



## The Price of Freedom



The fall of 1862 set into motion a philosophical change in the recruitment of Union soldiers to fight the Civil War. For the first time Negroes enlisted in the Louisiana Native Guards and the Corps D'Afrique. These recruitments took place four months before the Emancipation Proclamation. The opportunity for Negroes to fight and die for their freedom did not come easy. Using former slaves as soldiers evolved over painful stepping stones of hostility, discrimination and ill will. Some Northerners, despite their abolitionist views, did not like Negroes, nor wanted to associate with them on any terms of equality.

## The Battle of Port Hudson

The 1<sup>st</sup> Louisiana Native Guard was comprised of well-educated, professional freemen. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Louisiana Native Guards were runaway slaves. The officers for the three units were black and white. The Spring of 1863 found the Louisiana units camping in mud, first at Algier and then at Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The only assignment the soldiers had been given since the day of mustering was one of drudgery and the hard physical labor of building forts and repairing bridges. As the war continued to go badly for the Union, Lincoln realized if the Emancipation Proclamation was ever to be a reality, the Negroes would have to be given the chance to fight for their liberation.

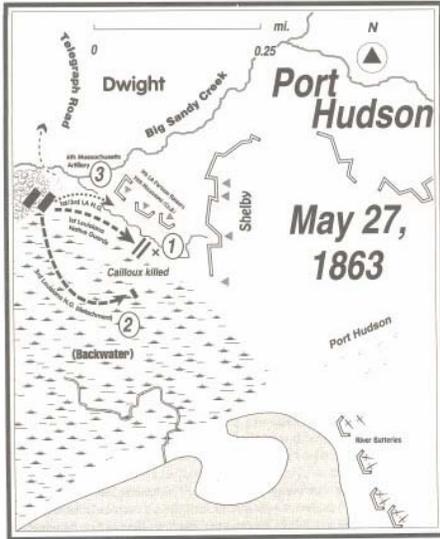
The first use of Negro troops took place along the Mississippi River. Two fortified cities enabled the Confederacy to maintain control of 200 miles of river. Vicksburg, to the north, and Port Hudson, to the south, were heavily fortified, with high bluffs and commanding views of the river. These strategic cities had to fall in order for the Union to control the Mississippi River and split the

Confederacy in two. The first chance for the Native Guard units to fight came at Port Hudson, Louisiana.

Port Hudson's three-mile long fortified line was built by slave labor. Assaulting this line would not be easy. The line was in a sweeping arc with the Mississippi River's 80-foot bluffs guarding the backside. Along the semi-circle was abatis (a series of felled trees with their branches sharpened). This area was supported by a series of rifle pits and outlying battery works. The fortifications were twenty feet thick and protected from assault by a fifteen-foot ditch. The forts had names such as The Citadel and Fort Desperate. The line was armed with 20 siege guns and over 100 artillery pieces. Port Hudson was a formidable wall. Added to this fortified line was an excellent rear facility for the prompt shifting of troops and artillery from one point to another along the line. On the morning of May 27, 1863, Union troops faced this wall.



**"...Or Report to God the Reason Why."**



1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Louisiana Native Guards' Assault at Port Hudson, Louisiana, May 27, 1863

