

1-1-2009

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### Recommended Citation

Armstead, Ron E. (2009) "Veterans in the Fight for Equal Rights: From the Civil War to Today," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter\\_review/vol18/iss1/12](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol18/iss1/12)

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# Veterans in the Fight for Equal Rights: From the Civil War to Today

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**Ron E. Armstead**

When a man puts his life at the disposal of the nation, that man has earned the rights of a citizen. So the black man owes it to himself and to his advancement to heed the call of war. That is what Frederick Douglass thought, and he gave voice to that opinion in his last autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881): “I ... urged every man who could to enlist to get an eagle on his button, a musket on his shoulder, and the star-spangled banner over his hand.” History has proven him wrong. Black men and black women contributed to every war that America waged through the twentieth century, but at the conclusion of military service the full rights of citizenship were not on offer until very late in that period.

So for more than a century African-American soldiers and veterans fought for civil rights. They fought for the Colored Soldiers and Sailors League and with the Niagara Movement, NAACP, and other organizations formed later during the civil rights movement. In the words of James Monroe Trotter, a Civil War veteran and father of William Monroe Trotter, they fought for both “manhood and equality,” from the Civil War and Reconstruction Period to World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The favorite song of the black combat soldiers in Vietnam, for instance, was Aretha Franklin’s “Respect.”

During the Civil War, Douglass put action behind his words and recruited soldiers to join the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, one of the first black units organized. The movie *Glory* tells the story of the unit, but

before the release of *Glory* in 1989, most people did not know that black men had played an active role fighting for the nation. According to Dr. Frank Smith, Jr., founder of the African American Civil War Museum, 209,145 black soldiers served during the Civil War, and they participated in every major campaign of 1864–1865 except Sherman’s invasion of Georgia. In all, they took part in 449 separate battles against Confederate forces, according to Dr. John David Smith, author of *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (2002). These battles included Port Hudson, Milliken’s Bend, the Battle of New Market Heights, Fort Pocahontas, Petersburg, The Crater, Nashville, Honey Hill, and Olustee. Each time they fought, they countered the assumption that black men were cowards who didn’t have the gumption for battle. Until 1998, there were no monuments (except for the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial in Boston) or museums in this country representing them; their names and deeds were simply ignored. The framing of the transitional phrase “Slave, Soldier, Citizens” offers a nineteenth-century paradigm for contemporary conversation about citizenship or civic duty, patriotism, and African-American military service, including women deployed in the global war on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Douglass was writing from faith, believing that Americans would live up to their democratic ideals once it was proven that blacks were committed to the success and continuance of the nation as long as it was synonymous with their emancipation and liberation. War was the key to freedom from slavery. Once blood was shed by white men and black men side by side on the field of battle, they would become brothers and the history of slavery would no longer divide them. W. E. B. DuBois, who was born in the nineteenth century, a few years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, was a man of golden words, like Douglass, and he had the ear of the people. When war presented itself again, DuBois argued that blacks would do themselves a great service by picking up the gun and going to “the war to end all wars,” World War I. Great gains could be had, he said. Those gains were very slow in coming; witness the injustices done against black soldiers in Houston in 1917 and the riots of the Red Summer of 1919. The Brownsville disturbance, which predated World War I, made palpable the disregard with which the black soldier was viewed. In the twentieth century, blacks extended their participation

in the nation's wars, fighting again in segregated units in World War II, in Korea after Harry Truman's order desegregating the military, and, more recently, in the Gulf War and in Iraq. Even if they were not able to claim all the benefits they had anticipated, black war heroes and black veterans earned, despite the odds, significant expansions of civil rights from their position on the battlefield for America.

Heather Butts, an attorney, recalls that seeing *Glory* was pretty much a life-changing event for her. She was sixteen at the time and in high school, and had never heard that blacks had fought in the Civil War—even though she was a history buff. Subsequently, the movie changed the way she looked at history and information, while it also interested her in the Civil War and Civil War medicine. In graduate school, she was doing research on the history of medicine and came across the name of Alexander Augusta, a black physician during the Civil War. She began studying his life and learning about black doctors in that period. By 2005, after eight years of research, she had authored a National Medical Association journal article about Dr. Augusta, a true champion for civil rights.

