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Review of *The Black Regulars, 1866-1898* By William A. Dobak and Thomas D. Phillips

Robert Wooster

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

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The Black Regulars, 1866-1898. By William A. Dobak and Thomas D. Phillips. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. xxviii + 360 pp. Photographs, illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

As part of its 1866 army reorganization bill, Congress, presuming that black troops would be less prone to desert than white soldiers, reserved six of the sixty regiments for black enlisted men. Although subsequent reductions allowed for only four such regiments in a forty-five-regiment army, the all-black units functioned as their sponsors had intended. Stationed largely in the West until 1898, the men of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry and Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry regiments deserted far less frequently and reenlisted far more often than their white comrades. Their story has often been told, but never with the comprehensiveness, sensitivity, and tough-minded analysis found in William A. Dobak and Thomas D. Phillips's *The Black Regulars, 1866-1898*. Combining a thorough scouring of printed materials with exhaustive documentation from court-martial testimony and pension records in the National Archives, the authors have crafted a readable and illuminating investigation not only of the black regulars, but of the army as a whole.

Dobak and Phillips demolish many of the myths and legends that have previously

clouded our understanding of the twenty thousand enlisted men who served in the four black regiments. They did not refer to themselves as buffalo soldiers, nor did they receive much attention from the contemporary press, white or black. Acknowledging that black troops faced considerable racial prejudice, the authors argue that "practical considerations" precluded any systematic institutional discrimination. The army was too small and its tasks too large to allow for any such luxury. Thus the army assigned officers and distributed horses, weapons, and equipment to the black troops no differently than it did to white units. In the army, the black regulars found an unusually impartial institution in a society plagued by racial discrimination and prejudice.

Naturally, the black regulars had their strengths and weaknesses. Dobak and Phillips argue that their stability and professionalism was counterbalanced by the shortages of men who could read, write, or carry out the skilled artisan crafts needed in the western garrisons. To have assumed that these men could have immediately overcome the problems stemming from ineffective army recruiting methods and the lack of education available to blacks in nineteenth century America, Dobak and Phillips contended, would be unrealistic. Thus the black regulars were good soldiers, but were no more "elite" than the men of other units.

Honest and enlightening, *The Black Regulars* deserves a broad readership.

ROBERT WOOSTER
Department of Humanities
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi