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A Salute to African Americans Who Served in the United States Armed Forces

by
Harold Horton

African Americans have volunteered to participate in every war or conflict in which the United States has been engaged. This is true despite their ancestors having been slaves for 244 years of America's history.

From the Revolutionary War to the Vietnam War, African Americans have demanded the right to serve their country in the armed services and, in several instances, they have made the difference between victory or defeat for American troops. Throughout this history, African Americans were ever cognizant of the dual freedoms—their own personal freedom as well as the nation's—for which they so bravely fought and gave their lives. They long held onto the hope that they would be granted the full rights of citizenship if they proved their loyalty to their country in war.

Indeed, in addition to fighting the enemies of America, African Americans in the armed services have simultaneously battled their own "second-class station" within the ranks of the military. In this battle they have seen numerous victories, including President Truman's Executive Order No. 9811. Issued in 1948, this pivotal order created the President's Committee on Equal Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services in addition to the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), which were intended to eliminate racial discrimination in the armed services and in federal employment.

The Revolutionary War

Although skirmishes often erupted between the British troops and black and white patriots in Boston during the colonial era, they reached a peak during the winter of 1770. Crispus Attucks, a Massachusetts native who had escaped from slavery, was shot and killed in one such skirmish on March 5, 1770. While almost five years passed between the Boston Massacre and the beginning of the Revolutionary War, many consider Attucks to be the first martyr of the struggle for American independence. Some historians have even credited John Adams with stating that the foundation of American independence was laid on the night that Attucks was killed. As a special tribute on the occasion of a monument being erected in Attucks's memory 118 years later, in 1888, the poet John Boyle O'Reilly wrote the following poem:



And honor to Crispus Attucks, who
was leader of voice that day:
The first to defy, and the first to die,
with Maverick, Carr and Gray.
Call it riot or revolution, or mob or
crowd as you may,
Such deaths have been seed of nations,
such lives shall be honored for ay.

(Bennett, 61)

African-American soldiers fought in virtually every major battle of the Revolutionary War. While official policy on the enlistment of black men fluctuated, it became apparent after Valley Forge that every able-bodied man — black or white, slave or free — was needed in the Continental army. By almost all accounts black soldiers were among the most valiant defenders of the Revolution; and by the end of the war some five thousand blacks, slaves and free men, had served in defense of American liberty (Quarles, 56–61).

The Civil War

In the Civil War, African Americans were not granted permission to serve in the Union army until 1862, and even then they served in segregated units that were referred to as the "United States Colored Troops" (Franklin, 287). The victory of the Union in the Civil War brought about freedom for the slaves as declared in the Emancipation Proclamation but, despite their loyal service in the war, African Americans were still not granted the same civil rights, education, or employment opportunities as whites.

Blacks were turned away in the early stages of the Civil War because it was believed that permitting them to

fight would give them a status comparable to that of white soldiers. Blacks were also considered incapable of fighting in war, even though they had successfully participated in previous wars fought by the United States. As W. E. B. Du Bois explained, "Negroes on the whole were considered cowards and inferior beings whose very presence in America was [considered to be most] unfortunate" (Du Bois, 56).

A total of 215,000 African Americans served in the Civil War. Historian Carter G. Woodson estimates that "Negroes held altogether seventy-five commissions in the army during the Civil War." Black troops fought in combat in every major battle and suffered significantly higher casualty rates than did white troops. It is estimated that black troops suffered 68,000 casualties (Woodson, 374).

Surprisingly, blacks also served in the Confederate army. While many in the South feared that if blacks were armed they would rebel, the Confederacy also faced the prospect of runaway slaves joining the Union army. Often, Confederate troops utilized blacks as cooks and for other such menial tasks. Some affluent Confederate soldiers even took their slaves as body servants to war with them. Toward the end of the war, the Confederate Senate enacted a bill calling for the enlistment of 200,000 black troops who were promised their freedom if they remained loyal throughout the war (McPherson, IX-X).

Without question, the role of the black soldier in the Civil War has been diminished. One historian of the period, however, has summarized the participation of African Americans in that struggle as follows: "Without their help, the North could not have won the war as soon as it did, and perhaps it could not have won at all. The Negro was crucial to the whole Union effort" (McPherson, IX-X).

The Spanish-American War

When the United States went to war with Spain in 1898 many blacks volunteered to fight. In order for them to be able to serve in the army, Congress passed an act authorizing the formation of ten colored regiments. However, African Americans resented the War Department's stipulation that officers above the grade of second lieutenant be white. Hence, rather than join the national regiments, most African-American soldiers chose to serve in the troops recruited by the individual states, which did not ban black officers (except in Alabama). Each of the eight states recruited a regiment that was either wholly or partially black.

Frank Knox, a white soldier who fought in the Spanish-American War, wrote in his diary, "I joined a troop of the Tenth Calvary, colored, and for a time fought with them shoulder to shoulder, and in justice to the colored race I must say I never saw braver men anywhere" (Quarles, 178).

World War I

While the First World War was ostensibly fought to make the world safe for democracy, it seems that it was not fought to make America, or the world, a safe place for blacks. There was still no place in or out of the armed

services for black Americans.

Black officers and soldiers who served in World War I were repeatedly humiliated by white officers, many of whom addressed them as "coons" or "niggers." Black soldiers were often forced into labor battalions or assigned to menial duties as orderlies. In France, some white soldiers spent so much time trying to inoculate French people with their social prejudices that black leaders commented that the white American fought more valiantly against blacks than against the Germans (Bennett, 348).

