

The Independent

March 15, 1919: p. 368

WITH THIS BLACK MAN'S ARMY

BY DAVID LE ROY FERGUSON

Mr. Ferguson is a negro preacher from Kentucky who has been at St. Nazaire, France, during the war, in charge of Y.M.C.A. work with the negro stevedore troops there



The stevedore band that entertained not only the men but also the French people

“**M**OST of the American colored stevedores never saw a ship until they started for France,” says the *Stars and Stripes*, the American army's overseas newspaper, “but they have proved their worth as cargo handlers. Working in the hold of a ship with the August sun raising heat waves from the deck isn't the easiest job in the army, but they are breaking records at it, and it hasn't dampened their sunny disposition, either.”



“On the same day that the American infantry, trekking in the wake of the retreating Germans, gained the outskirts of Fismes, colored stevedores unloading a ship at one of the base ports unostentatiously won an important victory by discharging 1200 tons of flour in 9½ hours, setting a record for the A. E. F. and a pace which is rarely excelled on the best equipt docks in the United States. The same group of stevedores over a period of five days discharged an average of 2000 tons of cargo per day from one ship, a record more notable still.”

“It is a twenty-four hour a day grind at the base ports now, where thousands of American colored troops are putting ashore the million and one articles, big and little, which are necessary for the maintenance of a modern army.”

“With the same force with which American line units, in the last few weeks have made their debut in a big scale warfare, have the other branches of the service upon whose efforts depend the potency and effectiveness of the men in the trenches accomplished their less spectacular but equally important work.”

This vast army of stevedores in France is composed mostly of men who volunteered at the first call. The first men who came



With This Black Man's Army



other men received, the stevedores shared equally.

They were soldiers and took great pride in the fact that they belonged to Uncle Sam's army. With all the display that goes with drills, reviews and inspections, saluting an officer, flag raising, and perchance, the grand parades — with companies swinging into line, and the martial music of bands, the stevedores always stepped proudly and lively enough

to suit the keenest military eye for discipline and fine training.

The stevedores also took great pride in their companies, their camps and all that belonged to the army, and because their work and contribution was always emphasized by officers as being essential to the boys in the trenches, the name stevedore finally became a dignified and distinguished term, representing part of the great American Army.

Naturally, many amusing stories and jokes, with the war and France as a background, will feature the colored boys over there. One hears many funny "bon mots" and puns and clever stories attributed to the colored soldier, until it seems that they brought and made most of the humor connected with the grim, frightful war. With that native talent and fun-making nature of his, the colored soldier was quick to see whatever was humorous over there: the war, the army, the firing line; even the serious and dangerous things that make others sad, he made the base of jokes, and oftentimes ridiculed, so that even his dangers and tasks seemed to have been less difficult.

As to cheerfulness, the stevedore camps had their share of songs, music and that gaiety which characterizes a cheerful race. One thing that most impress those who were willing to observe, was that all thru those stress-

ful days, and anxious, when the strain of work and the handling of cargoes and ammunition for the front became really one long grind for the stevedores, morning, noon and night, one could see them thru all sorts of weather and hours, swinging by companies into line, marching bravely to the difficult tasks, singing or whistling.

Frequently the base commander and other distinguished officers visited the camps and the public gatherings and Y. M. C. A. buildings. I have heard them repeatedly emphasize how much the army at the front depended upon the work and loyalty of the stevedores at the base. They also spoke to them in the highest terms about the way in which they were performing their tasks, without the show and excitement that inspire the soldier at the front.

OldMagazineArticles.com



With This Black Man's Army

© COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION FROM U. & U.

TYPES OF NEGRO ENGINEERS WHO WERE SUCH IMPORTANT FACTORS IN OUR OVERSEAS FORCES.



They were doing the drudgery, the dull routine, the monotonous labor; still they were the foundation and groundwork upon which the whole army was built. They also were American soldiers and heroes!

Such patriotic sentiment to encourage them. I believe acted also as a spur to keep the morale up to the highest, and the energy with which they worked was all the more vital because they responded readily to the principle of patriotism that urged them on, believing that thru their efforts all the more quickly, victory and peace would come.

Even after the armistice was signed and their thoughts naturally turned homeward, a new appeal was made to them to which they are responding loyally. The Army of Occupation now needs supplies and food, and the stevedores are over there still at work, far into the night.

When it is considered to what extent with regard to different states and communities the huge army of stevedores was organized, and the various types and conditions of men represented ranging from city bred young men of school training to those often illiterate, from hamlets and small farms way down South, it is remarkable how they were all brought together and welded finally into a fine industrial army that made a wonderful record.

Personally, I am amazed and frankly proud at this development under army discipline of hundreds of young men from crude farm hands, very raw material, indeed, to earnest, industrious soldiers, erect and alert, and I believe in them may be found a type of industrious and useful citizen for the future America.

They have learned remarkable lessons in this experience of war times, aside from the broadening view of life that travel and foreign contact give; the lessons of self-control, cleanliness, promptness, obedience, efficiency, and the value of time.

Another agency with the camp that greatly influenced the men and urged the development of mind, body and soul was the Y. M. C. A. In each camp wherever the stevedores were stationed there soon were established very homelike and commodious Y buildings, all equipt with the same regular, standardized furnishings and supplies as others, under the able direction of colored secretaries. That the men received additional help and advantage here also is well recognized. Our programs were elaborate and interesting. These fine influences must have reached the minds and hearts of the stevedores, and I know scores of men who came to the army illiterate, who were able after the training received, to write their first letters home.

(Images on this page were pulled from "The American Negro in the Great War" (1919) by Wm. Allison Sweeney)