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Commentary

Blacks in U.S. History

by
Wornie L. Reed

During Black History Month many people paused to discuss and reflect on the presence and the contributions of African-Americans in the history of the United States. During February two years ago we had a visit from a white Navy veteran from nearby Quincy, Massachusetts, who had his own black history story—although he did not express it as such.

Quincy, a city of some 85,000 people, has one of the lowest percentages of blacks of any city its size in the country. In this setting, and perhaps others, this man had grown weary of hearing his friends and acquaintances characterize blacks as contributing relatively little to this country. So he brought in a yellowed newspaper clipping that described the heroics of some black Navy personnel on his aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. *Essex*, when it was attacked during World War II.

Although black men on the carrier were consigned to mess hall and similar duties and were not permitted to hold combat positions, they had badgered their superiors for the opportunity to participate directly in the fighting. Consequently, several of them were manning the anti-aircraft guns when the ship was attacked by a Japanese suicide pilot. Eight of the men were killed as they stuck by their guns and continued firing at the plane until it crashed into the ship. Pictures of the action show that not one of the men wavered or left his position in spite of the almost certain disaster.

The actions of the blacks in this episode appear to be typical. Throughout the history of this country, blacks have fought valiantly in the battles of America. Some 5,000 blacks fought in the Revolutionary War, some of them coming from as far away as Haiti. Blacks were at Lexington and at Concord. In fact, they fought in practically all of the big battles of the war. Two made the famous Delaware crossing with Washington.



And, of course, blacks fought in the Civil War. By the end of the war there were over 186,000 black soldiers in the Union ranks. During World War I, while reported lynchings in America totaled 54 in 1916, 38 in 1917, 64 in 1918, and 83 in 1919, and black leaders were trying in vain to get U.S. presidents to make statements against lynching, some 370,000 black soldiers fought in Europe, then returned home to more than 20 major race riots across the country. White mobs were attacking blacks in city after city because blacks were working in factories at jobs that were previously reserved for whites.

During World War II, with over one million black soldiers participating, there were major black combat air units. Approximately 600 black pilots received their wings before the end of the war with more than eight winning the Distinguished Flying Cross. This group destroyed 111 enemy planes in the air and 150 on the ground.

In this issue Philip S. Hart, sociologist and filmmaker, provides a personal account of how he developed a television documentary to tell the story of the early black aviators who created pathways for the exploits of black pilots in World War II.

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