**Myron Winslow Smith (1838-1863)**

Myron Winslow Smith was born 24 Sep 1838 in Newark, New Jersey, where he lived his entire life. He graduated from Rutgers College in 1858, then studied law in the office of Joseph P. Bradley, Esq. (who was appointed US Supreme Court Justice in 1870 by President Ulysses S. Grant.) Myron was admitted to the bar in 1861.

On January 7, 1863, Myron was commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in the New Jersey Volunteers, Company I, 4th Regiment, but three months later, his appointment was revoked by the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, to clear the way for Myron to accept a Presidential appointment of leadership in a controversial,new regiment of 1,000 soldiers to be comprised of colored troops.

On May 22, 1863, the [United States War Department](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_War_Department) issued General Order Number 143 establishing a *“*[*Bureau of Colored Troops*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bureau_of_Colored_Troops)*”* to manage the recruitment of [African-American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American) soldiers to fight in the [Union Army](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Army). It was only natural the organization effort should begin in the nation’s capital; even though war clouds enveloped Washington, the city had become a *mecca* for the liberated.

In June 1863, troops were organized in the District of Columbia and officially designated the *First Infantry Regiment of United States Colored Troops* (1st Regiment USCT Infantry) – the first of its kind to be formally admitted into federal service. Embarrassingly, while the Union was willing to let black soldiers fight, they were not deemed competent to lead, so all the officers of all USCT units were required to be white.

Myron was officially mustered into service on June 17, 1863, joining the 1st USCT Infantry Regiment as its 1st Lieutenant and Adjutant, reporting to the unit commander, Colonel John H. Holman. The 1st USCT Infantry Regiment soon became part of the First Brigade, 3rd Division, 18th Corps, *Army of the James*, Department of Virginia and North Carolina.

**Wilson’s Wharf**

The first real skirmish of Myron’s unit was on May 24, 1864 in a battle to protect the Union supply depot at *Wilson’s Wharf* in Charles City, Virginia. Joined in the battle with another USCT unit from Virginia, the combined force of 1,800 soldiers repulsed an attack by Confederate Maj. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee’s cavalry division of 3,000.

This was the first battle of the war in which all the Union soldiers were black. Although 167 men lost their lives, this victory firmly and finally established the courage and fighting ability of the black soldier. Less than a month later, June 15-18, the 1st USCT would participate in one of the major campaigns of 1864…the assaults on Petersburg, Virginia.

**Assaults on Petersburg**

The assaults on Petersburg involved a total of 104,000 troops: 62,000 Union forces were led by Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and Maj. Gen. George G. Meade opposing 42,000 Confederate forces led by Gen. Robert E. Lee and Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard. Eventually the effort was judged a Confederate victory, but at an enormous human cost to both sides. Estimated casualties were 11,386 total – 8,150 Union and 3,236 Confederate.

General Grant was not to be deterred. On July 30, 1864, he had Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside lead a follow-on assault known simply as *“The Mine.”* After weeks of preparation, Union troops succeeded in exploding a mine that blew a gap in the Confederate defenses of Petersburg.

From its propitious beginning, though, everything deteriorated rapidly for the Union attackers. Unit after unit charged into and around the crater, where soldiers milled in confusion. The Confederates quickly recovered and launched several counterattacks. The break was sealed off and the Union troops were repulsed with severe casualties; one division of black soldiers was badly mauled.

**Chaffin’s Farm**

For 1st Lieutenant & Adjutant Myron W. Smith, the most important battle for his unit occurred on the north side of the James River September 28-30, 1864. Thirteen regiments of U. S. Colored Infantry joined in battle with white units and engaged the enemy in what is historically known as the *“Battle of Chaffin’s Farm.”* The combined engagements, including the Battles of Chaffin’s Farm and Forts Harrison and Johnson and Gilmer were collectively known as the *“Battle of New Market Heights.”*

General Ulysses S. Grant had approved a plan sending Major General Benjamin F. Butler’s *Army of the James* against the Confederate defenses protecting Richmond. Grant anticipated General Lee might shift troops to meet the threat against Richmond, thus weakening Confederate lines at Petersburg. More ambitiously, it was hoped if Butler managed to break through, capture of the Confederate capital became possible.

During the night of Wednesday, September 28, Butler’s men crossed the James River at *Deep Bottom Landing* to assault the Richmond defenses north of the river the following morning. Although Myron managed to cross the river with his unit, he fell so ill that evening Colonel Holman ordered him to remain with the ambulance all day Thursday while his unit went forward to battle.

Just before dawn Thursday, the *Army of the James* launched a two-pronged attack. One prong relied on Brigadier General Charles Paine’s division of three USCT regiments – commanded by Colonels John H. Holman (1st USCT-DC); Alonzo Draper (36th USCT-NC); and Samuel Duncan (4th USCT-MD.) Gen. Butler recommended Paine’s division lead the Union attacks because he was convinced blacks would fight as well as whites; New Market Heights was a perfect opportunity for the USCTs to prove their ability.

Paine’s division quickly came under Confederate fire. Waiting behind earthworks along the New Market Road were perhaps 2,000 Confederate soldiers. Paine’s brigades formed behind Four Mile Creek and steadied themselves before the grand rush toward the enemy’s line. Col. Duncan’s 4th USCT Brigade charged first, but was soon bogged down, unable to penetrate lines of fallen trees and debris the Confederates had prepared to protect their position. Next Col. Alonzo Draper’s 36th USCT unit attacked across the same ground. Under constant infantry and artillery fire, Draper’s men spent thirty brutal minutes pinned down by southern firepower.

Finally, Confederate fire slackened, providing an opening for the USCTs to charge. Union infantrymen crossed the Confederate earthworks and rushed up the slopes of the heights only to find most of the Rebel defenders gone. The courage and determination shown by those making the attacks could not be denied. During the hour-long engagement, Paine’s division suffered tremendous losses – more than 800 casualties in just over an hour.

By evening, Myron felt well enough to join his unit as it stood guarding the rear of Fort Harrison. Troops on both sides slept fitfully Thursday night, each expecting a surprise attack from the other.

Near noon-time Friday, September 30, General Robert E. Lee directed a major counterattack against Fort Harrison. Both armies entrenched – continuing the seemingly endless cycle of attack, dig, and wait. The Rebel assault came, but under Union fire the Rebels were driven back. Again they came with still greater fury; again they were repulsed.

The Rebel assaults failed, though sharp-shooters kept firing on the works. Tragically for Myron Winslow Smith, the battle was over and the victory was won when a ball from a guerrilla sharp-shooter passed through his chest, piercing his lung.

The Battle of [New Market Heights](http://americancivilwar.com/statepic/va/va075.html), Virginia (*Chaffin’s Farm*) became one of the most heroic engagements involving African-Americans. Black soldiers fighting for the Union won both glory and respect; for their bravery, 14 African Americans, all enlisted men, received the *Medal of Honor* for uncommon valor at the Battle of New Market Heights. This was an especially significant event in American military history, considering only 16 Medals of Honor were awarded to black troops during the *entire* Civil War. Indeed, these fourteen constitute the largest number of black soldiers so honored in a single day’s battle in our entire American history!

Gravely wounded, Myron was transported from the Chaffin’s farm battlefield 75 miles down the James River to a Union hospital at Fortress Monroe, Virginia where he died six days later. Myron’s last words to his father (who had traveled from Newark to be at his son’s bedside) were, *“I die in a glorious cause…”*