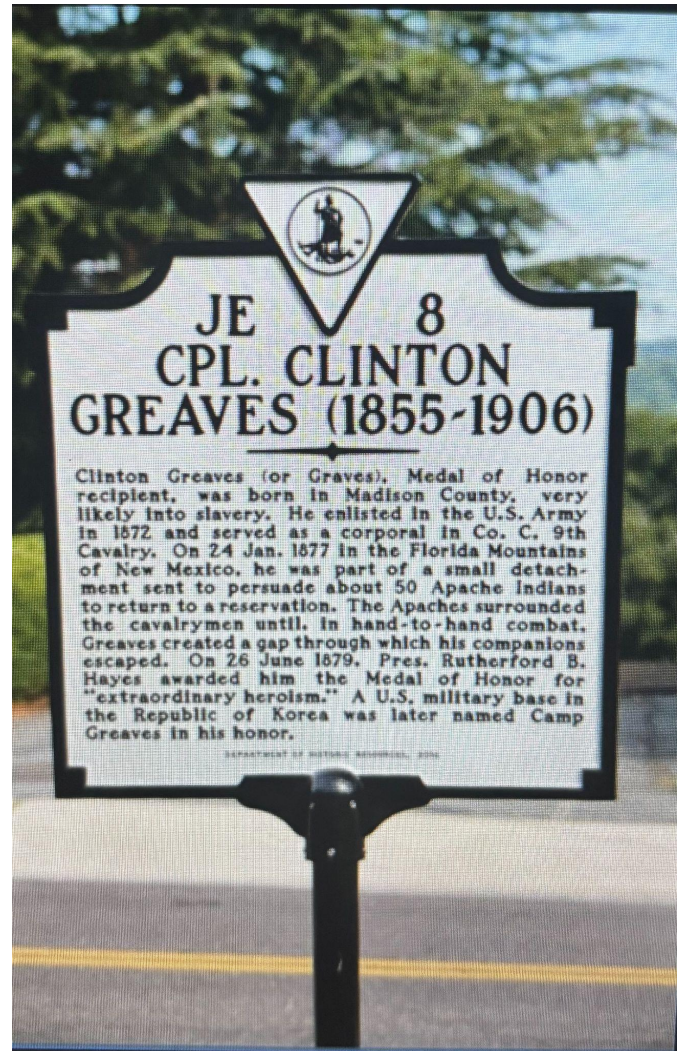




Clinton (Graves) Greaves and the Buffalo Soldiers

The Apaches had them pinned down in a shallow rocky gully. Lieutenant Wright's 10-man patrol was surrounded. Out-numbered nearly 5 to 1. Their carbines clicked empty. It was no longer a negotiation - it was a slaughter about to happen.

One man didn't reach for ammunition.

Corporal Clinton Greaves threw his empty carbine over his head, brought it down like a battering ram, and charged into a wall of warriors. He swung the heavy rifle stock like an axe, cracking bone, pushing bodies, creating a gap. For 30 seconds, he was the only thing standing between his brothers and death.

Greaves swung until his arms gave out. When his comrades crawled through the bloody opening he had smashed into the Apache line, he was the last man out. He didn't stop fighting until the survivors were safe.

This is the story of a man born in chains who became one of the most decorated soldiers in the American West.

The Boy Who Escaped the Smallest Chain Clinton Greaves — his real family name — was born in August 1855 in Madison County, Virginia, to an enslaved woman named Mary.

The plantation owner's ledger listed him as property. He was one of five children. His father, a free man named John Graves, could buy his own freedom, but not the freedom of his son. For the first decade of his

life, Clinton watched his father walk through the front door as a free man while he remained behind the gate.

By 1870, the family had escaped the Virginia plantation and settled in Prince George's County, Maryland. Here, Clinton learned that the war had changed the laws, but not the world. Free Black men were still expected to take the lowest jobs, suffer the worst insults, and accept the smallest pieces of the American pie. But Clinton had watched his father bring himself up from nothing. He decided the best uniform to wear was blue.

In September 1872, he walked into the recruiting station. The clerk wrote his name wrong on the paperwork - "Greaves" instead of "Graves" — but the young man didn't correct him. He figured they'd get it right later. They never did. But the Army didn't care about spelling. They just needed fighters.

The Buffalo Soldier

The Army assigned him to the 9th Cavalry Regiment, the legendary "Buffalo Soldiers." The nickname was given by the Cheyenne and Comanche warriors who respected the Black troopers' ferocity and curly hair. In 1870s New Mexico, the Apache had a different name for them: "The Devil's Men." They were the toughest fighters on the frontier.

By 1877, Greaves had fought his way to Corporal, stationed at Fort Bayard in the New Mexico Territory. The Apaches were on the warpath. In January, word arrived that a large band of Chiricahuas had massacred a group of settlers and were heading east toward the Florida Mountains. Lieutenant

Henry Wright grabbed a patrol of just 10 men: four other Buffalo Soldiers, a handful of infantrymen, and three Navajo scouts. They rode out to negotiate.

The Gauntlet

On January 24, 1877, Wright's patrol found the camp. But the Apaches weren't interested in talking. The warriors circled the white flag, pretended to negotiate, and then suddenly closed the perimeter. Wright realized the trap seconds too late.

