

## A STORY TO TELL FROM NORTH CAROLINA'S PAST

a review by Kristina L. Knotts

David Wright Faladé. *Black Cloud Rising*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2022.

**KRISTINA L. KNOTTS** is the Assistant Director of the Banacos Academic Center and a Program Advisor in the Learning Disabilities Program at Westfield State University in Westfield, MA. She has a PhD in English from the University of Tennessee and reviews for NCLR frequently.

**DAVID WRIGHT FALADÉ** is co-author of two previous books, including *Away Running* (Orca Book Publishers, 2016) with Luc Bouchard. A Professor at the University of Illinois and former Fulbright Fellow to Brazil, Faladé holds a BA from Carleton College and an MFA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

When history refers to African American soldiers' service in the American Civil War, the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry Regiment – famously portrayed in the 1989 film *Glory* – usually comes to mind. *Black Cloud Rising*, an historical novel by David Wright Faladé, shows there is much more to learn about the heroism of Black Union soldiers than just the 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment. *Black Cloud Rising* recreates the gritty and inspiring true story of Sergeant Richard Etheridge. Born into slavery and living on Roanoke Island at the start of the Civil War, in 1863 Etheridge joined the Second North Carolina (Colored) Volunteer Infantry regiment in Company F, also called the African Brigade, under Union Army General Edward Wild. Wild commanded an army of both black and white soldiers, with many of his black soldiers recruited from the areas of southeastern Virginia and eastern North Carolina and recently freed from slavery. Faladé's novel arises from his earlier historical book, written with David Zoby, about Richard Etheridge, *Fire on the Beach: Recovering the Lost Story of Richard Etheridge and the Pea Island Lifesavers* (2000), which focuses on Etheridge's exemplary service commanding an all-black lifesaving unit on the North Carolina coast.

*Black Cloud Rising* covers a month of Etheridge's Civil War service from November 1863 to Christmas Eve 1863 with an afterword set in 1899. Much of the novel's action explores the struggles the black soldiers encountered during their service, from the resentment from white Union soldiers, as well as the local whites, bushwhack-

ers and Home Guard, who were loyal to the Confederacy, and conflicts among the black soldiers. Faladé's novel shows the tensions the young soldiers must navigate in the swiftly changing world around them. The black soldiers in Wild's regiment, with a few exceptions, were recently enslaved. Aside from the stress of combat, much of their anxiety stems from their worry about family and friends who are not yet free. The Confiscation Act of 1862 allowed the Union soldiers to seize property used to support the rebellion, which could certainly mean soldiers could confiscate and set free those who were still enslaved. As Wright and Zoby make clear in *Fire on the Beach*, the "men of the Second had a stake here. Most came from the region or nearby, and they would be freeing family and friends. But there was a larger goal [here] also. These men all wanted to make a strong statement about their unwillingness to see in bondage themselves, their families, or anybody who looked like them" (69).

*Black Cloud Rising* portrays the soldiers going into the community to find relatives and friends and bring them into the protection of the Union troops. As the men of the Second travel into hostile territory, Etheridge's childhood friend Fields goes in search of his still-enslaved brothers when it's rumored their enslaver left the area with them. In one of the most powerful scenes, Fields asks one of the white relatives of his former owner where his brothers are but is mocked for inquiring, and Etheridge must restrain Fields, who tells them: "You will tell me where my brothers are, or you

will lose like I have lost" (156). Richard and his men's mission could not be any clearer: to end slavery and assert their rightful humanity.

As narrator of *Black Cloud Rising*, Richard's voice is earnest, intelligent, and introspective. Twenty-one years old at the novel's beginning, Richard rises to the rank of sergeant. As the troop moves into armed conflict, he embraces his role as a leader even as he wrestles with troubling memories and his new identity. At various times in the novel, Richard examines his own life and background to make sense of his past with the white Etheridges. He's been taught to read and write, for example, a rarity among his peers. Throughout the novel, he wonders if this unusual favor is because the white master, John B. Etheridge, is his father, as he suspects. Richard's embrace of his role as a sergeant and the respect he garners from the white officers aggravates some of Richard's peers, especially when Richard is called on to discipline the men in his troop. Revere, another soldier who, like Richard, joined the regiment after leaving slavery, serves as his antagonist throughout the narrative. At times he calls Richard a "lackey and a lickspit" and remarks, "How much you despise your own black skin" (107–108).

One of the considerable strengths of this novel is Rich-

ard's growth, psychologically, in his relationships, in his reflecting on his past, in his reassessment of the white Etheridges, and in his dawning understanding of his mother. He has moments where he acknowledges his limited perspective of the women in his life, and he reckons frequently on the considerable scrutiny and suspicion the black soldiers face. In one scene, Richard critiques General Wild's tactic of taking local white women hostage: "If the general intended to use this method of combat against the Rebels – menacing the men by the threat of terror to their women – it put us colored soldiers in a tight spot. For would we not be seen as the lustful brutes that Southern men already believed us to be in the first place?" (151). Faladé's narrative shows Richard vigilant during the conflicts and difficult situations the soldiers find themselves in, mindful of the racist views they're constantly subjected to, which their general, though an abolitionist, is oblivious to.

Faladé's novel also sheds light on the various groups Richard encounters who populate the region. As he and his fellow soldiers traverse the southeastern Virginia and coastal Carolina landscapes, they encounter a variety of people: hostile Home Guard types, defensive Confederacy sympathizers, black men and women who joyously greet the troops, and the free black people who populate the Swamp and live by their own rules and creed, preferring their bartering lifestyle to what the military offers. Faladé's storytelling gift is that he reveals the complexity of those in the South, black and white. He shows there are more stories to tell, not only about Richard Etheridge who continued his military service and later had a distinguished career with the Life-Saving Service on the North Carolina coast, but also the other soldiers he served with, as well as the newly freed men and women who made up the Outer Banks landscape who deserved and fought for freedom. ■



RIGHT Keeper Richard Etheridge (left) and crew, Station Pea Island, NC (The appearance of US Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.)