Constructing the Past

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Colonel Nathanial W. Daniels of the 2nd Native Guard Volunteers

Myles Black
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Abstract

A new officer it placed in the newly reoccupied Gulf Coast under command of a regiment of African Americans. Faced by discrimination and conflict among other units, Colonel Daniels bases his actions not by the color of another's skin, but by the duty he was assigned.

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After Admiral Farragut captured and occupied the Confederate city of New Orleans in April 1862, General Benjamin Butler was placed as commanding general of the newly created Department of the Gulf[1]. His first order of business included appointing three white officers to the newly formed Native Guard volunteers, which consisted mainly of the former slaves in the area. It was built up of three regiments to which he appointed seventy-five men to lieutenant or captain, a bold move in the eyes of a nation that had been unexposed to the world of integration[2]. Butler appointed Colonel Nathan W. Daniels, a resident of Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, to the position of commander in the Second Louisiana Native Guard. Daniels was originally from New York and Ohio, and the majority of his family lived in the North. At the outbreak of the war he joined the Army of the Ohio and returned to Louisiana after his tour of duty. He continued as the provost marshal's office of St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, and St. James Parishes, where Butler found him[3]. Little did Daniels know his position would lead him into a prolonged effort to fight segregation and racism throughout his ranks and time in service. This would include quarrels regarding segregation, friendly fire, and various forms of discrimination against his colored troops in the Gulf region. The Colonel fought through these attacks from his own side, however, and became an excellent leader and participant in the advancement of equal treatment for blacks during the Civil War.

The Native Guard was a main point of interest in not only the public but also the high ranks of both Armies. Although originally a Confederate unit, it turned Union after the complete occupation by the North. Abolitionists believed it was a great accomplishment and a step in the direction of equality. The outfit gave current slaves a sense of hope and a goal in their time on plantations. In the capital, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton saw it as "the perfect opportunity to strengthen the numbers of forces and ease the occupation"[4]. In addition, General Butler considered the manpower a necessity to continue efforts of control in the area. He stated, "I need reinforcements very much…Indeed we are being threatened with an attack on the city of New Orleans…If it comes at all imminent I shall call upon Africa to interfere and I do not think I shall call in vain."[5] On August 15, 1863, Richard Irwin, the assistant adjutant-general, made a report of the number of colored troops raised in the Gulf region, totaling 7,699. This number included those in Colonel Daniels'

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[1] Weaver, C.P, ed. *Thank God My Regiment an African One* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1998), xvi.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 14.

[4] Ibid., 9.

[5] Ibid.

unit[6]. Butler himself didn't approve in the arming of blacks, but he considered light-skinned free blacks to be much different. On the other hand, many more democratic northerners objected to the arming of free blacks. Some believed that this would provoke the south into deeper rebellion. This would lead to Confederate leaders that wanted to control the political situation at home and influence the upcoming election in the north by insisting Lincoln's action towards freeing slaves was a major stepping stone towards peace.[7] Others knew that the integration of blacks, free or not, would increase uneasiness and commotion within the ranks of white soldiers. This was something in which the Colonel had much experience during his campaign on the Gulf.

Ship Island was a small sand strip ten miles off the coast that was used mainly as an outpost for prisoners and a place for ships to lay anchor. The island was a "barren sand patch…once held by Confederate troops, abandoned in September as untenable; the scene just now of a steady, ominous build-up of Federal troops and an in-gathering of many supply vessels."[8] Of course there was no action taken towards the Federal presence because of the "certain" attempt to take the city from the North. Also, the fact that Butler was previously "an old time Democratic politician, who less than two years earlier had tried to get Jefferson Davis made President of the Unites States"[9] lessened the chance of an invasion from the Gulf. The desolate island was an ideological for Daniels and his troops; colored troops were usually assigned to hard labor work away from the action. The island was considered so separated from the mainland that many prisoners were contained there. After the unexpected occupation of the city, the Federal troops met with hostilities among the civilians. One incident includes a woman screaming for joy as a funeral procession of a dead Union officer went by. Her punishment was "imprisonment and uncomfortable lodgings on desolate Ship Island."[10] This hard labor consisted of fortifying the island with new batteries, coordinating with supply vessels, and the guard of a few hundred prisoners. Upon Colonel Daniels' arrival to Ship Island on January 12, 1863, he knew he had "now come to a drearier duty on this God-forsaken Isle."[11] He had only begun to imagine the hardships that were coming with his tasks on the Island.