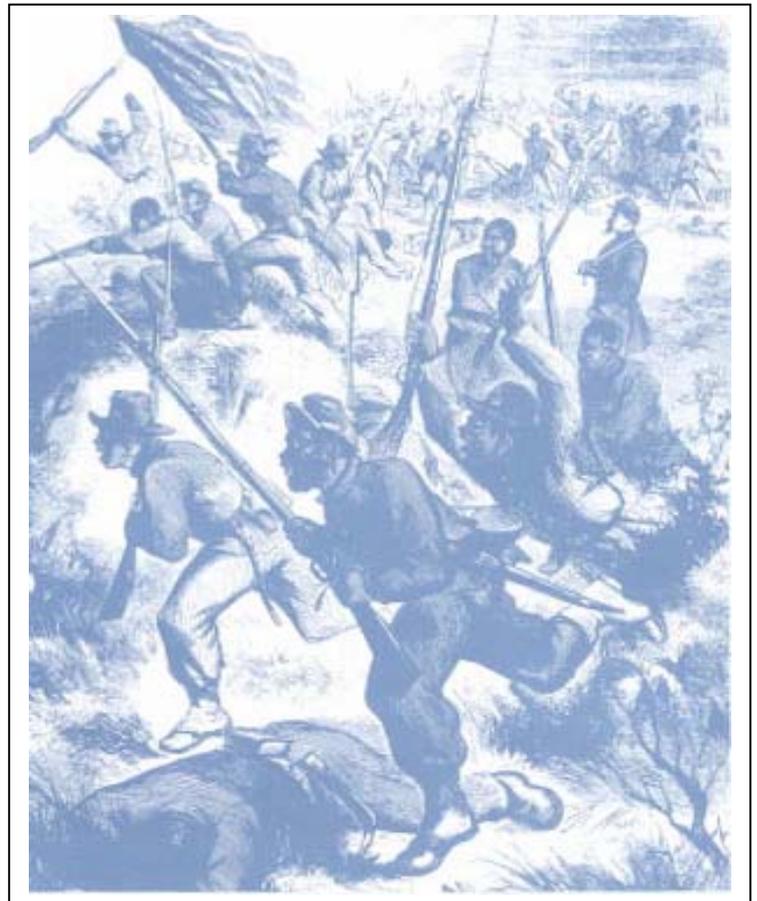
For months the black soldiers had been subjected to ridicule and harassment. The white soldiers in blue resented the prospect of serving next to the Negro soldiers. "Niggers won't fight!" became the cliché. So on the morning of May 27<sup>th</sup>, the battle for Port Hudson took on a new meaning. No longer was it simply a conflict between Southerners and Northerners, or between Blacks and white Southerners. This historic first would answer the questions: *Could Negroes fight? Would Negroes fight?* The future of the Negro soldier was at stake.

As the Union batteries shelled the line, 1,100 Negro soldiers formed four columns to advance 1.5 miles to the front line. To their right was an impassable swamp connected to the Mississippi. To the left was abatis, thick underbrush, ravines and gullies, and in front a pontoon bridge. The position was made impregnable by an engineered use of the river to create an area called the backwater, filled with water twenty feet deep. But the most ominous feature was the high bluff with its artillery pieces. To turn back now would mean dishonor, possibly a coward's death. This was not even considered - they had come to prove the worth of the Negro soldier. Gripping the unfurled banner was Color Sergeant Anselmas Planciancois of the 1<sup>st</sup> Louisiana with the orders to "protect, defend, die for, but do not surrender these flags." Sgt. Planciancois responded, "Colonel, I will bring these colors to you with honor or report to God the reason why."

At 10 A.M., the bugle sounded, "Charge!" The Confederate rifle pits and batteries opened fire with everything they had. Over and over the volleys came, direct fire on the front and crossfire from two batteries to the left and right. The black soldiers wavered, halted, then rushed for cover only to reform and again advance. The scene was repeated over and over, until the line was stopped by the backwater from the river. Sgt. Planciancois was decapitated and fell still clutching the banner. Six men died for the honor of carrying the flag. Finally after 4 assaults, the retreat order came and the siege of Port Hudson began.

As a military operation, the assault was a failure, but the behavior of the Negro regiments was a bright spot. Their conduct had been closely observed, because Port Hudson was the first real battle in which Negro troops were used. Had they retreated under fire, the future of the Negro soldier would have been jeopardized. Three hundred men from the Native Guard units were killed/wounded or missing. The history of that day proved to the United States Government it had found in this group of men effective supporters and defenders of a country in which they were not even citizens.

*"Now," the flag-sergeant cried,  
 "Through death and hell betide,  
 Let the whole nation see,  
 If we are fit to be,  
 Free in this land; or bound  
 Down, like the whining hound -  
 Bound with red stripes of pain  
 In our old chains again!"  
 Oh! what a shout there went  
 From the black regiment!  
 George H. Boker*



**Sources:**

- Port Hudson, Vols. I & II - David Edmonds
- The Negro in the Civil War - Benjamin Quarles
- The Sable Arm - Dudley Cornish
- Civil War, Vol. II - Shelby Foote