Dr. Margaret Humphreys, author of *Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the American Civil War* (2008), has argued that health standards were so dismal in the nineteenth century that more black soldiers died from disease than from battle. Black soldiers were treated as second-class citizens in a variety of ways, including poor-quality food, equipment, and tents. Most of the white officers, unlike Robert Gould Shaw, accepted command of black units for the promotions and pay and could not have cared less about their men. They never had enough doctors, hospitals were terrible, and the men never got enough rest. In addition, many members of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) were ex-slaves who were illiterate and did not know how to advocate for themselves. According to Ira Russell, an Army surgeon, a large number of black soldiers died from neglect by white officers and medical personnel.

## **W. E. B. DuBois**

In his July 1918 “Close Ranks” editorial for the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine, DuBois, whose ancestors had fought in the American Revolution, echoed Frederick Douglass. He believed that World War I offered the black soldier an opportunity to gain his stripes. Reaction to his editorial was

strong, and in another editorial in August he explained that he did not see blacks as beggars having to earn their place in this country for which “we have worked ... we have suffered...we have fought ...; we have made its music, we have tinged its ideals, its poetry, its religion, its dreams; we have reached in this land our highest modern development and nothing, humanly speaking, can prevent us from eventually reaching here the full stature of our manhood. Our country is at war. The war is critical, dangerous and world-wide. If this is our country, then this is our war. ... But what of our wrongs, cry a million voices with strained faces and bitter eyes. Our wrongs are still wrong. War does not excuse disfranchisement, ‘Jim Crow’ cars and social injustices, but it does make our first duty clear. It does say deep to the heart of every Negro American—‘we will not bargain with our loyalty.’” Thousands responded, and many black soldiers gave their all to the war, some winning medals for their bravery. In return, they received little. The lynching did not stop. The schools and bathrooms and drinking fountains remained segregated.

### **William Monroe Trotter**

Less conciliatory than DuBois, William Monroe Trotter had reservations about black participation in war. Once the soldiers had enlisted, however, he published editorials in his Boston-based paper, *The Guardian*, urging better treatment. At the end of the war, he went to France as an independent delegate so that the black presence would be represented at the bargaining table. His father, James Monroe Trotter, had come from Ohio during the Civil War to join the 55th Massachusetts, where he served with George Garrison, son of William Lloyd Garrison. As a soldier, James Monroe Trotter was a leader in the fight for equal pay for African-American troops. After the war he was the president of the Negro Ex-Soldiers’ and Sailors’ National Reunion Association in the 1880s, which held its national meeting in Boston in August 1887 at Tremont Temple, attracting more than 300 veterans. The meeting was the largest known assembly of black former soldiers and sailors after the Civil War (although essentially a Massachusetts affair), according to Dr. Donald Shaffer, author of *After the Glory: The Struggles of Civil War Veterans* (2004). An article in the *National Tribune* on August 11, 1887, exclaimed, “Colored Veterans: A Large & Enthusiastic Reunion of Negroes from many Regiments at

Boston.” A dutiful son, William Monroe Trotter idolized his father and did everything he could to make him proud. At Harvard, he was the first African American elected to Phi Beta Kappa. As Stephen Fox observed in his biography of Trotter, the combination of racism, his father’s influence, his Harvard education, and the militant group in the Boston elite pushed him into political activism.

### **Niagara Movement**

The seal of the Niagara Movement for the Boston meeting in 1907, attended by 800 delegates, symbolizes the connection between the black soldier’s sacrifices and African-American civil rights, or earned rights, as opposed to birth rights. To quote DuBois’s *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), “Nothing else made Negro citizenship conceivable, but the record of the Negro as a fighter.” The monument to the black soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and their white commander, Col. Robert G. Shaw, represents a march toward black empowerment. The statue, which depicts a people fighting for their rights, inspired the leaders of the Niagara Movement to adopt it as their official seal. The broken chains around the border were added by the Niagara Movement.

### **National Outrages of the Early Twentieth Century**

Two major incidents epitomize the outrages against blacks in the era of the Niagara Movement. The first occurred in August 1906, when black soldiers of the 25th Infantry were accused of starting a riot in Brownsville, Texas, to protest their treatment by white townspeople. When the accused soldier could not be found, President Theodore Roosevelt—with no trial or hearing—ordered the discharge of three companies, or 167 black soldiers, “without honor.” He barred them from collecting pensions, back pay, allowances, or any other benefits. Six had won the Congressional Medal of Honor for valor defending their country.

Finally, in 1971, Congressman Augustus F. Hawkins introduced legislation to reverse Roosevelt’s order and declare the discharges honorable. After an investigation, President Richard M. Nixon approved honorable discharges. The only discharged member of the 25th Infantry who was still alive, Dorsie W. Willis, received \$25,000 and medical treatment at a VA hospital.