Colonel Daniels came to the island to replace Colonel Henry Rust and the 13th Maine Regiment U.S. volunteers with seven companies of his La N.G. and came under command of two companies of the Maine regiment. Colonel Rust had given strict orders to keep the companies separate, for he knew the trouble that would come with integration. Daniels ignored the request, and

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[6] Lt. Col Robert N Scott, *War of the Rebellion Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. XXVI, Vol. I (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), 684.

[7] Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 148.

[8] Bruce Catton, *The Centennial History of the Civil War.* Terrible Swift Sword ed. Vol. 2 (Gardon City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1963), 167.

[9] Ibid., 247.

[10] Ibid., 395.

[11] Weaver, 47.

ordered a consolidation of all the troops that included battalion drill, dress parade, and camp and guard duties. In this case, black officers had given orders to white lieutenants of the New England outfit, but were refused because of their color. The white officers were arrested under insubordination. When the command fell to the next ranking sergeants, they asked their fellow troops if they would follow under the Native Guard officers. Like their officers, they refused, and were also arrested. Daniels wrote, "Placed under arrest all of the Commissioned Officers and most of the Privates of the Companies of the 13th Maine Vol at this Post for Disobedience of Orders."[12] This action, fourteen days into Daniels' command, reflects Daniels' disregard of race in relation to rank. These troops were disbanded and taken ashore for evaluation. Another incident involved the sailors of the gunboat USS Jackson and sentries of the Native Guard. Daniels explains, "Sailor ashore, caught in the act of committing a serious offence. Guard attempted an arrest, but were outnumbered by the Tars, and they succeeded in getting into their boats, and the sentinel could (not) get any assistance. The Sentinel however, put his bayonet into Jack."[13] This confrontation between a black soldier and white sailor on the USS Jackson would later come to haunt Daniels and his men. Even more prejudice and pressure met with the black officers in the guard. On February 3rd, 1863, General Nathaniel Banks approved a three-member examination board to assess the capabilities and knowledge of the officers of his detachment. The board was created as an attempt to gradually remove the black officers under his command because of the sensitive issue raised from headquarters. In response to the actions to General Banks' board, the line officers from Daniels' regiment, mostly light-skinned, free blacks convened and signed a petition. Their listed complaints ranged from enduring "the heaviest guard duty ever known on the Opelousas Railroad to continually erecting Batteries, Magazines, and Fortification, working both day and night on the island."[14] The officers agreed that with all the labor work assigned they had little time to learn about the military. Banks responded to their petition stating that they were a "source of constant embarrassment and annoyance to the white officers."[15] Daniels mentions nothing about the dilemma in his diary, mostly because he wanted his officers to prove themselves worthy in the eyes of the white officers. If they were to succeed with the interrogations, Daniels thought they might be given more respect. In one of his entries he stated that, "there are many rough diamonds among this race, and what they need is only cultivation and opportunity."[16] Daniels was always willing to aid the blacks in their education by ordering books for those curious for knowledge, but not enough to treat them like children. One thing Daniels would not stand for, however, was prejudice. When one of General Banks' captains was removed from his post due to unfair

[12] Weaver, 48.
[13] Ibid., 58.
[14] Ibid., 35.
[15] Ibid., 36.
[16] Ibid., 64.

treatment, Daniels wrote a letter to him complaining that "his dismissal a great outrage upon the Gentleman, and a disgrace to the American service, and Respectfully requested that he might be resorted to his original position immediately."[17] After an encounter with the enemy and what was considered to be a victory for the black troops, Daniels wondered if they would ever get the recognition they deserved. In mid-April he wrote, "Would like to know whether a correct Report had been published or not Whether The Press will over come their unjust prejudice against colored troops sufficiently to enable them to do them Justice."[18] Manning stated that, "In light of the dangers black Union troops faced from the Confederate enemy, the scorn many of them encountered from white Americans on their own side proved all the more galling."[19] This was a clear example, and Daniels knew it. He was probably one of the few that realized the potential of the black soldiers.

