

Captain Horace W. Bivins: A Soldier's Soldier

He was a soldier, and a good one, with a career that could have filled many an adventure novel. He learned his trade fighting Geronimo. One of the best marksmen in the US Army, he turned down Buffalo Bill's offer to join the Wild West Show. Instead, he charged up San Juan Hill next to Teddy Roosevelt. And then he came home to Billings.

Born to a farmer on the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay in 1866, Bivins enrolled in the Hampton Institute at age 18, studying military science. In 1887, he formally enlisted in the Army.

Bivins' first assignment was with Troop E of the Tenth (Colored) Cavalry. He joined his regiment at Arizona Territory, just in time to be part of the fight against the Apaches. The Tenth took a prominent role fighting against Apache Kid, Geronimo, and other southwestern chiefs. While in Arizona, Bivins honed his innate shooting skills. He became a gunner, and was promoted to corporal in 1890.



The Tenth was next sent to Fort Custer in Montana, beginning a six-year stretch in the state. Fresh from the heat of Arizona, they arrived in a blizzard, and marched to the fort through a foot of new snow. They also served at Fort Assiniboine near Havre. This was a relatively uneventful period for the Buffalo Soldiers, who were called upon to deal with a railroad strike, and to deal with some minor issues with the Cheyenne and Cree tribes.

The Army had established a Distinguished Marksman program in 1884. Since its inception through 2009, 3,275 Soldiers have earned the distinguished rifleman's badge and 1,740 Soldiers have earned the distinguished pistol shot badge, while 392 Soldiers have been awarded both badges. Bivins was the first to earn both, which he did in 1894, while still stationed in Montana. During his time at Fort Custer, Bivins had met Claudia Browning of Billings, the woman he would later marry.

Buffalo Bill Cody heard about this marksman, and in 1896 offered him a chance to shoot with his show. At the same time, he expected to be appointed as ordnance sergeant, and thought it a better choice.

The Tenth was sent to Cuba after the Spanish-American War erupted. Bivins was assigned to a Hotchkiss gun battery team. The first big engagement of the war was at Las Guasimas, where the Tenth first met the Spanish troops as they withdrew toward Santiago. A few days later came the battle of San Juan Hill. Bivins earned a Silver Star for his actions at San Juan. The other six members of his unit were wounded or killed,

and he handled the one-pounder Hotchkiss on his own, firing 72 shells from the gun, which recoiled six feet after every shot. It then had to be pulled back into place, reloaded and aimed. He did this though a bullet had grazed his temple earlier in the battle, and knocked him out. Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders got the glory, but the First and the Tenth Colored Cavalries of the regular Army flanked those volunteers going up. Roosevelt himself said that "but for the timely aid of the 10th Cavalry, the Rough Riders would have been annihilated." Bivins was appointed squadron Sergeant Major.

In 1901, his squadron was posted to the Philippines. His team went to the island of Samar, and was tasked with keeping the area pacified and patrolled, and taking any insurgents prisoner. They returned the following year, for five years' service in the western states. This included a stint at Fort Missoula, and he married Claudia Browning in 1904. He was ordered back to the Philippines in 1906 for two years.

Bivins retired from active duty in 1913 and settled in Billings, near Claudia's family, where they raised their two sons and daughter. After his retirement, Bivins was closely involved in developing and writing for a history of his unit. *Under Fire with the Tenth U.S. Cavalry* traced the history of the African-Americans in military service during the period of 1866-1899. His contribution was detailed and eloquent.

When World War I began, he was recalled and commissioned as an infantry Captain. He served as a supply officer at Camp Dix. During the war, he had been offered a commission from Liberia to train their Army. He retired again from the Army in 1919.

At the outbreak of World War II, Bivins – now in his 70s – offered his services once again, but was turned down. Bivins had to watch his son Paul go to the Pacific instead. Claudia died in 1943, and his son Paul was moving to Philadelphia in 1949. Captain Bivins was expected to join him there. Though many sources indicate that he died in 1937, he actually lived to the age of 94, and was buried in the Baltimore National Cemetery in 1960.

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