In 1917, 40 black soldiers were court-martialed on charges of participating in a riot in Houston. After they were convicted, fifteen were summarily hanged on the orders of the camp commander. The executions provoked national outrage and calls for an appellate process to review death penalty cases. That review did not happen. But during World War II, numerous examples of excessive sentences and other criminal justice disparities led Congress to develop the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

## **World War I**

The 369th Infantry, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, fought the Germans during World War I as part of the French Army. The unit had black officers. One of them was James Reese Europe, who introduced jazz to France. The unit's soldiers made history. From their ranks emerged the first American soldier to be awarded the Croix de Guerre—France's highest military honor. Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts were cornered by the Germans, but Johnson held them off, eventually fighting with a knife when he had no more bullets. The dogged determination that he showed was reflected in the post-war New Negro spirit that refused to kowtow, that knew it had bought respect with its blood. For the most part, however, that blood meant little. After the war, Johnson's efforts were not recognized, and he died penniless and alone. In later years, that neglect was addressed. Bill Clinton awarded him a Purple Heart in 1993 and, in 2007, a charter school was named in his honor in Albany, N.Y. The 369th was the American regiment that served the longest stretch in the field—191 days without replacement—never losing a foot of ground or a man as prisoner. At the end of their service, the entire regiment received the Croix de Guerre from a grateful French nation.

Robert Moton, Booker T. Washington's successor, cautioned black soldiers returning from the war not to expect too much or to radically change their behavior. "I hope no one will do anything in peace," he told them, "to spoil the magnificent record you have made in war." Among those returning was Charles Hamilton Houston, who had served as an Army Officer. He would later write: "The hate and scorn showered on us Negro officers by our fellow Americans convinced me that there was no sense in my dying for a world ruled by them. I made up my mind that if I got through this war I would study law and use my time fighting for who could not strike back." Houston later mentored Thurgood Marshall.

Several historical commentaries provide additional insight into the postwar New Negro Movement, later the Harlem Renaissance, and confirm that African-American life in the North was sharply affected by World War I. Many African Americans saw the war as a chance to show the nation they deserved equal rights. Almost 300,000 served. But military life came with the strains of bias and segregation. African Americans who fought under French command earned respect in key battles. Others were affected by the experience of living among Europeans, who regarded them not as outcasts but as human beings. When African-American veterans returned, they spoke out against lynching, segregation, and other forms of racism.

The bold spirit of returning veterans helped spark a new mood in African-American communities. Alain Locke, the first black Rhodes scholar, described it as a “new spirit... awake in the masses.” Locke wrote about the changing sensibility and edited *The New Negro*, an anthology of African-American writers. In Locke’s view, a “New Negro” had emerged, willing to settle for nothing less than equal rights, human treatment, and active involvement in politics, business, and the arts. The ideals of the Niagara Movement became action in the aftermath of war.

The term “New Negro” was coined by political radicals eager to be distinguished from older black leadership. The title was coveted by nationalist, leftist, and angry reformers. It was proudly claimed for those who fought to defend black communities during the 1919 race riots, which erupted in numerous cities across the country. The distinction between New and Old Negro can be best understood when reading DuBois’s declaration on the aims of returning black soldiers, which was widely republished as an example of the fighting spirit of that time:

**Returning Soldiers** (*Crisis*/May 1919)

We return

We return from fighting

We return fighting

Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.



Another New Negro anthem, which is now a classic, is the 1919 Claude McKay poem “If We Must Die.”

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

Christopher Klemek, an historian at Florida International University, recalls that “the year 1919 (also known as the Red Summer) was a year of tremendous violence and upheaval, sometimes triggered by the sight of black veterans returning in uniform.”

## **World War II**

At the beginning of World War II, 75 percent of black Americans resided in the South, 90 percent lived in poverty, and only 25 percent had a high school education. One-third of employed black men were sharecroppers or tenant farmers, and the majority of black women labored as domestic servants or farmhands. In the armed forces, blacks also tended to occupy menial positions. That was the case with Dorie Miller, who acted with heroism on board the USS *West Virginia* as it was anchored at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Miller was catapulted from lowly messman attendant to a national hero and an icon to generations of African Americans. Miller's heroism was exceeded only by its irony, according to Philip A. Klinkner, coauthor of *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (2000). At the time, blacks were segregated in all of

the nation's military branches, just as they were in most other areas of American life. After the attack, the Navy refused to release Miller's name, referring to him only as "an unidentified Negro messman." Some claim that the Navy did not want its first hero of the war to be a black man. Black newspapers and civil rights organizations uncovered Miller's name and publicized the incident in the hopes of forcing the Navy to recognize his bravery and open its higher ranks to blacks.