Colonel Daniels' troops would only get one chance to prove themselves worthy in combat during their calling. On April 9th, 1863, Daniels' regiment was assigned to a reconnaissance mission in Pascagoula, Mississippi, where a small force of Confederates was thought to be in control.[20] Early that morning the colonel, two companies and two observers rendezvoused with the USS Jackson to land in Pascagoula. Daniels and his men laid picket around the hotel in the town when they encountered Confederate cavalry. Daniels exclaimed that, "the large force outnumbered us five to one, and though greatly outnumbered & without cover succeeded in fully repulsing them."[21] Skirmishes continued through out the day, with little help from the Jackson. At one point Daniels ordered one of his men "to go aboard and ask The Army Officer to commence firing."[22] The Jackson threw three shells, but to little effect, "appearing to care little whether we were overcome or not."[23] At this point in the day Daniels realized that his black troops not going to get the chance to be compared to white troops, other than those whites on the confederates and sailors supporting them. He felt as if his troops were isolated, facing racism from all around him. However, his leadership prevailed and he never let down his guard with the enemy. His main hindrance was from his own side, from the gunboat Jackson. As a column of Daniels' troops were mobilizing, the ship fired a single round, which killed five men and wounded seven others. The idea occurred that the Jackson was getting revenge as they vowed to "repudiate against the difficulties that had occurred on the Island between soldiers and sailors, if The Jackson was ever called upon to assist she would fire at us instead for us."[24] During the confusion and discouragement created by the friendly fire, Daniels was able to rally his men and fall back to the wharf in order to

[17] Ibid., 78.
[18] Ibid., 89.
[19] Manning, 161.
[20] Weaver, 40.
[21] Ibid., 80.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 81.

remobilize for the possibility of another landing. As they withdrew, Daniels yelled to the Captain of the Jackson, "Sir your last shot killed instantly five men and wounded a large number."[25] Daniels knew this was a cowardly action because they "dared not to come within rifle shot of the enemy or make an attack."[26] In his General Report to General Sherman, however, he stated that the gunboat "unfortunately threw a shell directly into the column moving out of the wharf."[27] Daniels took a very prudent stance on the situation when it came to dealing with the higher rank. Perhaps he knew the small possibility of proving the USS Jackson at fault, due to the obvious racial differences between each unit. On the other hand, he might have not wanted anyone to feel sorrow for his troops as if they were unequal to the whites. If that were the case, it would be another time that Daniels wanted his troops to prove themselves without simultaneously holding their hands. In his statement to the troops after battle, he concluded that they had "demonstrated to its fullest extent the capacity-the bravery-the endurance and the nobility of your race, and taught the malignant foe that a century's oppression had not extinguished your manhood or suppressed your love of Liberty."[28] Manning quotes a Sergeant James Trotter from the fifty-fifth Massachusetts, "I mourn the fact that the Union Army intended to deny a poor oppressed people the means of *liberating themselves*."[29] Daniels was aware of the Union's intentions; he completely disagreed with them and planned to do everything in his power to repudiate them. On April 20th, 1863, eleven days after the expedition, Daniels sent a letter to President Lincoln "asking that he would issue orders for the payment of our troops."[30] This was the only time there was any mentioning of payment of his troops in the diary, and the fact that it was proposed to the president of the Unites States signifies the little help Daniels received from his closer superiors. The immense lengths he went to, the enormous sacrifices he made, and the pure dedication to the successfulness of his men made Colonel Daniels one of the best commanders of a black regiment after the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War.

In conclusion, Colonel Daniels left his home to an unclear future of stress among a world of white supremacy. Because of his determination, he was able to struggle against lack of faith, ample injustice, and the inexperience of new leadership to succeed in advancing the idea of black equality in what would be an entirely new nation with new beliefs and standards. Without men like Daniels, many blacks would still be fighting the heat outside on plantations instead of overcoming prejudiced violence within society.

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 82.
[27] Ibid., 85.
[28] Weaver, 86.
[29] Manning, 162.
[30] Weaver, 94.