"Fight your way out," Wright yelled. "Fix bayonets."

The fighting was savage. The soldiers fired their carbines until the barrels were too hot to hold. Greaves shot until he ran out of ammunition. The Apaches swarmed the position, trying to drag the men down. One soldier went down with a bullet in the chest.

Two of the scouts were bleeding.

Wright later wrote that the soldiers were "in imminent danger of being overwhelmed." The fighters were so close they could see the war paint on the Apaches' faces.

Greaves' carbine clicked dry. He was looking at a sea of hostile faces. Instead of pulling a knife or throwing a punch, he reversed his empty carbine - the \$22 rifle that had been his lifeline for five years — and swung it like a club. He didn't swing it at arms or legs. He swung it at the chins and temples of the Apaches blocking the only path out of the canyon.

According to the official Medal of Honor citation, Greaves "managed to shoot and bash a gap through the swarming Apaches, permitting his companions to break free." He didn't just fight; he created a door. One trooper later recalled that after the fight, the wooden stock of Greaves' carbine was splintered into three pieces — broken from hitting bones.

When the last soldier cleared the gap, Greaves turned and ran, zigzagging up the side of the mountain, dodging arrows, until he caught up to the rest of the patrol alive.

Five Apache warriors were dead. The detachment brought 11 captured horses back to the fort. Nobody in the patrol was killed.

The Medal and the President

Lieutenant Wright immediately wrote a commendation. The chain of command agreed. On June 26, 1879, President Rutherford B. Hayes — the man who had ended Reconstruction and pulled federal troops out of the South - stood in a ceremony and placed the Medal of Honor around the neck of a former slave from Virginia named Clinton Greaves.

The citation reads:

"While part of a small detachment to persuade a band of renegade Apache Indians to surrender, his group was surrounded. Cpl.

Greaves in the center of the savage hand-to-hand fighting, managed to shoot and bash a gap through the swarming Apaches, permitting his companions to break free."

It is the only Medal of Honor citation that uses the phrase "bash a gap."

The Forgotten Hero

Greaves reenlisted. He spent 15 years with the 9th Cavalry, crisscrossing the frontier, protecting settlers, and fighting in skirmishes that history no longer remembers. He was eventually transferred to the Columbus Barracks in Ohio, where he served as a drill instructor and sergeant. In 1893, after 21 years of service, he retired at the rank of Sergeant.

He stayed in Columbus, working as a civilian blacksmith and laborer for the Quartermaster Department. By 1906, his heart began to fail him — likely worn down by the altitude of the frontier, the fighting, and the hard life of a Black man in a country that refused to honor him properly.

On August 18, 1906, Clinton Greaves died of heart disease. He was 51 years old. The Army sent him to Green Lawn Cemetery, where they buried him without a grave marker.

For 92 years, the man who had shattered a line of Apaches with an empty rifle lay beneath an unmarked plot of grass in the quiet corner of a city cemetery, slowly being forgotten.

The Lost Marker

In the 1980s, researchers stumbled upon a faded index card referencing Greaves. The Black veterans' community in Columbus went

In the 1980s, researchers stumbled upon a faded index card referencing Greaves. The Black veterans' community in Columbus went looking for him. They found the plot number

- Section 27, Lot 88. They dug. They found no marker.

In 1996, they raised the money to purchase a proper headstone for the Buffalo Soldier. The grave of Clinton Greaves now reads:

Clinton Greaves
Medal of Honor

Corpl Co C 9 US Cav Indian Wars

Today, the Columbus Buffalo Soldiers Club holds a memorial service at his grave every Memorial Day. They ride in on Harleys and place flags at the stone.

In 2017, a historical marker was erected in his hometown of Madison, Virginia. A legionnaire named Vincent Falter pushed for it after discovering that the town had markers for everything except the former slave who won the Medal of Honor. He said: "There's historical markers for everything around here, but there's not any that I've ever found that honor a former slave who did such a heroic action."

And Camp Greaves - a U.S. Army installation in South Korea, less than two miles from the Demilitarized Zone — was named in his honor.

It was the only US Army camp in Korea named after a Black man from the Indian Wars.

The Statue and the Silence

A life-sized bronze statue of Greaves swinging his rifle stands at Fort Bayard, New Mexico. It is the only statue of a Buffalo Soldier on the grounds of the fort. The plaque simply states his name and the date of his action.

No one there discusses the rest of his life.

The quiet death. The graveyard without a stone. The paperwork that misspelled his birth name and lost him for a century. They just look at the statue of a man swinging a club and remember.

What Greaves Knew

Clinton Greaves was born in a slave cabin in Virginia and spent 21 years fighting for a country that still denied his humanity daily.

He was rejected by politicians, ignored by historians, and buried in a pauper's field.

But he understood something that cannot be taught: Courage is a currency that can't be devalued by the cheapness of the people spending it. When the Apaches trapped his patrol, he could have surrendered. He could have hidden behind a rock and let the others die.

Instead, he walked into the middle of the ring and started swinging his rifle like a Louisville Slugger. He broke a hole in the wall of the world, shoved his men through it, and followed them out.

He didn't break because he was a Medal of Honor winner. He was a Medal of Honor winner because he refused to break.