

# Charles Young



Cavalryman, Huachuca, and  
Early Intelligence Officer

## Colonel Charles Young: Black Cavalryman, Huachuca Commander, and Early Intelligence Officer

In the world of military biography men there is no shortage of remarkable men. That may be why some of the more quiet heroes are slighted by history. One such man is Charles Young. He wore no pearl-handled revolvers, did not pin grenades to his lapels, nor did he design his own uniform. His distinguishing feature was his skin color in an American Army just after the turn of the century that had only a few dark skinned officers.

Both his mother and father were former slaves. His father, Gabriel, served in the Union Army and was discharged shortly after the Civil War. While waiting for her husband's return from the war, Arminta Young gave birth to Charles in a humble log cabin in Mays Lick, Kentucky, on 12 March 1864. His father moved to Ripley, Ohio, when Charles was a young boy, opening a life-long livery business. Charles went to high school in Ripley and taught at the "colored school" there for three years.<sup>1</sup>

Appointed from Ohio to the U.S. Military Academy in June 1884, he graduated in 1889, the third African-American to do so out of the nine that had entered the academy up until that time. Young graduated 49th in a class of 49. He graduated two months later than the rest of his class so that he could repeat the math test, a subject that gave him much trouble. He was hazed at the academy and referred to as the "load of coal." Upon graduation, he was commissioned Additional Second Lieutenant, 10th Cavalry. His entire field career was spent in black regiments—the 9th and 10th Cavalry, and the 25th Infantry.

Young was an accomplished linguist, speaking Latin, Greek, French, Spanish and German. He served as Professor of Military Science at Wilberforce University, Ohio. A friend who knew him at Wilberforce University, said he was "popular as a musician, vocalist, violinist, pianist and composer." He wrote a drama entitled *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, an essay entitled *Military Moral of Races*, and a collection of poetry called *Long Wings*. A musician and composer, he was accomplished at the piano, harp, cornet and ukelele. Among his musical compositions were eight *Beatitudes*, a collection of hymn arrangements called *Offertory*, and a number of *Serenades*.<sup>2</sup>

From 1894-98 and during the Spanish-American War, he was with the 9th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. In 1903 he was superintendent of parks at Sequoia and General Grant National Parks in California.

Congress authorized in 1889 a system of military attaches that would be controlled by the Military Information Division (MID), the first official and permanent U.S. Army intelligence agency that had emerged in 1885 with a small office under the Adjutant General. Their job was to observe the training and exercises of foreign armies and make reports on their relative strengths and weaknesses. One of the first of these dozen or so attaches was Charles Young who, from 1904 to 1907 was military attache to the American legation in Port Au Prince, Haiti. During this time he made an extended military reconnaissance of the country and the neighboring Republic of Santo Domingo, producing maps of much of the terrain.

Before he left for Haiti in 1903, he married Ada Barr who would bear two children, Charles Noel in 1907 and Marie in 1909. The family established their home in Wilberforce, Ohio, where Charles had been teaching military tactics at Wilberforce University between

assignments since 1894.

Following his service in Haiti, he reported for duty in the Second Division of the War Department in Washington, D.C. The Second Division was the designation given to that element of the newly created General Staff which had the responsibility for the collection and dissemination of military information (intelligence).

In 1908 Young was sent to the Philippines to join his regiment and command a squadron of two troops. In 1912 he was once again selected for attache duty, this time to Liberia where he advised the Liberian constabulary and supervised the construction of new roads to provide military lines of communication. For his services there he was awarded the Springarn Medal, an award that annually recognized the African-American who had made the highest achievement during the year in any field of honorable human endeavor.

He was most renowned for his leadership during the 1916 Punitive Expedition which marched into Mexico in pursuit of the bandit Pancho Villa who had murdered American citizens. On 9 March at Agua Caliente, Mexico, Young, then a major, led the 2d Squadron in a cavalry pistol charge against the Villista forces, threatening to envelope the right flank. Beltran's 150 men were driven out with no losses to Young's aggressive squadron.

At the Hacienda Santa Cruz de la Villegas, 12 April, he was the hero of the hour when he rode with his squadron to the relief of Major Frank Tompkins, who was severely wounded while his 13th U.S. Cavalry squadron fought a heavy rear guard action. Young's reinforcement of Major Tompkins at this critical time is credited by many as preventing a war with Mexico.

It was obvious that the beleaguered Tompkins was glad to see the relief force come up. Captain George B. Rodney was among those first 10th cavalymen to ride into Tompkins' position and he recounted the scene.

The sound of our hoofbeats brought Tompkins to the gates and he gave us a warm welcome. He had been wounded in the arm and he had injured a leg by falling over some hasty entrenchments that he had been supervising, and he was glad to see us. As we splashed through the ford he shouted to us. I can hear his words yet.