Blacks, however, continued to enthusiastically volunteer to serve in the armed services, and they played a significant role in World War I. According to official records, approximately 370,000 black soldiers and 1,400 black commissioned officers served in the armed forces during the First World War. Four of the outstanding American units were composed entirely of black enlisted men: the 369th, 370th, 371st, and 372nd. With the exception of the 370th, each of these units received *croix de guerre* for valor. The 370th received distinction for its battles in the Argonne Forest. The 369th, the old Fifteenth Regiment of New York, was the first allied unit to reach the Rhine. Although this unit was under fire for 191 days; it never lost a foot of ground, a trench, or a single soldier through capture. No less courageous was the 370th regiment, the old Eighth Regiment of Illinois, which was commanded almost entirely by black officers and fought the last battles of the war. The first American soldiers to be decorated for bravery in France during World War I were African Americans: Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts of the 369th Infantry Regiment (Bennett, 346-48).

World War II

Throughout the 1930s, civil rights leaders consistently brought the second-class status of black Americans to the attention of leaders in America. With the threat of another war facing Americans, black leaders began to petition the government for change. Asa Philip Randolph, the founding president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters who had established local councils in cities across the country and pursued a direct-action campaign using the mass appeal of freedom songs and mass meetings, informed President Roosevelt that he was going to lead a march on Washington unless something was done immediately regarding the plight and condition of black Americans. On June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in war industries and apprenticeship programs. This executive order, the first on race relations since the Emancipation Proclamation, significantly changed the climate of the civil rights struggle (Bennett, 367).

During the course of World War II a total 1,154,720 blacks were inducted or drafted into the American armed services. As of August 1945 official records listed over 7,700 black commissioned officers. Three all-black units were awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation: the 969th Field Artillery Battalion, the 614th Tank Destroyer

Battalion, and the 332nd Fighter Group (Bennett, 539).

Of course, it was not only black men who fought in the nation's armed services during World War II. At the height of the conflict there were 3,902 black women, 115 of whom were officers, in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WACS) and 68 in the navy's auxiliary (WAVES). Two black women reached the rank of major: Major Harriet M. West and Major Charity E. Adams (Bennett, 539).

The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was probably the most unpopular and controversial war fought by the United States. Ironically, "equal opportunity" for blacks to be a part of America's armed services was never more in effect than during this conflict. Of course, many blacks protested against this war just as many had against past wars. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke out in the 1960s against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In a speech he delivered in Chicago on March 25, 1967, King stated:

We are in an untenable position morally and politically. We are left standing before the world glutted by our own barbarity. We are engaged in a war that seeks to turn the clock of history back and perpetuate white colonialism (King, 33).

Despite the fact that the civil rights struggle in America peaked during the 1960s and despite significant opposition to the war among blacks, African Americans once again volunteered and fought in disproportionate numbers. In May 1971, a Pentagon report noted that 12.5 percent of all soldiers killed in Vietnam since 1961 were black. In 1966, at a time when casualties in Vietnam had begun to spiral upwards dramatically, 66 percent of blacks in the army re-enlisted, a rate more than three times as high as whites. (*New York Times Magazine*, March 24, 1968, 37)

Milestones in the Struggle for Equality

The involvement of black Americans in the various wars fought by the United States has, to some extent, served as a major catalyst for change in the broader realm of American race relations. Throughout this rich history, a number of individuals have stood out or reached important milestones that should be acknowledged. In 1945, for instance, Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., became the first black to command an Army Corps base; he also became the first black general in the air force in 1954. In 1949 Wesley Brown became the first black to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy (Jaynes & Williams 1989, 69–71).

Despite these individual accomplishments, in 1969 blacks comprised only 3.2 percent of the officer corps and held very few field or general officer positions; yet they comprised 10.7 percent of the enlisted corps (National Urban League, 1988). An investigation by the NAACP into complaints of racism in the armed services led to the creation of the Defense Race Relations Institute (DRRI). The DRRI, established in 1971, was created to train race

relations instructors, both military and civilian, who would assist in efforts to reduce racial tensions on military installations throughout the world.

After the establishment of the DRRI, the 1970s saw a number of military firsts for black Americans: Samuel L. Gravely, Jr., became the first black admiral in the U.S. Navy in 1971; major general Frederick E. Davidson became the first black commander of an army division in 1972; in 1975 Daniel James, Jr., became the first black four-star general in the air force; and in 1977 Clifford Alexander, Jr., became the first black Secretary of the Army. Roscoe Robinson, Jr., became the first four-star general in the army in 1982, and in 1987 full general Bernard P. Randolph became commander of the U.S. Air Force Systems Command. Today, of course, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces is a black American, General Colin Powell (Jaynes & Williams 1989, 68–71).

Today, African Americans comprise a significant proportion of the armed forces, especially in relation to their numbers in the general population. According to 1986 figures, African Americans comprised 30 percent of the army, 20 percent of the marines, 17 percent of the air force, and 14 percent of the navy (Jaynes & Williams 1989, 71).

Though rather slow in coming, it appears that concrete actions have been taken to assure African Americans and other people of color who select to serve in the armed services fair and equal treatment as representatives of the United States of America. It is most fitting and appropriate for the Trotter Institute to team up with the Joiner Center and produce this commemorative edition of the *Trotter Review* honoring black veterans who, since the beginning of the nation, have so boldly volunteered to fight for the welfare of the nation — even if it did not always result in the securing of their own rights.

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