



THE MEN OF COMPANY L

BLACK ARMY SOLDIERS SERVED IN EARLY SKAGWAY

by Michael Engelhard

SOME LIKELY WERE BORN AS SLAVES. Their brothers-in-arms a year prior had stormed San Juan Hill under withering fire from their side's 10-barrel Gatling guns, seizing a Spanish-held blockhouse and trenches alongside Roosevelt's "Rough Riders." Too many died in that Cuban maelstrom and more got wounded. Their regiment, the 24th Infantry, established in 1869, forged Medal of Honor recipients. It had shielded railroads, escorted supply trains, chased horse thieves, and thwarted Victorio's Apaches who called the men "Buffalo Soldiers," for their courage, skin color, and curly, dark hair.

On May 20, 1899, while Company H chased poachers in Yosemite, Company L disembarked from S.S. *Humboldt* at Dyea, a booming staging ground and Klondike gateway.

At the gold rush's height, the previous year, the territorial governor had requested a militia be raised to police rowdy stampeders and those who preyed upon them. Within months, the War Department had dispatched four infantry companies to this northern hotspot. A contingent helped arrest the Skagway conman "Soapy" Smith's gang members and

brokered a dispute between Chilkat Tlingit Indians and Jack Dalton, who'd blazed a toll road from Lynn Canal near present-day Haines to the Yukon's headwaters.

Company L, freshly arrived from Seattle, relieved one of these units. A forest fire fanned by a stiff glacial wind that July charred Camp Dyea and its wharf. The rear guard barely escaped in a small boat. Captain Henry Walter Hovey, his 112 soldiers, and families of some enlisted men relocated 10 miles to Skagway, where, initially tenting, they occupied their predecessors' camp.

The Yukon's population of 30,000 engulfed 100 African Americans eager to escape the mainland's prejudiced restrictions. "J.H. Woolfork, a colored miner," the *Dawson Daily News* reported, "is the owner of a bench claim opposite N. 44, which he is industriously working, taking out good pay." Yukoners perhaps used to ebony faces among them marveled at the sight of them under union-blue forage caps.

In Skagway, Company L went on fire patrols, learned Morse-flash lantern

Above: Company L stops for a photo on Skagway's Fifth Avenue on July 4, 1899.

signals, notified the town of President McKinley's assassination, and saluted him with rifle fire and mourning sashes. It received a Gatling "in case of war or riot." An exact seaboard boundary with Canada had not yet been surveyed, taxing relations with the famed, red-frocked Canadian North-West Mounted Police, the "Mounties" who monitored Chilkoot, Chilkat, and White Pass traffic

to the goldfields. During cold snaps, the men drilled and studied in their quarters—light duty compared to the 24th's bloody Texas Staked Plains grind. They sat in the Baptist Church's Sunday school and fielded one of the town's first three baseball teams, playing Juneau and Bennett also. They retrieved murder victims, staged a musical mocking race stereotypes, and rescued folk from the 1901 fall flood, shoring up the collapsing riverbank.

As at Fort Douglas, Utah, and San Francisco's Presidio—which existed in a distant, sunnier world—garrison tasks comprised marching and marksmanship practice, building improvements and maintenance, clerical work, and post-school lessons. With brillian-tined hair, polished belt buckles, bayonets, brass buttons, and boots, having donned wool sack coats, sky-blue pants, and white cotton gloves, they lock-stepped down unpaved Fifth Avenue on July Fourth before battling in the tug of war. They attended formal concerts and funerals. Their days, except weekends, closed with tattoo drummed at 9 p.m., followed by taps.

Town showed a nasty visage when many burghers opposed a desegregated club. "Line Drawn: Objections Arise to Colored Men in YMCA," the headline read. Jim Crow reigned in America, and minstrels performed blackface.



Left: Company L cooks behind Skagway's Hotel Astoria prepare halibut. The troops temporarily lived in the hotel after a forest fire burned them out of Camp Dyea. **Below:** A mountain goat hunt at Warm Pass near Skagway, in 1901. The two African Americans likely are men of Company L.

These men, Private James G. Cole of Company B had told the *Oregonian* a year earlier, "did not stop to ask if it was worthwhile for them to lay down their lives for a country that has silently allowed her citizens to be killed and maltreated in almost every conceivable way." Cole argued for the importance of Black officers commanding Black subalterns.

Those buffalo warriors had skulls to match, unlike docile cattle. Barred from a white madam's "bawdy house," Private Robert Grant hurled a rock through a window and was sentenced to three months jail and discharged dishonorably. Bluecoats brawled with miners and sailors and sometimes, as soldiers will, with each other.

Most, like Augustus Snoten, who'd reenlisted in 1899, finished their term with clean records. In fact, Black troopers deserted less frequently than their counterparts. Company L celebrated the mustering out of some men with wives "radiant in party dresses...gallantly swung to the best dance music that Skagway could afford." Captain Hovey's farewell, an all-white affair, was held separately.

In May 1902, three years after landing at Dyea, Company L, including Snoten, promoted to Corporal, transferred to Fort Missoula, Montana. Alaska didn't see African American units again until WWII, when regiments still commanded by white officers engineered a 1,500-mile ALCAN-Highway segment through the boondocks in merely nine months. 🇺🇸



The author a lifetime ago worked with African American teens in a Buffalo Soldiers program, practicing the 9th and 10th Cavalry's mounted drills and, as "Sergeant Horse," rode in reenactments.