NEIGHBORS

Blacks in gray

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A
history buff and a veteran of numerous Civil
War re-enactments, Randy Holden was told years ago when told that free
blacks had actually enlisted with the
Confederacy in New Orleans.

"At first I didn't really believe it," Holden said. "I
said, 'That's not true. It makes
about as much sense as Jews
fighting for Nazi Germany.'"

But it was true, and the more
Holden looked into it, the more he
found the facts at odds with the his-
tory he thought he knew. He also
decided their story had not been com-
prehensively told.

Holden is trying to change that. He
is researching a book he plans to
write about
Louisiana's black Civil War soldiers.
War records dem-
ont that 24,032
blacks from
Louisiana fought for the Union —
more than from any other state,
North or South. Serious histori-
ans know about
these, but the gen-
eral public does
not, Holden said.

"I'm really just
doing it to set the record
straight
and let everybody
know what hap-
pened," Holden
said.

To protect New Orleans
What happened is filled with ironies and little-known
facts, starting with the blacks wearing Confederate uni-
forms.

They were born free black and Creole men of New
Orleans who enlisted to protect the city. With a popula-
tion of 181,000, New Orleans was by far the largest city
in the South, and 11,000 of the 24,000 blacks in the city
were free.

Holden said Jordan Noble, an affluent black man,
placed a notice in The True Delta newspaper on April 27,
1861, encouraging "free men of color" to form a black
home guard to help defend New Orleans. Initially, 400 to
500 signed up, and they took the name the 1st Louisiana
Native Guards. Their number grew to more than 1,000,
and on May 12, 1861, Gov. Thomas O. Moore recognized
them as part of the Louisiana militia.

"They were quite an elaborate bunch," Holden said.
"What they mostly did through 1861 was parade around
New Orleans and hold drills for the citizens, this and
that. It was quite a big deal back then. There are a num-
er of newspaper reports in The True Delta and other
New Orleans newspapers about their going-ons."

Despite their performance in drill, this and other
home guard units were quite poorly armed, Holden
said. Those who signed up for the regular Confederate
army took most available weapons. Some of the Native
Guard soldiers never received a gun, Holden said.

"They probably weren't worried. To prevent a Union
attack up the Mississippi River, New Orleans rested its
defense on Forts Jackson and St. Philip downriver.

Their illusion of security was shattered in April 1862
when Union Adm. David Farragut's fleet got past the
forts.

Although Confederate ground troops outnumbered
those aboard Union ships, New Orleans had nothing
to defend itself from the warships' cannons. When
Farragut arrived, the city surrendered without firing a
shot, and many of the home guard units left to join the
Confederate army at Camp Moore in Tangipahoa Parish.

The Native Guard, however, stayed behind. Historical
accounts differ as to why. Some say the white
Confederates wouldn't let them go with them. Others say
they were left behind to destroy the U.S. Mint before it
fell into Union hands. Holden favors another reason.

"A lot of the home guard units, even the white folks,
stayed behind because they had pretty much joined up
to defend New Orleans," Holden said. "This was their
house. This was their home. They didn't want to go fight
anywhere else. If they weren't going to stand and make a
fight at New Orleans, there wasn't any sense in doing it.
Most of them put away their uniforms, put their guns
down and tried to blend back into social life as best they
could.

That would not be possible. Union generals would see to
that.

Native Guard reborn in blue

Gen. Benjamin Butler had no great love for blacks. In
fact, when Butler discovered that an abolitionist subor-
dinate, Gen. W. P. Fergus, was training runaway slaves,
he ordered him to stop it.

But Butler was short on soldiers, and when
Confederate troops attacked Baton Rouge on Aug. 5,
1862, the threat to New Orleans caused Butler to change
his mind. He wrote to the Secretary of War asking per-
mission to arm blacks.

"Two months went by, and he didn't hear anything
about it, so he considered that an OK," Holden said.

Butler began rounding up members of the Native
Guard and, Holden said, threatened to have them shot
as spies if they didn't enlist. This recruiting tactic
proved successful, and the 1st Louisiana Native Guard
was reborn in blue instead of gray uniforms. The 2nd
and 3rd Louisiana Native Guard was formed from run-
away slaves. Again, not all of them volunteered.

This was the first of many indignities they would suf-
fer.

In late 1862 in what was known as the Teche
Campaign, they were used primarily to guard railroad
tracks and, ironically, plantation slaves.

"The Union, of course, needed the cotton just as bad
as the South did, and the problem was that too many of
the slaves were running off. So, they posted a lot of the
Native Guard and white troops to keep field hands in
the field, which was kind of strange. Most Northern his-
tory buffs don't want to admit that, but that's exactly
what the case was."

Butler was replaced on Nov. 9, 1862, by Gen.
Nathaniel Banks, who named the black troops the Corps

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Soldiers

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d’Afrique. The name did not improve their status. The 1st and 3rd Guards were sent to Baton Rouge, where their treatment by white Union soldiers was so bad that all of the officers of the 3rd resigned.

“The Union privates wouldn’t take orders from the black officers,” Holden said.

While white soldiers were sent to fight, black troops were used as laborers. This was especially demoralizing to the 1st Louisiana Native Guard, whose members had been businessmen before the war.

The 1st and 3rd Native Guards were finally sent into battle on May 27, 1863, in Banks’ attack on the Confederate bastion at Port Hudson. They had the misfortune of being placed under the command of Gen. William Dwight.

“Dwight was arguably the worst general in the Union army,” Holden said. “He was drunk all the time. He was an absolute tyrant hated by everybody. He really was just a pathetic general.”

The black soldiers were ordered to attack the northernmost part of the Confederate fortress. Had their attack been coordinated with other expeditions for different parts of the fortifications, it might have succeeded. Instead, they were exposed to murderous fire and — despite Northern newspaper reports to the contrary — apparently never got within 200 yards of the breastworks.

Still, this was the first time black troops had been used in a major assault, and members of the 1st and 3rd demonstrated their courage, charging, regrouping and pushing forward six times before being thrown back.

“They were incredibly brave,” Holden said. “It was an unbelievably futile thing for them to walk out there. The bravery was absolutely incredible.”

Casualty figures differ. Holden believes about 40 percent — as many as 600 men — were killed or wounded. When it was over, though, the bodies of the 1st and 3rd Louisiana Native Guard were not recovered. Instead, they were left on the field to rot.

While some accounts said Confederate forces would not allow the Union to bury the black troops, Holden said records clearly show that Banks and Dwight refused Confederate requests that the dead be buried under a flag of truce. Dwight did the same thing in a different attack on another part of Port Hudson, saying he wanted to “stink the Confederates out.”

“He was a pretty revolting guy,” Holden said.

Despite their sacrifices, when Port Hudson finally surrendered on July 8, Banks did not allow the 1st and 3rd Louisiana to paint the name Port Hudson on their battle flags.

Similarly, these soldiers were overshadowed by other black comrades. Although its fame attack on Port Wagner, S.C., came weeks later, the 54th Massachusetts was immortalized in the 1968 movie Glory.

“All those guys are really overlooked by history, and that’s what really got me into it,” Holden said. “I hate to see history neglected or forgotten about. I don’t want to be thought of as a history revisionist, but the stuff was never right to begin with.”