

Colonel Charles Young

Third African American Graduate of West Point



A thick thread runs through the fabric of all black men who have served in the U.S. Military. It is a thread of determination in the face of outrageous odds and an understanding that actions taken in the present would echo for future generations. One man who passed on this understanding with compelling motivation was Charles Young.

Young was the third black man to graduate from West Point. He was an educated, intelligent leader who always found time for family and an eclectic group of friends who could easily have made a list of Who's Who of Black America around the turn of the century.

Born in 1864, in Kentucky, the son of former slaves, his father was a Civil War Veteran. Charlie grew up across the river in Ohio. His maternal grandmother reinforced the daily lessons taught in public school, becoming his tutor. He graduated from high school, then attended Wilberforce University. After graduation, the University hired Young to teach undergraduate studies.

In 1884 he took a test for placement in the West Point Academy. His score was second best in Ohio and earned him an appointment. The Academy was a true test for the 20 year old. Classmates jeered him with the nickname, "load of coal." There were racial slurs from fellow cadets as well as those of higher rank.

Young had academic problems as well. Mathematics proved to be difficult for him and he was dismissed after his first year. The easy course would have been to give up, then and there, and take an easier way out of his dilemma. But that was not what Charles Young was all about. For the first of many times in his life, when faced with a challenge he would not surrender. He sharpened his math skills, took a test and was readmitted the following fall.

After another three years of hard work he earned the rank of Second Lieutenant and became only the third black graduate of the Army's Academy. He remembered the racist

attitudes and intimidation and made them a positive motivation in how he treated all the soldiers in his command.

His first assignment was with the 9th Cavalry in Nebraska and Utah. Within months of his arrival on the plains, war broke out with Spain. The Second Lieutenant was reassigned to training duty at Camp Alger, Virginia. It was here in the south that Young would once again meet the ignorance of racism in the Army. A rebellious white soldier refused to salute the black officer. The soldier's commanding officer found out and confronted him in front of Young who was ordered to remove his uniform coat and place it on a chair. The soldier was then ordered to salute the coat. Young was ordered to put his coat back on and the soldier commanded to continue to salute it.

Young was then awarded a commission as a Major in the Ninth Ohio Volunteer Infantry but was not assigned to combat in Cuba.

After the war with Spain, Young was once again assigned West to Fort Duchesne in Utah. There he settled a dispute between Native Americans and sheep herders.

It was in Utah that Young met a young Sergeant Major named Benjamin O. Davis. Young was impressed with the young man's ability and encouraged him to attend Officers Training School. Davis later became the first black General in the U.S. Army. This was the first of many young men Young would directly encourage. He once told a friend who was getting ready to join the Tenth Cavalry, "Get a good life insurance policy, with your family as beneficiary. Bring your Bible and yourself." His vast experience in educating, training and motivating troops left a very lasting impression on the Officer Corps of the Army. Young worked his men and horses hard. It was a common joke in military circles that, "Young's men and horses could not help but look healthy and lean, because they were never still long enough to put on weight."

Just after the turn of the century, Young was assigned to command in the Philippines. His mission was to hunt revolutionaries who lived in the dense jungle. He proved his ability to command in combat conditions in a politically unsettled environment. There were skills he would need for his next post as Military Attache to Haiti.

Haiti was in political turmoil at the time. The U.S. wanted stability on the island and needed information. Young was ordered to secretly map the country and provide intelligence information about the various political groups struggling for power. With his life in almost constant danger, Young's mission ended in disaster. A clerk he hired stole his maps and information and sold them to the Haitians. Embarrassed, Young returned to the United States.

At home, Young was a devoted family man with a wife, Ada, and two children; son, Charles Jr. and daughter Marie. He also mastered several languages, played and composed music for piano, violin and guitar. His friends were some of the most educated and gifted black men of the day. They included W.E.B. Du Bois, who started the

N.A.A.C.P., scientist Booker T. Washington, and poet/ song lyricist, Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

Young served along the U.S. Mexican border during the Mexican Revolution. He commanded the Tenth Cavalry as part of General "Black Jack" Pershing's punitive expedition into Mexico in 1916. It was a 300 mile long, hard campaign in search of Pancho Villa. Villa tried and failed to take control of the government in Mexico City. Not happy with the U. S. decision to support then Mexican President Venustiano Carranza, Villa tried to provoke a war between the U. S. and Mexico. In January of 1916 Villa, and his men, pulled 16 Americans off a train near El Paso and shot them. When the U. S. was slow to respond, Villa's gang attacked Columbus, New Mexico. Nineteen Americans were killed and the town burned to the ground.

The real task for American troops was to contain the almost daily battles between Mexican Federal Troops and Revolutionary forces along the Arizona border. It was dangerous duty because American troops were under strict orders that limited their ability to defend themselves with their rifles. Often the fighting spilled over into the U.S.

As war broke out in Europe, most black officers and troops found themselves on the border with Mexico. Almost immediately there was an uproar in the black media calling for the promotion of Young to Brigadier General. Even then former President Teddy Roosevelt, in a speech days before his death, said that he knew of one black man very capable of command and that was Charles Young. The War Department was heavily pressured from white officers and Southern Congressmen to stop Young's promotion. At the time about 75% of the Army Officer Corps was made up of southern white men.

At the same time Young was part of a group lobbying the Army to create an Officers Training Camp for black soldiers. The Army had opened 14 training camps around the country but none were integrated.

It was also at this time that Lt. Colonel Charles Young was due for a physical. Doctors said his blood pressure was high and recommended his retirement. And that's what the Army did.

The 54 year old soldier would not just fade away, however. He told his wife, "Every full-blooded American who loves his country and his people naturally would have some high blood pressure." In June of 1918 he saddled up his horse at his home in southwestern Ohio, and started a 16 day, 500 mile ride to Washington D.C. Along the way he received encouragement and the ever present racial slur, but he pressed on.

In Washington he met with the Secretary of War (now called Secretary of Defense) who promised to look into his request for immediate reinstatement and command of a combat unit in Europe. It took many months. Young was reinstated and promoted to full Colonel, but he was assigned to duty at Camp Grant, Illinois. By the time this reassignment came through the war was winding down.

The Colonel was stationed overseas the following year. He returned to Liberia as Military Attache. His lifelong friend W.E.B. Du Bois, wrote, "If Charles Young's blood pressure was too high to go to France, why was it not too high for him to be sent to even more arduous duty in the swamps of West Africa?" It was a good question, but one Young gave little thought to. He reported for duty and served until December of 1921. He was in Nigeria and was admitted to the hospital after an attack of nephritis. Young had long suffered from a chronic inflammation of the kidneys, called Bright's disease. On January 8, 1922 Charlie Young died. He was buried in Nigeria. Some 18 months later his body was exhumed and he was finally laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery across the river from Washington D.C. Over 100,000 people lined the route of his funeral procession. His long ride was truly over.

He had served his country, his family and friends and served as a role model for future generations of soldiers and men. A lesser individual might have given up along the way, but Charles Young was not a quitter. His legacy is of determination and success in the face of bigotry and racism. He rose through the attitudes of his time to become a successful officer, father and husband.