Major Charles Young, one of the six Negro officers of the Army and our Squadron Commander, was riding by me at the head of the advance guard when Tompkins sighted him and called out, "By God! They were glad to see the Tenth Cavalry at Santiago in '98, but I'm a damn sight gladder to see you now. I could kiss every one of you!"

Young grinned and called back. "Hello, Tompkins! You can start in on me right now."

There was no further talk of kissing....<sup>3</sup>

The 10th Cavalry chaplain, Major O. J. W. Scott, noted that Young used to play the organ in religious services while the regiment was encamped in Colonia Dublan, Mexico. He wrote of his friend:

I knew him best perhaps in Mexico where we were "bunkies." When I started to join the 10th Cavalry I wrote him asking him what I could bring that would be of value to the men. His answer was characteristic. "Send your family home, get your life insured in their favor, bring your Bible and yourself." He met me at Colonia Dublan and told me to put up my flag in front of his tent. I did so and felt at home from that day on. He would take the blankets off his own bed to keep others warm; divide the last piece of bread and give the last drop from his canteen to another. He allowed me to ride his own favorite horse out of Mexico, insisted that I ride her, while he rode a troop horse.

Colonel Young was a polite gentleman of good manners always, he believed that it is right to make sacrifices for those whom we love. ...He had great faith in his race. In turn his race had great

faith in him. ...He often taught that it does not pay to hate anyone.<sup>4</sup>

Of the colonel, First Sergeant Vance H. Marchbanks said:

...He was a splendid man, possessed a wonderful personality, superb leadership and the men who followed him possessed almost sublime faith in his ability. ...He was a past master at the military game, a strict disciplinarian, and he knew all the answers to military problems.<sup>5</sup>

Young, on his own initiative as a senior officer in the regiment, opened an officers' training school for enlisted men at Fort Huachuca in 1917. Not only did he anticipate the need for more African-American officers if the U.S. entered the war in Europe, but believed in unlocking individual potential and building confidence among his followers.

Young's brilliant and aggressive operations in Mexico won him a lieutenant colonelcy in the 10th Cavalry in 1916. A year later he was promoted to colonel and was briefly Fort Huachuca's commander. He was medically retired in 1917 for high blood pressure and Bright's disease said to have been incurred during his African service.

Young was described by a fellow officer of the 10th Cavalry, Jerome W. Howe, as "a fine specimen of an athletic officer and a perfect gentleman." Howe "found him very likable. I often visited him in his quarters, and heard him play beautifully on the piano. He had a fine family, but never had them with him on a military post."

A hometown neighbor who knew him as a boy remembered Young as "a highly intelligent man, a cultured man" who possessed a large personal library and was fluent in many languages. "He often visited back and forth with Dayton poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and author W.E.B. DuBois."<sup>6</sup>

Anxious to command his black troopers in France in World War I, the 53-year-old colonel rode on horseback from his home in Ohio to the War Department in Washington, D.C. to demonstrate his fitness for duty. Young wrote about the experience:

...As soon as the school year was over, I rode on horseback from Wilberforce to Washington, walking on foot fifteen minutes in each hour, the distance of 497 miles to show, if possible, my physical fitness for command of troops. I there offered my services gladly at the risk of life, which has no value to me if I cannot give it for the great ends for which the United States is striving.<sup>7</sup>

Charles Young was not wanted on the greater stage of World War I in Europe. He would remain an understudy, not for want of talent—all of his comrades testified to his abilities—but because of the hue of his skin. An African-American leader emerging upon the world stage would invalidate the theory held by those of paler skin about the inferiority of people of color. It was a theory that had to be maintained within the United States to explain the continued denial of equality to the descendants of older victims of inhumanity. It was the great American untruth.

Writing to a unknown correspondent who questioned his patriotism for not serving in the first World War, Young made this reply. He explained why he had been retired and said he was "on active duty in the state of Ohio where I am now and with nothing to do. Despite this, I voluntarily assumed the chair of Military Science and Tactics for Wilberforce University last year, teaching every school day, going through all kinds of weather the distance of a mile and from 7 to 8 a.m. I also threw my house open each Sunday night for the further instruction of young college men; served on the military boards of the college; and encouraged by precept and example the students whom I found at first to a degree apathetic in regard to the war and their interests therein. It was I who exacted from the male student body in general assembly last year a cheer for President Wilson as 'Our President of the United States and Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy.'<sup>8</sup>

Retired for disabilities and denied the opportunity to get in on the fighting in Europe, Young managed to get recalled to active with the Ohio National Guard in which he served until 6 November 1918. He was later called to serve as Military Attache to Liberia. He died on 8 January 1922 in that post. At the time he was on a reconnaissance expedition in Lagos, Nigeria, then a British possession. He was interred there with military honors rendered by British troops. But, according to British law, his body could not be exhumed until a year had passed. His body was returned to the U.S. and interred at Arlington Cemetery in Washington, D.C. on 1 June 1923.

The Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt eulogized Colonel Young in ceremonies in New York City in May 1923. The veteran of San Juan Hill, Cuba, and future president said:

We meet here tonight to honor Colonel Young, a distinguished American and an able member of our military service. No man ever more truly deserved the high repute in which he was held, for by sheer force of character, he overcame prejudices which would have discouraged many a lesser man.

...He did not approach life on the basis of seeing what he could get out of this nation. He did not eternally ask others to give. He gave himself. He approached life with the single purpose of seeing what he could do for this nation. When a young man, he put aside the thought of material advancement and consecrated himself to this ideal of service. Able, honest, high of purpose, and courageous, he gave, and gave generously of himself. For this reason, ...he lives—for what he has done will remain with us in the country as a constant inspiration and guide of the generations to come.<sup>9</sup>

Historian and NAACP founder W.E.B. DuBois wrote this memorial to Colonel Young in the February 1922 issue of *The Crisis*.

The life of Charles Young was a triumph of tragedy. No one ever knew the truth about the Hell he went through at West Point. He seldom even mentioned it. The pain was too great. Few knew what faced him always in his army life. It was not enough for him to do well—he must always do better; and so much and so conspicuously better, as to disarm the scoundrels that ever trailed him. He lived in the army surrounded by insult and intrigue and yet he set his teeth and kept his soul serene and triumphed.

He was one of the few men I know who literally turned the other cheek with Jesus Christ. He was laughed at for it and his own people chided him bitterly, yet he persisted. When a white Southern pygmy at West Point protested at taking food from a dish passed first to Young, Young passed it to him first and afterward to himself. When officers of inferior rank refused to salute a “nigger,” he saluted them. Seldom did he lose his temper, seldom complain.

With his own people he was always the genial, hearty, half-boyish friend. He kissed the girls, slapped the boys on the back, threw his arms about his friends, scattered his money in charity; only now and then behind the Veil did his nearest comrades see the Hurt and Pain graven on his heart; and when it appeared he promptly drowned it in his music—his beloved music, which always poured from his quick, nervous fingers, to caress and bathe his soul.

Steadily, unswervingly he did his duty. And Duty to him, as to few modern men, was spelled in capitals. It was his lodestar, his soul; and neither force nor reason swerved him from it. His second going to Africa, after a terrible attack of black water fever, was suicide. He knew it. His wife knew it. His friends knew it. He had been sent to Africa because the Army considered his blood pressure too high to let him go to Europe! They sent him there to die. They sent him there because he was one of the very best officers in the service and if he had gone to Europe he could not have been denied the stars of a General. They could not stand a black American General. Therefore they sent him to the fever coast of Africa. They ordered him to make roads back in the haunted jungle. He knew

what they wanted and intended. He could have escaped it by accepting his retirement from active service, refusing his call to active duty and then he could have lounged and lived at leisure on his retirement pay. But Africa needed him. He did not yell and collect money and advertise great schemes and parade in crimson—he just went quietly, ignoring appeal and protest.

He is dead. But the heart of the Great Black Race, the Ancient of Days—the Undying and Eternal—rises and salutes his shining memory: Well done! Charles Young, Soldier and Man and unswerving Friend.

There is an all-important distinction between a subordinate and a follower. An officer acquires subordinates by virtue of an organizational hierarchy. A leader must win over followers. He must convince would-be followers of his capability to translate common objectives into a course of action, to motivate his contemporaries toward shared goals, and must demonstrate his willingness to be accountable to his constituents. There is no better example of that than Charles Young, cavalry leader and intelligence officer.

#### Notes

1. Ullmer, Katherine, Staff Feature Writer, "Profiles in History: An Officer and a Gentleman: Col. Charles Young fought his battles on and off the field," *The Journal Herald*, Dayton, Ohio, 3 February 1984.
2. Chew, Abraham, *A Biography of Colonel Charles Young*, R. I. Pendleton, Washington, D.C., 1923, p. 6.
3. Rodney, George B., *As a Cavalryman Remembers*, Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho, 1944, pp. 262-3.
4. Chew, p. 16.
5. Marchbanks manuscript on file in the Fort Huachuca Museum (FHM).
6. Ullmer.
7. Young, Charles, papers in FHM files.
8. Ullmer.
9. Chew, p. 8.