

Connecticut's own glory

By JOHN LACY
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State blacks battled bravely in Civil War

All the soldiers of the 29th Regiment, although dark-skinned, felt the full responsibility of their mission," wrote Alexander H. Newton in a diary he kept during the Civil War.

Like the 54th Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry — whose story is told in the new feature film "Glory," which opens today at area theaters — the 29th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry Regiment was composed of black soldiers commanded by white officers.

Newton — born the free son of a slave father and a free mother in North Carolina — enlisted in the regiment at age 26 as a private in New Haven on Dec. 18, 1863. He rose to the rank of commissary sergeant. The regiment fought in some of the war's fiercest battles and afterward performed garrison duty until October 1865 — six months after the war ended — when the troops returned to Hartford.

After the war, Newton became a Protestant minister and authored the only history of the 29th regiment. In 1910, he turned his daily journals into an autobiography, "Out of the Briars" (Ayer Co. Publishers Inc., \$15.25).

Before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation took effect in January 1863, there was no inclination in the office of Connecticut Gov. William A. Buckingham to enlist blacks as soldiers.

Buckingham had been assailed by critics in the summer of 1862 for ordering a military

draft that did not include blacks. Replying to criticism, the governor said: "It seems to me that the time may yet come when a regiment of colored men may be profitably employed. But now . . . it would create so much unpleasant feeling and irritation that more evil than good would result."

But after the proclamation, which freed the slaves and called for blacks to be "received into the armed services of the United States," Connecticut and Massachusetts organized black regiments.

Young Newton was working as a bricklayer in New York in July 1863 when a violent four-day draft riot resulted in the beatings of many black New Yorkers. The riot was generated in part by Irish-Americans angered at the idea of being drafted to fight in a war to free the slaves, who they feared would come North to compete for jobs and social space.

Newton ran "like a wild steer," he later wrote, to catch a boat for a safe haven. Landing in New Haven, he found work with another bricklayer.

It was on Nov. 23, 1863, that Buckingham called for black volunteers to form the 29th regiment. Newton enlisted three weeks later.

In March 1864, the unit received a U.S. flag from "the colored ladies of New Haven" and left by transport ship for Maryland, according to William Gladstone, a photo-historian from Westport.

Gladstone has studied the role of blacks in the Civil War through photographs and artifacts from the period. An exhibit of his collection, pertaining to the black military experi-



Connecticut Historical Society

■ Alexander Newton enlisted in the 29th Connecticut Infantry Regiment in 1863.

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State blacks also battled in Civil War

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ence, is on display at Gettysburg National Military Park Museum in Gettysburg, Pa., through May.

Connecticut's 29th entered the war in Virginia in August 1864. Black and white troops fought at Chaffin's Farm, a battle so savage that 37 men — including 13 blacks — were awarded the Medal of Honor, Gladstone says.

In his diary of the battle, Newton recalled a "narrow escape" when a 20-pound cannonball bounced over his head. "Many rebels were wounded, killed and taken prisoner," he wrote.

"We had the same muscle, the same strength, the same heart, the same conscience as the white man. We were fighting under the same flag and the same God.

"I remember the words of Gen. Saxon, 'Boys, if you want to make good soldiers, you must look a white man straight in the face and let him know that you are a man.'

"This gave us fresh courage to press forward as soldiers to certain victory," Newton wrote.

About 180,000 blacks fought in more than 190 battles in the Civil War, and about 68,000 of them were killed or wounded, according to The World Book Encyclopedia.

