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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ HISTORY

And Be Free

Barry Roy Nager
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“The 54th did well and nobly…They moved as gallantly as any troop could, and with their enthusiasm they deserved a better fate,” said a white general about the black 54th Massachusetts Infantry (the same regiment depicted in the film *Glory*). Though rightfully deserving of praise for their service in the Union army, the unit received little recognition. And so it continued to be true of African Americans in the armed forces over the next century. This and other unsettling facts are brought to light in Barry Roy Nager’s enlightening historical work, *And Be Free.*

Nager’s work is really two books in one. Though primarily a concise overview of African American history, the book is also an exposé of valor on the battlefield. The author, a retired law practitioner and historian, brings to focus a more factual representation of African Americans than has been depicted in mainstream history books. As a chronicler of black soldiers, Nager provides eye-opening accounts of some of the defining events in US history, beginning with the antebellum period and ending with the Vietnam War—events that ultimately helped bring about civil rights.

And Be Free chronicles the heroic actions of black soldiers in the Union Army, the Buffalo Soldiers in the Cavalry, and the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II. Even though they fought—and died—for their country, black servicemen were forced to serve under oppressive conditions, characterized by racial discrimination in segregated armed forces. Jim Crow policies and racial prejudice persisted between World War I and the Vietnam War. White officers held on to their beliefs that African Americans were cowardly and deficient when it came to fighting and conducting combat operations. Excluded from high-ranking positions, blacks were relegated to infantry combat or manual labor—digging ditches, building bridges, or loading cargo ships. Rarely were valorous African Americans accorded the recognition they deserved. Segregation would drag on until whites recognized that their brothers-in-arms were displaying repeated acts of valor on the battlefields. It was not until 1948, under President Truman, that the nation finally desegregated the military.

Nager’s revelations are unsettling, but will be enlightening for readers of history who may know little about the role that African Americans have played in preserving American democracy. Though the story is indeed a bitter one, Nager refrains from lamenting the injustices that befell African Americans. He skillfully leaves readers to reach the inescapable truth.

Students of military history will find the exposés of combat moving and will doubtlessly be interested to learn that these soldiers had to fight for equality within their battalions while fighting an external enemy. Though the book is well-researched and filled with supporting statistical data, the sources are neither directly cited nor listed in a bibliography. Readers are left to wonder if the data was derived from the suggested readings provided at the end of some of the chapters.

GARY KLINGA (June 23, 2011)

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