|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | **The Brownsville Raid**  **by Joe DeFrano** | |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | The Brownsville Incident, also known as the Brownsville Raid, took place in August 1906, in Brownsville,Texas. While stationed at Fort Brown, 167 members of the all black 25th Regiment, First Battalion, known as the Buffalo Soldiers, were dishonorably discharged on orders from **President Theodore Roosevelt**. This decision followed investigations of accusations of violence against white citizens by black soldiers recently stationed near Brownsville, a small southern city resentful of the transfer of black troops to Fort Brown from Nebraska. Many of these men had 25 years of distinguished service, had fought in frontier skirmishes, and had served under Roosevelt in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, as well as alongside US troops in the Philippines. Several had been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor (Goodwin, 512). To this day, the Brownsville Incident and the punishment imposed by TR, is considered one of the most serious mistakes of the Roosevelt presidency.  From the time they arrived at the base in July 1906, the Buffalo Soldiers endured a barrage of racist insults and abuse. Before arriving at Fort Brown they ran into resistance to their presence in Austin where they were to participate in field maneuvers with the local militia. The militia regiment’s commander, Colonel R.W.Hoyt, contacted the war department to “warn the authorities of conditions that are certain to arise from an encampment at Austin with Texas militia” (Weaver, 19). Racially tinged confrontations set the stage for what was to follow upon the regiment’s arrival at Fort Brown.  Soon after arriving, black soldiers who went into town were shoved off sidewalks, hit with revolver butts, and denied access to public bars. An army major who led the regiment suggested a curfew to Mayor Frederick Combe so that further violence could be avoided. Then, rumors of a black soldier assaulting a white woman were followed by allegations of soldiers firing into buildings, killing a saloon keeper, and so gravely injuring the police chief, M.Y. Dominguez, that his arm had to be amputated (Goodwin, 511). Even when all-white commanders said that the infantrymen had remained in their barracks after curfew, the town authorities refused to believe them. Eyewitnesses produced contradictory accounts, and no one could positively identify any individual soldier. Nevertheless, Mayor Combe sided with the townspeople and declared the soldiers guilty.    Initial reports blamed between nine and fifteen black soldiers for initiating the attacks, but interviews with members of the regiment failed to identify any soldier who participated, and none was indicted. However, once the case made its way to the desk of President Theodore Roosevelt, and after two more investigations, TR was convinced of their guilt: “By George! The men’s guilt is as clear as day!” (Weaver, 17) He unilaterally, and without the consent or support of Secretary of War William Howard Taft, decided that their code of “silence”, was grounds enough to have all 167 soldiers dishonorably discharged. This punishment not only barred the men from re-enlisting but also prevented them from holding any civil service position and denied them their pensions. *The New York Times* later called Roosevelt’s action against the troops “the only documented case of mass punishment” (September 29, 1972) in U.S. Army history.  Choosing not to submit the men to trial, Roosevelt’s adamant decision to punish the guilty along with the innocent caused “deep resentment” within the black community, giving rise to accusations that Roosevelt was pandering to his new found popularity in the South (Goodwin, 515). The sole defender of the men was Senator Joseph Benson Foraker of Ohio, and his political fortunes were destroyed by his defense of the black soldiers of the 25th Regiment. Black activist and frequent advisor to the the president, Booker T. Washington anguished over the situation and personally pleaded with Roosevelt who eventually dismissed Washington’s petition. Reacting to Roosevelt’s decision against the soldiers, a preacher in Harlem famously compared the president to the ultimate betrayer, Judas Iscariot: “Once enshrined in our love as our Moses is now enshrouded in our scorn as our Judas”(Goodwin, 513).  In 1970, John D. Weaver’s *The Brownsville Raid* investigated the incident in depth and concluded that the soldiers were innocent. The army conducted a new investigation and reversed the dishonorable discharge order of 1906. Congressman Augustus Hawkins and Senator Hubert Humphrey worked to get the last survivor, Wlilis Dorsey, a tax-free pension and $25,000. That was after President Richard Nixon in 1972 granted members of the 25th honorable discharges though most of the regiment had died by that time. One soldier did re-enlist in 1910 and was able to retire with benefits.    Sources:  Chandler, D.W. NewsOne, August 13, 2013.  ﻿*Encyclopedia Britannica.*  Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *The Bully Pulpit*, Simon and Shuster, 2013.  Weaver, John D. *The Brownsville Raid.*  Wormser, Richard. Black America Web, Jim Crow Stories. Channel 13. | |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | |  | |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | **Buffalo Soldiers, 25th Regiment, First Battalion** | |