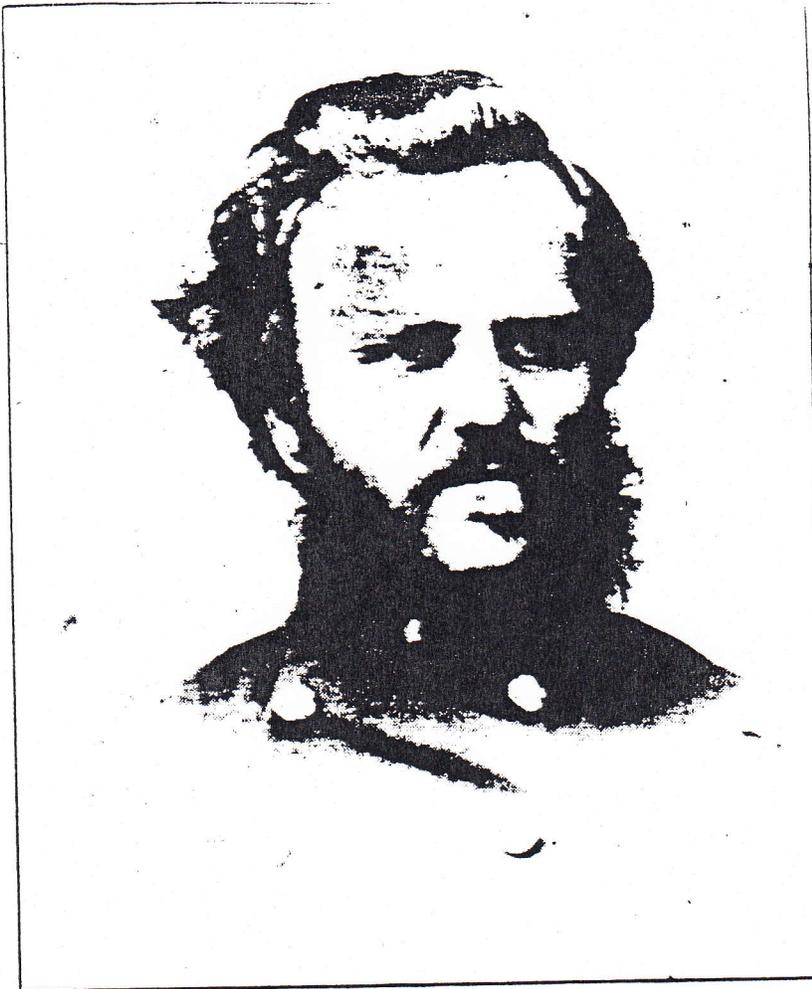
Lt. Col. Oliver T. Beard, who commanded one of the first black companies to see combat, reported that "the colored men fought with astonishing coolness and bravery."

Like Col. Robert Shaw, whose leadership of the 54th Massachusetts blacks is memorialized in "Glory," the commander of Connecticut's 29th was white, a combat veteran and an extremely sensitive person — Col. William B. Wooster.

Wooster grew up on a farm in Oxford and studied law at Yale University. After President Lincoln issued his famous call for 300,000 volunteers, Wooster joined the 20th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry Regiment and was commissioned a lieutenant colonel on Aug. 22, 1862, his 41st birthday.

For distinguished gallantry in the battle of Chancellorsville, Va., in May 1863, he was made a colonel. Almost completely surrounded by enemy forces, he tried to escape by mounting two stray horses in succession, but both were shot out from under him.

He was captured and imprisoned. Released in a prisoner exchange, Wooster rejoined his outfit until March 1864, when he was assigned to



Courtesy of William Gladstone

Col. William B. Wooster was commander of the 29th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Wooster grew up on a farm in Oxford and studied law at Yale University.

be commander of the blacks in the newly formed 29th regiment.

Wooster's relationship with his troops is described as extraordinary in J.L. Rocky's 1892 book, "History of New Haven County."

"His care of the soldiers under him was constant, painstaking, self-sacrificing," the book says. "He could take no rest himself unless his soldiers were provided with the food and clothing and accoutrements they were entitled to; and if need be, he would jeopardize his popularity in certain quarters by complaints at headquarters, if the supplies were not forthcoming. His bravery and ability of command, and his devotion to the well being of his men, made them confide in him to the fullest extent and love him."

The historical sketch reports an incident after the battle of Chancellorsville to illustrate Wooster's tender-heartedness.

Although he was a prisoner, "He induced the rebel commander to allow him to go under guard back over the field that he might see who of his men were killed and gather up messages and mementoes from the wounded and dying to send back home to their friends and families."

Newton, who continued to fight even though he was saddened to

learn that his brother had been killed while serving in a federal outfit, had kind words in his journals for his white officers, and he described his concern for officers and soldiers who were wounded.

About 100 of the 29th regiment were lost (meaning wounded, taken prisoner or died), Newton wrote, in 24 hours of fighting near Richmond in September 1864 in "a disastrous battle, probably the most disastrous I had ever witnessed."

All told, 24 members of the regiment were killed in the war, according to regiment records.

Writing in the Jan. 8 and 15 issue of The New Republic, historian James M. McPherson examines the question of whether the movie "Glory" can teach history despite some inaccuracies. His answer: Yes.

The movie is the most accurate yet in telling the story of blacks in the Civil War, says McPherson, author of "Battle Cry of Freedom: The Era of the Civil War" (Oxford University Press, \$35), which won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1989. Their fight "achieved a new dignity, self-respect and militancy for the former slaves who fought for the Union. It helped them achieve equal citizenship and political rights — for a time — after the war."