

On May 18, 1903, at the Presidio of San Francisco, after three years of continuous service with Troop K, Ninth Cavalry, Private George Metcalf of Frankfort, Kentucky, was discharged from the U.S. Army.

What kind of day was it that shone on Pvt. Metcalf on his last official hours as a soldier? Did a fog roll in, obscuring not only Fort Point but also the thoughts of a man who found himself illuminated by a final sunrise? No more bugles sounding duty. He was now free to decide for himself all that he would do on the following day. There must have been a sense of release, but also a little giddiness, and fear, accompanying that freedom.

There were probably no parades in his honor, no confetti was flung from the rooftops, throngs of admirers did not speak his name, for he was just another soldier, his duty done, about to move on in life to a new adventure. History would soon forget him, and he would become just another name on a government ledger.

On the muster rolls written for his troop, the following notation was made:

Discharged at Presidio of S. F. Cal., May 18, 1903 per expiration of term of service. Discharge and Final Statements given. Due soldier for clothing not drawn in kind Three dollars and Sixteen cents (\$3.16) For deposits Ninety Dollars (\$90.00). Character "Excellent".

Those few words do little to encompass the range of feelings that must have been like heavy seas rolling through George Metcalf on that day. How would you have felt after three years in the Ninth Cavalry? For those years your life would have been under the control of superiors. They would have determined when you awakened in the morning, where you slept at night, what you did during the day and how you might die tomorrow.

You were in the Army. You were a soldier. You followed orders. God was a first sergeant who didn't particularly like you. Heaven was a place you went to when you could manage to sleep. Your family was Troop K. These men were your brothers. You would die for them, and they would die for you. This was not out of love, but out of necessity. It was the nature of survival.

Now after three years of taking orders, in a moment as thin as the paper you signed, you were on your own, no longer part of that unit, that family. You were abruptly an ex-soldier, you were alone with only a few choices.

Which did you make, George Metcalf? Did you imagine yourself working a ranch in Montana, riding horses,

or mules, when you wanted to? Were you hoping to get back home, back to Frankfort, Kentucky? Was there someone there waiting for you? What was her name? Or did you just want to be home, to not move elsewhere, but be there fully again?

Were these the thoughts that swept through you on May 18, 1903? There was no way you could ever imagine that just about the only thing that would remain of you on that day would be a brief list of final dispensation. "Character, Excellent."

Certainly there is more written somewhere in the universe about Pvt. Metcalf, but until the summer of 2001, it was about all that I knew of him. He was simply one of hundreds of buffalo soldiers who served in Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks in 1899, 1903 and 1904. For each of these men perhaps a similar day would dawn, or perhaps they would die, still a soldier, somewhere alone or with a comrade close by.

Whatever their final moments may have been, and wherever they breathed their last, they all passed away slowly into this forgotten story. However scattered they may be now, this history binds them together in death as surely as that hard military discipline bound them together in life.

People whose history has been forgotten suffer a different kind of death. Not only are they physically absent, their legacy is also elsewhere. In another essay I referred to this place as the "one hundred year hole." The hole is that void where lives collect in documents and reports. Nothing organic remains; no bones, no tissue; you're just a shadow cast onto faded correspondence stored in boxes and vaults. A hole by any other name.

Most of these soldiers are in that hole. Their destiny was to fall, or be lowered, without much ceremony into that hole. It's dark in that hole, and crowded, so dark that there's not even a memory of light.

Down there in all of that is, or rather was, George Metcalf. He probably would have remained there forever, at least for me, had it not been for Larry Montgomery, a seasonal ranger here in Yosemite Valley.

Last year, as I was sitting in my office going over Ninth Cavalry muster rolls, which are lists of soldiers in particular troops and commentary about their status, Larry happened to stop by. Larry's from Kentucky. You can hear Kentucky when he speaks. It's not just in his words; it's how they're packaged, his sentences move in a way that's Kentucky. George Metcalf was from Frankfort, Kentucky, so I wondered if his speech sang in a similar way: "Hey,





A portrait of Private George Metcalf sent to the author by his descendant, Derrick Graham.

Larry.” I said. “There’s a soldier here from Kentucky. Why don’t you take a look?”

I handed over the muster rolls and Larry read what was written and exclaimed, “George Metcalf! The Metcalfs? I know the Metcalfs from Frankfort. They’ve lived there for over 100 years!”

I thought he was joking. He wasn’t.

All of last summer I walked around Yosemite Valley presenting my living history program, aware that I had found the relatives of one of Yosemite’s buffalo soldiers, or perhaps closer to the truth, one of those relatives, through the agency of Larry Montgomery, had found me. Do we discover history, or does history discover us?