A year after Pearl Harbor, Miller was nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor by the congressman John Dingell, a Democrat from Michigan. The following year, 1943, Miller perished at sea in the line of duty when the Japanese sank the aircraft carrier he was serving on. In the words of poet Langston Hughes:

When Dorie Miller took gun in hand—  
Jim Crow started his last stand.  
Our battle yet is far from won  
But when it is, Jim Crow'll be done.  
We gonna bury that son-of-a-gun!

Tragically enough, Miller never received the nation's highest military honor, the Congressional Medal of Honor. In fact, no African American who served in World War II received the medal until seven Army veterans became recipients in 1997.

Before he became famous as a baseball player, Jackie Robinson ran into trouble in the military. He had refused to sit in the back of the bus. For that, he was brought before a court-martial. His confrontations with racial discrimination were typical of the experience of the black soldier during World War II. As Robinson wrote of his acquittal, "It was a small victory, for I had learned that I was in two wars, one against the foreign enemy, the other against prejudice at home." Had he been convicted and dishonorably discharged, as he feared, it is doubtful that Branch Rickey, general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, would have chosen him to integrate the white major leagues in 1946.

According to the historian Jack Foner, author of *Blacks in the Military in American History* (1974), during World War II, "Many soldiers

were unjustly convicted by court-martial, either because their officers assumed their guilt regardless of the evidence, or because they wanted to 'set an example' for other black soldiers." The demand on the NAACP for assistance for black soldiers was so great that they had to turn down most requests unless the case was deemed to be "of national importance to the Negro race."

After serving overseas in the Army, Charles and Medgar Evers returned home to Mississippi, where they began to organize voter registration drives. When they tried to register themselves to vote during the 1946 campaign, they were turned away at the polling station by armed whites. Dr. John Dittmer, who has written about civil rights in Mississippi, assesses the situation: "Black people wanted to vote, white people would do anything to stop them and serving your country meant absolutely nothing!"

The Medgar Evers story offers more details about the transformative nature of overseas military experience. Evers served in a segregated field battalion in England and France. When he was stationed in France, he became close to a French family, and was romantically involved with one of the daughters. He was unaccustomed to being treated like a full human being by whites. The experience affected him deeply. Evers questioned whether he should return to Mississippi. "He was very much in love," his wife Myrlie Evers later explained. Medgar Evers had learned to feel deep affection for "someone of another color." Once he made the decision to return to the segregated South, the idea of coming home with a French bride made no sense. In most states, including Mississippi, interracial marriage was then against the law. Despite his decision, Medgar privately kept his precious photographs and letters of his French romantic acquaintance for several years, destroying them only when he married Myrlie Beasley in 1951.

A litany of Jim Crow stories warns of the perils of postwar America. For instance, when blacks came home after World War II, they were warned not to wear their uniforms. White police were beating black soldiers and searching them. If they had a picture of a white woman in their wallet, they would be killed.

Amzie Moore helped organize blacks to resist a series of racist killings that had been designed to ensure that returning black soldiers

knew their place and did not disrupt the “southern way of life.” Ironically, Corporal Moore had been drafted into the armed service in 1942, and his job was to counter Japanese propaganda that, via media broadcasts, reminded black soldiers of the difficulties and dangers they would face when they went home.

According to Ralph D. Abernathy, Sr., who was also drafted into World War II: “The army that fought World War II was almost completely segregated,” Abernathy said, “so all the enlisted men in my company were black, but our officers were white...When World War II came along, the army perpetuated this bigotry when it structured the vast civilian army that was required to fight a global war.”

Rev. Benjamin Hooks, who served in the 92nd Division, found himself in the humiliating position of guarding Italian prisoners of war who were allowed to eat in restaurants that were off-limits to him. The experience helped deepen his resolve to do something about bigotry in the South. After his wartime service—he was promoted to the rank of staff sergeant—Hooks went north to Chicago to study law at DePaul University. No law school in his native Tennessee would admit him. Whitney M. Young, Jr., Robert F. Williams, and Rev. Hosiiah Williams all served in World War II, just to name a few other veterans who became civil rights leaders. Dr. Howard Ball, professor of political science at the University of Vermont, helps crystallize the formidable role played by returning soldiers in the fight for civil rights, writing that “black veterans of World War II and the Korean War became the core plaintiffs in the lawsuits leading to victory against Jim Crow in the 1950’s.”

