

**Cathy Williams:**  
**The First Female Buffalo Soldier**  
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## Cathy Williams: Buffalo Soldier

The United States of America will always be known as the land of the free and the brave. Its history attests to this assertion and the marked and unmarked graves of its fallen heroes are more than enough proof to the unwavering spirit of its people – ready to do whatever it takes to make this nation a mighty citadel of democracy and freedom.

It is not a very popular notion that aside from the Europeans - generally speaking, these are the Caucasians who came to a New World awash with promise – there are others who came not by their own free will and yet made history like the rest. These are the African slaves forcibly brought to the American shores, a people that would later play a major role in the history of the new nation.

The African-Americans who had come to call America their new home contributed much not only in farming and working in the many industries that came about. They also serve in the U.S. military. They first saw action in the Civil War and since then the U.S. Armed Forces allowed the former slaves to become a part of the regular fighting force. One of their earliest successes occurred when they join in combat with a group called “The Buffalo Soldiers”.

There are many stories concerning African-American bravery, dedication, and perseverance in the battlefield. But only a few can match the audacity and commitment displayed by one former Negro slave. A woman who enlisted herself in an all male unit called the “The Buffalo Soldiers”, one of the toughest fighting forces in the annals of the United States Armed Forces.

This paper will look into the life of Cathy Williams and the circumstances that made her decide to join the Army. This study will also look into the circumstances that directly or indirectly prepared her for the tough military life especially for a woman like her. At the end she

inspired many and was a shining example of what the late John F. Kennedy echoed in one of his great speeches; that it is better not to ask what the country can do for an individual but what that same person can do for his or her country.

### **Negro Slaves**

The present day United States of America was established by its hard working people, toiling the land, creating opportunities for trade and moving goods and services throughout the world. Most of them are not native born, they were immigrants, sons and daughters of foreigners who came from overseas and chose to stay. Truly, the US is a land of immigrants. But it can be argued that there are two kinds of immigration that occurred. The first one belongs to those who with their own free will, braved the ocean crossing to come from as far as Asia and Europe. They came for their own personal reasons and nobody forced them to do so.

The second group belongs to slaves who were forcibly taken from their homeland, made to board ships and forwarded to traders and slave owners residing in the New World. After more than a hundred years had passed, the Negroes had settled in their new home. They were able to adapt to a new country and soon their number grew. The Negro slave became an indispensable cog in the economic machinery of this adopted land.

So when the Civil War erupted, slave owners, slave traders, and other interest groups fought to the bitter end. It is also in this chapter in U.S. history when the Negro slave became more than just an economic factor. This time African males became a part of war and ultimately began to actively participate in charting the destiny of their people.

### **Women in War**

It is obvious that even though women could not carry arms nor fight toe to toe in fierce combat, they can serve the Army in other ways. Their contribution can ultimately win battles because a hungry and demoralized Soldier is no use in the war front. A woman's motherly ways

is sorely needed not only in binding up wounds but most importantly in lifting up a fighting man's spirit. Now, what if a woman's motherly instinct is suppressed and mimics the more violent ways of men? This ceases to be a theoretical question in the life of Cathy Williams in the year 1866. But before all that it is worth checking her personal background because doing so would surely explain the unexpected – a black woman joining a 19th century U.S. Infantry.

### **Cathy Williams**

A poet made the following tribute to this extraordinary woman and the poem goes like this (Kirkpatrick, 2002, p. 39):

Then the Civil War ended and Cathay was finally free  
And in seeking out her freedom, She found her place in history.  
Her own way she wanted to make and a burden to no one be  
So as a Buffalo Soldier she joined up in the 38th U.S. Infantry.

The poem, in a few statements was able to explain the high points in Ms. Williams' life and gave a clue as to the reason why she had to join the Army. First of all she was born a slave and that was her lot early in life. Yet she did not allow the circumstance surrounding her life to deter her from pursuing what she believe a woman of color should be – to live free and become a productive citizen.

### **The Buffalo Soldiers**

According to Ron Field, in July of 1866, the U.S. Congress authorized the forming of African-American units and he wrote:

...blacks were organized into two cavalry and four infantry regiments, which were commanded by white officers ... The mounted regiments were the 9th and 10th Cavalry, and the foot regiments were the 38th, 39th, 40th, and 41st Infantry. All were quickly

nicknamed the “Buffalo Soldiers” by their Cheyenne and Comanche enemies. Until the early 1890s these troops constituted approximately 20 percent of all regular forces on active duty in the American West (2004, p. 3).

It is interesting to note that at the time that the U.S. government had authorized the formation of a military unit with an African-American component, it also this very moment that a former female slave felt that her life is at a crossroad. Cathy Williams was looking for a way out of poverty, the stigma of slavery, and a life purpose that will allow her to transcend her past and her present circumstances.

### **Enlistment**

It is fair to say that Ms. Williams was very desperate. There were not enough opportunities for former slaves in a nation still healing from a devastating war. Yet it is easy to understand what gave Cathy Williams the confidence to go and enlist. First of all she knew the U.S. military like the back of her hand.

