

Conflict in Bisbee, 1919

The Bisbee Riot in 1919 was an event that not only made national headlines,¹ but international ones as well. During the night of July 3rd violence erupted between African American soldiers of the 10th Cavalry and local authorities resulting in the wounding of four service members and one civilian, a Mexican woman who was clipped in the head from a stray bullet after the first rounds were discharged.² The Riot was initiated when members of the cavalry unit during their liberty in town, assaulted a fellow soldier from the 19th Infantry Regiment after he ordered them to hand over the weapons that they carried into town. The attack on Private George Sullivan attracted the attention of the local authorities, who found the cavalry soldiers carrying weapons and asked them to stop and hand over the fire arms, but their request was ignored. The soldiers opened fire on the policemen and a firefight broke out in the middle of Brewery Gulch. While alcohol was a key contributor, there were other factors that also contributed to the actions of these groups.

THE 10TH CAVALRY

At the time of the riot, the African American 10th Cavalry had a long running relationship with southern Arizona, dating to the search and capture of Geronimo. That positive history



Striking workers march to a field to await deportation, 1917.
-Courtesy AHS, PC 047, #48371

earned them a spot to participate in the first Independence Day parade in Bisbee after the First World War that included the 19th Infantry Regiment and local clubs. For some within the county government,³ however, that invitation to the parade raised concerns. They feared that the soldiers would incite a riot with the help of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). That summer the city was enthralled by the ongoing trials from the controversial 1917 Bisbee deportation, which had led to the illegal deportation of a huge number of striking mine workers. The threat of radicals invoking a major disturbance on the 4th of July was dismissed after the searches conducted by the Department of Justice found no presence of the IWW, but the fear of a mishap was still observed due to the change of attitude that occurred during that summer.

RED SUMMER

The summer of 1919 was a time when many in the African American community throughout the country experienced a change in attitude. Once the African American soldiers returned from the Great War,⁴ their push for self-defense

enabled many to stand up to racial violence, which some did during the event in July. Pvt. Sullivan was assaulted by members of the famous unit because he was ordering men to hand over the means that these soldiers chose to carry in order to protect themselves against racial violence.⁵ The attack on Pvt. Sullivan created a chain of events that quickly got out of hand resulting in the firing of 100 rounds and a mass gathering of individuals. The outnumbered authorities had to quickly disperse the crowd, but had a hard time doing it due to Cochise County Deputy Sheriff Joseph Hardwick's actions that elevated the violence.



Soldiers of the 10th Cavalry conduct mock arrest drills. -United States Army-10th Cavalry, Courtesy AHS, #26187

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

The uncompromising execution of Deputy Sheriff Hardwick's authority during the riot created fear and forced some soldiers to conduct tactical actions to protect themselves. But these service men were quickly fired upon and wounded without question as a result of Hardwick's heavy-handedness. His prosecution of the civil disturbance made it hard for the military leaders to take control of the situation. The presence of a new attitude and the prospect that it could start a disturbance like the one in 1917 influenced the sheriff. Members of the 10th Cavalry disregarded the orders to disengage in order to preserve their right of self-defense due to the sheriff's assault on them.



Picture of Brewery Gulch where the firefight between soldiers of the 10th Cavalry and local authorities occurred.
-Brewery Gulch, Courtesy AHS, #56116.

The actions of all parties were reported and investigated. The military report may have laid the blame heavily on the soldiers, but the contributing events of the past and present played a significant role in the riot for all who were involved.

¹ "Negroes Cause Riot in Arizona Colored Cavalrymen Refuse to Disarm at Request of Officers; Fourteen," *Lexington Herald*, no. 186, 5 July 1919.

² Investigating reports created by Special Agent O.L. Tinklebaugh and District Intelligence Officer Captain Forrest Wright. Casefile 10218-348: Investigation of a Race Riot between Negro Soldiers and Civilians, Alleged Industrial Workers of the World, Bisbee, Arizona, 1919. <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001360-021-0443&accountid=8360>.

³ Investigating reports. Names of county officials that protested the involvement of the 10th Cavalry in the parade are illegible, but their positions were part of Cochise County.

⁴ Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2011), 12.

⁵ Casefile 10218-348, 9.

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