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Ian Michael Spurgeon, *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom: The 1st Kansas Colored, the Civil War's First African American Combat Unit*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2014. Pp. xii, 442. ISBN 978-0-8061-4618-8.

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Since 1956, when Dudley Taylor Cornish published *The Sable Arm*,¹ a history of African American soldiers in the Civil War, scores of books have explored virtually every aspect of the black troops' experience, but histories of particular regiments have been the exception rather than the rule. Ian Michael Spurgeon's study of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers demonstrates the rich returns that unit-level snapshots can offer.

Spurgeon is a historian with the Department of Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office in Washington and has previously written a sympathetic biography of James H. Lane,² a Democratic congressman from Indiana who underwent a political odyssey to the Republican Party after moving to Kansas in 1855. A vigorous proponent of free-soil, he became a prominent jayhawker who fought against proslavery Missouri bushwhackers. In 1861, when Kansas entered the Union as a free state, Lane left for the US Senate. He became the prime mover behind the First Kansas Colored Volunteers.

In sketching the history of the territory during the 1850s, the early chapters of *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom* make clear the shaky ground on which the regiment stood from the start. The bulk of the narrative follows the unit from the earliest enlistments in summer 1862 through the end of the war and beyond. Along the way, Spurgeon examines its battles both with Confederate forces and with doubters, delayers, and obstructionists on the Union side. At its birth, only two other experiments in arming black men were under way: Gen. Benjamin F. Butler's free-black Native Guard regiment that Confederates officials in Louisiana had organized and Gen. David Hunter's regiment of freedmen in South Carolina. In fall 1862, the First Kansas Colored Volunteers became the first such unit to engage Confederate forces, fully nine months before the storied assault by the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Colored Infantry at Fort Wagner, South Carolina. The book's ninety-one-page appendix contains a comprehensive roster of every officer and man in the regiment, listing the name, rank, dates of service, and (if recorded) age and home state. Spurgeon draws liberally from local newspapers, personal papers, and official records in Kansas and Washington.

Like President Lincoln, Lane was a free-soiler but not an abolitionist. At first he was content to "*Let slavery take care of itself*" (39), confident that Union victory would destroy the institution incidentally. But by fall 1861, he recommended that the president set a deadline for the rebels to lay down their arms upon threat of emancipation, an approach Lincoln adopted the following summer. Though far from being a champion of African American equality, Lane envisioned two benefits of tapping into the reserves of black manpower. First, black soldiers might relieve white soldiers of burdensome camp chores and, after proper training, join them in combat operations—which he described metaphorically as a transformation of "squires" into "knights" (46). Second, black troops from Missouri might return home to liberate slaves, recruit additional men, and otherwise menace rebel sympathizers.

As much as he loved the verbal sparring of the Senate chamber, Lane preferred actions to words. After organizing a self-defense force of government clerks in the capital, he wangled from the War Department an appointment as brigadier general of volunteers and began shuttling between Washington and Kansas. Lane's first few steps as a field general proved less than glorious. When Confederate Gen. Sterling Price threatened Kansas in September 1861, Lane's undermanned Kansas Brigade offered a few ineffective jabs. Then, during a controversial raid on Osceola, Missouri, Lane forsook the pursuit of Confederate guerrillas

1. Subtitle: *Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (rpt. Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1987).

2. *Man of Douglas, Man of Lincoln: The Political Odyssey of James Henry Lane* (Columbia: U Missouri Pr, 2008).

and targeted civilians instead, destroying property and liberating slaves. Commentators in both Kansas and Missouri roundly condemned the action.

Osceola precipitated Lane's fall from grace as a military commander, but by early 1862 he had recouped his losses sufficiently to be named "commissioner of recruiting in the Department of Kansas" (53). That summer he informed Secretary of War Edward M. Stanton of his success in enrolling white troops. He also sought permission to muster two black regiments into service, having been convinced that the time was right by the eagerness of black Kansans to get into the fight. When Stanton informed him emphatically that the president disapproved, Lane pressed forward anyway. Company by company, the regiment began to take shape, with officers and men soon occupying a camp and mastering the drill.

Although Lane managed to procure rations, tents, arms, and equipment, his creativity proved incapable of getting the men paid. Demoralization and desertion ensued. Some local officials also turned against the unit. Following one roundup of deserters, the mayor of Leavenworth announced the primacy of civil authority and arrested several officers "for disturbing the peace," contending that the men being pursued "had not been properly enlisted ... and the entire regiment was illegitimate" (101). Missouri's Governor Hamilton Gamble objected strenuously to the whole project. Heeding the fears of slaveholders in the western part of his state, Gamble informed President Lincoln that "organizations of negroes are forming in Kansas ... for the purpose of entering this state and committing depredations here" (74). The governor announced his intention to repel the "negro invaders and their associates" by force if necessary (75). The lack of official approval haunted the organization and the men associated with it.

As earlier, Lane's thinking and his motives were mixed but malleable. He despised slaveholders and delighted in the knowledge that black men, organized and armed by the United States, would help crush the rebellion. As the men gained experience and skill as a fighting unit, Lane's appreciation of their soldierly abilities grew. The officers were from the outset deeply committed to the work and to its political and military significance. The commanding officer, Col. John A. Williams, was an abolitionist who was eager to mold the men into an effective fighting force. Adj. Richard J. Hinton, another abolitionist, was a newspaper reporter who had regularly published accounts of the free-soil struggles in the New York press since moving to Kansas in 1856. Two black men, Patrick H. Minor and William D. Matthews, both leaders in the African American community in eastern Kansas, served as company officers.

