

SOUTH CAROLINA VOLUNTEERS.

LETTER

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF WAR,

IN ANSWER TO

A resolution of the House of June 9, 1862, transmitting correspondence of Major General Hunter, in relation to arming South Carolina volunteers—fugitive slaves.

JULY 2, 1862.—Laid on the table, and ordered to be printed.

WAR DEPARTMENT,
Washington City, D. C., July 2, 1862.

SIR: On reference to the answer of this department of the 14th ultimo to the resolution of the House of Representatives of the 9th of last month, calling for information respecting the organization by General Hunter, of the department of South Carolina, of a regiment of "volunteers for the defence of the Union, composed of black men, (fugitive slaves,)" it will be seen that the resolution had been referred to that officer with instructions to make immediate report thereon.

I have now the honor to transmit herewith the copy of a communication just received from General Hunter, furnishing information as to his action touching the various matters indicated in the resolution.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,
EDWIN M. STANTON,
Secretary of War.

Hon. G. A. GROW,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT OF THE SOUTH,
Port Royal, South Carolina, June 23, 1862.

SIR: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of a communication from the adjutant general of the army, dated June 13, 1862, requesting me to furnish you with the information necessary to answer certain resolutions introduced in the House of Representatives June 9, 1862, on motion of the Hon. Mr. Wickliffe, of Kentucky, their substance being to inquire:

1. Whether I had organized or was organizing a regiment of "fugitive slaves" in this department.

2. Whether any authority had been given to me from the War Department for such organization; and

3. Whether I had been furnished by order of the War Department with clothing, uniforms, arms, equipments, &c., for such a force.

Only having received the letter covering these inquiries at a late hour on Saturday night, I urge forward my answer in time for the steamer sailing to-day, (Monday)—this haste preventing me from entering as minutely as I could wish upon many points of detail, such as the paramount importance of the subject calls for. But in view of the near termination of the present session of Congress, and the wide-spread interest which must have been awakened by Mr. Wickliffe's resolutions, I prefer sending even this imperfect answer to waiting the period necessary for the collection of fuller and more comprehensive data.

To the first question, therefore, I reply that no regiment of "fugitive slaves" has been or is being organized in this department. There is, however, a fine regiment of persons whose late masters are "fugitive rebels"—men who everywhere fly before the appearance of the national flag, leaving their servants behind them to shift, as best they can, for themselves. So far, indeed, are the loyal persons composing this regiment from seeking to avoid the presence of their late owners, that they are now, one and all, working with remarkable industry to place themselves in a position to go in full and effective pursuit of their fugacious and traitorous proprietors.

To the second question, I have the honor to answer that the instructions given to Brigadier General T. W. Sherman, by the Hon. Simon Cameron, late Secretary of War, and turned over to me by succession for my guidance, do distinctly authorize me to employ all loyal persons offering their services in defence of the Union and for the suppression of this rebellion, in any manner I might see fit, or that the circumstances might call for. There is no restriction as to the character or color of the persons to be employed, or the nature of the employment, whether civil or military, in which their services should be used. I conclude, therefore, that I have been authorized to enlist "fugitive slaves" as soldiers, could any such be found in this department. No such characters, however, have yet appeared within view of our most advanced pickets—the loyal slaves everywhere remaining on their plantations to welcome us, aid us, and supply us with food, labor, and information. It is the masters who have in every instance been the "fugitives," running away from loyal slaves as well as loyal soldiers, and whom we have only partially been able to see—chiefly their heads over ramparts, or, rifle in hand, dodging behind trees in the extreme distance. In the absence of any "fugitive master law," the deserted slaves would be wholly without remedy, had not the crime of treason given them the right to pursue, capture, and bring back those persons of whose protection they have been thus suddenly bereft.

To the third interrogatory it is my painful duty to reply, that I never have received any specific authority for issues of clothing, uniforms, arms, equipments, and so forth, to the troops in question. My general instructions from Mr. Cameron to employ them in any manner I might find necessary, and the military exigencies of the department and the country being my only, but, in my judgment, sufficient justification. Neither have I had any specific authority for supplying these persons with shovels, spades, and pickaxes, when employing them as laborers, nor with boats and oars when using them as lightermen; but these are not points included in Mr. Wickliffe's resolution. To me, it seemed that liberty to employ men in any particular capacity implied with it liberty, also, to supply them with the necessary tools; and acting upon this faith I have clothed, equipped, and armed the only loyal regiment yet raised in South Carolina.

I must say, in vindication of my own conduct, that had it not been for the many other diversified and imperative claims on my time and attention, a much more satisfactory result might have been hoped for; and that in place of only one, as at present, at least five or six well-drilled, brave, and thoroughly acclimated regiments should by this time have been added to the loyal forces of the Union. The experiment of arming the blacks, so far as I have made it, has been a complete and even marvellous success. They are sober, docile, attentive, and enthusiastic; displaying great natural capacities for acquiring the duties of the soldier. They are eager, beyond all things, to take the field and be led into action; and it is the unanimous opinion of the officers who have had charge of them, that, in the peculiarities of this climate and country, they will prove invaluable auxiliaries—fully equal to the similar regiments so long and successfully used by the British authorities in the West India islands.

In conclusion, I would say it is my hope—there appearing no possibility of other re-enforcements, owing to the exigencies of the campaign in the peninsula—to have organized by the end of next fall, and to be able to present to the government, from forty-eight to fifty thousand of these hardy and devoted soldiers. Trusting that this letter may form part of your answer to Mr. Wickliffe's resolutions,

I have the honor to be, most respectfully, your very obedient servant,

D. HUNTER,

Major General Commanding.

Hon. EDWIN M. STANTON,

Secretary of War, Washington, D. C.