Two of the most noted examples were fathers of named plaintiffs in fabled school desegregation cases: Oliver L. Brown in *Brown v. Board of Education* from Kansas, and Harry Briggs in *Briggs v. Elliott* from South Carolina.

The commentary of Edward O. Frantz, assistant professor of history at the University of Indianapolis, on blacks in the war underscores the interrelatedness of military service and civil rights. In a very real sense, the war years provided the impetus for black Americans to redouble their efforts to achieve full equality at home.

Equally important, Frantz believes, for many blacks participation in the war proved to be their Rubicon: Once crossed, there would be

no going back. This war experience, in which blacks at home and abroad were reminded of their dual identities (Americans, but subordinated as black Americans), galvanized their efforts to achieve greater equality.

The best expression of this push for equality was the famous slogan of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. As a leading black newspaper of the 1940s, the *Courier's* position carried significant weight. The phrase was simple and memorable: the Double V. Blacks needed to seek victory not only over the enemies on the battlefield abroad, but also over the enemies of the race at home. The import of the war for black Americans was summed up by Walter White of the NAACP, who predicted the impact of the war in his 1945 book *A Rising Wind*. Service overseas made black soldiers aware that people of color throughout the world were similarly marginalized. As White memorably put it, such exposure had “immeasurably magnified the Negro’s awareness of the disparity between the American profession and practice of democracy.”

## **Korean War**

The Korean War, known also as the Forgotten War, has long been looked upon as a watershed moment in American race relations in that it preceded the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and eventually led to the military being labeled the most integrated institution in America. Yet a closer examination of the historical facts reveals a slightly different picture. As counsel to the NAACP, Thurgood Marshall spent five weeks with U.S. troops during the Korean War to investigate allegations of racism at courts-martial. He concluded that “even in Mississippi a Negro gets a trial longer than those of many convicted black soldiers.”

Despite serious accusations of cowardice on one hand, and historical omissions on the other, new memoirs, compelling congressional testimonies, interviews, first-person narratives, and recent publications by black Korean War veterans and family members (including Charles Rangel, Clarence Adams, Curtis Morrow, Cornelius Charlton, and Earl Dantzler, Sr.) provide a small glimpse of the racial specifics of combat, captivity, and post-conflict return experiences. Dantzler, for example, was one of a number of black prisoners of war during the Korean War, in which more than 33,000 Americans died. He served in the same

field artillery unit, the Army's 503rd, as then-Corporal Charles Rangel. Dantzler was held in captivity for nearly three years. Upon returning in uniform to his hometown of Richmond, Virginia, he was immediately told to get to the back of the bus. While the master narratives of the time tend to negate the racism endured in the military and on the home front, the significance of black military heroes and heroines such as Sarah Keyes Evans's and Dovey Roundtree's legal triumph over discrimination in interstate transportation, a case that predates the Rosa Parks protest, can't be overemphasized. As Rangel has said, "The greatest fight you will ever fight is not against the common enemies of America aboard, but right here fighting for your own civil rights."

### **Vietnam War**

The late journalist Wallace Terry, author of the acclaimed *Bloods*, said that veterans were essential participants in the civil rights thrust of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Over and over, he emphasized that they "were in the forefront of the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement!" This is true notwithstanding Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s address at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967. In that speech, he condemned the American hypocrisy in Vietnam for dashing the hopes of the poor at home while sending their sons, brothers, and husbands to fight and to die in highly disproportionate numbers 8,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia that they did not have in southwest Georgia or East Harlem. African Americans were repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of blacks and whites dying and killing together on foreign soil for a nation that practiced racial segregation in the schools, in jobs, and in neighborhoods. King could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.

Finally, there is the hope that Langston Hughes expressed:

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!

The Niagara Movement, the NAACP, and the latter-day civil rights movement all have a common ancestry, the Civil War. “If there were no Civil War, there could be no Civil Rights movement,” said Fred Boyles, Park Superintendent at Andersonville National Historic Site in southwest Georgia. Without a civil rights movement, there could be no Barack Obama. The veterans of the nation’s wars helped to sow the seeds for today’s bountiful harvest.