The regiment first joined battle with the Confederate enemy in Missouri, shortly after taking the field in October 1862. It began with rebel guerrillas harassing a foraging party and ended in a clash of arms that lasted for several hours.

The importance of the skirmish at Island Mound, as it became known, had very little to do with the specific operation. By October 1862, Union and Confederate armies had fought such bloody battles as Shiloh, where 23,746 men fell killed and wounded over two days, and Antietam, with its single-day casualty record of 23,719. Two dozen dead and wounded on a farm in western Missouri hardly warranted mention beyond the local communities. Nonetheless, the small battle on this nondescript hill in the fall of 1862 marked an important milestone. It was there that a unit of black soldiers saw combat in the American Civil War for the first time. And they won. (97)

Victory on the field did not entirely lift the veil of suspicion that hung over the regiment due to its lack of official authorization. But that was not all. White Kansans, both in uniform and in civilian garb, continued to doubt the soldierly quality of the men and their ability to contribute anything of value toward preserving the Union and vanquishing the Confederacy. White Missourians, both Union and Confederate, viewed the unit with contempt. Unionists considered the black troops little better than marauders and slave-stealers, while secessionist sympathizers viewed them simply as insurrectionary slaves.

After Lincoln promulgated the Emancipation Proclamation, the War Department's opposition dissipated, and the First Kansas Colored Infantry was mustered into federal service on 13 January 1863. In his speech on the occasion, the mustering officer noted the unit's potential "to revolutionize the war, giving Liberty to the bond, and restoring the Union to greater than its pristine glory" (112). But the revolution had limits: Captain Matthews and Lieutenant Minor, the two black officers, were denied commissions on account of

their color. The protests of their fellow officers fell on deaf ears. Despite this setback, the regiment got back to work engaging the enemy. Indeed, over the remainder of the war, its combat record earned it “a place among the hardest-fighting regiments of the war,” Spurgeon concludes (7). The men paid a fearful price. Guerrillas from Arkansas flipped Union Gen. Benjamin Butler’s concept of “contraband of war” on its head and sold captured black soldiers into slavery (141). In mid-April 1864, when superior numbers of Confederate regulars routed the regiment at Poison Spring, Arkansas, wounded men and prisoners were summarily executed and their corpses desecrated. “The Confederate Choctaw soldiers roamed the battlefield mutilating and scalping the dead and dying black men. Even some white Confederates were taken aback by the carnage” (214). Wounded and captured black men met the same fate following other engagements.

The men of the First Kansas Colored also suffered from the indifference of Washington officials even after the unit was legitimized. The long-awaited paymaster did not arrive until July, seven months after its mustering in and nearly a year after its initial organization. By that time, many of their families had become virtually destitute and survived only by virtue of support from public officials, private benevolence, and the kindness of strangers. At the end of the war, officers and men mounted a campaign for retroactive pay both to receive their just due and to remove all lingering doubts about their legitimacy in 1862. Again, their petition met silence. Only in 1891, after determined lobbying by Colonel Williams, did Congress authorize the back pay. By this time many of the veterans had died.

Several points need clarification. The first concerns the home state of the earliest enlistees. Enlistment records for several hundred men reveal what Spurgeon describes as their “residence or birthplace” (279). Forty percent of them were from Missouri and 34 percent from Kentucky. Apart from the fact that residence and birthplace are not necessarily the same, the percentage from Kentucky seems inordinately high. Nonetheless, Spurgeon takes it for granted even while conceding that we do not know “how many traveled directly from Kentucky to Kansas on their own or had been brought to Missouri by their owners” (69). If the Kentuckians were recent arrivals in Kansas, this would surely have caught the eye of contemporary observers and left a trail in the anecdotal evidence, which it did not. Two alternate explanations appear more likely. One is a function of the information gathering process and resulted in data being entered inconsistently, with some enrolling officers recording the residence and others the state of birth. Another is a function of the movement of enslaved people between Kentucky and Kansas. Given the difficulties of escaping from slavery in Kentucky and crossing through Missouri in wartime, the men more likely reached Missouri before the war, either accompanying their masters or via the interstate slave trade. In either case, Kentucky may have been their state of birth but not their state of residence at the time of enlistment.

Second, Spurgeon barely mentions the Second Kansas Colored Infantry and says nothing about the all-black Kansas light artillery battery commanded by Capt. H. Ford Douglas, an African American abolitionist who had previously served in a white volunteer infantry regiment from Illinois. Matthews and Minor, the two spurned black officers from the First Colored Infantry regiment, ultimately received commissions as lieutenants under Douglas and served until the battery was mustered out of service in July 1865.

Overall, Spurgeon’s treatment is commendable. His prose is crisp and engaging, and the cast of characters is memorable. The book shows the value of regimental histories of black troops, and perhaps it will prompt similar studies. Regarding the larger contribution of the First Kansas Colored to the outcome of the war, its men helped tame the troubled borderlands where Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and the Indian Territory came together. They fought regular and irregular Confederate forces, always acquitting themselves honorably, often against great odds. They gained a reputation for steadfastness and bravery, which Union commanders came to admire, even if at times grudgingly. With each succeeding engagement, the men strengthened their own case for equality and respect. *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom* goes far toward restoring the honor their service merited.