the Island of Iwo Jima. The battle of Iwo Jima raged for 35 days, and saw some of the fiercest fighting in the Pacific Campaign of World War II. Of the 70,000 U.S. troops who saw action, 6,822 were killed or missing in action, and 19,217 wounded.

BENEFITS DELIVERY AT DISCHARGE TEAM KOREA



From left to right: Emory Whitty, Chris Colby, Edgar West, Chong Caron, Steve Tucker, Kevin Nelson.

The day starts with a check of supplies. In the travel bag you will have VA benefits booklets, briefing material, handouts, claims forms, and a few other forms that may be needed for your briefing today. As important as the supplies for the briefing may be, so too is the location, your audience, and the facilities you will have access to. Welcome to Korea and being a Veteran Service Representative, (VSR), at the only Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD), site in Asia.

The BDD program is a joint VA/DoD initiative that allows military personnel to file for disability compensation between 60-180 prior to their release from active duty and also receive a single cooperative examination that meets both VA and DoD protocols. This allows for a timelier delivery of benefits following separation.

The Korea BDD site is located in the heart of Seoul on Yongsan Garrison. This places the office only 30 miles from North Korea and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Living and working on the Korean Peninsula as the face of the Department of Veteran Affairs comes with many challenges. Unlike most BDD sites the Yongsan office is responsible for providing services to the 28,000 active duty and countless numbers of Veterans, Family Members, and Widows/Widowers who make Korea their home. The job itself includes all the duties of a Military Service Coordinator as well as the many of the responsibilities of a regular VSR.

With over 8 briefing locations across South Korea, the team members are routinely on the road conducting Transition Assistance Program (TAP) briefings,

or assisting Veterans and Korean widows who work and reside in country. The BDD team is led by Edgar West, a seasoned leader who administers the programs operations to include interaction with various military leaders on a daily basis and he ensures quality service is provided to all who are seeking answers to questions or help with benefit applications.

To succeed at the mission in Korea, team members must travel to a location 12 miles from the North Korean border and conduct briefings at Camp Casey and on a few occasions, the team has conducted briefings within the DMZ. The BDD team also has to travel to reach Daegu, Chinhae, Pohaung, Pyeongtaek, and other locations using Korean transportation systems, driving the highways and back roads, or just catching the next military contract bus to a location from the Yongsan Garrison transportation terminal.

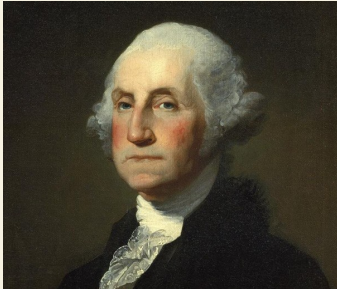
Travel is not a simple process. Some briefings require overnight stays and travel on weekends. Accommodations on base/post may not be available and finding a local hotel is the only option. During the travel or while in a local hotel, eating Korean foods is the norm as American cuisine may not be available.

The team members all have experience navigating the various trains, subways, taxis, and bus systems. Korean public transportation is stellar, however, they carry with them their business cards written in English and Korean in case of potential problems or in the event one of the Korean widows can't read English. Most of the team members know a few phrases of the language and have encountered few problems in their travels. However, should they encounter a language barrier they can always call Ms. Chong Caron, the in-take specialist who speaks Korean fluently. Ms. Caron is key to helping the office assist the many widows who don't understand the complexities of various VA programs and who have limited English skills. With her calm and pleasing manner and excellent knowledge of the programs she has aided numerous Korean widows in obtaining benefits they did not know they qualified for or had neglected to follow up on.

The rest of the team works on a daily basis in resolving inquiries, answering questions, conducting briefings, and processing applications. Team members also assist with the Foreign Medical Program, and most other programs a regional office would do

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Happy Birthday, George!



Did you know that on February 21, 2011 the country will celebrate Washington's Birthday – not "President's Day." The holiday originated in 1880, when Congress passed a law making Washington's

Birthday a holiday for federal employees in the District of Columbia. Five years later Congress extended the holiday to include all federal offices. The next change occurred in 1968, Congress passed a law to shift three federal holidays to Mondays; as a result Washington's Birthday was moved from February 22nd to the third Monday in February. An early version of the law included the provision to change the name of the holiday to President's Day, but that provision did not make it into the final bill. The law took effect in 1971.

The moniker of "President's Day" is largely a result of marketing. Businesses eager to take advantage of the three-day weekend to pitch sales began using the term President's Day in the mid-1980s. They eventually linked Washington's Birthday, a federal holiday, to Lincoln's Birthday, a holiday typically celebrated at the state level. This allowed sales campaigns to last over the week, rather than just over the weekend.

In 1999, bills were introduced in both houses of Congress to change the name of the holiday to "President's Day," neither bill made it out of committee. So, as you celebrate this February 21st, remember, it's not just a good excuse for a sale. It's a celebration of the birth of our most important Founding Father, George Washington, and his contributions and sacrifice that helped establish a nation founded on the principles of freedom and democracy.

VBA Today is an official publication of the Veterans Benefits Administration. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent that of the Veterans Benefits Administration

Transparency Continues in VBA

In our November 2010 edition of VBA Today, we reported the final rule adding presumptive service connection for ischemic heart disease, Parkinson's Disease and B Cell Leukemias, such as hairy cell leukemia, had taken effect on October 30, 2010. In January 2011, we began posting our progress in making claims decisions regarding these conditions.

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but on a somewhat limited basis. Often with the support of their home office (Pittsburgh) they can resolve issues before they develop into major concerns.

The Korea BDD office has for the past 9 years demonstrated to servicemembers, Veterans, retirees and widows a commitment by VA to ensure their benefits are awarded and protected. Should it be helping a service member submit a claim, a Veteran new to Korea learning about the Foreign Medical Program, a widow's continued entitlements, or a briefing on VA programs, the folks working out of the BDD office strive to have a positive impact on the mission; helping those who've served. Current BDD Korea team members include the OIC, Edgar West, 4 VSR's-Steve Tucker, Chris Colby, Emory Whitty, Kevin Nelson, and the in-take clerk Ms. Chong Caron.

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As of January 3, 2011, we had granted 23, 500 claims with an average award of \$18, 490. If you would like to follow our progress on this issue please visit <http://www.vba.va.gov/VBA/agentorange/reportcard/index.html> for the latest updates.

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