Jessica McElrath in her article concerning African-American history elaborated on this little known detail; that when the Civil War broke out a newly emancipated Ms. Williams, “...was placed into service for the Union Soldiers. While serving the Soldiers, she experienced military life first hand” (2007). It is very much probable that she was very familiar about the enlistment process and therefore knowledgeable if there were any flaws in the system.

As it turned out she knew that there was a loophole in the recruitment process. The recruits were not required to undergo any form of physical examination. Taking advantage of the loose standards at that time Ms. Williams presented herself to the officer-in-charge on November 15, 1866. How she was enlisted was made clear by Ron Field who wrote, “Being tall and powerfully built, and calling herself, *William Cathay*, she easily fooled the recruiting officer

of the 38th Infantry, who was anxious to secure volunteers to fill the ranks of his regiment” (2004, p. 10).

As mentioned earlier it was a time after the Civil War and most probably most of the men were already weary of war. They may have wanted to have peace after a bloody struggle. But there is a need for to expand and in order to do that the government has to obtain a significant number of volunteers to ride into the frontier and establish communities in areas where American Indians dwell. This is the reason why recruiting officers were pressured to hit their quotas. Moreover, violence is breaking out in many parts of the land and Soldiers are needed to secure the peace.

Aside from having the self-assurance that she can handle the Army for she once worked as a cook and laundress during the Civil War, there is another factor pushing her to enlist. Ms. Williams is in need of money. When the Civil War ended, her employment opportunities dried up. But she is too proud to go begging for it or to go back to slavery.

As Kirkpatrick would put it, “...she joined the newly formed black infantry with her cousin and a friend because she wanted to make her own living and not be dependent on relatives or friends” (2002, p. 42). There were no other open doors for her; she has to take this one. And she received what she wished for. She became a part of the 38th Infantry, at Jefferson Barracks, the largest military installation west of Mississippi (Tucker, 2002, p. 92).

### **Drills, Duties, Disguise**

It is one thing to get enlisted; it is also another thing to successfully evade detection. Philip Tucker was able to put it succinctly when he asked, “...how would she continue to disguise her sex when in the close proximity of so many men, especially in the beginning of her service” (2002, p. 92). She had to master marching and rifle drills. And on top of that she had to

carry heavy loads while doing all of these things she had to move, talk, and act like a man, every mannerism suppressed to protect her identity.

Mastering the drills and being able to run like a gazelle while strapping on pounds of equipment and supplies will not mean a thing when the Soldiers retire to their barracks. So Tucker asserts that aside from appearing tough the following would have been routine for Ms. Williams:

To ensure that she gave no hint of her sex, Cathy probably kept her uniform blouse buttoned to the top. She also no doubt kept her hair cut short. In addition, Private Cathay probably adopted masculine habits of drinking, talking about sex with women, smoking, chewing tobacco, cursing etc... (2002, p. 92).

From Mississippi, her company moved to Cummings, New Mexico on October 1, 1867 and according to Ron Field, "...for the next two years she helped protect miners and immigrants from Indian attack" (2002, p. 10).

Aside from guarding the fort it is also very probable that Ms. Williams was asked to do the following, as these are the regular duties given to the Buffalo Soldiers, and he wrote, "Besides their battle record, they performed the everyday task of protecting settlers, travelers, and workers alike. They built roads and erected forts, plus thousands of miles of telegraph poles, all of which brought civilizations to the American frontier (2002, p. 3).

### **A True Heroine**

Cathy Williams is a heroine because she served in the company of heroes. The Buffalo Soldiers were one of the most highly disciplined and most effective strike forces in the annals of the U.S. Army. In fact the Buffalo Soldiers "had participated in approximately 130 actions against hostile Indians in Kansas, Indian Territory, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Dakota

Territory as well as in Mexico. Twenty-two members of the various black regiments were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for extreme bravery and courage under fire” (Field, p. 3).

After taking all the pain, suffering, and enemy fire like a man, William Cathay was discharged on October 14, 1868, two years after enlisting (McElrath, 2007). She was a heroine indeed in her own right – in her service to her country, in offering protection to those who could not fight for themselves and in showing former slaves that there is a way out of their predicament. But her real strength was in full display 23 years later when she came forward to claim her pension. She was denied but she took it in stride never bitter even if the Army that she served for years refused to give her what she truly deserved.

### **Conclusion**

Enlisting to become a part of the legendary “Buffalo Soldiers” is like joining an elite fighting unit. These men were indeed one of the best and they prove their bravery time and time again when they served the U.S. government as enforcers of the law and brokers of peace and progress in far flung areas. But it can be said now, that one of them is a woman.

The bravery and strength of Cathy Williams is not merely measured by her joining the U.S. Army. It can be gauged by the way she lived her life. This was made plain when she decided that her color and her past could not be an excuse for mediocre living. Cathy Williams’ life story must be retold and commemorated especially in times like this when America desperately wanted role models for its next generation of parents, leaders, businessmen and the average American struggling to find their place in this world.



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