Sure, Private Metcalf never served here in the Sierra Nevada, but he was a soldier with Troop K which ventured to Yosemite barely one month before he was discharged from the Ninth Cavalry. Because in those days it took the U.S. Army nearly two weeks to travel from San Francisco to Yosemite, and it was logical for George Metcalf to finish his time in the military at the Presidio. George Metcalf remains part of that story. Like the rest of Troop K, he was a veteran of the Philippine-American War garrisoned at the Presidio of San Francisco. Like many of his peers, he was from the South. They had served together, sharing hardships and the deaths of fellow soldiers. The memory of George Metcalf certainly journeyed through the high country of Yosemite though the man did not.

I had found George, or had been found by George. George Metcalf has claimed me just as surely as I have claimed him. My research turned into a lifeline tossed into a dark hole, someone tugged at the other end, and now he’s slowly being pulled free. What must that feel like to be forgotten for nearly a hundred years, and then to suddenly have people saying your name, wondering about you again, as if you’d never been forgotten?

Of course, for the Metcalfs, George was always a part of family history. A few days ago I spoke to Derrick Graham, the great-grandnephew of George Metcalf. Mr. Graham is a schoolteacher in Frankfort, Kentucky. He told me that George never married, and that he was the only brother of four sisters, but all I could think of in that moment was that I was on the telephone with a relative of Pvt. George Metcalf.

In those few minutes, this history was no longer super-intendent reports, patrol reports, muster rolls, letters, or miscellaneous correspondence. It had become a conversation about someone real, someone who had sisters, someone who was remembered by people who were alive. Somewhere there was a heart beating, and a breath taken. There was blood flowing. There were tears.

George was alive for me while I was talking to Derrick Graham, alive in a way that he had not been in over three years of research. At what point does something far away awaken inside you? When does the temperature of a story shift from zero to hot? Now it was personal. Now it was the way he walked, the way he spoke, how he held a cigar. Did he smoke? Now it was the dreams he had, those forgotten dreams. It was a whole different thing. I had found George. George had found me.

For years I had been reaching my hands out into darkness, and when I least expected it, someone had clasped them, held them. I was no longer solely in this time, and George was no longer a creature of that time. A bridge had been built beneath us, and we had crossed somehow, and met amazed in the middle of that span.

What do you say? What do you ask? You feel close, but you’re a stranger. You ask simple questions; you wait, listen and hope to hear something you hadn’t thought of before. A phone call. Time slows. A voice. Talking about the dead. The living. What’s in between? You are.

Now the history no longer sleeps in yellowed documents, but shines in the eyes of George Metcalf. They look out into this world through his living cousins, nephews and nieces. He was never forgotten in those households. What is it all made from, those nails, the glue and bolts that keep a story together? It can all fall apart elsewhere, but in every family memories can be kept like heirlooms, without shelf or cabinet, there behind the eyes.

Yet, I have only found a part of George. The totality of a life can’t be captured in a photograph. He stares out from a fragment of a time and a place. He can’t be

restored completely without the restoration of the world that he knew. But before the arrival of this gift, this portrait that has bound us both in something living, there was little to hold.

One day soon, perhaps, I shall look up from my desk, and there before me will be Derrick Graham, a stranger who is not a stranger, a man from Kentucky with a story to tell. He may not use words, because not all stories are put down on paper. There is a language in the way he stands on that day, in the manner of his speech. The contours of his face speak about a history he has never lived. He will extend his hand, and I will take it, and then, finally, I will have come as close as I can in this world to finding George.

It won't be the end, though, because history never has an ending; it just goes on like a river. What nourishes you can also sweep you away. A blessing can fall silently as prayer.

Who now prays for George Metcalf, or the thousands who left the Old South to find something, or run from something that had no name? In what places today still dwell those ambitious, yet fearful shadows that eventually found refuge in the Old Army? One by one they drifted into that system like leaves to a stormy sky and were reborn as privates, corporals and sergeants. They became cavalymen or infantrymen. They were given a new purpose. New goals and objectives were laid before them and their opinion was not asked. They rode, they marched, they drilled, they fought, they slept and they died.

Each of those men has a story to tell. Some of those

stories weave together Yosemite, Sequoia and the Presidio of San Francisco into one narrative. The Buffalo Soldiers of the Sierra Nevada are just a few of those stories. All through the South, countless other George Metcalfs wait to speak. All they need is someone willing to listen.

When I peer into the muster rolls that house all the names, all the lives in this story of wilderness protectors and national parks, I glimpse in that black and white space at least 400 other shadows that once were living men. They still wait to be found. Most are like George Metcalf in that they were from the South, but some hail from other places, northern cities like Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago; or western cities like Kansas City, Denver and San Francisco. What are their stories? Who prayed for them? Who prays for them now? Are flowers still strewn over their graves, or do they lie forgotten in the shade of trees?

Once upon a time the Ninth Cavalry rode in Yosemite and Sequoia. These mountains heard their laughter, their cries. The shadows remember them. The shadows speak.

This is the beginning.

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African-American cavalymen, called "buffalo soldiers" by Native Americans for the texture of their hair, patrolled Yosemite during the turn of the century.



CELIA CROCKER THOMPSON