

## Eagles on Their Buttons: a Black Infantry Regiment in the Civil War

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## Book Notices

*Eagles on Their Buttons: A Black Infantry Regiment in the Civil War*, by Versalle F. Washington. Shades of Blue and Gray Series. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999. xv, 113 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY JENNIFER HARBOUR, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

Versalle Washington takes his title from a famous quote from Frederick Douglass, who noted in his wartime speeches to northern free black men that joining the Union Army would earn them the right to a new type of *full* U.S. citizenship. Washington's carefully researched, albeit diminutive, study focuses on Ohio's Fifth Regiment of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Perhaps the most famous of these USCT units is the 54th Massachusetts, the subject of the 1989 film, *Glory*. The fame accorded to the 54th does not go unnoticed by Washington, who notes that the Fifth Ohio was significantly different from other USCT regiments because it comprised mainly free northern men, not freedmen. Since these men had been raised free in the North, Washington posits, their chief reasons for joining the USCT included securing their political and legal equality and proving their manhood, rather than escaping southern bondage.

Washington's study is a welcome addition to the small collection of works dealing with African-American enlistment during the Civil War. It is one of a handful dealing exclusively with a midwestern regiment of the USCT, and would thus be of great interest to readers interested in midwestern, social, military, or African-American history. Washington's clever use of newspapers and unpublished letters reminds students of history to continually search for innovative ways to find primary material. Ohio's enlistment numbered more than 5,000 men, while Iowa had just over 400 in its USCT ranks. It would be fascinating to compare the motivations of African-American enlistees in a number of free states.

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